

## How the Bible has been Used to Justify Racism

Series: **The Bible and Racial Justice | Wednesday Meditations | Aug. 26, 2020**

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If you watched the first meditation in this series, and you're feeling a little bit snarky today, you might be saying to your screen: "But Katherine, I thought you said it was so obvious that the Bible teaches us that racism is bad. So how could people justify racism by using the Bible?"

I do think that it's obvious that we Christians should not only not be racist, but we should actively work against racism because it is against the will of God. And based on the number of times I've heard people ask, "How can Christians be racist? It doesn't make any sense!" over the past few years, I'm thinking that more and more of us are coming to agree about that, thanks be to God.

But unfortunately that has not always been the case. In fact, the opposite of that has long been accepted as true. And so the first part of the meditation will be one part history and a million parts confession and repentance.

Of course we won't be able to go over the whole history of how people have referred to the scriptures on topics related to racism. But we'll go over just a few highlights to help us see how Christianity has been involved in supporting – and even inventing – modern racism.

In last week's meditation I talked about how the idea of race that we have today didn't exist in the time the Bible was written. It came about comparatively recently, developing between the 1400s and 1500s. What I didn't go into in that sermon is that the Church was a leader in the development of race.

It was Christian people, referring to the scriptures and writing prayers to God, who established the idea that some humans are in a totally different category than other humans. It was the pope who encouraged kings and powers to go out and claim land, and to use as slaves the people who already lived there – in the name of Jesus.<sup>1</sup> And it was those actions that really solidified this sense of "us" versus "all of them."<sup>2</sup>

Now some European Christians did argue against all of that, emphasizing that all people were created in the image of God.<sup>3</sup> But they didn't "win" the argument historically. Instead, the European church's official teachings began grouping the people of different lands, religions, and skin colors together into different "races" that would eventually be codified in laws, institutions, and social norms. As one scholar put it: "We created the racial logic that now shapes the Western world."<sup>4</sup>

In the U.S., one of the shapes this racism took was a race-based system of slavery. And in the time before the Civil War, white Christians on both sides of the issue turned to their faith to support their views.

Anti-slavery Christians made arguments that probably sound familiar to us today. They drew on overarching biblical principles, like:

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1 See the brief description of the papal bull *Dum Diversas* at <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/dum-diversas/>

2 Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

3 For example, check out Bartolome de Las Casas: <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Bartolome-de-Las-Casas>

4 Willie James Jennings, "The Origin of Race," (lecture), National Capital Presbytery, 10 February 2017. Available on YouTube: <https://youtu.be/I5ZGwuwCHV0> Accessed 27 August 2020.

The equality of all people as creatures of God, which came from the Creation story itself:

*Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness...So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them."  
(Gen. 1:26-27)*

Anti-slavery Christians drew on the principle of the Golden Rule that Jesus taught: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets" (Matt. 7:12).

They realized the huge number of times that the scriptures tell us of God demanding freedom and justice for the poor and the oppressed. And, of course, they pointed to the Exodus story as an important example of God freeing people from slavery.

While they admitted that the Bible didn't condemn slavery outright, and actually seemed to give it the thumbs-up from time to time, they argued that the slavery in Bible times and slavery in 1800s America were so different, that it was almost like comparing apples and oranges. What the Bible said about ancient slavery, therefore, did not apply to modern slavery. Modern slavery was much crueler and was condemned by God.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, those speaking in support of American slavery also turned to the Bible to make their case. They really insisted that they were the group honoring the Bible's authority, while the abolitionists were twisting the Bible to make it go along with the culture of the times and their own anti-slavery agenda. They pointed to all the passages that explicitly said that slavery was ok, including this nationality-and-religion-based system established in the book of Leviticus:

*As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness. (Lev. 25:44-46).*

The pro-slavery Christians argued that "...the law of Moses was written 'by the finger of the Almighty.' This had to be believed or else 'flatly deny the whole of the Bible.'"<sup>6</sup>

Doesn't sound too different from some of the arguments the Church is having these days, right?

If all of this is confusing and maybe even scary for us today, just imagine how these arguments would have landed during a time when slavery was still normal. And so many Christians made another familiar move: deciding that slavery was a political issue better left to the politicians.

Others actions needed to be taken to help clarify things as slaves became Christians.

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5 David Meager, "Slavery – The Abolitionist Movement," *Cross+Way*, Summer 2007, No. 105. Available online: [https://mafiadoc.com/slavery-the-abolitionist-movement-church-society\\_5a1647fc1723dd8b6eb36381.html](https://mafiadoc.com/slavery-the-abolitionist-movement-church-society_5a1647fc1723dd8b6eb36381.html)

6 Larry R. Morrison, "The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830," *The Journal of Religious Thought*, Fall 1980/Winter 1981, Vol. 37, Issue 2, p. 16-29. Quote from p. 19. Available online: <https://www.kingscollege.net/gbrodie/The%20religious%20justification%20of%20slavery%20before%201830.pdf>

To help protect against any confusion (or rebellious ideas) among the slaves themselves, they were sometimes given special Bibles – Bibles with all passages that might teach that God condemned oppression and desired freedom for God’s people taken out of the book. Those books were missing most of the Old Testament and about half of the New Testament.<sup>7</sup>

Throughout the years some have turned to the Bible to defend segregation, forbid interracial relationships, and back up other racist policies. At the same time, others turn to scripture to advocate for things like desegregation, reparations, and the Black Lives Matter movement.

So who’s right? Is it the person who throws down the most Bible verses? How do we do our best to ensure that we’re not just picking the interpretation that we already want to believe?

One important thing we can do is to really think about how we interpret the Bible. We should have answers to questions like: if two Bible passages seem to be pointing us in different directions, how will we discern the path to follow? What are the main teachings God has given to us that will guide us when we get confused?

Really getting into that would take it’s own sermon series (or, like, 3-4 years in seminary). But for now, here are a few big ideas you can take home with you:

First of all: as Christians, we believe that the life of Jesus of Nazareth is the best revelation of who God is that we have. Scripture is – as Lutherans say – “the source and norm of [our] proclamation, faith, and life.”<sup>8</sup> We say it is the only source against which our teachings can be measured. It is the inspired Word of God. But still: we don’t worship the Bible. We worship Jesus Christ, the Word of God made flesh. And it is through his life, death and resurrection that we understand the scriptures – with the guiding inspiration and wisdom of the Holy Spirit.

So if we *think* that a Bible passage is telling us something that goes against the life and teachings of Jesus – well, that’s a pretty big clue that we’re on the wrong track.

The second big principle we’d do well to remember is the basic message of the Gospel. Again, I’ll rely on the Lutheran tradition, quoting the verses on which Luther based his understanding of the Gospel:

“For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God – not the result of works, so that no one may boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

It is the grace and promise of God that brings us into the family of God – through the obedient and radical life, death, and resurrection of a brown-skinned Jewish holy man (who was also God). It has nothing to do with our ancestry, or our skin color, or the things we do or don’t do. It is only by the grace of God that we are welcomed and accepted by God.

That radical, undeserved inclusion is at the heart of our faith. And we need to always remember what it feels like to be so generously and freely welcomed in to God’s family. The joy of it. The relief of it. The humility that comes with knowing we didn’t earn our way in, we weren’t born into it, but Jesus died and rose for us to be accepted, God loved us so much that God made a way for us. And when we hold

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7 Becky Little, “Why Bibles Given to Slaves Omitted Most of the Old Testament,” *History*, 3 April 2019. <https://www.history.com/news/slave-bible-redacted-old-testament> Accessed 27 August 2020.

8 Constitution of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (Nov. 2019 edition), 2.03.

on to those feelings, they affect how we read and interpret the Bible. They keep us focused on grace and openness and welcome and love.<sup>9</sup>

And finally, we should always be reading and interpreting scripture *together*, in community. I mean, please do read and study the Bible by yourself. Often. But don't stop there. Hear what others are thinking about those passages, too. Because when we read only by ourselves, we are more likely to just keep believing whatever we already believe, whatever we want to believe, and not be challenged by the Word of God. But when we read with others, we might hear something new; we might get a new angle on a familiar story; we might be challenged; and we will definitely get shaken out of our own internal echo chambers. The Holy Spirit uses shared conversation to speak to us. Importantly, the groups of people that we study scripture with should not be completely like us. How will we hear new things if we only gather with people who think and live like us?

In the context of our conversation on racism, we must remember to listen to the ways that people of color and people from other cultures interpret the Bible. This helps to create greater unity in the Church, to tear down the walls that continue to segregate us. Listening to others will open the scriptures in new ways. It will offer us new ways to think about and praise God. It will help us grow in our discipleship.

I'm sure a lot of us are thinking the same thing about that: But how do I study scripture with people who are different than me? My congregation is pretty much full of people like me – and I don't want to leave it. I don't feel comfortable just showing up to Bible study in a black congregation – or I don't have time – or whatever. Also, pastor, we're kind of in the middle of a pandemic, and I'm not supposed to be around a lot of people right now.

Actually getting to know people who are different from us and developing relationships is hands-down the best thing we can do. But if that doesn't seem possible, there are still ways that we can study scripture with others, though it will take some conscious effort. We will need to seek out what people of different cultures are saying and writing about the Bible and faith. Go online and listen to sermons or talks by Christians of color. Look for articles and commentaries written by unfamiliar voices. To help you on that adventure, I'll provide some resources below.

Let us pray.

God and Loving Creator of all: in your love you made all the nations of the world to be a family, and your Son taught us to love one another. Yet our world is riven apart with prejudice, arrogance, and pride. Help the different races to love and understand one another better. Increase among us sympathy, humility, and goodwill, that we may learn to appreciate the gifts that other races bring to us, and to see in all people our siblings for whom Christ died. Save us from jealousy, hatred, and fear, and help us to live together as members of one family at home in the world, children of one God who live in liberty through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.<sup>10</sup>

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9 Jennings, "The Origin of Race."

10 Adapted from the *Book of Common Order of the Church of Scotland*, (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1994). Found online on *Faithward's* list of prayers for racial harmony: <https://www.faithward.org/prayers-for-racial-harmony/>

### **Some Great Preachers and Teachers to Check Out**

The Rev. Tiffany C. Chaney (pastor, Gathered by Grace Lutheran, Montgomery, AL). Check out her sermon from the 2019 ELCA Churchwide Assembly on YouTube.

The Rev. Ronald Bonner (Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, Atlanta, GA).

The Right Rev. Robert Wright (bishop, Episcopal Diocese of Atlanta).

The Rev. Tuhina Rasche (ELCA). Check out her talk from the 2018 ELCA National Youth Gathering on YouTube.