

Racism and the Christian Church: A Brief History

This includes some highlights, but is by no means exhaustive. Hopefully it will give you a sense of the work the church has to do – and to undo. – Pastor Cindy

1400's: Papal Bulls (a declaration, decree or charter created by the Pope) in 1452, 1454, and 1493 authorized explorers to claim lands and enslave people. Here's an example from the Papal Bull Dum Diversas 18 June 1452:

We weighing all and singular the premises with due meditation, and noting that since we had formerly by other letters of ours granted among other things free and ample faculty to the aforesaid King Alfonso – to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.ⁱ

The theology and law that arose from these declarations came to be known as the Doctrine of Discovery.

Theologically, it provided the spiritual rationale for Europeans since the times of the Crusades to conquer and confiscate other lands, including what is now the United States. There were papal documents which laid the groundwork that, later, Protestants adopted. It treated the indigenous peoples as if they were animals; they had no (European) title to the land on which they lived. Thus, the Church justified removing and killing them.

Legally, the discovery concept was written into United States law as a doctrine to deny land rights to American Indians, through the Supreme Court case known as Johnson v. McIntosh in 1823. The decision stripped American Indians from the right of their own independence, providing a rationale for taking land away from the indigenous peoples, with the support of United States federal law. As a concept of public international law, it continues to be cited as recently as 2005. The United Nations Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues noted that the Doctrine of Discovery “was the foundation of the violation of their (Indigenous peoples) human rights.”ⁱⁱⁱ

1619- The first slaves arrive on US soil. The enslavement of Africans is justified by Christians (including Christian slave traders) by arguing that they are protecting the souls of the heathen by preventing them from falling into sin. At first Africans were not allowed to be baptized. (with the argument that they were sub-human or for fear that they would want freedom once they became Christian)

Late 1700's -early 1800's -The second Great Awakening hit the protestant church, and it became a priority to convert slave and free blacks to Christianity. Churches became bi-racial, but blacks had to sit in the balcony and were not allowed to pray or commune with

white Christians. In the slave quarters, a different style of worship included forms carried from Africa, such as call and response singing, shouting, dancing and demon exorcism.)

1787 – the African Methodist Episcopal church, the oldest black church denomination was established in Philadelphia when its founders tried to pray with white members. They were pulled off of their knees while praying. They left to form the Bethel AME church and successfully sued in the Pennsylvania courts for the right to exist separate from the white Methodist institution.

1820-1830 – Two major slave rebellions are driven by religious motivation. Meetings of blacks, including worship are regulated or banned in the south. In the north, the black church movement flourishes, partly as a response to segregated churches.

1843 - Josiah Priest publishes “Slavery, as it Relates to the Negro, or African Race. Priest defends slavery using the argument that black Africans are the descendants of Noah’s son Ham, who was cursed by Noah to perpetual slavery (Genesis 9:20-25).ⁱⁱⁱ This became a popular biblical defense of slavery to go along with Ephesians 6:5 “*Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ;*”

1916 – 1970- 6 million black people move north to escape conditions in the south. Most moved to urban areas, where both storefront churches and large black churches with thousands of members developed.

1915 – The Ku Klux Klan, (originally founded in 1865 by Confederate veterans in Tennessee bent on resisting Reconstruction in the Confederate States) begins its second incarnation. More than 4 million Americans join this anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, anti-immigrant, and anti-black organization. The requirement for joining the Klan is to be white, male and Christian (protestant). Klansmen had to attend church and make monetary donations. Their symbol was a cross. While many congregations affiliated with the Klan, many others denounced its combination of nationalism and religion.

1950’s & 60’s - the Civil Rights Movement. Black churches are the heart of the civil rights movement. Some white clergy and lay people march, sit-in, speak publicly. (mainly from Episcopal, Methodist and Catholic churches.) Most evangelical churches are either silent or actively opposed to civil rights saying that the church should not be involved in politics, and faith is about individual salvation. Segregationists use Acts 17:26 to argue against the “mixing of the races.” (*From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him— though indeed he is not far from each one of us.*)

Currently –

- The arguments about church not being in politics and that faith is for personal salvation are still strong today, resulting in all but theologically liberal churches remaining silent about racism.
- According to Pew research, the ELCA is the “whitest” denomination at 96%. The Episcopal church is at 90%, UCC at 89%, American Baptists 73%, Roman Catholics at 59%. (The general population is 66% white.)^{iv}
- Statistically, the more racist attitudes a person holds, the more likely he or she is to identify as a white Christian. In other words, the best predictor of someone becoming a white supremacist is whether or not they are Christian.^v
- The young man who shot 9 black Christians at Emmanuel AME Church in 2015 was a member of an ELCA church.
- 86 percent of white evangelical Protestants, along with 70 percent of white mainline Protestants and 70 percent of white Catholics, believe that the Confederate flag is more a symbol of southern pride than of racism.^{vi}
- nearly two-thirds (64 percent) of white Christians see the killings of African American men by police as isolated incidents rather than part of a broader pattern.^{vii}
- In the midst of this, the ELCA continues to speak out and encourage its congregations to work against Racial Injustice. You can find info from the St. Paul Area Synod Advocates for Racial Justice work group [HERE](#)

ⁱ Dum Diversas, <https://doctrineofdiscovery.org/dum-diversas/>

ⁱⁱ United Church of Christ, “Doctrine of Discovery” https://www.ucc.org/justice_racism_doctrine-of-discovery

ⁱⁱⁱ There is absolutely no historical or theological way to connect Ham to black Africans. – PC

^{iv} The most and least racially diverse U.S. religious groups. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/07/27/the-most-and-least-racially-diverse-u-s-religious-groups/>

^v White Christian America Needs a Moral Awakening” <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/07/white-christian-america-needs-moral-awakening/614641/>

^{vi}“ibid

^{vii} ibid