Christianity and Racism – Was Jesus a Racist?

Rusty Wright takes a hard look at this question: does Christianity promote racism? He looks at the lives and teachings of Jesus and Paul to see if they taught equality of all races or promoted racism. He finds that it is not the teachings of Christianity that promote racism. A biblical worldview will create a love for all people and a desire to help them develop personal faith.

Does Christianity Promote Racism?

Thirty years after the heyday of the Civil Rights movement, racial issues in the US remain sensitive. Racial quotas in the workplace and academia continue to be controversial. Prominent corporations are accused of racist practices. Certain supremacy groups promote the Bible, God and the white race. Race and politics interact in ways that carry both national and international significance.

A few years back, the Southern Baptist Convention made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raised a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place? How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" ever become linked with human bondage and social apartheid?

African-American theologian James Cone notes that "In the old slavery days, the Church preached that slavery was a divine decree, and it used the Bible as the basis of its authority."{1}

"Not only did Christianity fail to offer the … [Black] hope of

freedom in the world, but the manner in which Christianity was communicated to him tended to degrade him. The … [Black] was taught that his enslavement was due to the fact that he had been cursed by God. … Parts of the Bible were carefully selected to prove that God had intended that the…[Black] should be the servant of the white man….”{2}

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms, drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so the injustice I saw saddened me deeply. I was appalled that the Ku Klux Klan used the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in North Carolina. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of “last week’s racial incident” (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to maintain their longstanding policy of racial segregation. Thereafter, any Blacks attending would be handed a note explaining the policy and asking that they not return. I was outraged and left the church. (Postscript: A few years ago I learned that that white church had folded and that an African-American church came to use the same facility. Maybe God has a sense of humor.)

Does Christianity promote racism? Is it mainly a faith for whites? This article will examine these two burning questions.

Was Jesus Racist?

Does the Christian faith promote racism? Is it mainly for whites? Certain extremists think so. Some slavery-era ministers wrote books justifying slavery. George D. Armstrong wrote in *The Christian Doctrine of Slavery*, “It may be… that Christian slavery is God’s solution of the problem [relation of labor and capital] about which the wisest statesmen of Europe confess themselves at fault.”{3}

Consider another book, *Slavery Ordained of God*. In it, Fred A. Ross wrote, "Slavery is ordained of God, … to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family, until another and better destiny may be unfolded."{4}

Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to "love your neighbor as yourself," a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom. Each had its own turf. Jews considered the Samaritans to be racial "half-breeds." The two groups disputed which followed the Bible better and on whose land proper worship should occur.

The Samaritans were often inhospitable to{5} and hostile toward the Jews. Many Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthened their journeys to bypass Samaria. Jews publicly cursed Samaritans in their synagogues, would not allow Samaritan testimony in Jewish courts, and generally considered Samaritans excluded from eternal life.{6}

Once a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, "Who is my neighbor?"{7} Jesus, who as Jew surprised people by mixing freely with Samaritans, told him a now famous story. Robbers attacked a Jewish traveler, beating him and leaving him half-dead. Two Jewish religious leaders ignored the injured man as they passed by. But a Samaritan felt compassion for the Jewish victim – his cultural enemy – and bandaged his wounds, transported him to an inn and provided for his care. Jesus' point? This "Good Samaritan" was an example of how we should relate to those with whom we differ.

The founder of the Christian faith was no racist. He told people to get along. What about a chief expositor of the Christian faith? And why is eleven o-clock Sunday morning

often the most segregated hour of the week? Let's turn now to these important questions.

Was A Chief Expositor of the Faith A Racist?

Does Christianity promote racism? As we have seen, Jesus of Nazareth was no racist. Living in a culturally and racially diverse society that was in many ways analogous to ours, He promoted harmony by His example and His words. What about Paul, one of the chief expositors of faith in Christ?

Paul often had to counsel members of the communities he advised about diversity issues. Some in the groups with which he consulted were Jews, some were non-Jews or "Gentiles." Some were slaves and some were free. Some were men and some were women. The mix was potentially explosive.

From prison, Paul wrote to a friend whose slave had run away, had met Paul, and had come to faith. Paul appealed to his friend on the basis of their relationship to welcome the slave back not as a slave but as a brother. He offered to repay any loss from his own pocket. The letter survives in the New Testament as the book of "Philemon" and is a touching example of a dedicated believer seeking to internally motivate a slaveholder to change his attitudes and behavior.{8}

Paul felt that the faith he had once persecuted could unify people. He wrote to one group of believers that because of their common spiritual commitment, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one…."{9} Paul, a Jew by birth, wrote to some non-Jewish believers that "Christ himself has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one people. He has broken down the wall of hostility that used to separate us."{10}

Paul exhorted another group of believers to live in harmony. He wrote, "Since God chose you to be the holy people whom he

loves, you must clothe yourselves with tenderhearted mercy, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. You must make allowance for each other's faults and forgive the person who offends you. Remember, the Lord forgave you, so you must forgive others. And the most important piece of clothing you must wear is love. Love is what binds us all together in perfect harmony."{11}

Paul promoted harmony, not discord. If the founder of the faith and its chief expositor were not racists, why is eleven o'clock Sunday morning often the most segregated hour of the week?

True Followers?

Why is Christianity often associated with racism? The short answer is that some that claim to be followers of Jesus are not really following Him. They may have the label "Christian," but perhaps they never have established a personal friendship with Christ. They may be like I was for many years: a church member, seemingly devoted, but who had never accepted Christ's pardon based on His death and resurrection for me. Or they may have genuine faith, but haven't allowed God into the driver's seat of their life. I've been there, too.

I shall always remember Norton and Bo. Norton was a leader of the Georgia Black Student Movement in the 1970s. Bo was a racially prejudiced white Christian. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and some of his cronies beat Norton up. The animosity ran deep.

Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo rejected his hypocrisy and began to follow his faith with God in control. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a Christian conference. Initial tension melted into friendship

as they forgave each other, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Of course not all disobedient Christians are racists. Nor is everyone not aligned with Jesus a racist. But faith in Christ can give enemies motivation to reconcile, to replace hatred with love.

Historical examples abound of true faith opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, came to faith, renounced his old ways, became a pastor, and wrote the famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Newton encouraged his Christian friend, William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

Does Christianity promote racism? No, true Christianity seeks to eliminate racism by changing people’s hearts.

After I had spoken on this theme in a sociology class at North Carolina State University, a young African-American woman told me, “All my life I’ve been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people. Now I realize those oppressors were not really following Christ.”

Is Christianity just for whites? Norton, the Black activist, certainly did not think so. Let’s look further at the faith that crosses racial divides.

The Heart of the Matter

Is Christianity just for whites? Jesus and Paul said anyone who believed would be plugged into God forever. Africa has millions who follow Jesus. Koreans send missionaries to the US. And don’t we need them!

In Cape Town, South Africa, Saint James Church has been a beacon of diversity and social concern with its white, Black, Asian and biracial members. One Sunday evening, radical Black

terrorists sprayed the multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members' reaction.

Lorenzo Smith, who is biracial, saw his wife, Myrtle, die from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. Yet he forgave the killers. "I prayed for those that committed the crime," he told me, "so they, too, can come to meet [the Lord]."

The president of the West African nation of Benin came to the US a few years back with a message for African American leaders: His compatriots were sorry for their ancestors' complicity in the slave trade. An often-overlooked component of slavery's historical stain is that Black Africans sold other Black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants.

Benin's President Kerekou, who in recent years had made his own commitment to Christ, invited political and church leaders to his nation so his tribal leaders could seek reconciliation with African Americans.

Brian Johnson, an African-American organizer, said the realization that Blacks sold other Blacks into slavery has been difficult for many African Americans to handle. "This made it difficult to hold the White man responsible," he explained as we spoke. "This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this…. It's not merely a Black-White thing."

The problem is in human hearts, Johnson believes. "All have sinned," he claims, quoting the New Testament.{12} "All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness."

Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that "Everybody thinks

of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself."{13} True Christianity is not just for whites, and it does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it. Changing corrupt institutions is very important. An ultimate solution to racism involves changing individual hearts.

Notes

1. James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p. 74.

2. E. Franklin Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), p.115. Quoted in ibid. Bracketed words are mine.

3. Quoted in Frazier, loc. cit.; quoted in Cone loc. cit. Neither emphasis nor bracketed words are mine. Emphasis is likely Frazier's or Armstrong's. Bracketed words could be either Frazier's or Cone's.

4. Quoted in Frazier, loc. cit.; quoted in Cone loc. cit.

5. Luke 9:52-53.

6. Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1957, 1961, 1966), pp. 958-960. See also John 4:1-45.

7. Luke 10:29 ff.

8. Philemon 1-25.

9. Galatians 3:28 NIV.

10. Ephesians 2:14 NLT.

11. Colossians 3: 12-14 NLT.

12. Romans 3:23 NIV.

13. *World* Christian magazine (February 1989), p. U8.

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West Africans to African-Americans: “We Apologize for Slavery”

Rusty Wright presents a contemporary example of a new Christian offering repentance for past sins committed by his people and reconciliation through Christ in moving forward in the forgiveness of God. This is an excellent example of how those with a Christian worldview can work to bring healing to those wounded by past, grievous sins.

The president of the West African nation of Benin has a message for African-Americans: His compatriots are sorry for their ancestors’ complicity in the slave trade. During December, he’s going to tell them that at a special Leadership Reconciliation Conference on his soil.

An often-overlooked facet of slavery’s ugly historical stain is that black Africans sold other black Africans into slavery. When rival tribes made war, the victors took prisoners and made them indentured servants, often selling them to white slave merchants. Tribal animosity seethed.

Benin president Matthieu Kerekou says intertribal hostility over the slave trade still exists. Many of his people have never seen descendants of their forebears who were shipped off to the Americas.

Kerekou attended the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington last February and sought African-American church leaders to whom he could apologize. The pastors offered forgiveness. As a result, 125 Western leaders will gather with tribal chiefs from across Benin for the reconciliation event. U.S. Senator

James Inhofe (R, Oklahoma) and Congressman Tony Hall (D, Ohio) will participate along with pastors, athletes, celebrities and representatives of European (former) slave-trading nations.

Brian Johnson, an African-American living in Virginia, heads a U.S. sponsoring group COMINAD (Cooperative Missions Network of the African Dispersion) and works with many black churches. Johnson says the infamous “Gate of No Return” that stands on the Benin beach where slaves embarked will be renamed the “Gate of Return” and/or destroyed. African-Americans will be granted Benin citizenship.

Plans exist for a larger reconciliation event in 2000. A ship will sail the old slave route from the Canary Islands to Benin and business leaders will host an international business exposition to help stimulate trade.

Johnson says President Kerekou’s mission has a spiritual flavor motivated by the president’s own recent commitment to Christ. “In the same way that God offered forgiveness by presenting His Son, who was offended first,” Johnson notes, African-American church leaders want to offer forgiveness to the descendants of their ancestors’ captors. Both the president and the pastors hope to effect reconciliation and to provide an example to help ease global racial tensions.

Johnson says the realization that blacks sold other blacks into slavery has been hard for many African-Americans to handle. “This made it difficult to just hold the white man responsible,” he notes. “This creates some problems in our own psyche. We have to deal with another angle to this and it makes it difficult. It’s not [merely] a black/white thing.”

He says the problem is in human hearts. ” ‘All have sinned,'” he claims, quoting the New Testament. “All of us need to confess our wrong and appeal to [God] for forgiveness.”

Former Senator George Aiken of Vermont once said that if we awoke one morning to find everyone were the same race, color

and creed, we'd find a new cause for prejudice by noon. Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy lamented that "Everybody thinks of changing humanity, but nobody thinks of changing himself." Perhaps Johnson's and President Kerekou's prescription is worth considering.

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Church's Intolerant Past Not a True Representation of Christianity

The Southern Baptist Convention recently made headlines for renouncing racism, condemning slavery and apologizing for the church's intolerant past. That laudable contrition raises a deeper question: Why would Christianity ever be associated with racial oppression in the first place?

How did the faith whose founder told people to "love one another" become linked with human bondage, social apartheid and even today's racist militias?

As a white baby boomer growing up in the South, I experienced segregated schools, restrooms drinking fountains and beaches. My parents taught and modeled equality, so I was saddened by the injustice I saw. A CBS documentary emphasized the Ku Klux Klan's use of the Bible and the cross in its rituals.

During college, a friend brought an African-American student to a church I attended in Durham, N. C. The next Sunday, the pastor announced that because of "last week's racial incident" (the attendance of a Black), church leaders had voted to

maintain their “longstanding policy of racial segregation.” Thereafter, any Blacks present would be handed a note explaining the policy and asked not to return. I was outraged and left the church.

Some 19th-century ministers preached that slavery was a divine decree. In his book, “Slavery Ordained of God,” Fred A. Ross wrote, “Slavery is ordained of God … to continue for the good of the slave, the good of the master, the good of the whole American family.” Those words seem quite different from the biblical injunction to “love your neighbor as yourself,” a statement with equally poignant historical roots.

In first-century Palestine, the Jews and Samaritans were locked in a blood feud. Divided by geography, religion and race, the two groups spewed venom, with Jewish pilgrims deliberately lengthening their journeys to bypass Samaria. Once, a Jewish lawyer asked Jesus of Nazareth, “Who is my neighbor?” Jesus, who as a Jew surprised people by freely mixing with Samaritans, told a now famous story: The Good Samaritan aided a badly injured Jewish traveler who had been ignored by two passers-by, Jewish religious leaders. Which of the three was the “neighbor”? Obviously, the one who showed mercy.

The power of true faith to reconcile enemies was driven home to me in the’70s by Norton, Georgia state leader of the Black Student Movement, and Bo, a prejudiced White church member. Once during an Atlanta civil rights demonstration, Bo and his pals assaulted Norton. The animosity was mutual. Norton later discovered that Christianity was not a religion of oppressive rules, but a relationship with God. As his faith sprouted and grew, his anger mellowed, while his desire for social justice deepened. Meanwhile, Bo chose to reject his hypocrisy and follow his faith. Three years after the beating, the two unexpectedly met again at a conference on the Georgia coast. Initial tension melted into friendship as they forgave, reconciled and treated each other like brothers.

Historical and contemporary examples abound of true faith promoting reconciliation and opposing racism. John Newton, an 18th-century British slave trader, renounced his old ways, became a pastor and wrote the hymn “Amazing Grace.” Newton encouraged his Christian friend William Wilberforce, who faced scorn and ridicule, in leading a long but successful battle in Parliament to abolish the slave trade.

In South Africa in 1988, my heart ached as I saw impoverished Black townships and inequality falsely justified by religion. I also saw signs of hope. At a multiracial university student conference, Peter, a white Afrikaner, told me, “All my life, I’ve been taught the races should be separate. But now because of my faith, I believe we can be one.”

Sadly, his efforts to convince his friends back home were frustrating. “Maybe, you can love the Black man,” they reluctantly conceded, “but you can’t associate with him.” Inner change often takes time and hinges on individual willingness.

Two years ago in Cape Town, radical Black terrorists sprayed a multiracial congregation with automatic gunfire and grenades. Eleven died and 53 were wounded, some horribly maimed. The world press was astounded by the members’ reaction.

Lorenzo Smith’s wife, Myrtle, died from shrapnel that pierced her heart as he tried to shield her. In spite of his loss, he forgave the killers: “I prayed for those that committed the crime.” The pastor explained, “Christian forgiveness doesn’t mean that we condone what has happened or that we don’t wish the law to take its course, but that we have no desire for vengeance. We’re more determined than ever to contribute toward reconciliation and a peaceful future.”

Former Vermont Sen. George Aiken said that if one morning we awoke to discover everyone was the same race, color and creed, we’d find another cause for prejudice by noon. Human hearts

need changing.

A young African-American woman heard a speech on this theme in her sociology class at North Carolina State University. “All my life I’ve been taught that white Christians were responsible for the oppression of my people,” she noted. “Now, I realize those oppressors weren’t really following Christ.”

The Southern Baptists were right to renounce racism. Other institutions should take note. Racist policies, laws and yes—militias—need changing. But so do human beings. True Christianity does not promote racism but seeks to eliminate it by changing human hearts.

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This article appeared in the *San Bernadino [CA] Sun*, July 30, 1995.