

What Martin Luther King Jr. Realized About the Constitution That Most Americans Don't

In his fight for racial equality in America, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. found an ally in America's founding documents, and they became foundational to his cause. This is because America's founding documents are colorblind. Neither the Declaration of Independence nor the U.S. Constitution makes any reference to individuals on the basis of race, ethnicity or skin color.

Instead of race classifications, the Constitution speaks of "citizens," "persons" and "other persons." No mention is made of slaves or slavery. There is nothing in these documents to suggest that the freedoms they guarantee do not apply to every person. Yes, America's founding principles are colorblind, even though her history has not been.

Dr. King Understood America's Founding Documents

Dr. King understood this, and in his stirring "I Have a Dream" speech, he challenged America, not to dispense with her founding documents, but to live up to them. Speaking with passion from the steps of the Lincoln Memorial, he declared,

When the architects of our republic wrote the magnificent words of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, they were signing a promissory note to which every American was to fall heir. This note was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the "unalienable Rights" of "Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."

Then quoting from the Declaration of Independence, he proclaimed,

I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal" (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, 158).

Showing that he understood these freedoms to have roots in the country's Christian origins, Dr. King, who was a devout Christian, went on to say that he had a dream that one day all Americans—whether white or black—would be able to sing together the words of that Christian, patriotic hymn,

My country 'tis of Thee,/ Sweet land of liberty, of Thee I sing.

Land where my fathers died,/ Land of the Pilgrim's pride,

From every mountainside,/ Let freedom ring!

Other Black Intellectuals Have Understood This

The famous abolitionist, Frederick Douglass, understood this and argued that the language of the founding documents must be understood as applying to everyone. "Anyone of these provisions in the hands of abolition statesmen, and backed by a right moral sentiment," he declared, "would put an end to slavery in America" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 159).

Walter Williams, the brilliant black professor of economics at George Mason University, points out that slavery is not unique to the Western world but was practiced by Egyptians, Greeks, Babylonians, Assyrians, Armenians, Persians and many other ancient peoples. He notes that large numbers of Christians were enslaved during the Ottoman wars in Europe and that, "It was only after the year 1600 that Europeans joined with Arabs and Africans and started the Atlantic slave trade." He then

says,

While slavery constitutes one of the grossest encroachments of human liberty, it is by no means unique or restricted to the Western world or United States, as many liberal academics would have us believe. Much of their indoctrination of our young people, at all levels of education, paints our nation's founders as racist adherents to slavery, but the story is not so simple.

Understanding the Three-Fifths Clause of the Constitution

One of the most misunderstood sections of the Constitution is the "three-fifths clause," in which only three-fifths of the slave population of Southern states would be counted for representation. This had nothing to do with assigning value based on race. This was related to keeping the Southern states from gaining too much power in the new Congress, where the number of representatives from each state would be tied to the population of that state.

The Southern states wanted to include their slave populations to gain more representatives and more power, even though slaves could not vote. The three-fifths compromise was a way of diminishing their influence in the new Congress in that it counted only three-fifths of the slave population for purposes of representation.

Even here, the founders did not use the word "slaves" or slavery," but "other persons." Abraham Lincoln described this refusal of the founders to acknowledge slavery in the Constitution as being like a man who hides an ugly, cancerous growth until the time comes that it can be eradicated from his body.

That the three-fifths clause had nothing to do with assigning value based on race is confirmed by the fact that, at the time of the Constitutional Convention, there were at least 60,000

free blacks in Northern and Southern states who counted the same as whites when it came to determining the number of representatives to Congress. Additionally, it is important to note that there were as many as 10 states where blacks had full voting privileges.

At the Constitutional Convention, concessions were made toward the Southern states because of concern that a union could not succeed if all 13 colonies were not included. The founders, however, were both careful and precise in the use of language. They referred to slaves as “persons” and never used the words “black” or “white,” “slave” or “slavery.” Though not banning slavery outright at the time, they purposely put in place the legal instrument and language that would eventually eradicate the institution of slavery.

The Biblical and Moral Outrage Against Slavery

Many, however, argued against such concessions and pushed for the immediate outlawing of slavery. One of these was George Mason of Virginia who warned of the judgment of God if slavery were allowed to continue. He declared,

Every master is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgment of Heaven upon a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, p. 160).

Many see the Civil War, with the loss of 700,000 lives, as the judgment predicted by Mason. Thomas Jefferson shared Mason’s concern, for it was in the context of the continued existence of slavery that he wrote,

God who gave us life, gave us liberty. And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that

these liberties are a gift from God? That they are not to be violated but with His wrath? Indeed, I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just and that His justice cannot sleep forever (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, p. 161).

With this sort of biblical and moral opposition to slavery at the time of the nation's founding, its days were obviously numbered. Williams says, in fact, that the most unique characteristic of slavery in America was the "moral outrage" against it, and this moral outrage was a product of the Great Awakening (1726-1770) that spiritually and morally transformed colonial America, as I have shown in my book, *Pilgrims and Patriots*.

Because of the Great Awakening, the consciences of many whites were awakened to the sin of slavery, slaves were humanized and spiritual and moral forces were unleashed that would spell its doom. Historian Benjamin Hart, says, "Among the most ardent opponents of slavery were ministers, particularly the Puritan and revivalist preachers" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, 97).

Franklin and Washington Deal with Slavery

America's founders in general found slavery to be abhorrent and would agree with John Adams, the nation's second president, who wrote,

Every measure of prudence ... ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States. I have throughout my whole life held the practice of slavery in abhorrence.

This abhorrence to slavery was put into action by many. Two years before the Constitutional Convention, Benjamin Franklin set his two slaves free and began to advocate for abolition.

George Washington's situation was more complex, for he had inherited a large plantation with a number of slaves and to

thrust them suddenly and unprepared out into the world would have been unwise, perhaps harmful to them. Washington, therefore, set in motion a compassionate program to disentangle Mt. Vernon completely from the institution of slavery.

Those slaves who wanted to leave were free to do so. Those who chose to remain were paid wages, and he began a program to educate and prepare the children of slaves for freedom. He declared,

I clearly foresee that nothing but the rooting out of slavery can perpetuate the existence of our union by consolidating it in a common bond of principle (Hyatt, Pilgrims and Patriots, p. 161).

Dr. King Loved America

Secularists love to insist that America was founded on racist principles. They are wrong. David Azerrad was correct when he said, "The argument that the Constitution is racist suffers from one fatal flaw: the concept of race does not exist in the Constitution" (Hyatt, *Pilgrims and Patriots*, pp. 161-62). Dr. King obviously understood this.

America's founders were flawed individuals, born into a world of sin where slavery was already in existence. Nonetheless, with God's help, they did a marvelous job of formulating documents that brought into existence a powerful and prosperous nation, as Abraham Lincoln said, "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal."

No one was more aware of America's flaws and her strengths than Dr. King. Despite the flaws, he loved America, admired her founding documents and wanted her to succeed. He made this clear when, after being maligned, attacked and jailed, he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial and declared,

"I still have a dream. It is a dream deeply rooted in the American dream." {eoa}

*This article was derived from Pilgrims and Patriots by **Dr. Eddie Hyatt**, a book that documents America's overt Christian origins. Dr. Hyatt also conducts America Reawakening events in which he shows how America was birthed out of a great Spiritual Awakening and explains what must be done for another reawakening in the land.*