

Juneteenth and the Ethnic Mosaic of Christianity

In the past few years, we're finally getting around to recognizing Juneteenth, which celebrates the eagerly awaited complete emancipation of enslaved African Americans in America.

As I reflect on it this year, I remember that Christian principles were the pulse of the abolitionist movement that led to Juneteenth. Yet a growing group of people see Christianity as a religion created by white men for the benefit of white men to the detriment of all others.

I once had the privilege of chatting with a thoughtful and creative young African American man. He was raised in a Christian home, but a friend exposed him to arguments that denounced Christianity as the means by which slavers of old and modern racists justified policies that hurt African Americans. The young man came to view Christianity as the inherently racist "white man's religion." He eventually gave up his belief in God altogether.

The young man brought up his accusation that the Bible is inherently racist. Politely yet passionately, he started with Old Testament passages that he believed condoned slavery and ended with his claim that in the New Testament, neither Jesus nor the apostle Paul condemned the practice. The young man believed all religious belief fostered the kind of tribalism that pits people groups against each other and inevitably results in racial prejudice. With all of that, he had enough to disqualify Christianity as a racist, sexist, white man's religion.

One can see how he came to this conclusion, given the ubiquitous depictions of Jesus as a fair-haired European. It

is beyond serious dispute, however, that Jesus was an olive-skinned Middle Eastern Jew from the Judean province occupied by the Roman Empire. His original disciples were Middle Eastern Jews. Nearly everyone involved in Christianity's founding was from somewhere other than Western Europe.

The very first mass conversion after Jesus' resurrection was a mosaic of ethnic diversity. In the book of Acts, we read that people of at least 15 different ethnicities visited Jerusalem for the celebration of Pentecost (Acts 2:5–11). Among this ethnically diverse crowd were Arabs, North Africans and Romans (European ancestors). These facts alone give the lie to the idea that Christianity was incepted by white Westerners. There is more subtlety to be noticed here, however. This account includes Arabs (my people) along with Jews from Judea. Those two peoples have practically perfected the art of ethnic hostility. Yet both ethnicities were present to hear the gospel message, and both embraced it as a message that spoke to them. The Bible—the very book so many claim resists valuing ethnic diversity—goes out of its way to make such diversity a thing phenomenon of foundational value.

The gospel does not ethnically homogenize; it spiritually unifies. Commemorating Juneteenth calls to mind many things, one of which is the fact that if we can overcome a great evil that separated us, perhaps there is hope that more progress is possible if our efforts are fueled by a unifying message.

The God of the Bible is not tribal; He favors no one race while dignifying all ethnicities with His message. On Pentecost, 3,000 people—from Europe, Africa, the Middle East and Asia—became the seedlings of the Christian church.

From its birth to its adolescence, the church continued to be a tapestry of color. Within the first three centuries of nascent Christianity, North Africans were among the most influential church fathers. Tertullian, Origen, Augustine and Athanasius were all Africans and among the most influential

thinkers and theologians of Christianity's first few centuries. Augustine's theology and thinking would eventually have a tremendous impact on European theologians like John Calvin.

African countries like Nubia and Ethiopia had embraced the Christian message without Roman rule or influence. In the early days, darker-skinned people were the pulse of the church and effectuated positive change in the West. In our day, Christianity is growing among non-Whites all over the globe well after colonialism's decline. In other words, the message, and the propagation of that message by people of color, is thriving.

Nonetheless, the belief that Christianity is a white man's religion persists. The fact that the power-hungry, slave traders, and even otherwise brilliant theologians compromised the message to justify their complicity in slavery contributes heft to this narrative. Those attempts to baptize unholy deeds like slavery, segregation and Jim Crow by twisting Scripture have brought many a well-read and thoughtful person, like the young African American man I chatted with, to buy into the narrative.

Juneteenth—and the gospel-fueled abolitionist movement that led to it—renew my conviction that the Bible is part of the solution for the very ills it's often blamed for. Juneteenth renews my gratitude for thoughtful, intellectual giants like Frederick Douglass, a former slave himself, who saw through the subterfuge, machinations and bad interpretations with a clear enough lens to see Jesus for who He really is.

Writing at a time when “the Christianity of this land” meant a Christianity that endorsed slavery, Douglass pointed to the liberation that comes from true Christianity: “I love the pure, peaceable and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of

this land. . . . Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity.”

Douglass saw in the authentic teaching and life of Christ how counterfeit the Christianity of racists was. Douglass’s perspective ought to give today’s critics pause.

The gospel message sprang up amongst the olive groves of the Middle East, germinated throughout North Africa, and has flowered across the globe. Juneteenth, and the liberation that it signals, is one of the fruits of that message meant for all ethnicities. While we have more pruning and fruit picking to do, we look forward to the day depicted in Revelation 7:9, when “a vast multitude which no one could count, gathered from every nation and from all the tribes and peoples and languages of the earth.” {eoa}

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