

The Academy for Judaic, Christian, and Islamic Studies

RACIAL JUSTICE
A CHRISTIAN PERSPECTIVE

Casey Crouch
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Galatians 3:28

There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.¹

Ephesians 6:5-6

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.²

Matthew 7:12

In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.³

As I circled my mind in preparation for this short essay, time and time again these three New Testament passages resurfaced in my thoughts. No matter from which perspective one approaches Christianity, from the right, left, or somewhere in between, the paradoxical nature of the central text is unavoidable on questions of social justice. I was raised in a small church of about seventy members in a liberal Protestant denomination—the Presbyterian Church (USA)—and we love to confront these troubling matters. As I grew up, I listened to our pastor (who also happened to be my father) preach on the social justice of Jesus Christ and the importance of following his example in our daily lives. When we prayed the Lord’s Prayer, or the Our Father, our congregation always emphasized the lines: “Your kingdom come, Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven...[.]”⁴ I was raised to believe that Christianity was a practical, simple religion with challenging yet straightforward commands: to take care of others as we would have them take care of us.

¹ Gal. 3:28 (New Revised Standard Version)

² Eph. 6:5-6

³ Matt. 7:12

⁴ Matt. 6:10

Alas, the temptation of Matthew 7:12 for simplicity has led too many of my brothers and sisters in Christ to pave over the complications and agony which comprise significant portions of Church history. You don't need me to explain how WASP slaveholders in the Antebellum South used the Bible to justify the capture, trade and enslavement of millions of black Africans, and I'm sure you recognize one of the slave masters's favorite verses, seen above. I was taught to believe that our highest command as Christians is Jesus's call in Matthew 7:12 to love others as ourselves, and I was also taught that the Bible is never appropriately used as a weapon. In Sunday School, we learned about Dr. King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. We sang "We Shall Overcome." To varying degrees, most white Christians in the United States have shared an admiration for the black Church leaders of the 1960s and a sorrow for the pain of slavery which our religion endorsed for hundreds of years.

However, following our moment of acclaim, the next Sunday many of us, especially in the Protestant tradition, will pull out our hymnals and sing "Give Me That Old Time Religion." Originally a black spiritual of the late 19th century, this hymn has come to mean something very different depending on its audience. As a white Protestant, I can only speak for the white Church, and I can tell you that we were certainly not picturing a *black* church in the song. It goes:

Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
Give me that old time religion,
It's good enough for me.

According to online American musical compendium BluegrassMessengers.com, the song was introduced to white audiences in 1889 by Charles Davis Tillman, a white southerner who heard

the hymn sung by The Jubilee Singers in Lexington, South Carolina.⁵ This group of emancipated slaves formed to raise \$20,000 to support Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, an HBCU founded in 1866. It is unclear whether Mr. Tillman compensated The Jubilee Singers for the song, but what is clear is that he directed the song's cultural appropriation as lines which described the pain of slavery—"It brought me out of bondage...It is good when you are in trouble"—were replaced with white-friendly lyrics emphasizing the simplicity and goodness of Christianity—"Makes me love everybody...It will take us all to heaven." This is the version I sang growing up, as I'm sure millions of my fellow white Protestants did as well.

The hymn always seemed a little suspect to me. In the white imagination, "old time religion" means homogeneity. It implies that life was better in the past, in a time before competing ideas and challenges to one's identity. "Old time religion" looks a lot like Maycomb, Alabama, where diversity is seen only at the Methodist-Baptist football game, and the black people live far down the road. Liberal Christians do not intend to promote cultural appropriation, and I appreciate how they actually strive to recognize complexity. But "Give Me That Old Time Religion" exemplifies how the historically privileged status of white Protestants in the United States has led them to recognize Christianity only through its white interpretation.

In other words, we are *haunted* by our past. I learned about the language of social phantoms from one of my favorite undergraduate readings thus far: *A Glossary of Haunting* by Eve Tuck and C. Ree.⁶ In this text, the authors lay out a theory of group relations in which

⁵ "Gimme That Old Time Religion-Version 5 (Charles Tillman 1889)," *BluegrassMessengers.com*, last modified 2008, <http://www.bluegrassmessengers.com/give-me-that-old-time-religion--tillman-1889.aspx>.

⁶ Eve Tuck and C. Ree, "A Glossary of Haunting," in *Handbook of Autoethnography*, ed. Stacy Holman Jones, Tony E. Adams and Carolyn Ellis (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), Routledge Handbooks Online, 639-658,

historical oppression leads to a persisting trauma residing in the social unconscious, ready to re-emerge and haunt the living. Social justice alone is not a sufficient remedy for the horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, the authors argue. Instead, societies must pursue decolonization, which means “attending to ghosts, and arresting widespread denial of the violence done to them.”⁷ We see denial every day, from T.V. pundits denying police brutality to Op-Ed writers defending Confederate statues of Davis and Lee. In the Christian context, “Martin Luther King Sunday” and candlelight vigils will not suffice to calm our ghosts—we must recognize the role that the Church has played in the systematic oppression of black Americans and be willing to do something about it. And for many among us, even recognizing our faults has proven impossible.

But it shouldn't be. In the Book of Genesis, God punishes Adam and Eve for insubordination.⁸ For thousands of years, Christians have baptized themselves in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to be absolved of this “original sin.”⁹ Despite the newborn's fundamental innocence as a new creature in the world, Christian theology considers them guilty. Fine, then. Recognizing our plight as flawed beings in need of God's love, white Christians must also recognize our inherited guilt in the struggle for racial equality. We were born or brought into a social class which is fundamentally privileged and whose elevated status is errant with respect to God's vision for the world. As presented above, we obtain a glimpse of this vision in Galatians 3:28, which reads: “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/557744ffe4b013bae3b7af63/t/557f2d6ce4b029eb4288a2f8/1434398060958/Tuck+%26+Ree%2C+A+Glossary+of+Haunting.pdf>.

⁷ Tuck and Ree, “A Glossary of Haunting,” 647.

⁸ Gen. 2-3

⁹ Rom. 8:3

slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”¹⁰ We are all *one*.

Tragically, Christians have refused to acknowledge our oneness, and we have consistently placed earthly institutions over the directives of the heavenly kingdom. We have used tricks of theology to limit the glory of God’s vision to a later eternity in heaven, beyond the reaches of human accountability. In the case of Galatians 3:28, Christians argue that the Apostle Paul is only referring to the process of salvation. While we may all be equal *some day*, we are under no obligations to self-examine in the present era. This is the mindset of the “old time religion”—we go to church, we pray, and we go to heaven. And the black people live far down the road. As Eve Tuck and C. Ree argue that American society is haunted by chattel slavery, I argue that the Church is haunted by complacency towards the former. This haunting is most apparent on Sunday morning, which Dr. King referred to as “the most segregated hour of Christian America.” No branch of the Church operating in the United States today is innocent—Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and others have all sinned. But healing is possible. Christian decolonization looks like a declaration that Black Lives Matter. It looks like participation in black-led activism. It looks like self-reflection—a sermon on the consequences of “Give Me That Old Time Religion” and other instances of culturally-appropriated hauntings in our hymns and liturgy. I don’t know how to desegregate Sunday mornings. But those among us in the Christian faith must at least recognize the social justice directive which Jesus clearly prescribes in the Sermon on the Mount: to care for each other, and to do on Earth as God would have us do in Heaven.

¹⁰ Gal. 3:28