



RACE AND CHRISTIANITY IN THE UNITED STATES

Leader's guide

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Leader's Guide

Talking about race in the United States is challenging, complicated, and fraught. When some people say “black lives matter,” others answer back that “all lives matter.” Some people applaud Colin Kaepernick while others abhor him. Even as so much of our lives are affected by race—from where we live to how we vote—we disagree about how big a problem racism is and even how to define it.

Churches often mirror this divided reality. Many are still largely racially homogenous. And ideas about race—ideas that affect voting, housing, education and more—still divide Christians.

This video series provides one lens through which to explore race in the United States. Focusing on the history of black/white relations in the U.S., it considers how race and Christianity have interacted, for good and for ill. It offers a narrative that helps to answer the question “how did we get here?” I hope that by offering a look at our racial past, we will better understand ourselves and be better able to have those challenging, complicated, and fraught conversations our churches and our country need.

What This Series Is...and Isn't

The series is an introduction to the history of race and Christianity in the United States. Largely chronological, it offers one narrative that will help people understand how we have come to our present moment. That also means that this is one of many possible narratives. There are other ways of telling this story. That's part of what it means to think historically: you recognize that there is more than one way to organize a narrative (note, for instance, the difference between Matthew and Mark or Kings and Chronicles).

The story I tell, however, is not merely my interpretation. I rely heavily on the work of many scholars (I identify them in the resources and further reading sections of the website and guides). I've tried to offer interpretations upon which most historians would agree (even if they make tell it a bit differently). Although cries of “fake news” and “media bias” make some folks think that all ways of telling stories are equally valid because they are all equally biased, for the most part, historians disagree. Even as we recognize that there is more than one way to tell a story, we think that there are stories that better accord with the historical evidence, things like texts and artifacts from the past.

That I'm trying to tell an evidence-based history means two things. First, this history is not one I've designed either to flatter or to denigrate the Christian tradition. Both as a historian and a Christian, I think that getting as close as we can to truth, even if only through a glass darkly, matters. Sometimes, what the evidence says is that some Christians got things very wrong. When that's what the evidence says, that's what I say. When Christians acted well and faithfully, I say that too. Second, it means that you can check out what I claim. Again, I've listed a lot of

resources, both documents from the past and modern historical works. If you think I've gotten it wrong, I would invite you to read the texts and see if your interpretation is plausible.

A couple of warning about what this series is not. It is not a comprehensive look at the history of race in the United States (that would be a very long series). I only cover black/white relations and, even then, I can only cover some episodes and events. Nor does this series offer much in the way of addressing racism. My goal is to provide a historical background to the problem because I think we have to know where we've been in order to address the problem well.

How To Use This Series

I have designed this series to be flexible and adaptable. I created it with adult Sunday School and small groups in mind, but other audiences and contexts would work as well. Each session is built around a 20 to 25 minute video. The curriculum for each session includes an outline for people who want to follow along or take notes, a short synopsis and overview of the episode's key questions, and some reflection questions.

I suggest the following plan for each class session:

- a quick review of the last episode
- an overview of the key questions for the day. This review might include time for people to write about or discuss what they think the answers might be.
- Discussion after the video. This discussion could include time to check for understanding as well as conversation about the reflection questions.

I have also included material for a pre-session. This material focuses on getting a sense of what people know or believe about the history of race in the United States and on what is at stake for people in the discussion. Some groups might find the pre-session material helpful, others might not.

Talking About Race

This series invites people to ask hard questions about the history of the United States and of Christianity. For some people, the idea that people of their race or their faith acted in harmful ways will not be threatening. For others, it will be extremely so. As you prepare for these discussions, you might consider:

1. **Setting some ground rules.** For example:
 - a. Speaking from one's own perspective ("I think" rather than "everyone believes" or "we all know");
 - b. Not using anecdotal evidence to prove general points. Just because you know a black person or a white person who thinks a certain way does not mean that all black people or all white people think that way.

You might also decide in advance what you are going to do if challenges arise during the series. For example:

- c. Deciding what to do if people disagree with the history or the historical interpretation. Will you look at some of the sources Sarah suggests? If people want to bring in other sources, what kind of sources will you consider valid?;
 - d. Deciding what happens if one or more people start to dominate the conversation.
2. **Helping people think about what is at stake for them.** Sometimes people do not want a certain history to be true because it reflects poorly on their ancestors or because it makes it hard to believe that something to which they are committed—like their faith or their country—warrants their loyalty. Asking what it means for them or what changes for them if a narrative is accurate or an interpretation sound can help people think about their reactions.
3. **Helping people think about what is not at stake for them.** As Christians, we believe that neither life nor death separate us from the love of God. That means that telling hard truths about ourselves or our pasts (individual or collective) won't either. But it can certainly feel like it might. Reminding each other that God's love for us is not at stake can help ground people in their identity as God's children and make difficult discussions feel a bit less fraught.

Where are We Starting?

Leader's Guide

This optional session will help prepare your group for the study. This session has two objectives: 1) establishing what people think they know about the history of race and Christianity in the United States and 2) helping people consider what is at stake for them in learning more about the topic.

What We Think We Know and What We Want to Know

As lots of students will tell you, history is hard. In part, that's because many students have been taught that history is all about memorizing a bunch of dates. Fortunately, you won't be memorizing here. Still, history can be difficult for other reasons. Sometimes, what you learn overturns what you thought you knew—and changing your mind is usually not easy. And, sometimes, there is just a lot of information and it can be hard to make sense of.

The activities in this section will help with those two problems by helping people articulate what they think they know and what they want to know. Once you know what you think you know, it is easier to make comparisons between that and what you learn. Articulating what you want to know provides a framework for organizing all the information coming at you.

1. Ask people to write down what they think they know about race and Christianity in the United States on the pre-session worksheets.
 - a. This is brainstorming so any response is fine
 - b. People might want categories to help prod their memories. For example, “main characters, significant events, important institutions, key texts.”
2. Ask people to write down what they hope to learn about the history of race and Christianity in the United States on the pre-session worksheets.
3. If you have time and it works for your group, have people compare answers (either in small groups or a large group).
4. At the end of the video series, you might have people revisit these worksheets. What have they learned? How have their minds changed (if at all)? Are there things they still want to know?

What We Believe and What Is At Stake

Most people come to the study of race and Christianity in the United States with some beliefs and assumptions. Maybe they assume that Christianity has mainly played a positive role in racial issues. Maybe they assume that the story is one of unimpeded progress. Whatever their beliefs and assumptions, it will be easier to learn something new if they know what they already believe.

It is also easier to engage a difficult topic if we know what is at stake in our beliefs and assumptions. Sometimes we believe things, but don't really care if they are true. Sometimes, however, our beliefs have significant implications for how we understand things we really care about—things like whether our ancestors were good people, whether our faith helps society, and whether our country gives all people equal opportunity.

To help people in your group uncover their beliefs and assumptions and to consider what is at stake for them, have them complete the rest of the worksheet.

1. First, have them answer the four questions. They do not need to respond to the “Reflection” question yet.
2. After they have answered all four questions, ask them to consider what is at stake for them by:
 - a. Ranking their commitment or stake in their belief on a 1 to 4 scale (the scale is also on the worksheet) They can write the number next to “Reflections”. The scale is:

1=Being wrong about this would neither surprise nor concern me.
2=Being wrong about this might challenge some beliefs I have about myself, my faith, and/or my country, but not any beliefs that matter greatly to me.
3=Being wrong about this would challenge beliefs I have about myself, my faith, and/or my country
4=Being wrong about this would deeply challenge beliefs I have about myself, my faith, and/or my country
 - b. Next, have them write about their response. They might consider, for example, why the beliefs matter (or don't) to them and what it mean for them if the belief was wrong (or right).
3. Depending on time and the needs of your group, you could ask people to share answers, either in a large or small group.

Pre-Session Worksheet

What Do I Know?

In the space below, write what you know about the history of race and Christianity in the United States. If you don't know where to start, think about themes, events, people, and texts.

What Do I Want to Know?

In the space below, write about what you want to know about the history of race and Christianity in the United States.

What Do I Believe?

When starting to learn about a new topic, it can be helpful to think about what beliefs and assumptions we already have about it. To help you think about your beliefs and assumptions, answer the questions below. Leave the “Reflection” section blank until you have answered all the questions.

1. What do you believe are the main causes of racial problems in the United States?
 - a. What evidence do you have for your belief?

 - b. Reflection:

2. How much progress do you think the country has made on race from the colonial era to the present?
 - a. What evidence do you have for your belief?

 - b. Reflection:

3. What role do you think Christianity has played in the history of race in the United States?

a. What evidence do you have for your belief?

b. Reflection

4. Given what you know and what you have written above, how would you summarize the history of race and Christianity in the United States in a sentence or two?

a. Reflections:

What's At Stake for Me?

When learning about a new topic, particularly a difficult one, it is helpful to think about how much your beliefs about it matter to you. When we are deeply invested in a belief, we can have a harder time changing our minds or engaging well with people who hold other view.

To help you gain a sense of how much the beliefs you wrote above matter to you and why they do (or don't):

1. Rank your commitment to your response for each question on a scale of 1 to 4 (write the numbers after "Reflections").

1=Being wrong about this would neither surprise nor concern me.

2=Being wrong about this might challenge some beliefs I have about myself, my faith, and/or my country, but not any beliefs that matter greatly to me.

3=Being wrong about this would challenge beliefs I have about myself, my faith, and/or my country

4=Being wrong about this would deeply challenge beliefs I have about myself, my faith, and/or my country

2. Write about your response. For beliefs that received a 3 or 4, consider why you are so invested in these beliefs. What would it mean for you if you were wrong? For beliefs that received a 1 or 2, consider why you wouldn't be challenged if you were wrong. Why does the belief not matter that much to you?

Race, Slavery, and Christianity in Colonial America

Have you ever wondered why, in the United States, slavery was based on race? Have you ever thought about why conversion to Christianity did not change the status of slaves? Using colonial Virginia as an example, this episode explores how race became intertwined with slavery and how Christians used the faith both to challenge race-based slavery and to underwrite the identification between race and slavery.

Key Questions:

1. How did it happen that, in colonial Virginia, some people came to be seen as most appropriately property, as “slaves by birth”?
2. Why, in America, was slavery deemed appropriate only for those who had some African ancestry?
3. What was the role of Christianity in the identification of slavery with race?

Reflection Questions:

1. What in this episode most surprised or challenged you?
2. For some Americans, it is important that the early colonial project be a good one, undertaken for noble, even holy reasons. According to this episode, those reasons had much to do with money. How did you react to Sarah’s claims about the economic motivations behind colonization? Why do you think you reacted that way?
3. The Anglican Church in colonial Virginia had to grapple with the reality that many other religious groups would as well: slaveowners would be unwilling to allow them access to slaves if the church did not support slavery (and slaveowners would probably not be church participants either). That was not the only reason that various denomination countenanced or supported slavery, but it was part of the calculus. And it raises a question: at what point (if any) does complicity with an institution like race-based slavery, even purportedly for the sake of evangelization, undermine the claims of the gospel? When is it better to risk losing converts than to make peace with social and economic institutions? How do we know?
4. The slaves who wrote the Bishop of London made their case based on brotherhood (and sisterhood) in Christ. They asked that shared Christian faith matter more than race. Do you have identities that, either in theory or in practice, matter more to you than your Christian one? Do you have identities that make it hard to see some Christian brothers and sisters as your spiritual siblings?

Race, Slavery, and Christianity in Colonial America

- I. Introduction: Elizabeth Key Case
 - A. Biography
 - 1. Born to a white father and a slave mother
 - 2. Became an indentured servant
 - 3. Listed as property when John Mottram died
 - B. Key's Case
 - 1. Claimed she could not be a slave because her father was white, she had served her term, and she was a Christian.
 - 2. Ultimately won her case
 - C. House of Burgesses' Response
 - 1. 1662: Condition of slavery follows the mother
 - 2. 1667: Baptism does not free "slaves by birth."
 - D. Key Questions of Episode
 - 1. How did it happen in colonial Virginia that some people came to be seen as appropriately property or as "slaves by birth"?
 - 2. Why, in America, were those people with some African ancestry?
 - 3. What was the role of Christianity in the identification of race and slavery?
- II. Making Slavery Black in Virginia
 - A. Factors in identification of slavery with being black
 - 1. Existing transatlantic slave system.
 - 2. Christian evangelization
 - 3. Rebellion
 - 4. Greed
 - B. Transatlantic Slave System
 - 1. Turn from "quick" money to labor intensive ventures increases demand for labor.
 - 2. Europeans imported Africans to the Americas, Africans worked cash crops, Europeans sold the crops in Europe, and Europeans took money to Africa to purchase more slaves.

3. System not fully in place in Virginia in the early 17th century—
but was by early 18th century.

C. 1705 Act Concerning Servants and Slaves

1. Differentiated between white people and non-white people

a) White servants could only be whipped naked with permission of the justice of the peace; non-white “servants” could be whipped naked without permission.

b) Black people and white people—free or otherwise—could not marry.

c) Conversion did not free people whose ancestry was African

d) White people could not be slaves; black people seen as naturally slaves.

III. Why Limit Slavery to Black People?

A. Money

1. Labor supply for England was inconsistent, particularly after Great London Fire of 1666.

2. Slavery, unlike indentured servitude, possibly self-perpetuating

B. Why not enslave poor white people?: Rebellion

1. Bacon’s Rebellion witnessed black slaves and white indentured servants making common cause against elites.

2. Giving white people—rich or poor—a common identity and the shared right not to be slaves made poor white people more likely to align themselves with white elites, not black slaves.

IV. What’s Christianity Got to Do With It?

A. Some slaves used Christianity to argue against slavery

B. The possibility that Christianity might undermine slavery made slaveowners reluctant to have slaves evangelized.

1. 1667: Assurance (by church and colony) that baptism did not free slaves

C. Theological Implications of 1667 Decision:

1. Freedom grounded in race, not religion.

2. Earthly parentage more determinative of status on earth than heavenly parentage.
 3. Anglican Church supported slavery.
 4. Identification of being Christian with being white.
 - a) In 1705 Act, non-white Christians have descriptors; white Christians were simply “Christian.”
- D. 1723 Letter
1. Written by a slave or group of slaves to the Bishop of London
 2. Claimed that the Christian message was about freedom and kinship.
 3. Noted that slavery made important Christian practices impossible.
- V. Slavery and What It Means to be Black and White
- A. By 1705:
1. Laborers classified based on race.
 2. Race—not religion or class—has become the most significant marker of difference among people.
 3. Racial identification has buried commonalities, including shared religion.

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What's Race?

The connection between slavery and blackness predated the arrival of Africans in Virginia. In this episode, we go back in time in order to explore the roots of the connection between blackness and slavery and the role Christians played in solidifying that association. We will also learn more about what race is (and isn't) and why where our ideas about race come from matter today.

Key Questions:

1. What are the roots of the connection between blackness and slavery?
2. What is race?
3. How might the history of race affect our engagement with modern debates?

Reflection Questions:

5. What, in this episode, most surprised or challenged you?
6. In this video, Sarah claims that people began to read Genesis 9 in a way not supported by the text owing to a race-based economic slavery. Do you think Christians today read modern understandings of race into biblical texts?
7. How did you define "race" before watching this video? Do you still define it that way?
8. If Sarah is correct and our modern racial categories are neither "natural" nor morally innocent, what does that mean for how we think about our racial identities and those of other people?
9. Think about the ways you identify yourself. How do you react when those identities are challenged or their roots explored? Why do you think that you react the way that you do? [Note: this question is not meant to suggest that anytime you react negatively to an identity being challenged, you are doing something wrong. It is meant to get you to reflect on when and if that is so.]

What's Race?

VI. Introduction

A. The Curse of Ham

1. Story from Genesis 9 in which Noah curses Ham's son Canaan after Ham mocks Noah's nakedness.
2. Although the story is odd, many religious people over centuries believed it clearly indicated that God cursed Ham with black sin and slavery.
3. How did a strange interpretation become so widely accepted?
 - a) What came first, bad Bible reading or large scale enslavement of Africans?

B. This episode goes further back in time to explore how—before Africans were brought to colonial America—blackness became identified with slavery. It explains how the idea of race grew out of a desire to identify some people as naturally slaves and others as naturally free.

VII. Slavery in the Atlantic World

A. In the long history of slavery:

1. Slavery not associated with any particular skin color (often people of what we would consider the “same race” enslaved each other).
2. Slavery was associated with dirtiness and darkness.
3. Europeans did not have uniformly negative attitudes toward Africans

B. Early connection between blackness and slavery

1. Began when Muslims and Christians began enslaving large numbers of sub-Saharan Africans.
 - a) Started in the eighth and ninth centuries among Muslim slave traders.
 - b) Large scale enslavement of Africans shifted perceptions of them. Over time, Africans identified with most menial labor.

- c) Note: that Muslims enslaved large numbers of Sub-Saharan Africans before Christians did neither negates the negative repercussions slavery had on the descendants of enslaved people nor shows that Christian morality with regard to slavery was superior to Muslim.
 - 2. Large scale enslavement made it convenient to apply the Curse of Ham to Sub-Saharan Africans.
- C. Spain, Reconquest, and the Spread of the Curse of Ham
 - 1. As Christians gained control of formerly Muslim-controlled portions of Spain, Jews and Muslims had to convert, leave, or die.
 - a) Some Christians doubted the authenticity of Muslim or Jewish conversions. These Christians worried about “blood purity,” meaning that Christian blood differed from Jewish and Muslim blood—and that conversion would not change that.
 - 2. At the same time that some Christians began accepting the idea of immutable differences among people (i.e. “different blood”), the Curse of Ham interpretations spread into Spain and Spaniards began importing Africans into Spain.
 - a) Result: Belief that Africans were fundamentally different from Spaniards (had “different blood”) and naturally slaves. This is the development of what we call race.
- D. Back to Virginia
 - 1. Existing traditions about slavery
 - a) Not having slaves
 - b) Having slavery, but not basing slavery on race
 - c) Supporting race-based slavery with the Bible
 - (1) Even though the tradition existed, it still needed to be codified through law.

VIII. What is Race?

- A. Common belief: race is a biological reality, meaning it is natural and immutable.
- B. Reality: not a biological reality

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1. Over time, people have named biological, natural, immutable differences differently.
 - a) People who were considered “essentially” different in fifteenth century Spain are considered “the same race” in the United States today.
 2. Race is a human creation: people decide what differences matter in how we group people.
 - a) Examples: Norwegians and Italians; Nigerians and South Africans.
 3. Skin color does not reflect other, immutable similarities or differences.
 - a) People we group in the same race have as much difference among themselves as they do with people of other races.
 - (1) Examples: Fingerprints; lactose-tolerance.

C. Race as a “construction”

1. Not biologically real, but (because people have made it so) socially meaningful.

IX. Why Does It Matter?

A. Race and Current (Facebook) “Debates”

1. Question: why no “White History Month”?
 - a) Note that people do celebrate ethnic and immigrant identities.
 - b) “White” is not a morally innocent category. The category was created so that some people could be protected from slavery and other people designated as appropriately slaves.
 - (1) “Whiteness” became a way of naming kinship more determinative than baptism.
2. Does this mean Sarah hates white people?
 - a) No. There is a difference between recognizing a category people created has a problematic moral history and hating people who are grouped into the category.
3. Why isn’t Black history month a problem?

- a) Difference between immigrant stories in which people know where they came from and forced migration (slave) stories in which people's ethnic identities were erased.
- b) Proposal: there is a difference between finding a way to celebrate what was intended to be a negative category that was imposed upon you and celebrating a category created so that some people could impose upon others.

X. Conclusion

- A. Although slavery is very old, race-based slavery is relatively new (historically speaking).
- B. Many of the primary ways we identify ourselves come out of a racial system designed to justify enslaving some people and not others.

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