

It's in Our Cultural DNA

A sermon preached at Niles Discovery Church, Fremont, California,
on Sunday, March 12, 2017, by the Rev. Jeffrey Spencer.

Scriptures: [Galatians 3:23-39](#) and [Daniel 1:1-21](#)

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“Despite bitter cold, wind, rain and hail,” the PBS Newshour reports, “hundreds of members of Native American tribes and supporters from around the country turned out Friday to march on the White House, in an effort to turn the momentum of the Standing Rock protests [against the building of a oil pipeline through and near reservation land] into a more sustained movement for native rights.

“The march and a rally in Lafayette Square across from the White House came after four days of protest, prayer and lobbying on Capitol Hill, where Native communities called for the protection of natural resources and demanded the new administration honor treaties with indigenous peoples.”¹

Five and a quarter centuries after the Doctrine of Discovery emboldened Europeans to come to the Americas and claim them, five and a quarter centuries after the people living on America's soil were first enslaved or killed with the blessing of the church, the descendants of those first nations are still fighting for their rights and their sovereignty.

If you're wondering how it is possible that the Doctrine of Discovery is still active in our society, the answer is easy: It's in our cultural DNA. Let me explain what I mean.

Last week, I talked about how the church is responsible for creating the Doctrine of Discovery and blessing the colonial expansion of Christian nations, which of course meant European countries. Thanks to the Doctrine, by the 1600s, Spain had established colonies in Central and South America, the Caribbean, and what is now Florida. Likewise, the Portuguese had established a foothold in South American.

England had gained military power and started establishing colonies in North America. The Doctrine of Discovery gave the justification for the English to do this. Back in 1497, just a few years after Columbus' first voyage to the Americas, a English-financed explorer planted the English flag in what is now Newfoundland, so they felt they could claim they had “discovered” the land. In 1607, they founded Jamestown, and in 1621 the Plymouth colony was established by English Pilgrims.

In 1619, a year before the Pilgrims set out to establish their utopia, a Dutch ship arrived in Jamestown that would have repercussions for the next four hundred years. The ship carried Africans, but they were not passengers. They were the cargo. While they may have been the first slaves brought to an English colony as cargo, they were hardly the first slave brought from Africa to the Americas. “By 1619, a million blacks had already been

¹ Elizabeth Flock and Iman Smith, “Strengthened by Standing Rock, Native Americans march on D.C. What's next for the movement?” *PBS Newshour*, <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/strengthened-standing-rock-native-americans-march-d-c-whats-next-movement/> (posted and accessed 10 March 2017).

brought from Africa to South America and the Caribbean, to the Portuguese and Spanish colonies, to work as slaves.”²

The African slave trade was justified the same way the conquest of the Americas and the enslavement or murder of the native peoples living there was justified: the Doctrine of Discovery. Successive Popes had said that European kings should “invade, capture, vanquish, and subdue ... all Saracens and Pagans and all enemies of Christ ... to reduce their persons in perpetual slavery ... and to take away all of their possessions and property” (to quote the 1452 Papal Bull *Dum Diversas*). Historian Howard Zinn notes, “By 1800, 10 to 15 million blacks had been transported as slaves to the Americas, representing perhaps one-third of those originally seized in Africa. It is roughly estimated that Africa lost 50 million human beings to death and slavery in those centuries we call the beginnings of modern Western civilization, at the hands of slave traders and plantation owners in Western Europe and America, the countries deemed the most advanced in the world.”³

A century and a half after the English started establishing colonies in North America and importing Africans to work as slaves, the colonists decided it was time to break ties with the king. And so they fought a war and managed to win, declaring their independence with the words, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” Of course, when they said “all men,” they didn’t mean all people. They meant all property-owning, white, males.

Although this new nation was founded on freedom from tyranny, the idea that white people and Christians had certain divine rights was nevertheless ingrained in our nation’s cultural DNA and quite literally into our policies. As someone raised in New England and whose family goes back to the Mayflower, I like to think of myself as coming from a people who opposed the evils of slavery. But New Englanders profited directly and indirectly from the slave trade and the three-fifths compromise in our constitution was pushed by the Yankees. They didn’t want Blacks counted as people when it came to deciding how many Representatives southern states received. And nobody wanted the Indians counted. Thus, it was compromised that the population of the states would be set by “adding to the whole Number of free Persons, including those bound to Service for a Term of Years [that is, indentured servants], and excluding Indians not taxed, three fifths of all other Persons.”⁴ Well, the only other people who were left were slaves of African ancestry.

Another way this supremacy of the white people became part of our policies and cultural DNA was through the court. The 1823 Supreme Court decision in *Johnson v. M’Intosh* is a key example. While the decision is often framed as “private citizens could not purchase lands from Native Americans,”⁵ what it really said is that Indians really didn’t own the property in the first place. The decision “begins with a lengthy discussion of history of the European discovery of the Americas and the legal foundations of the

² Howard Zinn, “Drawing the Color Line,” *History Is a Weapon*, <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/zinncolorline.html> (accessed 10 March 2017).

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ The Constitution of the United States of America, Article 1, Section 2.

⁵ “Johnson v. M’Intosh,” *Wikipedia*, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnson_v._M’Intosh](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johnson_v._M'Intosh) (accessed 10 March 2017).

American Colonies. In particular, [the decision] focuses on the manner in which each European power acquired land from the indigenous occupants. Synthesizing the law of nations, [it] traces the outlines of the 'discovery doctrine' – namely, that a European power gains radical title (also known as sovereignty) to the land it discovers. As a corollary, the discovering power gains the exclusive right to extinguish the 'right of occupancy' of the indigenous occupants, which otherwise survived the assumption of sovereignty."⁶

Then the decision says that when the United States "declared independence from Great Britain, the United States government inherited the British right of preemption over Native American lands. The legal result is that the only Native American conveyances of land which can create valid title are sales of land to the federal government."⁷ The decision literally calls the Native peoples "heathens" in justifying this decision.

For Native Americans, this decision foreshadowed the Trail of Tears and almost two hundred years of forced removals, violence, and broken treaties. The very things the Standing Rock Sioux were protesting this weekend are a direct legacy of these attitudes and this decision.

In 1845, the political leader and prominent editor named John L. O'Sullivan gave the Doctrine of Discovery a uniquely American flavor when he coined the term "Manifest Destiny" to defend U.S. expansion and claims of new territory to the west. It furthered the sense among U.S. citizens of an inevitable or natural right to expand the nation and to spread "freedom and democracy" (though only to those deemed capable of self-government, which certainly did not include Blacks or Native Americans). Of course, *Johnson v. M'Intosh* gave the legal cover for simply taking the land from the inhabitants as our nation pushed west.

Our denominations are not immune from the racism of the Doctrine of Discovery and the United States' spin on it, Manifest Destiny. The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was complicit in white American exceptionalism. The denomination's founders, Barton Stone and Alexander Campbell, were 19th century men. As white, free, land-owning, educated, males, they acquired great privilege. There is little wonder they adopted, most likely without any conscious thought, the American power construct.

Campbell was an immigrant from Scotland. Immigrants choose to live in a land different from their birth, and Campbell had a deep desire for his chosen nation to be the best. Fully adopting the social concept of manifest destiny, adding a touch of Protestant superiority, mixing in some white superiority, and Campbell developed a social construct for Disciples. Writing "The Destiny of Our Country" in the August 1852 edition of the *Millennial Harbinger*, Campbell pronounced, "In our countries [sic] destiny is involved the destiny of Protestantism, and in its destiny the destiny of all the nations of the world. God has given, in awful charge, to Protestant England and Protestant America – the Anglo-Saxon race – the fortunes, not of Christendom only, but of all the world."⁸

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Alexander Campbell, quoted by David B. Bell, "Disciples Unified Destiny," *Landscape Mending*, <https://landscapemending.wordpress.com/bent-grass-a-breif-history-of-cdod-and-doc/> (posted 20 July 2011; accessed 10 March 2017).

As the issue of slavery took on a greater and greater importance in the United States, Campbell wrote, “Much as I may sympathize with a black man, I love the white man more,” thus endorsing a church system that places white folk first and theologically supported Aquinas’ argument of soul layering (which I talked about last week), placing the white soul a notch higher than the soul of a person of color.⁹

After the Civil War, during the initial months of his administration, President Ulysses S. Grant decided he needed to address the so-called “Indian Problem.” Disciples pastor David Bell points out, “five years earlier the United States had ended a war to ensure only one nation would occupy the land from sea to shining sea. However, once the Civil War was over, the reality that years of treaty making between the U.S. and American Tribes had created multiple independent Indian nations across the American landscape confronted the Grant administration. The question before the Grant administration was how to eliminate the Indian nations – thus the Grant Peace policy.

“To eliminate Tribal sovereignty and nationhood the U.S. had to first ‘abrogate’ existing treaties. A rider on the March 3, 1871 Indian appropriation bill made it a reality that, ‘no Indian nation or tribe within the territory of the United States shall be acknowledged or recognized as an independent nation, tribe, or power with whom the United States may contract by treaty’ [U.S. Statutes at Large, 16:566]. This radical congressional action of dismantling Tribal identity and structure changed the U.S. government’s opinion of American Tribes from that of sovereign nations to that of designated ‘wards.’”¹⁰

Now that Native Americans were considered wards, the United States initiated a program to do away with Indian identity. In 1870, Congress passed an appropriation for Indian education. This allowed the government to recruit a wide variety of Christian denominations to establish Indian mission school with the goal of converting and civilizing the Indians. Attendance at these mission schools was made mandatory on many reservations for all native children aged six through sixteen.¹¹ I’m not sure if the Disciples of Christ actually ran such a school on the Yakama Reservation in Washington, but I do know that the DOC has had a mission on the reservation since about this time, a mission that still functions today.

The good news is that how the mission functions has changed in many ways since it was founded. Just this year, they have supported the call for Native rights at the Standing Rock demonstrations and at Oak Flats, and they will be working with the Inter-Tribal coalition of the Diné, Ute Mountain, Hopi, Zuni, and Ute to bring awareness and support for the Bears Ears National Monument. The Yakama Christian Mission has gone from a tool of

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ David B. Bell, “An 1870 Faith Based Initiative,” *Landscape Mending*, <https://landscapemending.wordpress.com/bent-grass-a-breif-history-of-cdod-and-doc/> (posted 20 July 2011; accessed 10 March 2017). Verb tenses changed to fit the past tense voice of the sermon.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

white supremacy to a vehicle of protection of “the North American Landscape and her Indigenous People.”¹²

The United Church of Christ is also complicit in white supremacy. The Congregationalists (one of the predecessor denominations of the UCC) sent missionaries out into the world – that is, out to the heathens who just happened to be non-whites – to bring them Christianity and civilization. One of the places they went was Hawaii. The Congregationalist missionaries and perhaps moreso their children were complicit in the overthrow of Queen Lili’uokalani.

As the UCC said in their 1993 apology to the Hawaiian people, “Some of these [missionary] men and women ... sometimes confused the ways of the West with the ways of the Christ. Assumptions of cultural and racial superiority and alien economic understanding led some of them and those who followed them to discount or undervalue the strengths of the mature society they encountered. Therefore, the rich indigenous values of na Kanaka Maoli, their language, their spirituality, and their regard for the land, were denigrated. The resulting social, political, and economic implications of these harmful attitudes contributed to the suffering of na Kanaka Maoli in that time and into the present.” The United Church of Christ’s apology came with some money for restitution, too.¹³

Apologies and restitution are a start. Changing behavior to demonstrate a new attitude is a start. But what else can we as a church do to overcome how deeply ingrained racism is not just in our society, but in the churches as well?

If we really believe what Paul wrote to the Galatians, that distinctions of ethnicity and distinctions of economic and societal status and even distinctions of gender do not matter, for we are all one in Christ, then we need to do our best to remove racism from our cultural DNA.

The culture that Daniel and his friends were forced into wanted them to violate their consciences. The Babylonians wanted them to do things that went against their values, but they held fast and made a way of conscience when one might of thought there could be no way. My hope is that we can do the same - that we will hold fast to our values of equality and community even when the culture around us continues to allow white supremacy to function.

Last year, the General Board of the Disciples of Christ received a report from the “Racist Language Audit Task Force.” The report goes through the official documents of the denomination – the bylaws (called the “Design”), the standing rules for meetings, denominational policies, and other such documents – and makes specific recommendations of how these documents can be changed to be less racist. In essence, they made recommendations for how the General Ministries of the DOC can work to remove some of the racism from the denomination’s DNA.

¹² The Yakama Christian Mission’s mission statement is “To advocate and educate in favor of the North American Landscape and her Indigenous People.” Learn more at <https://yakamamission.org/>.

¹³ The Rev. Mr. Paul Sherry, as part of his formal apology to the Hawaiian people on behalf of the United Church of Christ, recorded at <https://uccapology.wordpress.com> (accessed 10 March 2017).

As you know, during this sermon series, I am making a suggestion of a possible action we as a congregation or we as individuals can take to respond to some aspect of racism. My suggestion for this week is that we create our own Racist Language Audit Task Force to recommend how our bylaws, policies, and meeting rules (and even our Strategic Plan, if it's needed) could be less racist.

That's one concrete example of something we can do to be less racist. I want to offer one more concrete example of something some other people did. I'm not sure how we can apply it to our congregation, but it is a story that gives me hope.

About five weeks ago, a Native American man told Diana Butler Bass a story about something that had happened at the Standing Rock protests in the preceding months. She wrote about this story: "At the height of the prayer protest, there was also great violence. At one point, a white man stood up and called out, 'Everyone here who is white, come to the front! We will form a shield that the security forces must shoot us first!' And they did so. All the white folks who had gathered at Standing Rock surrounded all the native people, all holding hands, and stood between the water protectors and the guns.

"The native man told me this story with tears in his eyes. 'Yes,' he said, 'terrible things are happening. But never in my life – never in the history of my tribe – did white people stand between us and the bullets. Terrible things are happening. And beautiful, brave things as well.'"¹⁴

May we all find beautiful, brave things to do. Amen.

¹⁴ Diana Butler Bass, in a Facebook post <https://www.facebook.com/Diana.Butler.Bass/posts/10154589452273500> on 11 February 2017 (accessed most recently on 10 March 2017).