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“Race in America  
and a Christian Response”  
Rev. Bill Haley

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## Race in America: A Christian Response

When cities like Los Angeles in the early 90s and more recently Ferguson, Baltimore, Dallas, Charleston, and Charlotte erupt in protest and flames because of racial tensions, it's not without context and a long history.

The history of the enslavement of Africans in the Americas is a long one indeed, lasting well over three centuries from the mid-1500s to the late 1800s. Because of the land development it enabled and the economic gains it produced, as well as the conflicts it generated, much of our globe would be unrecognizable today without the more than 12 million Africans brought across the Atlantic to the Americas, and the many millions more who were born from them into slavery. Slavery indelibly shaped and still shapes parts of Europe, all of England, all of South America, all of West Africa, and all of the United States. While America was founded on some noble principles, it must also be said and grieved, and repented of, that America was founded on the attempted genocide of one group of people and the oppression of another, for centuries explicit and for decades implicit.

In this terrible story an early ray of hope came through a community of friends including William Wilberforce, the British Parliamentarian in the early 1800s whose efforts led to the abolition of slavery in England and then stopped England's participation in the trade itself. He was a white, evangelical Christian, and wrote **“Let it not be said that I was silent when they needed me.”** It was a Christian's response in Britain then.

When we consider an American Christian's response to racial tensions here now, I want to offer 4 words that begin with an R to guide us, but only explore one in this reflection. An appropriate Christian response to racial issues in America is to Recognize, Repent, and Respond, in the context of Relationship.

The word I want to dive into here is Recognize.

To be agents of healing and reconciliation, Christians in America must Recognize that the legacy of explicit slavery is still very much alive, even if now implicit and harder to see, and that that legacy of slavery still profoundly impacts millions of our black brothers and sisters. If you're not on the receiving end of this fruit of slavery, it can be hard to see it, and if you can't see it you'll find it hard to sympathize, and find it harder still to act redemptively with power.



The amazing Bryan Stevenson—a Christian—says it most simply. **“Slavery didn’t end in 1865. It evolved.”**

From 1581 in St. Augustine, FL and from 1619 in Jamestown, VA, then all the way to 1865, the forced servitude and enslavement of black people was widely allowed, legally supported, and refined on a state wide basis with what would come to be known as the “Black Codes”, particularly in the South. It took the Civil War, costing at least 623,000 lives—blood and death and anguish—for the federal law of our land to finally say that slavery was not right, and illegal. But the legal, economic, and social system that supported this racial oppression then morphed for the next 100 years—from 1865 to the 1960s—into what would be called the “Jim Crow” laws which, while they were particularly pernicious in the South, were still effective throughout the whole country.

If you want to know why Chicago looks the way that it does now or why Baltimore erupted the way that it did in 2015, study the history of this period of Jim Crow.

In total, 375 years of baking explicit racism into the DNA of our country. We live in 2017, 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement. It takes more than five decades to uproot something that is that deeply rooted in almost 4 centuries, something that is still bearing fruit.

What kind of fruit?

Here is a short list of the direct and current legacy of Slavery, Black Codes, and Jim Crow in America today.

- Mass Incarceration effecting a disproportionate percentage of black men
- Convict leasing and forced prison labor, again effecting a disproportionate percentage of black men
  - We see these dynamics operating just outside New Orleans at Angola Prison in Louisiana, the largest maximum security prison in the United States with roughly 6,300 inmates. Early in its history Angola pioneered both the use of chain gangs and the use of leasing prisoners out to private companies for cheap labor, and it still does. Currently 75% of Angola’s population is black, while the population of the state of Louisiana is only 33% black. Angola’s history is interesting. In the 1830s a man named Isaac Franklin—a slave trader—wanted his own plantation, so he bought a huge swath of land with his profits and named it for the country that



many of his slaves came from. Angola. That same land was later turned into what is now Angola Prison, otherwise known as the Louisiana State Penitentiary.

More direct and current legacies of Slavery, Black Codes, and Jim Crow include...

- The death penalty and life imprisonment without parole, again effecting a disproportionate percentage of black men and even black children.
- The creation of certain sorts of laws targeted at African Americans with unfavorably inconsistent prosecution and sentencing
- Racial profiling in policing
- Ghettoization and sub-standard housing
- Sub-standard education and re-segregation of schools
- Gerrymandering and targeted voter restrictions
- The Racial Wealth Gap generated at least by centuries of unequal access to property
- The breakdown of the family in parts of the African American community
- and there are still more fruits of slavery that persist...

For the vast majority of our country's history, black lives have mattered less, it's just a matter of whether or not that was and is explicit or implicit. Now it is more implicit.

Do you remember in November of 2014 when the 12 year black boy Tamir Rice was shot to death by the police in Cleveland, Ohio? A petition calling for the indictment of the two officers involved received about 120,000 signatures over a period of 18 months.

And then do you remember in Cincinnati, Ohio, not far from Cleveland, in the summer of 2016 when at the zoo a 3 year old boy fell into the cage of Harambee the gorilla, and the zoo had to shoot the gorilla? Within 48 hours of Harambee's death, a petition calling for criminal charges against the parents of the child received more than 330,000 signatures.



Two days, 330,000 people signed for a gorilla. 18 months, 120,000 people signed for a human being who was black. With reference to NASA and Apollo 13, “America, we have a problem.”

When African Americans in Ferguson in 2014 and then Baltimore in 2015 erupted into protest over the deaths of Michael Brown and Freddie Gray, and the violence happened, and the flames erupted, this is what I heard from my own white evangelical community:

“Why are they burning their own stuff?”

I heard prayers for peace from my fellow white Christian community. I did not hear prayers for justice from my fellow white Christian community.

I did not hear much understanding or grief about the African American experience from my fellow white Christian community, a grief that overcomes you, makes you double over, makes you want to puke in the grass, a grief that makes you sob.

I heard nervousness, a wanting it to be over, a desire to do something and be helpful, but with little idea about what to do. I would suggest that the very first thing Christians in America must do regarding race in America is to Recognize, in the marrow of our bones and in our very guts, we must recognize that if it took 375 years to bake this racial oppression into our country’s DNA, it didn’t get resolved in the 1960s or in just 5 following decades. We’ve got a lot of work to do.

Bryan Stevenson again, “**Slavery didn’t end in 1865. It evolved.**”

And Christians are uniquely positioned to do the work that is required. We are a people familiar with repentance. We are a people accustomed to saying, “I am sorry. What can I do to repair the brokenness of this? How can I amend my life as an expression of my repentance?”

Race in America and a Christian response? Christians in America of all people must grieve the past of slavery and hate its present legacy that still wounds millions of lives. We must fight that legacy. We must begin by speaking up.

We love William Wilberforce. We want to remember that he did not do his work alone. He was part of a community of Christians oriented around the Bible and prayer and life together and working together to right what is wrong. Let us also remember that he said, “**Let it not be said that I was silent when they needed me.**” I would suggest that we can really tap into his legacy and carry it on, which we all want to do, by speaking up



about and acting for those same sorts of men and women that he fought for. The issues he was contending against are not vanquished, they evolved.

We do this with our eyes on Jesus, empowered by the Spirit of Jesus.

Especially in the season of Advent or Christmas, and yet very appropriate at all times, the lyric from that sublime carol “O Holy Night” inspires us....

*Truly He taught us to love one another  
His law is love and His gospel is peace  
Chains shall He break for the slave is our brother  
And in His name all oppression shall cease.*