

## Script I-Introduction

Our Christian faith cannot be seen as unanimous or univocal. We may occasionally view that lack of uniformity as detrimental (when we can't find agreement or even manage to work together for the shared love of our neighbors). At other times, we may view the diversity with relief (when we say, for example, "I'm not THAT sort of Christian; they don't speak for me!"). However we perceive variety in the Christian tradition, that it exists is readily apparent.

As we begin this mini-course on Christianity and racism, we may begin by noting that there is a long and complicated history related to Christian views of diversity itself—of how we see each other or "the other." As a whole, we have to admit that Christianity can't be labeled strictly either as pro- or anti-racism. Our predecessors were neither singularly heroes of equality nor solely violent villains. Both streams have been present throughout our history. And each side has been just as apt to understand themselves to be "right" (i.e., true to the heritage of the faith) while casting the other side as deviant or sinful, as missing the mark.

Although the concept of race or racial identity as we understand it is really less than 250 years old, we can already see much in the Bible that relates to insiders and outsiders, "us versus them," people like me contrasted with strangers and foreigners.

The Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, speak about relationships to outsiders with a wide assortment of voices:

- The laws of Deuteronomy commanded justice and concern for the outsiders. For example, “You shall not deprive a resident alien or an orphan of justice; you shall not take a widow's garment in pledge. Remember that you were a slave in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you from there; therefore I command you to do this. When you reap your harvest in your field and forget a sheaf in the field, you shall not go back to get it; it shall be left for the alien, the orphan, and the widow, so that the LORD your God may bless you in all your undertakings” (Deuteronomy 24:17-19).
- On the other hand, the book of Joshua described conquering the land with the sword, killing all of the foreign inhabitants in such complete vengeful destruction that they obliterated men, women, children, and even livestock (e.g., Joshua 6:21).
- While Ezra condemned mixed marriages with foreign wives and cast them out (10:10-12), the story of Ruth tells us that David, the greatest of kings, was the great-grandson of a Moabite (4:17).
- The prophet Isaiah spoke oracles against the nations in fear, but also envisioned a day when the small people of Israel would be a beacon, “a light to the nations” (42:6), and when all peoples would stream to the temple (2:3)

In the next session, we will make more use of the New Testament and trying to align our lives with the life and teachings of Jesus. For now, we note that the conflict between faithful insiders and Gentile outsiders continued in the biblical stories of early Christian history. So, Peter would refuse to eat with non-Jewish Gentiles, but came to declare, “I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). Paul argued with the church hierarchy about including the Gentiles in the mission of the Gospel (Acts 15, Galatians 1), and went on to proclaim, “There is no longer Jew or Greek...for all are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28). A vision in the book of Revelation finally sees “a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the lamb, robed in white” (Revelation 7:9). Generally, then, we might say that the New Testament trends toward developing acceptance and an open table, but we would also have to note that inclusion remains conditional on being part of the Christian community.

As time progressed, the Church became less and less homogeneous. The gospel was received across an expanding geography and among more and more peoples. Although we, in North America, frequently focus on the development of the church as institutionalized and centered in Europe, we recognize that the Christian faith originated in Jerusalem, included Arabs (Acts 2:11) and spread to Ethiopia (Acts 8:27). Early centers of Christianity included many places that American Christians have, in

large degree, considered foreign or “multi-cultural.” These traditions continue to exist with deep roots. For example, the Coptic branch of Christianity, centered in Alexandria, Egypt traces its origin to the evangelist Mark. Christians in India claim their founding from the disciple Thomas. Augustine, often viewed as the greatest theologian of the church, was from North Africa in what is now Algeria. The Great Schism in 1054 split what had been a vast hegemony of Christianity into two major groups – East and West – separating many of our traditions from their historic roots in Asia. As western Christianity separated from headquarters in Constantinople (now Istanbul), among the deep historical roots that were forgotten, or lost track of, was fellowship with the Armenian Orthodox Church, which was the first country to adopt Christianity as its official religion in 301.

This very hasty overview of Christian history serves as both reminder and corrective. Many of our denominations in the Wisconsin Council of Churches trace our founding and identity in the European history of the past 500 years or so. Engendered with white privilege and supremacy, we associate our congregations with Scandinavian or German or French reformers and heritage, and English is the standard language in our churches. Further, we have considered global mission to mean sending missionaries to Africa or Asia, betraying a patronizing bias of “First World” to “Third World.” The presumptions of this history contrast with our current context, in which our towns are the mission fields, and we are not the predominant source we might have imagined.

Returning somewhat more directly to our conversation of race and religion, we can note well that, in our country's history of the early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century, the same Christian faith was understood and practiced in very different ways by slaveholders, slaves, and abolitionists. The slaveholders used biblical justifications that masters were to rule over their slaves as Christ was the head over the body (Ephesians 5) and twisted Noah's curse of his son (Genesis 9:25) into racial categories, or claimed they were bettering the uncivilized. African slaves reformed this oppressive religion to make it their own as they clung to promises of freedom, as God's people had been rescued in an exodus from slavery. Abolitionists argued that biblical slavery was different in not regarding people as property and turned to Hebrews 13:3, "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body" (KJV). Frederick Douglass condemned the weakness and indifference of churches, writing, "Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference." Among the denominations of the Wisconsin Council of Churches is a similarly diverse history regarding abolition – support or opposition, inaction or resistance, or non-involvement.

Similar trends, yet with increasing complexity, have continued in the time since the end of slavery. The Christian faith was the central strength and motivation for the nonviolent resistance of the Civil Rights Movement, founded around love, but it was

also the bulwark of the segregationists' hatred. More recently, the shape of popular Christianity has moved from social engagement to individualistic salvation.

In recent decades, our church bodies have continued this variety of involvement. Some have worked on interracial dialogue and have incorporated increasingly multicultural music. Some have developed Black and Womanist theology to counter the dominance of white males. Some have been part of divestment in South Africa to force the end of apartheid. Some have engaged in poverty relief and criminal justice reform. Some have sought to welcome new immigrants and refugees. Some have adopted official statements and begun anti-racism training. All have a complex, checkered past, and a long way to go.

### **Discussion Questions?**