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The Sins of the Church

Texts: **Genesis 9: 18-27; Philemon; Abraham Lincoln, *Second Inaugural Address***

(For further historical information, see Jemar Tisby, *The Color of Compromise*, from which much information in this sermon has come.)

By now most of us are aware that the first Africans arriving in the American Colonies did so in 1619 in Jamestown in the Virginia colony. One of the reasons given for the righteousness of slavery was that it afforded to non-Christian Africans the possibility of hearing the gospel and converting to Christianity. This could, of course, have been done without also enslaving the Africans, but people find justifications for unjust actions wherever they can. However, there was a problem. It was the longstanding custom in England that Christians could not enslave one another, because they were spiritual brothers and sisters. As the enslaved became Christians, some masters felt that they had to set them free. Their consciences said so. That's why in September 1667, the Virginia General Assembly, consisting of good church-going Anglican men, passed an act which read in part: "It is enacted and declared by this Grand Assembly...that the conferring of baptism does not alter the condition of the person as to his bondage or freedom." It saw this as a positive benefit for Christian masters, continuing: "Masters, freed from this doubt, may more carefully endeavor the propagation of Christianity by permitting children, though slaves, or those of greater growth if capable, to be admitted to that sacrament." And so the state, with the acquiescence of the Anglican church, set out on the path of a theological justification of slavery that would not interfere with the institution of slavery.

One of the chief passages that was used to justify the practice of enslaving others was found in Genesis in the text we heard this morning. In it, in a drunken or perhaps hungover stupor, Noah was found lying naked in his tent by his son Ham. In his shame and embarrassment, Noah lashes out at Ham, and condemns Ham's son, Canaan, Noah's grandson, to be a slave to the offspring of Shem and Japheth. It's a crazy little story, probably meant to show how human the great hero Noah really was, so that no one would be tempted to deify him. It was also meant to be a justification of the later Israelite destruction of the Canaanite cities in the promised land. But it's clearly an unjust story from the get-go. Noah was in the wrong being drunk. Ham did nothing but check on his father's well-being and was confronted by his father's nakedness through no fault of his own. As a result, the still hung-over Noah rage curses Ham's son, Canaan. Canaan had nothing to do with the incident at all. It's grossly unjust to him. Noah's curse is that Canaan will be the slave of his brothers, by which the text clearly means not Canaan's brothers, who are also Ham's children, but the offspring of Shem and Japheth, Ham's brothers.

The whole thing is a mess, but this is the text that southern theologians hung the whole institution of slavery on. They argued, for no reason at all, that Ham represented all Black people, the people of Africa. Shem was clearly the Jews – the word Semite comes from the name Shem – and Japheth they interpreted to be the white race. Asians don't get an ancestor in this genealogy of humanity. But if Ham is the ancestor of the Blacks, and Japheth the ancestor of the whites, then clearly Blacks are meant to be enslaved by whites. This makes slavery just and a biblical mandate, and there's nothing anyone can do about it. So they argued.

The absurdity of this argument on its face is striking. Arbitrarily assigning Africans to Ham is very convenient. Arbitrarily assigning white Europeans to Japheth is also very convenient. Neither attribution has any basis in reality. Critics also pointed out that the curse was on Canaan, not Ham, and was fulfilled when Israel defeated the Canaanites in the conquest of the Promised Land. And further, critics pointed out, why should the whole institution of slavery rest upon the drunken curse of an embarrassed and hung-over Noah. How is that the divine will? Is everything that an alcoholic father spouts about his children and grandchildren supposed to be the will of God? Clearly not. But this argument about Ham was accepted by all southern churches as justifying slavery. In fact, before the Civil War, as the theological arguments flew back and forth across the Mason-Dixon Line, southern theologians belligerently asked for a single word of Jesus or the Bible condemning slavery outright. And, unfortunately, no such verse can be found, as they well knew before asking the question. These same church theologians pointed out that some of the patriarchs owned slaves, and still found favor with God.

Opponents of slavery, both in the north and the south, argued that the whole tenor of the Scripture pointed to the law of love, and that no one could enslave another in love. They argued that the spirit of the law clearly outlawed slavery, even if the letter had no explicit condemnation of it. They further argued that, while Paul had not commanded Philemon in direct words to free his slave Onesimus, Paul had used all his influence to direct Philemon to treat Onesimus as a beloved brother, not a slave. The opponents of slavery didn't know it at the time, but it is likely from history that Philemon did free Onesimus and that Onesimus went on to become the bishop of Ephesus. This would be our first example of a formerly enslaved person becoming the bishop of a church.

The theological opponents of slavery also argued that slavery as known in the Bible is completely different from slavery as it was in America. Bible slavery is about prisoners of war, or about debt slaves, people who had sold themselves into slavery to pay off a debt. It wasn't about race and children weren't born into it. But this was a complicated argument to make and not everyone could follow it, nor wanted to follow it. As Upton Sinclair, the great political activist for justice, once wrote: "It is difficult to get a man to understand something when his salary depends on his not understanding it." In the same way, southern Christians who lived by slavery failed to understand any argument against it.

It was in this context that southern and northern churches split up before the Civil War. The Methodists split into the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, over the issue of whether a *bishop* could hold slaves. The Southern Baptist Convention split from the Northern Baptists over whether *missionaries* could hold slaves. The Presbyterians split into the Presbyterian Church in the USA and the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America over the question of whether the church could insist on allegiance to a nation, the United States, or whether that was joining Christ to Caesar, that is, joining church and state too closely.

In the south there was righteous fury over northern opposition to slavery. The south saw it as entirely Biblical, based on the story of Ham and the failure of the Bible to condemn slavery outright. They thought that the arguments of the opponents of slavery were based on the spirit of the law, not the letter of the law, and they were committed literalists in their Scriptural interpretation. Here is Southern Methodist preacher J.W. Tucker, preaching to Confederates in 1862: “Your cause is the cause of God, the cause of Christ, of humanity. It is a conflict of truth with error—of Bible with northern infidelity—of pure Christianity with northern fanaticism.” The cause of slavery is the cause of pure Christianity, the cause of the Christian church. I shudder in repentance at such thought.

An influential southern theologian was James Henley Thornwell and his doctrine of the Spirituality of the Church. He argued that the church’s Constitution was the Bible and that the church should say nothing about political or social matters. This doctrine has long been used to keep the church silent on many social injustices, declaring that the church has no place to speak out about racism, or homophobia, or sexism, or any other injustice in society. It was developed to silence the church opposition to slavery, but it continues to this day to keep many ministers silent about grave injustices.

In Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address, given on March 4th, 1865 just six weeks before his assassination, we can hear clear echoes of this fight over the meaning of slavery and the Bible. Lincoln had already issued the Emancipation Proclamation three years before, in 1862, to take effect on January 1st 1863. He had freed the slaves in any territory that Union forces captured after that date. By the Second Inaugural in March 1865, the Union was clearly winning. It would all be over by May 9th, 1865, and the remaining slaves would be freed and slavery in the United States would be effectively ended. This could not have been foreseen at the outset of the war, as Lincoln mentions. Lincoln’s Address is full of Biblical imagery. Lincoln not only wants to win the war on the battlefield, he wants to win the war on the Bible field as well. Lincoln goes back to his own passage in Genesis, to Genesis 3:19, after the fall of humanity, where God says, in the King James Version, which is the one Lincoln knew: “In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread, till thou return unto the ground; for out of it wast thou taken: for

dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return.” Lincoln shows perplexity at those who would wring their bread from the sweat of other men’s faces.

Lincoln knows that he will be accused of judging others, so he quotes Matthew 7:1, “Judge not that ye be not judged.” In fact, he knows that the north was not innocent in respect to Black people. There were plenty of racists in the north as well, and even Lincoln was not without fault in this regard. So he seeks not to judge, even as he speaks of God’s judgment. To explain all of the woe which the war caused, which came, as Lincoln sees it, from the sinful offense of slavery, Lincoln feels justified in quoting Matthew 18:7: “Woe unto the world because of offenses; for it must needs be that offenses come, but woe to that man by whom the offense cometh.” Lincoln argues that the defeat of the Confederacy is the just retribution of a just God upon the grave offense of slavery. The woes of the war come from the offense of slavery. Lincoln sees God’s justice in destroying all the wealth that was built up by the slave over 250 years of slavery in just the few years of the Civil War. Of course, it wasn’t all destroyed, and within two decades much of it was back in the hands of those who had held slaves and who had started the war, but Lincoln could not know that. This destruction of wealth is a sign that God is displeased with slavery, Lincoln thinks, but the destruction is just and merited because of the grave sin of enslaving others. God is right in making that judgement. Lincoln quotes Psalm 19:9: “The judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.”

Lincoln fills his address with Biblical language because he knows that he will have to win over the church as well as the state in defeating the south. The church was complicit in the sin of slavery and racism. It had to be brought around, and corrected. Lincoln is using his address to make his contribution to the theological argument, using the defeat of the Confederacy as a sign that God’s will is on the side of those fighting against slavery.

What can we learn from this history and these Scriptures? First, we have to be extremely careful in our Biblical interpretation, especially when we think the Bible supports a position that is convenient to our interests. Half of the country took an obscure story from Genesis as the basis of chattel slavery and ran with it. The interpretation was, and is, absurd. Second, we have to be careful about what the church supports. Anglicans in Virginia decreed that Christians could hold other Christians as slaves because it supported their economic interests. What are we doing today that the future will see as grossly immoral because it fits in with our economic interests? Third, an insistence on the letter of the law instead of the spirit of the law, that is, an excessive literalism in interpretation, can lead to gross injustices towards others. It’s important to read the Scripture in a way that Lincoln prescribes: “with malice toward none, with charity for all.” That was a remarkable thing for Lincoln to say at the end of a bitterly fought Civil War, but it comes straight out of the theology of St. Augustine in the late fourth century: any interpretation of the Scripture that makes you love God or your neighbor more is a good one, and any interpretation of Scripture that makes you love God or your neighbor less is

a mistaken interpretation. Those arguing for slavery could have taken that to heart. It still applies today.

Finally, we can't let a theology of the spirituality of the church prevent us from taking stands on important moral issues of our day. This doctrine was concocted to protect slavery from attack by Christian preachers, and it has no business in our church today. The church shouldn't say who to vote for, but it should make clear what the moral issues are in our society, and encourage people to vote their awakened consciences.

May God use this history of the church, and its interpretation of Scripture to justify the mistreatment of Black people, as a warning and an admonition to us today, to work hard in the fight for justice, and not to be swayed by interpretations of Scripture that make some people better than others for any reason. Amen