

Atoning for Christianity's History with Our Black Siblings

We may not think about it much, but being a leader or participant in the Christian faith means that we are a part of a significant history spanning about 2000 years, and we add to that history each day. What we see and experience today in our personal spirituality, faith communities, and Christian religion is the product that was nurtured in the soil of what has come and been done before us. Routinely, we as Christian leaders and participants make space to focus on an aspect of our history and recognize how it continues to impact us today such as Christmas, Easter, Pentecost, the Lord's Supper, World Communion Sunday, Reformation Sunday, Gifts of Women Sunday, All Saints Day, and so on. The month of February offers us an opportunity to make space for a specific aspect of our history: the history of our engagement with the Black community.

February is Black History Month in the United States and this month is very appropriate for the Church to lift up the role we have played in the history of Black people in our country and the world. Sadly, whereas many of the aspects of our history that we lift up throughout the year are joyous and celebratory, our history with the Black community tends to not be so. This makes it more important for us as the Church to claim this aspect of history and reconcile it with the teachings and life of Jesus that we claim to follow.

Throughout history, Christianity (represented by the actions and rhetoric of our leaders and participants) has juxtaposed itself to the lives and well-being of our Black siblings. Maybe the most recognized critique of our relationship with the Black community comes from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in many of his speeches and writings, as he laid out Christianity's engagement (particularly the white Church's engagement) with the Black community plainly,

'I have longed to hear white ministers declare: "Follow this decree because integration is morally right and because the Negro is your brother." In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.' ([Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963](#))

King's experience of the Church's engagement with the Black community's fight for civil rights would be summed up later in his speech as *"some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows."* ([Letter from a Birmingham Jail, 1963](#))

The Church's history of acting against our Black siblings has not been so short as the Civil Rights Movement and not always so passive. In his book "[Stamped from the Beginning](#)" (2017), author historian and author Ibram X. Kendi explains, *"During America's first century, racist theological ideas were absolutely critical to sanctioning the growth of American slavery and making it acceptable to the Christian churches."* (p. 6, Kindle Edition) And Christian support of racism and violence against our Black siblings continued as the decades went on, including in the early 1700's when *"More and more enslavers began to listen to the arguments of missionaries that Christian submission could supplement their violence in subduing African*

people. Actually, the ministers focused on the submission and were mum on the violence.” (pp. 73-74, Kindle Edition)

It is time for us as members of the Church Universal to atone for the roles we have played in Black History and the teachings and model of Jesus whom we follow. It is time for us to repent. We must take responsibility for the ways Christianity has historically oppressed our Black siblings and has continued to do so still today. Even if we feel that this oppression has been carried out in the past and has not been continued in our time, we must enlighten ourselves as to how we benefit from our oppressive history and how our blindness to our past continues the harm today. And we must commit ourselves to actions that will mend the brokenness our history has caused. For this is repentance: confession, accountability, and reparation; and this is what we the Church must do if we are to hold to our convictions in following Jesus.

This is not an argument that the Church hasn't done good things in our world, because we have and will continue to do so. We cannot lift up our positive impact and ignore the ways that we have contributed to the suffering and marginalization of our Black siblings. Our goal in this work is not to tear down the Church or Christian faith, but to build it up and live into the vision of God's Kingdom Jesus set for us. This work will be challenging and will stretch our understanding of what it means to be faithful members of the Church and followers of Jesus. And, we can once again turn to King's message in a ["Letter from a Birmingham Jail" \(1963\)](#) to orient ourselves in doing this work out of love,

“I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. I do not say this as one of those negative critics who can always find something wrong with the church. I say this as a minister of the gospel, who loves the church; who was nurtured in its bosom; who has been sustained by its spiritual blessings and who will remain true to it as long as the cord of life shall lengthen.”

Let us make space in love for the atonement of Christianity's history with our Black siblings and a commitment to the realization of a future that nurtures all.

Your partner in the journey,

Rev. Zac Wolfe