

# “Three Historical Phrases Still Relevant Today”

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*There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. — Galatians 3:28 (NRSV)*

November is just dawning. But most of us, I suspect, are already eager to put 2020 in the rearview mirror. Hardly a picnic, this year has been largely defined by the pandemic, the resulting economic downturn, an extraordinarily bitter political campaign, a disturbing succession of violent acts by law enforcement officers caught on video, and nights of volatile protests in many cities.

I serve on the recently-formed Racial Justice Task Team of the National Association of Congregational Christian Churches (NACCC). It took no arm-twisting to get me on this team. I volunteered as soon as I learned that it was forming. I have strong feelings and strong beliefs about equality—under the law, and in the eyes of God.

Admittedly, equality is a core principle that informs my views on all things political, social, and economic. But I find equality to also be a theological touchstone, and a spiritual tuning fork. Thus, for me, denying the existence of systemic racism would be self-deception. Ignoring it would be self-betrayal. And, for God’s church, silence would be both tacit approval and ecclesiastical malpractice.

That last sentence, I realize, may for some be a debatable point—perhaps even controversial. I recognize that when a church—or its representatives, lay or ordained—speak out on a social or political issue, some may bristle with discomfort. That said, I think scripture in general, and especially the voice of Jesus in the canonical gospels, has much to say about what we today would call issues of “social justice” and “human rights.” And the history of Christianity clearly records the contributions of church folk to the specific cause of racial justice—from John Newton (a slave ship captain turned Anglican clergyman, “Amazing Grace” lyricist, and abolitionist), to Martin Luther King, Jr. and onward to the present day.

For my part, I feel compelled—morally, ethically, theologically, and perhaps most of all spiritually—to personally engage on this issue, and to give voice to what’s on my heart and mind. Certainly, not everyone will agree with my point of view. And yes, that’s what this piece is: my point of view. It’s nothing more and nothing less. I offer it for whatever it’s worth to you, and I invite your feedback if you feel moved to comment. My email address is [rcf474@gmail.com](mailto:rcf474@gmail.com).

I joined the aforementioned Task Team with enthusiasm, but also with a clear, up-front disclaimer: I’m a white guy who’s a product of overwhelmingly white suburbs, serving a local church that’s even more overwhelmingly white. And so, while my heart is definitely with the cause, my own personal experience is quite limited. I’m grateful that the other members of the group welcomed me and have embraced my meager contributions to the work thus far.

While gladdened by their acceptance, I took it upon myself to do some remedial homework to help get me thinking outside my white comfort zone. A colleague recommended a good starting point: an extended article in the *New York Times Magazine* entitled “America’s Enduring Caste System” by Isabel Wilkerson. (The article is a synopsis of her new book, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*.) Then, I watched, for the first time, the entire original (1977) *Roots* mini-series based on Alex Haley’s landmark book. From there, I devoured all the episodes of the 2020 podcasts “Who We Are” and “1619.” My eyes and my mind are opening more and more widely.

I feel like a great many pages could flow forth from my fingers. But this isn't the forum for such an extensive discussion. For now, let me merely share a few thoughts on three historical phrases that strike me as remarkably relevant amid today's struggle for racial justice.

**1. The invisible hand.** If you took an economics class in high school or college, or if you just had a good world history teacher, you'll recall this phrase associated with 18th century British economist Adam Smith. The idea: If every individual simply pursues his or her own economic self-interest, the most righteous possible social outcomes will naturally emerge. It came to be a favorite phrase in the world of *laissez-faire* economics, championing the minimization of taxation, regulation, and other governmental interventions in finance and trade.

But, to the best of my understanding, the invisible hand has been no champion of racial justice. Rather, when and where the single-minded pursuit of economic self-interest has been allowed to advance unchecked, it has resulted in appalling disparities in housing, education, employment, income, wealth, and health, while turning a blind eye to outright exploitation.

Let's be clear: Nobody in the mainstream of American discourse is advocating for equality of *outcome*. In our economic system, people prosper to varying degrees. I certainly take no issue with that. But many are expressing concerns about equality of *opportunity*, or the lack thereof. Many are describing what they see as an uneven playing field. Many are questioning whether the economic disparities have become so extreme as to be immoral. And many are pointing to the various contexts in which they see structural bias. On each of these fronts, I count my voice among the "many."

**2. Means of production.** Back in school, many of us learned that the distinction between communism and capitalism comes down to the question of who owns the means of production—a nation's land, resources, factories, etc. Simplistically speaking, in a communist system, the government owns these assets. In a capitalist system, the means of production are in the hands of the private sector, i.e. corporations and, to a lesser extent, entrepreneurs. And, we were probably taught that whoever owns the means of production has a degree of control with regard to the aspirational self-determination of individuals. As Americans, most of us learned that it's unquestionably preferable to consign such control to an array of business interests rather than to a central government.

In the 19th century, the booming cotton industry largely drove America's economic strength. According to episode 2 of the "1619" podcast ("The Economy that Slavery Built"), at one point the market value of the nation's several million enslaved people (remember, they were commonly and legally regarded as property) exceeded the aggregate value of *all* the factories and *all* the railroads *combined*. In effect, slaves had become our country's most economically significant means of production. In the eyes of their owners, they existed for just one purpose: to maximize their owners' financial gain. They were no different, in that regard, than brick-and-mortar factories.

While the strength of America's labor movement has ebbed and flowed over the last century and a half, it currently appears beleaguered. The digital revolution has radically transformed the economy and the job market. While both political parties talk about worker retraining, effective initiatives have been few and far between. The federal minimum wage has been stagnant for over a decade. While "exploitation" may be too harsh a word, it seems fair to say that today's workers, by and large, are getting a pretty raw deal.

**3. The banality of evil.** Political philosopher Hannah Arendt's book, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* was published in 1963. But I first learned of it a quarter-century later, in an undergrad political theory class at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In observing the trial of former

Nazi official Adolph Eichmann, Arendt was struck by how much of his conduct was motivated not by heartfelt hatred or anti-Semitism or bloodlust, but rather by far more mundane considerations like obeying his orders and doing his duty.

If you remember *Roots*, think about characters like Captain Davies (Ed Asner), Squire Reynolds (Lorne Green), Dr. Reynolds (Robert Reed), and Tom Moore (Chuck Connors). At the core, what drove them? Was it really hatred based on skin color? Or was it a far more banal duo of motivations: greed and fear?

To be clear, I certainly believe that there was—and there is—heartfelt racial hatred. I don't claim to understand it, but its existence is undeniable. Still, I can't help but wonder how much racially skewed decision-making is motivated primarily by greed, or perhaps by fear, more so than by hatred *per se*. I wonder if relatively banal considerations—property values, job opportunities, college admissions, wage and price levels, etc.—drive our attitudes about education, immigration, Affirmative Action, taxes, transportation, the minimum wage, policing, and other issues far more than any truly deep-seeded animus.

The Old Testament wisdom book known as *Ecclesiastes* repeatedly asserts, "There is nothing new under the sun." Perhaps that can be said of today's racial tensions. I'll be the first to stipulate that the problems are immense, structural, complex, and vexing—and solutions are elusive. But perhaps these three historical phrases, taken together, offer a window into at least some of today's key issues. So much of what we face arises from the invisible hand of competing economic interests, how we value labor in the calculus of economic productivity, and how we self-manage our mundane, banal instincts of fear and greed.

*O God, with increasing openness, I acknowledge that my ancestors survived and prospered, at least in part, due to the systemic mistreatment of others. Directly and indirectly, my bloodline benefitted from the sweat and blood, involuntarily shed, of folks who outwardly appeared a bit different from me. I recognize that my privilege has meant the dis-empowerment of others who are equally your children. I realize that my skin color, and even the zip code in which I was raised, has advantaged me, tilting the playing field in my favor.*

*I confess, Lord, that I surely could have done more—should have done more—to help level that field. Forgive me for not speaking out more frequently, more boldly, and more eloquently. Forgive me for relishing a bit too much my privilege, my empowerment, my benefit, my advantage. Forgive me for any degree of spiritual myopia. And forgive me for any instance of inaction which suggests a shortage of human compassion.*

*Grant us your wisdom and guidance that we may build a tomorrow that's far more just than yesterday or today. Give us eyes to see, ears to hear, minds to perceive, hearts to discern, and hands to help. This I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.*

#### Questions for Reflection:

- What specific issue of the day stirs the greatest fervor or passion in you?
- How have you channeled that passion thus far, and how might you act on it going forward?
- Do you think it's appropriate and constructive for a church to address racial justice? Why or why not?
- How has the "invisible hand" of economic self-interest influenced your own social action or inaction?
- How do you tend to see labor-related issues like collective bargaining, wages, benefits, etc.?
- Most days, do you find yourself motivated mainly by lofty principles or by mundane, banal concerns?
- If Jesus were here in the flesh, what do you think he would say about the current state of our society?
- What, if anything, do you want to confess to God today?