

“John Wesley on ‘White Racism,’” talk delivered during worship at Claremont United Methodist Church, Claremont CA, on Feb. 10, 2019 by Ardys Hunter, Ward McAfee and Alex Morales; historical research by Ward McAfee, ed. Lois McAfee. Sponsored by the Dismantling Racism Committee, Claremont United Methodist Church.

The setting of the chancel area: Alex is in the pulpit; Ardys and Ward are behind music stands in middle of the Chancel. Alex begins speaking. Readers are standing at the outset.

Alex:

Last year the Growing Christians Adult class spent months in self-reflection while reading Debby Irving’s autobiographical book Waking up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race. We discussed and answered Irving’s probing questions at the end of each short chapter. It was eye-opening for those who are White. The class felt called to explore how our church could walk forward on this journey of self-discovery together. Five of us formed a racial justice committee soon renamed the Dismantling Racism Committee: Frank Cookingham, Ardys Hunter, Henry Jefferson, Lois McAfee, and myself.

Last week Brett O’Connor [Principal, Claremont High School] shared his self-discoveries about his own white racism and modeled for the congregation the kind of introspection that is necessary for dismantling racism.

This morning our committee shares with you some of the arguments, fervor and Christian faith found in a pamphlet first published in 1774 entitled “Thoughts upon Slavery.”¹ Its author was John Wesley, who lived from 1702 to 1791, and he was the founder of the Methodist Movement

In this pamphlet, Wesley did not address black people. His audience was the White Christian community, and his focus was on changing white hearts, attitudes and behavior.

Ward:

In 1735, at the age of 32, well before he founded the Methodist Movement in England, Wesley crossed the Atlantic at the behest of James Oglethorpe (a British reformer who had founded a New-World colony for debtors to get a fresh start). Wesley’s immediate purpose there was to convert the Indians to Christianity. Oglethorpe called his experiment Georgia. He did not allow slavery in his colony and Wesley approved. Wesley stayed in Georgia for only two years.

1 John Wesley, “Thoughts upon Slavery” Fifth Edition, (London: G. Paramore, North Green, Worship Street, 1792). Reprint: Forgotten Books: www.forgottenbooks.com, 24 pp.

Two decades later, the British crown overruled Oglethorpe's original intent, and slavery became established there. While Wesley did not experience slavery directly in Georgia, he knew from news, study, reflection, and prayer how the colony had changed.

By the time that he began to preach about the evils of slavery, he had founded the Methodist Movement dedicated to fighting injustice on many fronts systematically—methodically. His purpose was to change hearts and minds. Ultimately, Wesley felt led by God to write his anti-slavery tract in 1774 on the eve of the American Revolution.

England lost the war to retain its American colonies, but Wesley's appeal against slavery eventually triumphed, as England moved to eradicate the international slave trade (well before the new United States did)/ and outlaw slavery within the British Empire in the 1830s (a generation before the United States acted against slavery in 1865).

Put in the context of the American Revolution and what followed under the new United States, it can be seen that the Americans who supposedly were dedicated to freedom and equality of opportunity were much slower learners than the British in developing a mature attitude about the evils of slavery.

Ardys:

Wesley's pamphlet began as a history lesson on England's first encounters with the slave trade and slavery. This is how he began his "Thoughts upon Slavery:"

"It was about 1551 that the English began trading in Guinea, at first for gold and elephants' teeth, but soon after for men. In 1566, Sir John Hawkins sailed with two ships to Cape Verde, where he sent eighty men ashore to catch Negroes. But the natives escaped them. In pursuit, Hawkins sent men ashore again on a neighboring island. They burned several towns and seized some of their inhabitants, but they met with such resistance that seven of their own men were killed while taking only ten Negroes. So Hawkins went to yet another island till having taken enough Negroes, he proceeded to the West-Indies and sold them.

"Eventually Europeans found a more efficient way to trade slaves by prevailing upon Africans themselves to make war upon each other and then sell their prisoners. Till then the Africans seldom had any wars but were in general quiet and peaceable. But the white men first taught them drunkenness and avarice, and then hired them to sell one another. By this means even their kings became induced to sell their own subjects."

Alex:

Portugal and Spain were the first European nations to trade in African slaves, but men like Sir John Hawkins were intent on getting England involved as well. There was money to be made! As the slave trade grew, it became part of the economic expansion of the British

Empire and the New United States. But Wesley emphasized that this kind of economic growth was not admirable. This is what he wrote:

“It is said that slavery is authorized by law. But, can human law change the nature of things? Can it turn darkness into light or evil into good? By no means! Notwithstanding ten thousand laws, right is right, and wrong is wrong. There must still remain an essential difference between justice and injustice, cruelty and mercy. So I ask, who can reconcile this treatment of Negroes with either mercy or justice?”

“In 1724, an eminent statesman in the House of Commons said very short and plain, “Damn justice! Slavery is a necessity. If it is not quite right, yet it *must* be so: There is an absolute *necessity* for it. It is necessary we should procure slaves: And when we have procured them, it is necessary to use them with severity, considering their stupidity, stubbornness and wickedness.”

John Wesley asked “What is necessary? And, secondly, to what end? It may be answered, ‘The whole method now used by the original purchasers of Negroes is necessary to furnishing our colonies yearly with a hundred thousand slaves.’ I grant that this is necessary to that end. But how is that end necessary? And you answer: ‘Why, it is necessary to my gaining a hundred thousand pounds.’ Perhaps so: But how is *this* necessary? It is very possible you might be both a better and a happier man, if you had not a quarter of it. I deny that your gaining one schilling of it is necessary, either to your present or eternal happiness. ‘But,’ you say, ‘these slaves are necessary for the cultivation of our islands in the West Indies as white men are not able to labor in hot climates*.’ I answer: It were better that all those islands should remain uncultivated forever, yea, it would be more desirable that they were all together sunk in the depth of the sea, than that they should be cultivated at so high a price, as the violation of justice, mercy, and truth.”

And then Wesley recalled his own experience in Georgia before the introduction of slavery there:

“White men, even Englishmen, are well able to labor in hot climates--provided they are temperate both in meat and drink, and that they inure themselves to it by degrees. I speak no more than I know by experience. It appears from the thermometer that the summer heat in Georgia is frequently equal to that in Barbados. And yet I and my family (eight in number) did employ all our spare time there in felling of trees and clearing of ground, as hard labor as any Negro need be employed in. A German family likewise, forty in number, were employed in all manner of labor.

“It is not true therefore that white men are not able to labor, even in hot climates, full well as black. But if they were indeed not able, it would be better that no one should labor there--that the work should be left undone--than millions of innocent persons should be murdered, and many more dragged into slavery.

“Wealth is not necessary to the glory of any nation; but wisdom, virtue, justice, mercy, generosity, public spirit, love of our country--these are necessary to the real glory of a nation; but abundance of wealth is not.”

Ardys:

The account just read emphasized the claim that the Africans’ stupidity justified their slavery. Here is more of what John Wesley wrote in his “Thoughts upon Slavery:”

“You say that Negroes are stupid, that if freed from slavery they would not work. Allowing them to be as stupid as you say, to whom is that stupidity owing? Without question it lies altogether at the door of their inhuman masters who give them no means, no opportunity of improving their understanding. They were no way remarkable for stupidity while they remained in their own country. Certainly the African is in no respect inferior to the European. Their stupidity therefore in our plantations is not natural. Rather, it is the natural effect of their condition. Consequently it is not their fault, but yours: You must answer for it, before GOD and man.”

Ward:

Wesley’s arguments were made while Anglo-America was still in a colonial status. That form of slavery seems so long ago but its toxic residue is still with us. As Shakespeare said 500 years ago, “the evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.”

Slavery officially was outlawed in the United States in 1865, but it survived under another name. In fact, the supposed “freedom” of post-Civil-War-African-Americans in some ways proved to be worse than slavery, for under slavery white masters at least had an economic motive to protect their black human property. That was gone after 1865.

Lynching of blacks became a blood sport for white people after the Civil War. This remained well into modern times. Race-based lynching was a horrific form of domestic terrorism designed to keep blacks “in their place,” which was a condition much like slavery. It was during this period that the Ku Klux Klan came into existence. Some whites justified the Klan and those that didn’t either moved away or looked the other way.

The rationale for this brutality was that if the whites did not control the blacks, the blacks would control them. Slavery had trained that first post-slavery generation of Whites to believe that it was necessary to maintain white supremacy by any means necessary. The regime of “Jim Crow” (or systematic legal segregation, personal degradation and economic exploitation) followed.

When legal segregation was outlawed in the United States in 1954, it was sadly predicted even then that white racism could continue to maintain itself by a myriad of subtle and not-so-subtle attitudes and practices. At the time it was called “de facto

segregation.” And it is still with us. It is very hard to break bad habits deriving from past addictions. So here we are today asking the church to reflect upon racist attitudes and actions that are overdue for dismantling.

Alex:

As a Hispanic, whose parents were both born in Mexico, I want to share that focusing on historic injuries done to blacks is not intended to exclude anyone or give preference to any one story of cultural injury. Part of the upheaval of our own time is adjusting to a new America, where multiple narratives of real cultural injury are being aired in an environment often unprepared and unwilling to welcome diversity.

Refocusing now on the black American experience is bound to improve everybody involved. During the black civil rights struggle of the mid-twentieth century, lessons learned helped generate progress for many others outside the African American experience. So it will be in this instance also.

Until the mid-twentieth century, American history was essentially white-male history. For the past several generations, that has been changing for the better, and we are increasingly hearing new significant stories that enrich our common life together.

The history of white progressives too has long been a history of white-straight- male progressives. That too, is changing for the better. New heroes from the past are being exalted, inspiring the emerging cross-cultural American experience now coming into being.

In the coming months and years, our church will offer a series of opportunities to grow intentionally in understanding that will bear fruit in ways yet unimagined. We need to be clear about what is at issue here. When our church entered into a commitment to overcome homophobia, it was not about a program to change LGBTQ people. It was a program to change the rest of us. As our church changed, so did the wider society. Clearly, that struggle is not yet over, but there has been marked progress. In time, we hope for the same progress with our commitment to racial justice and dismantling racism.

Our society is again grappling with the issue of race. “Black Lives Matter,” and its laser focus on police practices and the subtle and not so subtle racism of people in high places and even the unconscious biases and inactions within ourselves makes us realize that we still have a past problem to deal with.

The past is not dead. It’s alive, similar to a painful old wound that is hard to heal, or an intergenerational disease debilitating a family.

Unlike the 1960s, when the focus was on helping Black-Americans, this time we will be helping the whites among us see, as our Black neighbors see. This kind of methodical introspection is in the Wesleyan tradition. We still have a long way to go in the maturation of our Christian faith. Growth occurs in slow and subtle ways as we learn to love our neighbors as we love ourselves.

In closing, let me emphasize that we are not on a fast track racing toward a discrete goal. Rather, this is a long journey--a gradual transformative process in this church's grand tradition of being a truly welcoming faith family that seeks to transform our world. In the coming months and years, you will be invited to participate in this individual and communal journey characterized by study ... prayer... deep reflection, and action.

May God hold us in our struggle to listen.

Amen.