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For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



## Lies My Seminary Professor Told Me: What Happens When We Miss the Point on Slavery

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In *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Textbook Got Wrong*, James W. Loewen finds several problems with how slavery is taught in high schools across the United States. Loewen observes that white Americans remain perpetually startled at slavery. Even many years after high school, white adults are aghast when confronted with the horror and pervasiveness of slavery in the American past. It seems they did not learn, or have quickly forgotten, that George Washington and Thomas Jefferson were among the multitudes of white Americans who owned enslaved Black Americans as their human property.

Loewen surmises the ignorance of white Americans on slavery can be traced back to high school classrooms. History textbooks incorrectly present slavery as an uncaused tragedy and minimize white complicity in the enslavement of Black Americans. Students are meant to feel sadness for the plight of four million enslaved Black persons in 1860, but not anger toward the approximately 390,000 white slaveowners because these slaveowners, and their unjust actions, do not appear in the pages of the textbooks.

Since Loewen published his book in 1995, there have been strides to improve the teaching and learning on slavery. One notable example is the introduction of lesson plans based on the 1619 Project from the *New York Times* in middle and high school classrooms in Baltimore, Buffalo, Chicago, Newark, Washington, D.C., and other cities. Yet, the backlash against a more comprehensive curriculum on slavery, which is most visible in President Trump's recent call

for a “1776 Commission” to directly challenge the pedagogy of the 1619 Project, reveals the need for an assessment of how theological schools are engaging these educational debates around slavery.

As I reflect on my experiences as a theological student and educator, I am concerned seminary classrooms are also failing to provide instruction that properly captures the totality of white Christian involvement in slavery and anti-Black racism. The perpetual shock in some white congregations over some basic historical facts about slavery is alarming. One pernicious myth I encounter is the notion that most white Christians in the antebellum period were abolitionists pushing for the immediate emancipation of enslaved Black persons. This is simply not true. Very few white Christians held this position and there was little support for immediate emancipation in the Baptist, Episcopalian, Methodist, and Presbyterian denominations.

Many white Christians in the southern states defended slavery so vigorously that some Black and white abolitionists identified white churches as the most impenetrable strongholds against their cause. Benjamin Morgan Palmer, a white Presbyterian pastor in New Orleans who previously taught at Columbia Theological Seminary, preached in 1860 that slavery was a providential trust that whites must preserve and perpetuate because the natural condition of Black Americans was servitude. Palmer mocked northern abolitionists for thinking that Black Americans could survive alongside whites as equals. Palmer was neither reviled nor rebuked for his white supremacist views. Rather, he was widely celebrated and elected to serve as the first moderator of the newly formed Presbyterian Church of the Confederate States of America in 1861.

Black Christians like Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth emphasized the eradication of anti-Black racism as an essential component in their abolitionism. But even white Christian abolitionists in the northern states fell woefully short in their advocacy against anti-Black racism. Archibald Alexander, a white theologian and professor at Princeton Theological Seminary, endorsed the colonization movement to send free Black Americans to Liberia, because he felt the discriminatory contempt white Christians held against Black Americans was too insurmountable to overcome. In 1846, Alexander wrote that anti-Black racism was wrong and unreasonable, but he did not commit to working toward racial equality. Instead of teaching white Christians to repent of their racism and white supremacy, Alexander preferred Black Americans, once emancipated, leave the country and find another home where their skin color would not be despised.

Seminary classrooms may not treat slavery as an uncaused tragedy, but I believe some of our teaching and learning in theological education also minimizes white Christian complicity and misdirects the anger students should feel about slavery. Rather than fully grappling with the histories and legacies of economic exploitation, sexual violence, and virulent anti-Black racism perpetrated by white American Christians, students are left with a neatly packaged lesson on slavery centered on the dangers of deficient biblical interpretation and proof-texting the Scriptures. Such instruction misses a crucial point the abolitionists themselves made, which was to identify and confront the anti-Black racism of white Christians. In 1845, Frederick

Douglass differentiated between genuine Christianity and the “corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land” in his autobiographical narrative. In the ongoing pursuit of racial justice today, our seminary classrooms must also engage in teaching a more complete history of slavery and white American Christianity.

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