

Frederick Douglass: Our Spiritual Predecessor

The primary issue of Frederick Douglass' day was the immoral, unjust, and systemic institution of slavery and the ways it was justified and perpetuated by the white Christian church. He and other enslaved Africans viewed the institution of slavery and the slaveholders who considered themselves Christians as a deeply disturbing paradox.¹ The incongruence Douglass identified between the Christianity of Christ and the Christianity of the land would become the impetus for Douglass becoming a biblical and social reformer in his culture.² He states, "I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of the land...I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels."³ Douglass confronted such atrocities from his core beliefs rooted in the moral authority of Scripture.

A historically researched and biblically cohesive understanding of Scripture served as the foundation of Douglass' biblical and theological opposition to the institution of slavery that propelled him towards his life's career as an abolitionist.⁴ History is a witness to the heinous effect of oppression with various groups of people throughout the centuries. Although slavery was abolished towards the latter part of the nineteenth-century, the plight and the effects of this particularly brutal form of systemic oppression is still felt today and has taken on new forms,

¹ Frederick Douglass, *Life and Times of Frederick Douglass: The Illustrated Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith, 2015), 54.

² Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. Amazon Digital Services (Rochester, NY: Public Domain, 2012), 67, Kindle.

³ V.P. Franklin, *Black Self-Determination: A Cultural History of the Faith of the Fathers* (Westport, VT: Lawrence Hill & Company, 1984), 56.

⁴ Aida Besancon Spencer, William David Spencer, and Mimi Haddad, eds., *Global Voices on Biblical Equality: Women and Men Ministering Together in the Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008),

first in Jim Crow laws, and more recently, the overcrowded prisons significantly contributed by black and brown men.⁵

Frederick Douglass, and other spiritual predecessors, serves as exemplars who took the responsibility to confront injustices of his day. He did so from his biblically astute and theologically motivated core beliefs. His beliefs were rooted and grounded in the moral authority of Scripture, which developed him as a biblical and social reformer of his culture. The current status quo of racism warrants similar spiritual leaders of Christlike character and leadership.

⁵ Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness: Revised Edition* (New York, NY: The New Press, 2012), 58.