

Doctrine of Discovery

by [Carol Howard Merritt](#)

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A few blocks away from where I live, there's a lovely green space. Renaissance Park is a revived bit of Chattanooga along the Tennessee River. There's a walking tour that you can take, where you call a phone number and hear the history of the place. Within that explanation, a soothing voice speaks of how the Trail of Tears began on that piece of land. But, the audio recording goes on to explain, the removal of the Native people allowed us to have a vibrant business district.

As if the genocide of a people is all good because there's an Applebee's now.

I remembered that infuriating recording when I spoke to [Mark Charles about the Doctrine of Discovery](#). Mark is the son of a Navajo man who lives on a Navajo reservation. He writes and speaks with a hope of forging peace through racial reconciliation. He wants to build "cross-cultural relationships of forgiveness, repentance, love and hope that result in walking in beauty with one another and God."

I asked Mark, "What are the biggest obstacles to racial reconciliation?"

"We believe that there is such thing as a Christian Empire, and we believe that we live in one," Mark answered. "But there is no such thing as Christian Empire, according to the teachings of Jesus."

Then Mark talked about the origins of Christian Empire, beginning with Constantine, when membership in the church became equated with membership in the Empire. Augustine set up just war theories in order to give some justification for war. Then, there was a shift, as we began to dehumanize people who were not Christians—Muslims, Natives, and others. A series of Papal Bulls came out that outlined the [Doctrine of Discovery](#). In 1452, Pope Nicholas V wrote the following mission:

“...invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and the kingdoms, dukedoms, principalities, dominions, possessions, and all movable and immovable goods whatsoever held and possessed by them and to reduce their persons to perpetual slavery, and to apply and appropriate to himself and his successors the kingdoms, dukedoms, counties, principalities, dominions, possessions, and goods, and to convert them to his and their use and profit.”

Protestants pushed back on the Doctrine of Discovery (the very word, of course, was wrong, since the land was not discovered, it was already inhabited). But then the Puritan John Winthrop began talking about a “city on a hill,” taking the words from Jesus, connecting them to Deuteronomy, and inspiring colonists to possess the land in the west. We began to embrace the ideas of Manifest Destiny, believing that our institutions had special virtue and we needed to expand across the continent.

“The thing is,” Mark explained, “We don’t have a land covenant with God in Scripture. Americans have not been chosen by God. The west is not your promised land.”

The Doctrine of Discovery is not something in the ancient past. It’s been evoked by the Supreme Court as recently as 2005. Evangelicals who care about immigration often use Old Testament scriptures to buttress their cause, further confusing the promised land with the US. Reagan used the “city on the hill” image repeatedly in his rhetoric. We place American flags in our worship spaces. We often think of mission programs as humanizing the subhumans.

“We need to take the race dialogue to a much deeper level in our country,” Mark explained. Even with the Civil Rights movement, we talked about how all men are created equal, but Mark said, “The Declaration of Independence calls me a ‘[merciless savage](#).’”

Mark said his work is often difficult, because a person will protest, “I’m not a racist.” But this isn’t just about one person’s racist’s views. It’s the fact that we benefit from systemic racism.

So how does racial reconciliation occur?

We talked about a lot of things. As part of the PC(USA), I hoped we could join the [many denominations](#) that have called for the repudiation the Doctrine of Discovery. (I don't think that we have.)

But Mark's hope went farther and deeper than that. He quoted Georges Erasmus, "Where common memory is lacking, where people do not share in the same past, there can be no real community. Where community is to be formed, common memory must be created." Mark wants a shared narrative and history. He longs for us to sit, create a common memory and form a common community.

[He writes](#), "Being Native American and living in the United States feels like our indigenous peoples are an old grandmother who lives in a very large house. It is a beautiful house with plenty of rooms and comfortable furniture. But, years ago, some people came into our house and locked us upstairs in the bedroom. Today our house is full of people. They are sitting on our furniture. They are eating our food. They are having a party in our house. They have since unlocked the door to our bedroom but now it is much later and we are tired, old, weak and sick; so we can't or don't come out. But the part that is the most hurtful and that causes us the most pain, is that virtually no one from this party ever comes upstairs to find us in the bedroom, sits down next to us on the bed, looks us in the eye, and simply says, 'Thank you. Thank you for letting us be in your house.'"