

Reparations for the Descendents of American Slaves

By Coleman Luck
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I believe there is a need for people to start thinking “Christianly” about the crisis issues of our day. And to think Christianly means refusing to march lockstep with the attitudes and agendas of either the left or the right. But, exactly how do we think Christianly? Perhaps it begins with some foundational beliefs: First, we must believe in the existence of a God of wisdom and love who has made His ways known and is willing to guide us both individually and collectively if we desire it. Second, we must believe that this God has spoken in the Bible about the crisis issues that we face. Third, we must commit ourselves to searching out that truth with the expectation that it will lead us to startling answers. Fourth, we must be prepared for those answers to focus on the welfare of others especially on justice and compassion for the poor. Most of all, to think Christianly means thinking in an on-going conversation with God. We call that conversation prayer.

Let’s struggle to think Christianly about a conflict plaguing our country right now. We might call it “The War Between the Races” and every year it grows worse. I think most of us would agree that if something isn’t done to change the climate of antipathy that exists between so many black and white Americans our future is very bleak.

The discussion of reparations for the descendents of black American slaves broke into the media a few years ago while lawsuits were moving through the courts of Europe demanding that reparations be paid by German companies who had benefited from slave labor during the Nazi era. A number of voices within the African-American community began calling for the same kind of compensation to be made here. As the years have passed media commentators, both conservative and liberal, have weighed in on the issue offering a series of arguments mostly against the idea.

From the conservatives:

1. Reparations are not a viable issue because too much time has passed. There is no connection between the victims of the “crime” and the people who would be receiving “compensation.” Since there is no emotional connection there can be no “closure.” Payment of reparations would only increase racial tension. It wouldn’t change black attitudes and whites would resent it.
2. Hundreds of thousands of white men died freeing the slaves during the Civil War. That was payment in blood and it’s enough.

3. It's been 150 years since the slaves were freed. In all that time their children have enjoyed the benefits of living in America. Yes, there have been problems, but we've been working on them. But along with the problems have come great opportunities. Never before have black Americans lived so well or found so much success as today. They should be thankful for what they've got and leave well enough alone.
4. Blacks should be glad their ancestors were brought here as slaves. It meant they could live here instead of Africa. We sure don't see any of them moving back to their "fatherland." If they're so miserable give them one-way tickets to Nigeria.
5. What about all the billions we've spent on welfare? What about Affirmative Action? Those and many other expensive government programs were designed to help black people. How much more of our money do they want? When are their demands going to end? Why don't they stop complaining and invest their energies in getting off the government dole?
6. It's okay to go after specific companies that profited from slavery, but don't even think about making individual taxpayers shell out for reparations. That would penalize innocent people. None of us living today had anything to do with slavery so we shouldn't have to pay for it.

And from the liberals:

1. Reparations might be due, but who's going to pay them? Not the families of the former slave owners. Their wealth was lost after the Civil War. And there are only a few big companies left who benefited from slavery. Even if you sold them off there wouldn't be enough money to give each descendent more than a few dollars. Sadly, it just isn't practical.
2. If the federal government tried to pay "reasonable" reparations we'd go trillions of dollars in debt. It might be the moral thing to do, but the Bush Administration has broken our economy with tax cuts for the wealthy and a selfish needless war, so it isn't possible.
3. Okay, reparations are in order. Let's get the companies that benefited from slavery to make large donations to black causes such as scholarship funds, etc. It's not all that's owed, but at least it's something. Since it's the best we can do our African-American brothers and sisters will have to be satisfied with it. And we'll keep fighting for them against a Republican congress and President who care only about the wealthy and big business.

After hearing these arguments as a Christian I was disturbed and unsatisfied. Something was missing. Perhaps because I am the descendent of slave owners I found myself drawn to the issue. Was there a way to understand and apply the truth of the Bible in searching for a resolution?

The first step was to define terms. What are reparations? To make reparation is the act of making amends offering expiation or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury. Often it includes the payment of damages. The Bible talks a lot about paying back what we owe. In the Old Testament the Mosaic Law incorporates an elaborate system for making restitution. As far as possible the payback should be equivalent to the loss. In some cases the penalty to be paid to the injured party was four, five, or even seven times the loss. (Exodus 21:18-36; Lev. 24:18-21; Deut. 19:21; Prov. 6:31) In the New Testament when Zacchaeus the thieving tax collector met Jesus he promised to pay back fourfold for any wrongs that he had done. (Luke 19:8) According to Matthew 5:23-24 restitution is a Christian obligation and it is vital if an individual wants a right relationship with God. Does this mean that restitution is only for Jews and Christians? Hardly. It is found in the most ancient non-Judeo/Christian legal codes. Clearly, the principle of restitution is at the heart of maintaining a peaceful and productive society.

In the case of the Nazis large companies in collusion with the German government stole from their slaves and did great damage to their families. In our country both large companies and individual slave owners in collusion with our government stole from slaves and did great damage to their families. As a Christian if I am in favor of reparations for the children of Nazi slaves (and I am) how can I think otherwise about the children of American slaves? Is there a difference? I can't see one. The only differences that I can find are both contrived and ugly: 1) The slave owners in Germany were hated enemies who still loom large in our collective memory, while the slave owners of the U.S. are long forgotten. 2) For the most part the Nazi slaves had white skins while the slaves of my ancestors didn't. 3) To pay reparations to the children of American slaves might cost me something, while paying reparations to the children of Nazi slaves will cost the Germans. These rationalizations make no sense.

In my opinion, there is no substantive difference between the cases. To believe that one action represents justice demands that we believe the same regarding the other. Now this is an uncomfortable position to take. It implies a very serious national guilt that I find repugnant. Guilt is not fashionable these days. But if it forces us to deal with the truth we need to face it.

All right, let's say that both logic and biblical morality lead us to one conclusion: Reparations for the children of black slaves represents justice. What about the arguments against it from liberals and conservatives?

First, there is the argument about the lapse of time. We are told that too much time has passed for payment of reparations to be a viable issue. There's no connection between the victims of the crime and those receiving compensation. Time does play an important part in our legal system. In many criminal and civil cases if you wait too long to apply for judicial relief you lose your right to do so. But with a great societal evil such as slavery the passage of time means nothing. To say that we shouldn't repair the damage caused by such an evil because too much time has passed is like saying that we shouldn't heal a disease because we've had it too long. The racial hate spawned by

centuries of slavery is a disease that is killing us. We should do whatever we can to heal it. But would the payment of reparations bring healing? Many would say no because so much time has passed that there's no connection between the crime and the payment. African-Americans of today have no memory of slavery. It would be like handing them money for no reason. But, is this true? Have they forgotten because so much time has passed?

Let's try a little exercise. Let's remove slavery and race from the equation and personalize the issue. Imagine that 100 years ago my great-grandfather stole ten thousand dollars from your great-grandfather and never returned it. My ancestors used that money to establish our family in comfort. Down through the generations our wealth has grown while your family never recovered and now lives in poverty. How would your family feel toward mine? Wouldn't the memory and anger over the crime grow larger with each generation as your family compared your plight to ours? Would you think that my family didn't owe you anything just because 100 years had passed? Wouldn't any reasonable outsider say that my family should return the stolen money to yours with interest? In particular, if we claimed to be Christians would that not be the Christian thing to do?

What about the argument that de facto reparations have been paid already in the billions that have been spent on welfare and countless other programs targeted largely toward the descendants of former slaves? Isn't that a form of reparations? Once again, let's take race and slavery out of the equation. So my wealthy family finally agrees that we owe your poor family something because of what my great-grandfather stole. However since you're poor and uneducated we consider you to be stupid. Certainly we can't trust you with any significant wealth. Your family would just squander it. So we will give you back some of the money (as much as we deem appropriate), but we'll do it our way. We'll dole it out in tiny parcels with all sorts of strings attached, supposedly to be certain that you use it properly. In reality our system will assure that your family never gets out of poverty. Even worse not only will your family remain poor, it will be dependent on us the family of the crook who stole it from you in the first place. Is that repaying what we owe?

Now let's examine the argument that the children of slaves should be thankful their ancestors were brought to America. Living here is reparation enough. Let's imagine that in spite of the terrible thing my great-grandfather did to yours some in your family have done quite well for themselves. When you confront us demanding that we return what was stolen we point to those of you who have succeeded. With smug self-satisfaction we inform you as to why your relatives succeeded. Because they didn't want to remain poor they worked harder and overcame their circumstances. Shouldn't the successful members of your family thank us for establishing the conditions that helped them achieve their success? Rather than asking for the stolen money to be returned you should be grateful we stole it in the first place. In fact rather than coming to us for restitution, go to your own rich relatives if you need help.

Finally, on the conservative side there is the argument that all the blood that was shed and the lives lost freeing the slaves during the Civil War are reparations enough. Let's add an element to our analogy. Not only did my great-grandfather steal from yours, he kidnapped him as well. The police came out in force. In the raid that freed him many policemen died. Clearly they were heroic and your family is very grateful, but does that mean the stolen money shouldn't be returned?

I confess that the liberal arguments against reparations frustrate me even more than those of the conservatives. First because so much money has been thrown down the rat hole of incompetent bureaucratic social programs many of which have done great damage to the African-American community. After wasting all that money it sounds like gratuitous blather to say that we can't afford to pay reparations. Unfortunately the sad truth is that they're right we can't. Someone has estimated that to pay reasonable reparations for the theft perpetrated on generation after generation of black slaves would mean paying every descendent \$500,000. If I recall correctly, that added up to a figure of around 13 trillion dollars. The liberal alternative of getting a few companies to pay for a few scholarships, etc., is laughably inadequate.

So what should be done?

And something really does need to be done. The truth is painfully clear. As a nation we stole vast amounts of money in the form of labor from black slaves. And it wasn't just the southern slave owners and a few corporations who benefited. The whole country grew rich from the products and services of the slave system. Whether we like it or not the benefits accrued to people whose ancestors were never slave owners and who came to America long after the Civil War was over.

Sadly our theft from the black community didn't stop with the end of slavery. When the slaves were "freed" most went from one form of degradation into another. From the slavery of the plantation they entered slavery as sharecroppers, house servants, and laborers in the factories of the north. Most had to live on unjust wages simply because their skin was black and they had not been allowed a decent education. In this new form of slavery that spanned well over a hundred years there wasn't even the slim hope that they would be taken care of in their old age. Having given them "freedom" white America shunned them, mocked them, and did everything possible to deepen their misery. Is it any wonder that so many of their children hate us? If you were a child of the slaves would you not think white people were evil?

We are facing the racial crisis of today because long ago our nation, supposedly built on "Christian principles," acted more like the pagan, slave-owning society of ancient Rome than a country "enlightened" by the love and truth of Jesus Christ. And every year that we don't acknowledge our guilt and seek to make restitution the tragedy deepens.

May I suggest a plan? It's not exactly reparations, but it would be a first step in admitting what we owe and saying to our black citizens how much we appreciate who

they are and what their ancestors did for us. It would be a first step in telling them that they are valuable and we believe in them. Maybe it could be the beginning of true racial healing. There are some who will laugh at this plan. There are some who will say it can't be done. But in America almost anything is possible. All I know is this – it would be an honest attempt to right a wrong.

So, here it is:

I suggest that Congress pass a new law. Starting in January 2008, all Americans who can prove that there is at least one slave among their ancestors are exempt from all taxes. And I do mean ALL TAXES – federal, state, and local, both hidden and otherwise, from property taxes right down to sales taxes. And this law would remain in effect for 120 years. (An arbitrary span covering approximately four generations. Embarrassingly less than the centuries of slave labor.) This full exemption from taxes would include all wholly owned black businesses. All normal benefits would accrue to black employees. FICA contributions would be paid by the federal government. If a white employer hired a black employee, he would still pay the employer's share of all taxes. But the black employee would not pay his portion. A wholly owned black company would be exempt from paying all employment taxes on either white or black employees. Only if a black-owned company went public would it enter taxable status.

What would be the result of such a law? I'm no economist but I believe that while the first decade would be a difficult transition, it would be an investment in the future. Within twenty years the black community would become an economic powerhouse. Within twenty years the poorest neighborhoods in our inner cities could be revolutionized. Young people whose only motivation is to sell drugs would be given a massive incentive to go into legitimate businesses. Capital would pour into black companies. Individually, hard-working African-Americans would have at least 20-30 percent more money to spend on themselves and their families. This increased spending would explode into every area of the economy including taxable businesses ultimately growing the economy and increasing tax revenues far beyond the taxes that were lost. Most important of all the African-American community might begin to experience hope. Would the "Tax Freedom for the Children of Slaves Act" answer every problem? No. But I believe the positive impact would be felt at every level of our society.

What are the objections?

1. "We can't afford it." My response is that we can't afford to go on the way we are. We can't afford the overwhelming poverty of our inner cities. We can't afford the armies of police that have to battle gangs that outnumber them ten or twenty to one. We can't afford the rescue workers, the medical costs, the loser schools that try to teach children who come from families without hope. Subtract a third of the cost of our broken inner cities and how many tax dollars would we save? As black enterprise thrived money would flow throughout our whole economy. It's possible that within a decade such a program would pay for itself. There is even a homeland security dividend.

Safer cities and less poverty would mean that much less fertile ground for terrorists.

2. "It isn't fair. It discriminates by giving an undue advantage to a class of people." My response is hogwash. We weren't afraid to enslave and discriminate against black people for hundreds of years. I think we owe them 120 years of tax freedom.
3. "It would be a nightmare to organize and maintain." Well, we organized and maintain monstrous social security and Medicare systems. We organized and maintain an Internal Revenue Service and tax system of gargantuan complexity. We organized and maintain welfare programs that give new meaning to the word byzantine. And many Americans would love to see us organize and maintain a behemoth national health care system. This seems simple compared to those monstrosities. It's true such a program would be difficult, especially at first, but not impossible.

Liberals should love this concept. Supporting it would prove that they really do have compassion and desire justice. It would prove that their carping about tax breaks for the rich isn't just a subterfuge to hide their love for all taxation. And, it would be a federal program that might actually work for a change. Conservatives should love this concept because it would give them an historic opportunity to prove that their theories about free enterprise and low taxation are correct. The tax-free black community would be a laboratory out of which could come irrefutable evidence about the value of tax relief.

But, will liberals and conservatives back such a radical concept? Not until hell freezes over. Forgive me for being cynical, but let's be honest. We know the truth. If the Tax Freedom for the Children of Slaves Act became a reality and true financial success came to African-Americans on the widest possible scale, liberals would lose an important constituency that they've been able to manipulate with fear and hatred for decades. And they've done it in collusion with so-called black advocacy groups. What would happen if the NAACP, Jesse Jackson, and Al Sharpton weren't needed anymore? If there was real hope and success in the black community even the abortion industry would be damaged. Most abortions are performed on hopeless young black women. This would force the Democratic Party redefine itself.

And the Republicans are no better. They would be just as against the concept because they really are the party of big business. The monstrous corporations of today are the enemies of free enterprise. Their CEO's would impale themselves on their golf clubs before allowing such tax-free competition. They'd rather buy cheap labor in India and let our inner cities rot. And what big business wants the Republican Party will give them.

But I confess that I have another fear and it brings great sadness. I fear that the average white American, conservative or liberal, Christian or not, would never back such a concept. He'd rather maintain the status quo of racial hate and agony than lift one

finger to see real change. Why? Because agony and hate are the soul of modern political entertainment. And we love our entertainment...just like the ancient Romans.