

## White supremacy in American Christianity

By [Lawrence W. Rodgers](#)

August 16, 2016

Christianity isn't inherently white supremacist. But Christian faith in America has been interpreted in a way that upholds the tenets of white supremacy, which is built on [18th and 19th century Western hegemonic values](#). These cultural values, which have been intertwined into mainline American Christianity, protect and uphold the system of white supremacy.

"All men are created equal," claims the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was written while black people were enslaved. It also excluded women. The belief behind this statement is that white people (particularly white men) are superior and should dominate society. Such hierarchy is mirrored in the church.

Racism goes hand-in-hand with capitalism: it limits people economically based on phenotype. Capitalism is built upon the concept of the American Dream, which presumes that non-white Americans have more social mobility than the evidence suggests they actually do. And capitalism presumes a strong individualism, in which resources belong to whoever grabs them most vehemently. America's early history includes the stealing of land from Native Americans and the theft of labor from enslaved Africans. Both accumulated wealth for white Americans, which was concretized by individualism and often validated by the church.

The [image of the white Jesus](#) affirms for white people that whiteness is God, and it teaches everyone else that they should submit to whiteness as if it were divine. White images of Jesus have been used repeatedly to subject nonwhite populations to the system of white supremacy. The white Jesus engenders spiritual colonialism, which is often the precursor to the literal colonialism of land, resources, and labor. The whiteness of the American Jesus did not emerge by accident. Despite abundant evidence from anthropologists, historians, and the biblical text that Jesus was not a European, America has consistently rejected a darker Jesus. This would violate the purpose of the image itself—the upholding of white supremacy.

Furthermore, the theological association of darkness with evil and ignorance prohibits Americans from envisioning a darker-skinned Jesus. There is an undeniable dichotomy between whiteness and darkness in our language, with *white* nearly always signifying goodness, holiness, and purity, and *black* or *dark* signifying that which is evil, untrustworthy, or defective. This dichotomy isn't substantiated by reality. Darkness is the first thing each of us sees in the womb, the hue of the universe when we look up into the night sky, and the last thing we see each night when we close our eyes to sleep. The healthiest fruits and vegetables are dark. Yet Americans continue to envision dark people, places, and things as evil rather than as a beautiful part of God's creation.

The black church emerged as an attempt to escape white supremacy and its effects. If American Christianity did not struggle with white supremacy, there would be no need for a black church. Thus, it is important for Christians in America to examine their beliefs regularly by asking, "Does what I believe free the oppressed or further oppress them?" If the answer is the latter, then your Christianity might be white supremacist. Or it might be intertwined with the ideas, doctrines, and hermeneutics that uphold the hegemonic values of 18th-century America.

*Our weekly feature Then and Now harnesses the expertise of American religious historians who care about the cities of God and the cities of humans. It's published in partnership with [the Kripke Center](#) of Creighton University and edited by [Edward Carson](#) and [Beth Shalom Hessel](#).*