

Reckoning with History

Settler Colonialism, Slavery, and the Making of American Christianity

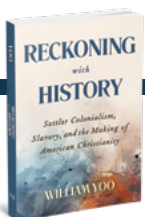
By William Yoo

STUDY GUIDE BY ROBERT A. RATCLIFF

At some point most of us find ourselves newcomers to an established group of people. We marry into a family, enroll at a school, join a congregation, enter the employment of a company, and the like. Often that newcomer status lands us in awkward, uncomfortable, or even painful situations due to our unfamiliarity with things known to everyone in the group but us. Those moments force us to reckon with the group's history. They teach us to get busy filling in our missing knowledge of its stories and beliefs, lest those things wind up biting us in the leg a second time.

At this moment in our common life, we Americans are engaged in just such a reckoning with history. Questions about who we are as individuals and as a people—some of them uncomfortable—seem to arise more and more. So often these questions center around issues of race. And though we might be long-time members of the American family, many of us are newcomers to the conversation about how our racial past informs and haunts our present. The more we explore that past, the more we see how inescapable it is. Decisions made and attitudes formed in earlier years, however distant and forgotten they might seem, continue to insert themselves into our politics, culture, and society today.

In *Reckoning with History*, William Yoo, Associate Professor of American Religious and Cultural History at Columbia Theological Seminary, introduces us to the single most important fact about our troubled history with race: the more we ignore or deny it, the more power over us we grant it. He explains why this is especially true for Christians in the United States. We can never hope to turn *toward* a transformed and just society until we have tried to understand the injustice we are turning away *from*, and Christians' role in allowing and promoting that injustice. And so, that is what this book does. It tells the parallel stories of how Christians justified and benefitted from the displacement of the indigenous population of the country, and from the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. Yoo shows us how white Christian participation in these injustices directly contradicted the gospel they claimed to profess. He also details how Indigenous, Black, white, and other American Christians recognized racism for the sin against God's children it was, and tried to address it.



Study Guide for *Reckoning with History* by William Yoo

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This can be an uncomfortable story to encounter, but Yoo tells it with wisdom, passion, and care. He tells the story, not to engender angry defensiveness or paralyzing guilt, but rather to inform and empower. A new story about Christianity in the United States is waiting to be told, he assures us, but first we have to admit and understand how and why the old story got things wrong.

A Note on Terminology

Most of us are familiar with definitions of “slavery,” but the phrase “settler colonialism” might be new to some. Settler colonialism pursues the same ends as colonialism, in which a dominant country or people subjugate another for the purpose of enriching themselves at the dominated country’s expense. But the additional aspect of settler colonialism is the migration of large numbers of the dominating country’s citizens to the dominated territory for the purpose of replacing its population and culture.

Using This Guide

The eight chapters of *Reckoning with History* are organized into four sessions in this guide. Sessions 2 and 3 each cover three chapters. The [author’s session introduction videos](#), included at the start of each session, are designed to align with this four-session format, helping your group connect the themes across the chapters in sessions 2 and 3. If your group prefers to study each chapter individually, we’ve highlighted the questions specific to each chapter within those sessions.



SESSION 1: The Church with the Soul of a Nation

Questions for Discussion after Reading Chapter 1

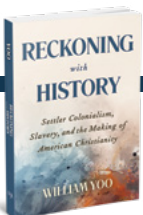


Click here or scan the QR code to watch the session introduction video from author William Yoo

1. In chapter 1 the author tells the story of Harriet Martineau, the groundbreaking female sociologist who visited the United States from her home in England. Martineau was surprised to encounter Americans' avoidance of the moral problems in the story of how their ancestors came to occupy the continent, displacing the indigenous population in the process. She concluded that the nation's leaders were treating their citizens like children, perpetrating "the notion that most white Americans could not engage complex ideas about their history, society, and nation" (p. 7)

Our country is currently embroiled in a debate about how (or even whether) to discuss the painful parts of our past. What are your thoughts about that conversation? At what ages, for example, should we start to teach children about slavery and Jim Crow? What should be the goal of doing so?

2. When many of us studied this period of American history, we were taught that attitudes were simply different back then, that things from which we recoil (like slavery and the theft of Indigenous lands) were seen as normal. In this chapter the author highlights Black and Indigenous Christians, as well as visitors from Europe, who denounced these evils in the most uncompromising terms. What does this fact have to say to the attempt to exonerate the white Christian majority of the time by claiming that "people were just different back then?"
3. What does the author mean by describing American Christianity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as "a church with the soul of a nation" (pp. 10-15)?
4. In 1837 the abolitionist Gerrit Smith said that white Christianity in the United States was defined by what he called "the doctrine of expediency," by which he meant that Christians here could find a way to ignore the evils of slavery and settler colonialism as long as they profited from them, either as individuals or as a society. What problems and injustices exist today that we find it similarly convenient to ignore or condone?
5. Harriet Martineau pointed out the hostility she encountered among white Americans to talking about uncomfortable subjects related to slavery and settler colonialism. Along these same lines, how likely are conversations on racial injustice in our congregations today?



SESSION 2: The American Church and Settler Colonialism

Questions for Discussion after Reading Chapters 2-4



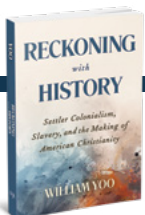
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Chapter 2

1. Robert Cushman lied to potential supporters of the Plymouth colony by claiming that the territory occupied by the Wampanoag Indigenous people was mostly empty and uncultivated, when the opposite was true. Juan Ginés de Sepúlveda admitted that profit, not evangelism, was the primary motivation for Spanish colonialism in the Western hemisphere. Yet when justifying the Spaniards' colonial enterprise, it was opportunities to evangelize the indigenous population of the Americas that surfaced most often in his arguments. Why did these and other defenders of colonialism think such lies and mischaracterizations were necessary?
2. The author tells us that “As English Protestants read Spanish Catholic criticisms of their colonial enterprise, they were convinced that they could, and would, do better in the Americas” (p. 38). What other conclusions might the English have reached? What would Bartolomé de las Casas have wanted them to think when they read his work?
3. The dual purposes of evangelism and profit show up time and again in the documents relating to both Spanish and English colonization of the Americas. Aside from the fact that profit seems to have been the stronger motivation by far, were the two compatible with one another?
4. Roger Williams stands out for his opposition to evangelizing the Indigenous population of the English colonies. His argument was complex and nuanced, but it can be summarized thus: colonialism created a false version of Christianity, and the colonists abused the freedom of conscience of Indigenous persons when trying to force that version of the faith on them. Arguments over how and whether Christians should use their majority status to promote their values and spread their faith to the rest of the American population continue down to today. Can you think of contemporary examples of Christians inserting themselves into the public square in ways with which Williams would disagree?

Chapter 3

1. Chapter 3 recounts Mahmood Mamdani's story of two of the most famous Black Americans—President Barack Obama and Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—and their differing interpretations of the United States' relationship to its Indigenous population. Obama argued that the United States stands out because in its founding it turned its back on making itself a colonial power. King contended the opposite: that by declaring Indigenous persons to be inferior to whites, the United States opened the door to the (colonial) theft of



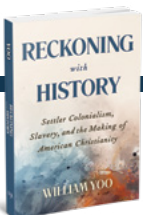
SESSION 2 (continued)

Indigenous lands and destruction of Indigenous cultures. Which of these two descriptions better represents our history, and why?

2. This chapter tells how the United States government and white settlers cheated Indigenous peoples out of their lands or displaced them by other means. How much of this story did you learn as a high school or college student? Did those who taught it to you try to grapple with the story's moral implications? If so, do you remember what they had to say on the subject?
3. The author relates that the Indigenous peoples of North America practiced ways of farming and hunting that maximized the benefit of the land's bounty across generations. The English settlers, on the other hand, engaged in practices that sought the greatest benefit for the current generation. Which of these two approaches best fits with the Christian understanding of stewardship? Why?
4. The book of Joshua tells the story of how the Israelites, after their forty-year wandering in the wilderness, occupied the promised land of Canaan, conquering and destroying the Canaanite population. This conquest and destruction took place, according to the book of Deuteronomy, at God's instigation (Deut. 20:16-18). According to chapter 3, more than one group of English settlers drew on the book of Joshua as justification for their acts of barbarism toward their Indigenous neighbors. Would we use the book of Joshua that way today? Why, or why not? How do we read it differently than did those early English settlers?
5. Chapter 3 concludes with the story of the Indian Removal Act and the ultimately unsuccessful attempt to save the Cherokee Nation from forced removal. It is a story with strong contradictions. On the one hand, white Christian leaders like Jeremiah Evarts and Daniel Butrick, as well as the multiracial married couple Elias Boudinot and Harriett Gold, sought to promote understanding and harmony between the Cherokee and white settlers in Georgia. On the other hand, Andrew Jackson and other politicians, with support from their white Christian constituents, pushed hard to deport Cherokees from their homes in the Southern states for the purpose of acquiring Cherokee land. Not even a Supreme Court decision in favor of the Cherokee could prevent this injustice from happening. How do you see the two sides of the story in relation to one another? Which represents the genuine face of American Christianity in this period?

Chapter 4

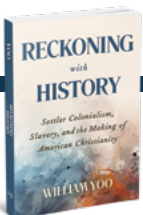
1. The Seneca leader Red Jacket suggested to the white missionary Jacob Cram that he preach to the Senecas' white neighbors, that it was they who were most in need of conversion. If you were Cram, what would your sermon to those settlers look like? How



SESSION 2 (continued)

would you seek to convert the white Christians of that place and time? How would you know that their conversion was genuine?

2. The Puritan pastor Thomas Shepard, like some of his colleagues, felt pangs of conscience that the Massachusetts Bay colony was doing so little to convert the local Indigenous population, in spite of the fact that doing so was one of the colony's stated purposes. In order to do better, he and other pastors had been trying to introduce English forms of dress, language, and morality to the Indigenous communities among whom they ministered. Shepard insisted that this "civilizing" activity had to come first, before hope of conversion could take place. Does this mean that there was a precondition to be met before the grace of Christ could be received by Indigenous persons? If that is the case, what does it say about the Protestant belief in "salvation by faith alone"?
3. Because their numbers were so much smaller than the English, French traders and settlers occupied a "middle ground" in relation to the Indigenous inhabitants of the continent. While the French no doubt held racist attitudes toward their Indigenous neighbors, neither group possessed the numbers to dominate the other, making greater communication and understanding between the two necessary. What would it take today for white Christians to move into such a middle ground with persons of color and those of other religions?
4. In this chapter we meet several courageous and compassionate white Christians who, in their different ways, tried to embody the gospel and call attention to the injustices visited upon the Indigenous peoples of the American colonies and later, the United States. How should we think about these individuals? Do they indicate that white Christianity was a mixed bag, with some who got the gospel wrong while others got it right? Or should we see them as exceptions that prove the rule, pointing by their scarcity and lack of overall success to the failure of white Christianity during this period to live up to its beliefs and commitments? How do you think Yoo would answer this question?



SESSION 3: The American Church and Slavery

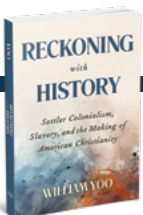
Questions for Discussion after Reading Chapters 5-7



Click here or scan the QR code to watch the session introduction video from author William Yoo

Chapter 5

1. After the Civil War, Henry Ward Beecher reflected on the difficulty that pastors even outside the slave states had in preaching or teaching about abolition and racism. Although Northern congregants generally opposed slavery, they were usually far more vehement in their rejection of abolitionism. Why do you think that was? Discuss your own experience of clergy who became unpopular or were even asked to leave their pulpits because they spoke too directly or too often about social injustice.
2. In 1839 the abolitionist Alvan Stewart told a meeting of pastors that silence about the evils of slavery and anti-Black racism would lead to acquiescence to those evils and eventually defense of them. History provides plenty of examples of this process at work when it came to slavery, but is the progression inevitable? Can you think of injustices during our own time to which this pattern might apply?
3. In 1700 and 1701, John Saffin and Samuel Sewall engaged in a pamphlet war debating the moral justifications for slavery. Sewall mounted a vigorous criticism of slavery from a Christian perspective, including strong arguments against it from the Bible. Yet, as Yoo recounts, Sewall himself was an enslaver, frequently advertising the sale of enslaved persons. Later, American leaders like Thomas Jefferson would repeat this pattern. What should we make of this hypocrisy? Do Sewall's actions (and those of others like him) invalidate his words?
4. There's a good chance that you ran across Jonathan Edwards' name when you were a student. If you did encounter him you probably heard something about his terrifying sermon "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God." But you might not know that Edwards is considered one of the most brilliant theologians to ever live and work in North America (that one infamous sermon notwithstanding). If that is the case, then why did Edwards not reject slavery, going so far in the other direction as to own an enslaved person himself? Why were Christian leaders whom we would expect to know better so frequently silent about or implicated in the ills of settler colonialism and slavery?
5. Earlier in the book we encountered white preachers who classified slavery as a political matter, and declared that their vocation was to speak of spiritual things alone. But the ministries of Lemuel Haynes and Samuel Hopkins indicated that God's sovereignty over everything meant that the Christian must talk about pressing political concerns, especially when they had to do with suffering caused by such evils as slavery. How do you as a Christian today judge when to bring your faith convictions to bear on political matters? How do you discern



SESSION 3 (continued)

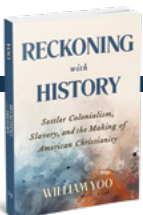
when doing so will be helpful, and when it will simply add to the deep well of hard feelings in our highly polarized society?

Chapter 6

1. Maria W. Stewart pointed out the hypocrisy of abolitionists in Boston decrying the plight of enslaved persons in the South, while lifting nary a finger to address the educational, economic, and social disadvantages of the free Black population of their own community. Her implication was that it's easy to denounce someone else's participation in racial injustice while refusing to recognize one's own. As twenty-first-century observers of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century sins of settler colonialism and slavery, perhaps we run the risk of doing the same. Can you think of ongoing racial injustices that we choose to ignore, because changing them would require us to admit uncomfortable truths about ourselves and make costly changes to the way we live?
2. James Forten is but one example of Black and Indigenous Christians who combined their religious faith with a devotion to America's democratic ideals. Given their treatment by the Christian church and the American republic, it might have been easy to imagine them rejecting both. What does this say to you about Christianity and the United States? What does it suggest about what white people can learn from their Black and Indigenous neighbors about how to be both Christians and Americans?
3. Why were white Christians at St. George's Methodist and elsewhere so upset at Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other Black Christians who left white churches to form their own Black-led congregations? If the white members of these churches wished to segregate their Black members, what was the issue with Black Christians choosing to separate from white congregations? How does the author characterize the difference between *segregation* and *separation*?
4. Chapter 6 tells us that a "shared sentiment among these Black Christians was holy indignation." They experienced God's love and returned that love, "yet they were also angry all the time" over the injustices they and other Black Christians were forced to endure. (See p. 161.) Have you ever known someone who experienced this holy indignation? Have you ever felt it yourself? If so, what was the reaction of those around you? Did they affirm that indignation or did they seek to suppress it?

Chapter 7

1. If you are someone who has spent a lot of your life as an active church member, and especially if you have admired your pastors over the years, this can be a challenging chapter. Were you surprised to learn that Christian clergy wrote almost half of the American defenses of slavery? If, as we've seen, the primary motivations for slavery were economic,



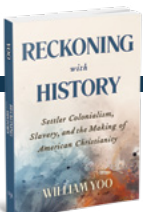
SESSION 3 (continued)

why did the defenders of slavery feel it necessary to draw so heavily on religious ideas to promote it? Why did pastors like Richard Furman and Basil Manly Sr. move from an earlier condemnation of slavery to writing justifications for it, based in Christian Scripture?

2. The proslavery writer Thornton Stringfellow draws on the story of Genesis 16:1-9 about Abraham, Sarah, and their enslavement of Hagar to present two possible approaches to the question of slavery. He said that to conclude that slavery is wrong requires one to demote Abraham and Sarah from their status as exemplars of faith in God, an esteem in which they've been held throughout the history of the Christian church. To leave them on their pedestal (as Stringfellow implies we must) is to accept that slavery is acceptable to God. Are there other options, though? Could one of them be to see Abraham and Sarah as people trying to live up to their faith commitments while simultaneously being capable of grossly immoral behavior (like the enslavement of another human being) because they saw that behavior serving their economic interests? What other approaches to this story would you offer?
3. Stringfellow and other defenders of slavery illustrate how easy it is to use biblical interpretation to miss the forest for the trees.
 - Do several individual passages treat slavery as a part of everyday life in ancient Israel and the world of the New Testament?
 - Does the Bible's overall message of human dignity and the status of all persons as beloved children of God supersede these individual passages and lead us to conclude that the horrors of slavery are unacceptable to God?

In 1860, roughly half of the country's Christian preachers would say yes only to the first of those two questions. Today, while there are still some holdouts, the overwhelming majority of clergy and laity in the Christian churches would affirm both. That being said, to what controversial issues today would the principle of biblical interpretation contained in the second question also apply?

4. Renowned biblical scholar Moses Stuart identified many of the problems with proslavery biblical interpretation while still refusing to condemn the practice of slavery in the United States. One reason for this was his reverence for the Constitution and for those who put it together. Is this an example a person's loyalty to God competing with their loyalty to country? Does that competition arise often for you? When it does, how to you discern how to resolve it?
5. Proslavery preachers accompanied their twisted version of the message of Christ with a staggering certitude that it was true. Beyond shaking our heads in disbelief, what are we to do in the face of someone being so fundamentally wrong? One response is to ask how the same thing might be happening among us today. Are there religious/social/political movements in the United States today that also pervert the gospel?



SESSION 4: Where Do We Go From Here

Questions for Discussion after Reading Chapter 8



Click here or scan the QR code to watch the session introduction video from author William Yoo

1. How different is the history of the United States recounted in the book from what you learned as a student? Has that difference been uncomfortable for you?
2. As the opening of this chapter states, Yoo has sought to celebrate those times when Indigenous, Black, white, and other Christians have worked for racial harmony and justice in the American colonies and the United States. But he has been unflinching in telling the story of how often (most especially white) Christians have failed to follow the dictates of the gospel when it comes to matters of race. What, do you think, is his primary purpose for telling this “warts and all” history? Why haven’t schools and churches done a better job of doing the same?
3. The way this history has been told through the years has evolved. These days, the blame for racial injustice in America is no longer placed on the supposed racial inferiority of the nonwhite population (as it was, for example, in the early nineteenth century). Today’s story, as the author recounts, admits that racial animosity was a problem, even in the churches, during the country’s early centuries. Yet that animosity was the work of a limited number of individuals; its solution arose from within American Christianity itself, especially in relation to the abolitionist movement; and that solution was largely accomplished by the Civil War, with the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 60s a kind of “mopping up” operation. How different is that telling of the story from what you’ve encountered in this book? Why do politicians and school administrators often prefer the sanitized version of the story as just described?
4. The author concludes the book with five suggestions that congregations can use to become more engaged and effective in addressing the ongoing problems of racial injustice. If you are studying the book as part of a group within your church, let me suggest that you choose one or two of these suggestions and in your group come up with action steps your congregation can take to translate them into meaningful action in your local community.

