

The Doctrine of Discovery

On two Sundays in November 2022, the First Church Christian Formation committee presented 9:30 sessions about the so-called Doctrine of Discovery and its horrific and ongoing effects upon Indigenous peoples. During the first session we explored the history surrounding this Doctrine and its persistence into our own time. In the second session we pondered the role of Christianity in supporting and elaborating upon the Doctrine.

Much of the substance of the two sessions was drawn from the very extensive and rich curriculum prepared by the United Church of Christ in 2015. Here is a link to the complete curriculum:

<https://new.uccfiles.com/pdf/DoctrineofDiscovery.pdf>

Below are a few notes from each session. ---Hilary Hopkins, Chair, Christian Formation committee

Notes from Doctrine of Discovery session 1 – 11/13/22

Some Indian Tribes

Assiniboine	Hopi	Oneida	Wampanoag
Blackfeet	Iowa	Pawnee	Yurok
Cherokee	Jicarilla	Quileute	Zuni
Delaware	Kickapoo	Rappahannock	and many many more
Erie	Lenni Lanape	Seneca	
Fox	Miccosukee	Tuscarora	
Gros Ventre	Navajo	Ute	

One Statement of the Doctrine of Discovery, Papal Bull of Pope Alexander VI, May 4, 1493 (there are other similar)

“...and in order that you may enter upon so great an undertaking with greater readiness and heartiness endowed with benefit of our apostolic favor...we...by the authority of Almighty God...and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ...should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains, give, grant and assign to you and your heirs and successors...together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdictions...all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered...With this proviso however that none of the islands and mainlands, found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered...be in the actual possession of any Christian king or prince...and we make, appoint, and depute you and your said heirs and successors lords of them with full and free power, authority and jurisdiction of every kind; with this proviso however, that by this our gift, grant, and assignment no right acquired by any Christian prince, who may be in actual possession of said islands and mainlands...is hereby understood to be withdrawn or taken away. Moreover we command you in virtue of holy obedience...you should appoint to the aforesaid mainlands and islands worthy, God-fearing, learned, skilled and experienced men, in order to instruct the aforesaid inhabitants and residents in the Catholic faith and train them in good morals...”

Gist of Johnson v. McIntosh, 1818

Supreme Court Chief Justice John Marshall ruled that the Federal government had the sole right of negotiation with Native American nations. The Indians themselves did not have the right to sell their land to individuals. They had only the right of occupancy, not ownership. (Birds occupy the air but do not own it, as it were.)

Manifest Destiny

A phrase from 1845, the idea being that the United States is destined—by God, its advocates believed—to expand its dominion and spread democracy and capitalism across the entire North American continent. This philosophy drove 19th century US territorial expansion and was used to justify the forced removal of Native Americans and other groups from their homes.

Reinhold Niebuhr on Manifest Destiny (quoted by James Cone in the Cross and the Lynching Tree)

“North America was a virgin continent when the Anglo-Saxons came, with a few Indians in a primitive state of culture.” Niebuhr saw America as being elected by God for the expansion of empire (Cone).

We viewed a TED talk by Mark Charles, called We The People. It is easy to find online if you wish to view it again.

Posted by a commenter on this talk

“In retort to those who say it is ancient history, I wasn’t here, my parents weren’t here, I am first generation, etc. etc. etc., I often say that it is not a burden to be the generation that starts the lament, repentance, restoration, and reconciliation...it is our privilege, duty, and honor to do it.”

Notes from Doctrine of Discovery session 2 – 11/20/22

We viewed a video about the 19th and 20th century involvement of Christianity in the destructions visited upon the Indians. The video was made by the Episcopal church, which was the first denomination to repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery. Search for it as follows: Episcopal video re Doctrine of Discovery.

The Great Commission – 2 versions of Matthew 8:16-20

“Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. When they saw him, they worshipped him, but some doubted. And Jesus came and said to them, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything that I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.’

--Revised Standard Version (which we use at First Church)

“The remaining eleven of his followers journeyed to Circle of Nations [Galilee]. There, at the mountain where Creator Sets Free [Jesus] had told them to go, they met with him. When they saw him, they gave to him the honor he deserved—but there were some who still doubted. ‘All the authority of the spirit-world above and the earth below has been given to me,’ he told them, ‘So now I am sending you into all nations to teach them how to walk the road with me. You will represent me as you perform the purification ceremony with them, initiating them into the life of beauty and harmony represented in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. You will then teach them all the ways that I have instructed you to walk in.’ Creator Sets Free [Jesus] then looked into their faces with love and great affection. He lifted his hands toward them and spoke these final blessing words over them. ‘Never forget,’ he said as he began to rise up into the spirit-world above, ‘I will always be with you, your invisible guide, walking beside you, until the new age has fully come.’

--First Nations Version: An Indigenous Translation of the New Testament [2021] (available on Amazon)

Excerpts from speech of Chief Red Jacket , Seneca sachem and orator of the Six Nations, at 1796 council with a group from the Connecticut Land Co., with whom the Indians were attempting to negotiate to retain their land

“...Brothers, you say you are sent to instruct us how to worship the Great Spirit agreeably to his mind, and if we do not take hold of the religion which you white people teach, we shall be unhappy hereafter. You say that you are right, and we are lost; how do we know this to be true? We understand that your religion is written in a book; if it was intended for us as well as you, why has not the Great Spirit given it to us, and not only to us, but why did he not give to our forefathers the knowledge of that book, with the mean of understanding it rightly? We only know what you tell us about it. How shall we know when to believe, being so often deceived by the white people?

Brother, you say there is but one way to worship and serve the Great Spirit; if there is but one religion, why do you white people differ so much about it? Why not all agree, as you can all read the book?

Brother, we do not understand these things. We are told that your religion was given to your forefathers and has been handed down from father to son. We also have a religion which was given to our forefathers and has been handed down to us their children. We worship that way. It teaches us to be thankful for all the favors we receive; to love each other, and to be united. We never quarrel about religion.

Brother, the Great Spirit has made us all; but he has made a great difference between his white and red children; he has given us a different complexion, and different customs; to you he has given the arts; to these he has not opened our eyes...since he has made so great a difference between us in other things, why may we not conclude that he has given us a different religion, according to our understanding. The Great Spirit does right; he knows what is best for his children; we are satisfied.

Brother, we do not wish to destroy your religion, or take it from you; we only want to enjoy our own."

From the UCC curriculum on the Doctrine of Discovery

Euro-American faith tended to slip into belief systems where the tendency is to put a wall around their beliefs, and the wall becomes a fort of protection from intruders, and from which they attack others. Their belief system allowed, even encouraged them to decimate the First Nations populations as an act of faith.

But some belief systems, rather than being a fort, are the base from which one's faith can reach out, be nurtured and grow. Hopefully, a Christian belief system will lead to a nurturing relationship with God that builds bridge, not walls, and that means a just relationship with fellow humanity.

Questions to ask ourselves

--After the injustices perpetrated upon Native Americans in the name of Christianity, how can we understand that many Indians are Christians?

--Do Indians need Whites' help in finding a sense of God's mission?

--Do we hear any differences between the RSV and FNV versions of the Great Commission? If so, how are these instructive?

--In what ways might our belief system be a fort instead of a bridge?

--How can we practice bridge-building?

Our FCC Land Acknowledgment:

We, gathered here, acknowledge that we are meeting on land which has been the traditional ancestral homeland of the Massachusetts people. We acknowledge that this land is unceded and remains sacred to the Massachusetts and to their close neighbors and relatives, the Nipmuc and Wampanoag peoples. We acknowledge and deplore the violence and erasure perpetrated upon Indigenous peoples and their lands in the name of this country, and by our First Church forebears. We commit to ongoing listening, learning, and acting in ways that honor Indigenous peoples and the land.

What identity would repudiating the Doctrine of Discovery give us??