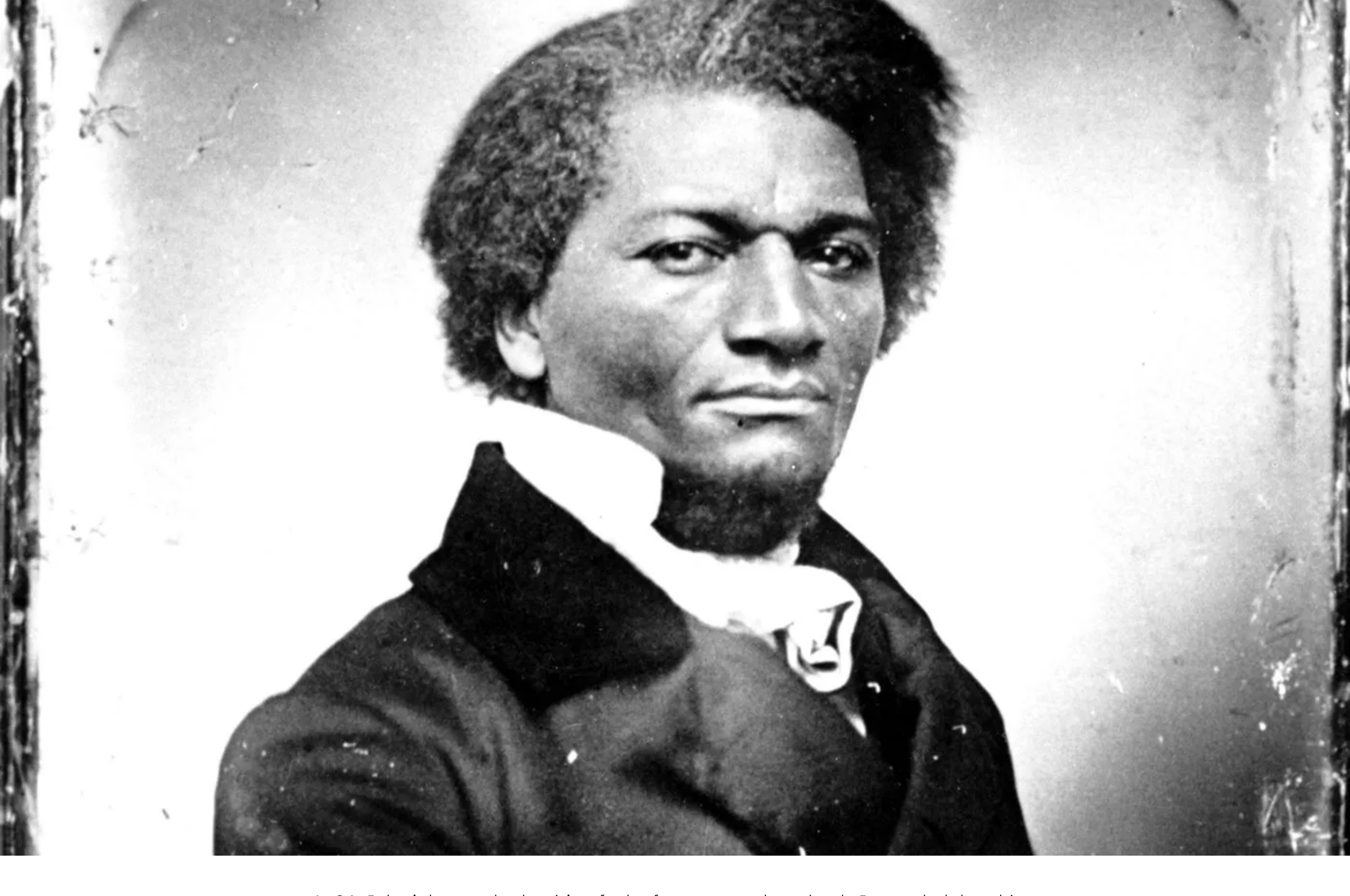




Frederick Douglass's Indictment of Southern Christianity

● Chad C. Ashby ● July 3, 2018 ■ Books ● Christianity, frederick douglass, slavery



At 31, I don't know whether it's a fault of my own or the schools I attended that this summer is the first time I've read *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave*.

I'm glad to say my high school students won't suffer the same fate. In our Literature and Composition class this fall, we will wrestle together with this heart-wrenching saga of a man fighting for his life in an American South where the right to "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" only extended to those born to two white parents.

Douglass was born to an African slave mother—the illegitimate son of his own master. Among the atrocities scrawled by the edge of Douglass's cool pen, he ponders what sort of man will whip, beat, and sell his own son as property. He dissects the cruelty and intentionality with which slaveowners shaped the worldview of their slaves into an inescapable prison. Even religion—*especially* religion—was prostituted to this wicked end.



Don't let this summer pass by without reading this harrowing account. You can get the [PDF here](#) or the [Ebook here](#).

Douglass attached an [Appendix](#) to his narrative further explaining his perspective on Christianity. He was worried that way he excoriated the religion of his masters might cause his readers to think he himself was not a Christian. He writes,

What I have said respecting and against religion, I mean strictly to apply to the *slaveholding religion* of this land, and with no possible reference to Christianity proper; for, between the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.

I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity. I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels. Never was there a clearer case of "stealing the livery of the court of heaven to, serve the devil in."

With eyes wide open, Douglass saw straight through the utter hypocrisy of those who traded, sold, beat, and bred black men and women as chattel Monday through Saturday but praised the Lord, preached the gospel, and commissioned missionaries on Sunday:

I am filled with unutterable loathing when I contemplate the religious pomp and show, together with the horrible inconsistencies, which every where surround me. We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday, and claims to be a minister of the meek and lowly Jesus. The man who robs me of my earnings at the end of each week meets me as a classleader on Sunday morning, to show me the way of life, and the path of salvation. He who sells my sister, for purposes of prostitution, stands forth as the pious advocate of purity. He who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible denies me the right of learning to read the name of the God who made me. He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families,—sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers,—leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate.

We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery. We have men sold to build churches, women sold to support the gospel, and babes sold to purchase Bibles for the *poor heathen! all for the glory of God and the good of souls!* The slave auctioneer's bell and the church-going bell chime in with each other, and the bitter cries of the heart-broken slave are drowned in the religious shouts of his pious master. Revivals of religion and revivals in the slave-trade go hand in hand together. The slave prison and the church stand near each other. The clanking of fetters and the rattling of chains in the prison, and the pious psalm and solemn prayer in the church, may be heard at the same time. The dealers in the bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, and the pulpit, in return, covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise.

Quoting Matthew 23, Douglass breathes the curses of Christ upon the Pharisaiism of this so-called Christianity:

"...Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye are like unto whited sepulchres, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity."

Dark and terrible as is this picture, I hold it to be strictly true of the overwhelming mass of professed Christians in America. They strain at a gnat, and swallow a camel. Could any thing be more true of our churches? They would be shocked at the proposition of fellowshipping a *sheep*-stealer; and at the same time they hug to their communion a *man*-stealer, and brand me with being an infidel, if I find fault with them for it. They attend with Pharisaiical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith. They are always ready to sacrifice, but seldom to show mercy. They are they who are represented as professing to love God whom they have not seen, whilst they hate their brother whom they have seen. They love the heathen on the other side of the globe. They can pray for him, pay money to have the Bible put into his hand, and missionaries to instruct him; while they despise and totally neglect the heathen at their own doors.

As he concludes, he attaches a scathing parody hymn written by a Methodist preacher:

Such is, very briefly, my view of the religion of this land; and to avoid any misunderstanding, growing out of the use of general terms, I mean, by the religion of this land, that which is revealed in the words, deeds, and actions, of those bodies, north and south, calling themselves Christian churches, and yet in union with slaveholders. It is against religion, as presented by these bodies, that I have felt it my duty to testify.

A PARODY.

"Come, saints and sinners, hear me tell
How pious priests whip Jack and Nell,
And women buy and children sell,
And preach all sinners down to hell,
And sing of heavenly union.

"They'll bleat and baa, dona like goats,
Gorge down black sheep, and strain at motes,
Array their backs in fine black coats,
Then seize their negroes by their throats,
And choke, for heavenly union.

"They'll church you if you sip a dram,
And damn you if you steal a lamb;
Yet rob old Tony, Doll, and Sam,
Of human rights, and bread and ham;
Kidnapper's heavenly union.

...

"Another preacher whining spoke
Of One whose heart for sinners broke:
He tied old Nanny to an oak,
And drew the blood at every stroke,
And prayed for heavenly union..."

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3 thoughts on "Frederick Douglass's Indictment of Southern Christianity"

christine1736@gmail.com

July 11, 2018 at 2:33 pm

This opens my eyes to the fact i've been standing on this country being built by Christians (which it was)...Now I wonder, what kind of "Christians" were they? Hopefully ones like Thomas Jefferson who released slaves and gave them up freely? Hopefully not rapists, hypocrites and baby thieves. This would be an amazingly insightful book to read if you write it...Just sayin.

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Zach Kennedy

July 5, 2018 at 9:46 pm

Since when did you start teaching a high school Literature and Composition class?

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Chad Ashby

July 8, 2018 at 8:48 pm

Zach, this will be my first year. I'm teaching at a classical hybrid school named Chapin Academy. The classes meet Tuesday/Thursday and then they do homeschool the rest of the week.

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