

The year 2019 marks a traumatic moment in American life – the 400th anniversary of the first slave ship’s arrival on these shores in August 1619. In his classic text, *Before the Mayflower*, Leone Bennett, Jr. wrote:

She came out of a violent storm with a story no one believed, a name no one recorded and a past no one investigated. . . . A year before the arrival of the celebrated “Mayflower,” 113 years before the birth of George Washington, 244 years before the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation, this ship sailed into the harbor at Jamestown, Virginia, and dropped anchor into the muddy waters of history. . . . What seems unusual today is that no one sensed how extraordinary she really was. Few ships, before or since, have unloaded a more momentous cargo.

The arrival of that ship is an event we ignore at our peril, particularly at this moment in the nation’s history. Its implications impact us yet. Have you seen the recent video in which an African-American high school wrestler named Andrew Johnson has his dreadlocks cut off in front of everyone at the New Jersey state tournament? The young wrestler acquiesced, and, with only seconds to spare, his hair was cut with the crowd watching, a 41-second eternity now viewed on social media over 15 million times. Johnson won the match in overtime, but there was no joy in him. It wasn’t about hair; it was about humiliation, and yes, race.

Watching the video of those New Jersey events reminded me of the warnings that African-American parents give their children, particularly their male children, on being young and black in the U.S.A.

I also went back to this passage from W.E.B. DuBois’ great work, *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903, 40 years after the Emancipation Proclamation: “The Nation has not yet found peace from its sins; the freedman has not yet found in freedom his promised land. Whatever good may have come in these years of change, the shadow of a deep disappointment rests upon the Negro people.”

Today, 115 years after DuBois wrote those words, the nation is still searching for peace from the sins of its racist past and present. In December 2018, as the New Jersey wrestling incident went viral, the Southern Baptist seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, issued a 72-page document titled “Report on Slavery and Racism in the History of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary”, detailing the school’s ties to the South’s slave culture and charting its own contemporary exorcism.

The well-documented study extends from the seminary’s founding by Southern Baptists in 1859, through the Civil Rights movement, and ending with efforts of its board of trustees to distance the institution from a lecture given by Martin Luther King, Jr. on the seminary campus in 1961.

With this important study, SBTS joins such institutions as Baptist-founded schools like Wake Forest and Furman Universities in exploring the advocacy of chattel slavery, Jim Crow legislation and white supremacy by earlier generations of faculty, trustees, donors, graduates and ecclesiastical leaders. They and other schools with similar histories are struggling to respond

American Racism, 1619–2019: exorcism of this demon is needed—now

by Bill Leonard



to the racist elements in their origins, and what they mean to institutional identity for the future.

The SBTS report illustrates that reality. It begins by asserting that while “the seminary leaders . . . labored to save the eternal souls of blacks no less than whites,” they “contradicted these commitments . . . by asserting white superiority and defending racial inequality. . . . The seminary’s leaders long shared that belief and therefore failed to combat effectively the injustices stemming from it.” The study documents that the school’s four founding faculty, ensconced in the orthodoxy of Reformed theology, were all slaveholders who “defended the righteousness of slaveholding” and “supported the Confederacy’s cause to preserve slavery.” Later, “after emancipation, the seminary faculty opposed racial equality,” supporting “the restoration of white rule in the South” and “Lost Cause mythology” during Reconstruction and beyond.

Before any of us white folks cast the first self-righteous stone, we’d best take stock of ourselves, past and present. Indeed, the SBTS study and others like it compel us to ask, when do our current assertions and actions toward racial or any other kind of inequality contradict our deepest claims to Christian commitment?

As a student of Baptist history, as well as a member of the SBTS faculty, 1975-1992, I’m forced to ask: what am I promoting as gospel right now that later generations will document, repudiate and apologize for? I can’t repent of the racism of my Baptist ancestors if I won’t repent of racism in myself and my own segment of American culture right now.

That’s why we must confront this terrible, teachable anniversary, 1619-2019. Unless we exorcise demon racism, and any biblical or theological means of supporting it, this “one Nation, under God, indivisible” won’t (maybe shouldn’t) last another 400 years.

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Bill Leonard is the founding dean and the James and Marilyn Dunn professor of Baptist studies and church history emeritus at the Wake Forest University School of Divinity.