

# In 1492 Columbus Sailed The Ocean Blue

In Doctrine of Discovery<sup>[1]</sup>, YCM<sup>[2]</sup> on **July 18, 2013** at **5:41 am**  
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**July 18, 2013**

The folk of the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) (DOC) passed the resolution, GA1324: Reflection on Christian Theology and Polity, the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, and the Indigenous Voice! It has taken years to get to this point, but now, the people of the DOC have said, “perhaps we should take some time and wonder whether or not the Christian Doctrine of Discovery (DOD) influenced our Theology, our Polity and Structure, and most of all, our relationship with American Indians and First Nations People.” The exploration may not be an easy one in the years to come, but one which is sure to expand our vision of Creator and Creation.

Much is to come, however, a beginning, on this day after adoption on GA1324, can be found in the reflections of Keith Watkins in his observation The Christian Doctrine of Discovery<sup>[5]</sup>. Additionally, the full text asking the body of the DOC to risk years, if not generations, exploring the DOD’s influence in their development—theology and polity—and actions is found below.

Many of us grew up with the phrase, “In 1492 Columbus sailed the ocean blue.” Some of us honored it, some of us did not. What we did not learn is Columbus’ return to Barcelona, Spain set of a series of papal bulls, edicts, court decisions, treaties, and laws that enhanced the age of discovery, which today we call the Christian Doctrine of Discovery.

Furthermore, what few of us learned was the ensuing European colonization of indigenous lands could not have occurred as it did, to the length it did, without the approval of and the theological underpinning of the Christian Church.

The bull *Romanus Pontifex* in 1455 and Pope Alexander VI’s 1493 bull *Inter Caetera* laid out a European structure of discovery which allowed any Christian king or prince to claim and subjugate indigenous landscapes and people not already under the purview and conquest of another Christian king or prince. That underpinning lead to five

hundred years of Christian theological development that supported the suppression of indigenous people of color throughout the world.

In the America's, this Christian underpinning led to Supreme Court Justice John Marshal's decision on the 1823 case *Johnson vs. M'Intosh*, in which he asserted, "Conquest gives a title which the Courts of the conqueror cannot deny." This decision created the basic legal framework of U.S. government and American indigenous nation's relationships, which continue to this day.

Marshal's decision enhanced the development of Christian thought which led to the development of the 1845 U.S. expansionist phrase, *Manifest Destiny*. Embedded within Manifest Destiny is the Christian theological argument of *The Great Commission*, interpreted during this era as a Christian mandate to "overspread and to possess the whole of the continent."

This matters to us, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), for the preference for European conquest, *The Great Commission*, and *Manifest Destiny*, was not lost on our early leaders. Writing on, "The Destiny of Our Country," in the August 1852 edition of the *Millennial Harbinger*, Alexander Campbell stated, "in our countries destiny is involved the destiny of Protestantism, and in its destiny the destiny of all the nations of the world. God has given, in awful charge, to Protestant England and Protestant America—the Anglo-Saxon race—the fortunes, not of Christendom only, but of all the world."

This matters to us, because, as Howard Thurman said when writing about segregation, "Most of the accepted social behavior-patterns assume segregation to be normal—if normal, then correct; if correct, then moral; if moral, then religious." Because our roots were planted in a time of U.S. expansionism and extreme racist conflict, the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is called to wonder if our religious underpinnings, our theology and our polity, are grounded in the Christian Doctrine of Discovery.

This also matters to us because the Doctrine of Discovery continues to damage indigenous landscapes and people.

- In 2005 Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg delivered the opinion of the court on a case between the City of Sherrill and Oneida Indian Nation that because roughly 200 years had elapsed before the Oneida tried to reestablish ownership of ancestral lands, they could no longer assert tribal immunity. The first footnote of the decision says, "Under the 'doctrine of discovery'... lands occupied by Indians when the colonists arrived became vested in the sovereign—first the discovering European nation and later the original States and the United States."
- In 2012 the Canadian Omnibus Budget Bill C-45 (Jobs and Growth Act) removed self-rule of First People Nations and their environmental protection of over nearly 5 million bodies of water, leaving only 97 lakes protected.

This also matters to us because we are a people of a welcoming and open table. Yet, when we look around the people of the ancient people on which our table resides are not here with us.

The Yakama and Cherokee, the Crow and Laguna, the Cree and Mahove, the Chicasaw and Algonkin, the Kickapoo and Dakota, the Choctaw and Timucua (tee-moo-kwa) are not at our table.

We are called to, question why our sisters and brothers whose ancestry resides in the landscape of the Americas are not with us. For without them we have no balance, our gait is uneven, our soil unstable. Without them we are not whole and the wind is only the wind and the voice of the ancients, of the cloud of witness, is lost. Without them, our children's children will live in a landscape whose harmony is in discord.

For these reasons, the signers of this **resolution** ask the General Assembly of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) to approve Resolution 1324: *Reflection on Christian Theology and Polity, the Christian Doctrine of Discovery, and the Indigenous Voice* and begin a generational walk of exploring these and the incurring questions that are sure to arise.

We ask this, because the writers and supporters of this resolution believe that if we commit to and develop a passion for the inclusion of America's and the world's indigenous people to our table, and if we become accountable to their voices, then our children's children may one day experience the harmony and the shalom, that certainly is eternally theirs.

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## Links

1. <https://ridgevalleyreflections.wordpress.com/category/doctrine-of-discovery/>
2. <https://ridgevalleyreflections.wordpress.com/category/ycm/>
3. <https://ridgevalleyreflections.files.wordpress.com/2013/07/13-07-18.jpg>
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5. <http://keithwatkinshistorian.wordpress.com/2013/07/15/the-christian-doctrine-of-discovery/>
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