

Theology Pub

July 2019

Reparations

1. Is there biblical support for reparations? Consider the following passages from the Old Testament:

- *Leviticus* discusses “Jubilee” regulations, where every 50 years, if there were slaves, they were to be freed, their debts forgiven, and their land returned to them. *See, e.g.*, *Leviticus 25:41* (“In this Year of Jubilee everyone is to return to their own property. . . . Then [the Israelites] and their children are to be released, and they will go back to their own clans and to the property of their ancestors.
- In *Isaiah*, Isaiah prophetically speaks for the Messiah, saying the following: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” *Isaiah 61:1-2*.

2. In saying, “to proclaim *the year of the Lord’s favor*,” is Isaiah referencing Jubilee regulations? Why do you think there would be a Jubilee year every 50 years?

3. Switching gears to the current debate about reparations, one typical opposing argument is that reparations should be paid only to those directly wronged and not their descendants. Because there are no living survivors of slavery, opponents state that we should move on. What do you think of that argument?

- Consider the fact that as late as 2017, the United States government was paying a \$73.13/month pension to the 86-year-old daughter of a civil war veteran. The civil war ended long before any of us were alive, yet people do not voice complaints about these pensions. Does this change your answer?

4. Other issues identified by opponents have been who exactly to compensate, and how much money? Do these problems make you think that reparations just aren’t feasible?

- Nearly 47 million Americans identified as “black” or “African American” in the last census. Many persons can trace their ancestry to slaves, while others, such as more recent immigrants from African countries, cannot.
- According to a May 2019 NY Times Article, if the United States was to do a true “Jubilee” year today, dollar figure estimates have been as high as \$17 trillion.

5. Consider the following counterpoint: After slavery, African Americans suffered under the systematic racism of Jim Crow, “separate but equal” education, and discriminatory

housing policies like redlining.¹ In other words, African Americans have been denied access to intergenerational wealth building by government policies that are interwoven into the fabric of American society. Does this change your answers to questions 3 and 4?

6. In April 2019, Georgetown University students approved a resolution to impose a fee on themselves—\$27.20 per semester—to pay reparations for the university’s ties to slavery (Jesuits sold 272 slaves to finance the university in its early days). The resolution provides that the proceeds “will be allocated for charitable purposes directly benefiting the descendants of the GU272 and other persons once enslaved by the Maryland Jesuits — with special consideration given to causes and proposals directly benefiting those descendants still residing in proud and underprivileged communities.”

What do you think the students’ vote? Would you support reparations designed to fund underprivileged communities of color?

7. How does your faith impact your thoughts on reparations (if at all)?

8. Consider these polls from June 2019 asking the question, “Should America Pay Reparations?”

Marist Poll Yes 26%; No 68%

Data for Progress Poll: Yes 26%; No 47%

Fox News Poll: Yes 32%; No 60%

Rasmussen Poll: Yes 21%; No 66%

Do you think reparations are likely to occur? Why or why not? Should reparations happen in some capacity?

Sources:

Ulysses Burley III and Nathan Roberts: The Biblical Case for Black Reparations, available at <http://thesaltcollective.org/biblical-case-black-reparations/>

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Patricia Cohen, THE NEW YORK TIMES, What Reparations for Slavery Might Look Like in 2019, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/23/business/economy/reparations-slavery.html>

Curt Mills, U.S. NEWS & WORLD REPORT, U.S. Still Paying a Civil War Pension, available at

<https://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2016-08-08/civil-war-vets-pension-still-remains-on-governments-payroll-151-years-after-last-shot-fired>

Tracy Jan, THE WASHINGTON POST, Redlining Was Banned 50 Years Ago. It’s Still Hurting Minorities Today, available at https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/wonk/wp/2018/03/28/redlining-was-banned-50-years-ago-its-still-hurting-minorities-today/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.55613fd5dc51

¹ For those who may not know, “redlining” was practiced by the Homeowners Loan Corporation (HOLC), a former U.S. government agency established in 1933 to help stabilize real estate during the Great Depression by refinancing mortgages at low interest rates to prevent foreclosures. The HOLC created color-coded maps of 239 cities to show which neighborhoods which neighborhoods were good investments, and which were “risky.” Every black neighborhood was coded “red” for being “risky,” including the upscale neighborhoods that were home to Duke Ellington and Ella Fitzgerald. Private banks began using these maps for all home purchases and finances. This practice remained until Congress outlawed it in 1968 through the Fair Housing Act.