

CHRISTIAN ACTION COMMISSION
Resolution to Repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery

“Let us make humankind in our image.” —Genesis 1:26
“For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works.”
—Ephesians 2:10

“There was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.”—Revelation 7:9

ABSTRACT/OVERVIEW

This resolution briefly explains the Doctrine of Discovery and outlines its long-lasting impact in the U.S., as well as the damage and trauma it has inflicted on Indigenous peoples. We turn to Scripture to remember that God has created all humans in God’s own image and imbued each individual with God’s image (*imago Dei*).

We confess with our Indigenous brothers and sisters that the whole of creation is the work of God, and we acknowledge the damage done to the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas through the taking of rights, property, and land. We acknowledge the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples through sustained and systemic acts of injustice. We acknowledge the complicity of the Christian church (including the Covenant Church) in that dispossession, subjugation, and relegation.

We the Evangelical Covenant Church hereby repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. We will seek to support Indigenous people as they identify ways to affirm their inherent human rights and resolve wrongs.

INTRODUCTION

The history of the Indigenous people of North America is not fully understood or taught in public schools or mainstream culture in the U.S. This history is difficult for many to face, especially in light of the complicity of the Church. The violence and brutality of colonization in U.S. history stripped Indigenous people of their land and culture, and it was done “In the name of Christ.” For more than five centuries, the Doctrine of Discovery and the laws based upon it, have legalized the theft of land, labor, and resources from Indigenous Peoples, from which the dominant culture continues to benefit. This doctrine originated with the Christian church in the 15th century. It is now the Church’s responsibility to refute it.

The Evangelical Covenant Church (ECC) is a multiethnic denomination and committed to the Six-Fold Test for Multiethnic Ministry,¹ which includes Practicing Solidarity. This resolution seeks to raise awareness around the injustices caused by the Doctrine of Discovery in the United States and throughout the world, and to offer ideas for meaningful individual and corporate action toward healing.

As a people who affirm *imago Dei*, believing that all people have inherent value as created in the image of God, we seek to be a part of Christ’s healing work where *imago Dei* was rejected. We must hear the truth and lament the complicity of the Church and its marginalization of Indigenous people.

The Doctrine of Discovery has been the seedbed of racism and colonialism in North America for centuries.

WHAT IS THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY?

The Doctrine of Discovery, also known as the doctrine of Christian discovery,² is a set of legal and theological principles derived from a series of papal bulls, or decrees, issued by popes of the Catholic Church in the 15th century. The papal bulls provided theological justification for European monarchies to “discover” and claim lands inhabited by non-Christian peoples.

In 1452, Pope Nicolas V issued the papal bull *Dum diversas* to King Alfonso V of Portugal, authorizing him to “capture, vanquish, and subdue the Saracens [Arab or Muslims at that time of the Crusades], pagans, and other enemies of Christ,” to “put them into perpetual slavery” and “take all their possessions and property.” Under this sanction, Portugal trafficked slaves from west Africa and claimed land along its west coast. A pattern of dehumanization and genocidal conquest had begun in the name of Christian discovery.

Pope Alexander VI issued the *Inter caetera* papal bull in 1493 at the request of King Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain, retroactively sanctioning the “discovery” of Guanahani Island (modern-day Bahamas) by Columbus in 1492, and the brutal conquest of the Taíno Indigenous inhabitants in the Caribbean.

“This doctrine on which all European states relied thus originated with the arbitrary and unilateral establishment of the Iberian monarchies’ exclusive rights under Christian canon law to colonize foreign peoples, and this right was later seized by other European monarchical colonizing projects.”³

The papal bulls served to grant Christian nations the divine right to claim absolute title to and ultimate authority over any newly “discovered” lands and their non-Christian inhabitants. The ideology and practice of the Doctrine

¹ <https://covenantcompanion.com/2020/07/09/six-fold-test-summit-what-does-it-mean-to-practice-solidarity/>

² Steven T. Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land* (Golden: Fulcrum, 2008), xxii.

³ Roxanne Dunbar-Ortiz, *An Indigenous Peoples History of the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2014), 199.

of Discovery reveal that Christian powers regarded Indigenous peoples as less than human, without human rights.

In its colonization of North America, the young United States claimed the discovery doctrine as a birthright from Great Britain and followed the same pattern of genocide and conquest in the name of Manifest Destiny. Even though the land was already occupied by hundreds of Indigenous nations, the doctrine offered a sanctified ideology of dehumanization along with a misappropriation of divine will. Considering themselves the chosen people in the promised land, inheritors of a divine command to capture, vanquish, and subdue non-Christian inhabitants, the United States claimed the inhabited land with violence. Manifest Destiny justified forced removal of American Natives from their homelands.

The doctrine was first established into U.S. federal law with the Supreme Court decision of *Johnson v. McIntosh* in 1823, which found that Native inhabitants have only the right of occupancy in their homelands, with no title rights to land. With Native land title extinguished by legislative authority, President Andrew Jackson authorized the Indian Removal Act of 1830. The Trail of Tears is notably mentioned in American history, but many more such death marches occurred as land was cleared of Native inhabitants for western settlement.⁴

The *Johnson v. McIntosh* decision is the cornerstone of U.S.–Indian policy and property law today and continues to suppress the rights of Native Americans, Native Alaskans, and Native Hawaiians.

A note on Canada: The Doctrine of Discovery fostered and justified nationalism among countries throughout the world. While Canada and First Nations people have their own story distinct from the U.S. embrace of Manifest Destiny, we recognize that Canada bears its own scars of nationalism, that also result from the legacy of this doctrine.

BIBLICAL FOUNDATION

We see the uniqueness of humanity emphasized in Genesis 1:26: “Let us make humankind in our own image, after our likeness.” Every human being is endowed with inherent dignity because humanity is imprinted with God’s own image. The image, suggests Covenant theologian Donald Frisk in *This We Believe*, contains both a substantial property and a relational one. We possess, in the very structure of our being, image—something like the imprint of the presidential likeness on a United States coin. It is easy to see how such an image may become so worn as to be almost obliterated, but nonetheless remain a part of the coin itself. Likewise says Frisk, the image is relational, “like the reflection of the moon in the mirror-like surface of a mountain lake.” There are elements of truth in both positions; image is substantial, and it is relational.

Our biblical understanding of the image of God is further amplified in Genesis 1:27: “So God created humankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.” We note here the implication that God created us for community, for relationship. To be in the image of God is to be in responsible relationship with others. Moreover, our vocation or calling as human beings is to be agents through whom the entire creation can reflect the glory of God, praising him and glorifying his holy name. Image-bearing then, takes on both individual and communal meaning.

⁴ Mark Charles and Soong-chan Rah, *Unsettling Truths: The Ongoing Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2019), 107-113.

The powerful imagery of the coin, however, reminds us that the imago Dei is easily marred. As with the imprint of the presidential or monarchical likeness on a coin that becomes worn over time, so as to become nearly unrecognizable, the essence of the imago Dei in us as well as in others can become worn. Moreover, as a sinful and broken humanity, we can have a tendency to mar the image of God in others; to relegate, dismiss, or discount it altogether. This marring has been evident in the historic legacies of colonization, conquest, and the marginalization of Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and internationally, the theological justification for which was grossly misinterpreted in the Genesis narrative. Genesis 1:28 states, “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it.’” This text became the false narrative and biblical justification for subjugating Indigenous peoples in the U.S. and led the west to place itself above and apart from the rest of creation and even above and apart from the rest of humanity. Such interpretation misses the essence of *dominion as stewardship* rather than ownership; yet divine dominion became the scriptural basis for propelling the Doctrine of Discovery—the *divine* right of conquest, superiority, Manifest Destiny, theft of land, and the brutalization of thousands of Native peoples who occupied the space before “discovery.” *Image marred*, in both parties, so worn as to be almost obliterated, but nonetheless, remaining a part of the coin.

Just as the meta-narrative of the Genesis and indeed, the entire biblical story reflects the paradigms of creation, sin, redemption, and reconciliation (i.e., Genesis 1:26; 4; 11; 18:22), so it is with the substantial and relational enterprise of image-bearing. Image created, and subsequently marred, is redeemed by God in Christ. As Frisk reminds us, “Only by turning away from ourselves to God, or more accurately, to Jesus Christ, who ‘is the image of the invisible God’ (Colossians 1:15), the Word made flesh for us (John 1:14)” —can we be restored to the ‘wide space’ (the overarching narrative of the Gospel, Matthew 22:34-40)—the space of shalom, harmony, and justice, as theologian Walter Brueggemann alludes.

Pursuing the shalom, harmony, and justice of God as it pertains to the marginalization of Indigenous peoples is about making the shift from mere image bearers to image protectors. As Frisk reminds us, “We participate in truly human existence through faith in Christ, the Word. In Him, we ‘put on the new nature,’ created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness (Ephesians 4:24). True existence is nothing less than living in God’s love, in his forgiveness, in his service which is our true freedom,” and in right relationship with all of humanity.

As a people who affirm the doctrine of imago Dei, believing that all people are created in the image of God and have inherent value, we seek to be a part of Christ’s healing work where imago Dei was rejected. We must hear the truth and lament the complicity of the Church in the marginalization of Indigenous people. Further, it is the very essence of imago Dei which compels us to reject the dehumanization of Indigenous peoples and repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery.

ONGOING IMPACT OF THE DOCTRINE OF DISCOVERY

The legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery in the U.S. and Canada today has created historical intergenerational trauma (post-traumatic stress disorder and historical trauma response)⁵ due to genocide, forced assimilation, removal, loss of homelands, and loss and repression of language and religion. These effects are directly related to conditions of excessive poverty on reservations, disproportional youth suicides, addiction issues 6-12 times higher than the rest of the U.S. population, extreme incidences of Type II diabetes from loss of traditional diets, and some of the highest unemployment rates in the United States. Similar conditions exist in Canada as well.

⁵ Charles and Rah, *Unsettling Truths*, 68-172.

One example of forced assimilation in the U.S. and Canada is the tragedy of Indian boarding or residential schools. Following the Civil War, Native American and Native Alaskan children were often forcibly taken from their families and sent into boarding schools to undergo rigorous civilizing and “Christianizing” in an effort to “induce assimilation.” Army Captain Richard Pratt modeled the flagship boarding school in Carlisle, Pennsylvania, after prisoner of war camps he designed during the Civil War. The schools were designed to implement a philosophy of “kill the Indian, to save the man.”⁶

Too often, however, they killed the child. Children suffered from starvation and disease, as well as mental, spiritual, and sexual abuse in boarding schools. From the years 1883 to 1918, 500 deaths were reported at Carlisle alone.⁷

In 1872 in the U.S., the Board of Indian Commissioners assigned 73 Indian agencies to various Christian denominations who administered the boarding schools. Twelve Christian denominations administered 357 schools in 30 states.⁸ In Canada, there were over 130 residential schools administered by three denominations from 1831 through to 1996. (<https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/residential-schools>)

Native identity was attacked in boarding schools by eliminating cultural food and dress and inflicting harsh punishment when children spoke their native language or practiced any cultural customs. Children were institutionally reared in fear and neglect. Those who survived boarding schools often carried with them shame for their Native cultures.

The legacy and residual impact of the Doctrine of Discovery also gave rise in both countries to **federal policies that led to genocide, assimilation, removal, the Indian reservation system, reorganization, termination, and relocation**. Many reservations and reserves were targeted for nuclear testing sites and waste storage, uranium mining, and other mineral extraction that leaves toxic waste. Natives have persevered, but many Native tribes continuously suffer ill-health due to such environmental racism. As recently as 2014, an Arizona congressman referred to Natives as “wards of the federal government” at a public hearing regarding his bill seeking to open Oak Flat, an Apache sacred site, to copper mining.⁹ The ideology of the discovery principle has been so pervasive as to become institutionalized.

The effects of extraction industries on or near Indian reservations have resulted in **disproportionate rates of murder, missing persons, and sexual trafficking**, a phenomenon known as Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.¹⁰ The National Institute of Justice states that more than 80 percent of Native American women have experienced violence in their life; one in three have suffered rape.

The effects of Doctrine of Discovery extend beyond Indigenous people to impact every immigrant group in the U.S., including the white majority. The doctrine was an antecedent to chattel slavery, informing the transatlantic slave trade and perpetuating a nationalism that degrades the image of God into something far short of the fullness of humanity we see in Revelation 7:9.

⁶ www.edweek.org/ew/projects/2013/native-american-education/history-of-american-indian-education.html

⁷ *Native American Rights Fund Legal Review*, Volume 38, No.2, Summer/Fall 2013.

⁸ www.boardingsoolhealing.org/education/resources

⁹ Roxanne Dunbarr-Ortiz and Dina Gillio-Whitaker, *All the Real Indians Died Off and 20 Other Myths About Native Americans* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2016), 87.

¹⁰ www.nativewomenwilderness.org/mmiw

THE COMPLICITY OF THE CHURCH

In the most basic terms, the Evangelical Covenant Church has been complicit in the Doctrine of Discovery by establishing churches on land that was made available by removing the original Native inhabitants and denying right to title.

Number Nine Above

Specifically, one era in our history is particularly egregious. Between the years of 1898 and 1910, the Evangelical Covenant Church and Covenant missionaries participated in the Alaska gold rush. A group of Covenant leaders in Chicago formed the Good Hope Mining Company, which prospected and staked more than 300 claims. Missionary Peter H. Anderson became involved in two claims, “Number Eight Above” and “Number Nine Above,” near present-day Nome. Both were originally held in the names of Constantine Uparazuck and Gabriel Adams, two young Native Alaskans. At the time, Eskimos were classified as “aliens,” and Congress did not grant them citizenship until 1924. Anderson paid \$20 for the Number Nine claim.

When Number Nine began to pay off, the Covenant sued Anderson for rights to the proceeds. In response, Anderson offered the denomination \$54,000 to settle out of court. The Covenant Executive Board countered by asking for \$100,000, plus half of all future proceeds. Anderson refused and demanded. The Covenant eventually accepted the \$54,000 and signed a release acknowledging Anderson as rightful owner to the claim. North Park received \$29,000, and \$25,000 was designated for a hospital in Chicago. Later, however, the Covenant sued Anderson again over ownership of the claim. A legal battle strung out over a decade, the case going all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court. Upon appeal, Anderson’s claim was upheld.¹¹

Throughout these events, Covenant missionaries and denominational leaders who were called to serve Indigenous people in Alaska participated in land grab over the mines and succumbed to the lust for gold. At best they became greedy; at worst they were exploitive of Indigenous Alaskans in their pursuit of wealth, exploitation that flowed right out of the heart of the Doctrine of Discovery.

Listening to Our Indigenous Leaders

In 2017, a historic event took place among Covenant ministers. One evening during the Midwinter Conference in Louisville, Kentucky, more than 200 people packed a hotel conference room to listen to three Covenant ministers speak of their experiences growing up in the church as Indigenous people: Journey to Mosaic facilitator Lenore Three Stars (Oglala Lakota), Alaska Superintendent Curtis Ivanoff (Native Alaskan), and Pastor Jim Sequeira (Native Hawaiian).

Curtis Ivanoff, a Native Alaskan, spoke of the pain and trauma caused by the long history of the marginalization of Indigenous people in the United States. He likened the pain of the Indigenous people to the British Petroleum oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010, saying that the pain and trauma Native and Indigenous people carry is like that massive oil leak, leaving behind a path of destruction and death. Yet in contrast to the public’s reaction to that oil spill, very little effort has been made to stop the catastrophic effects of the Doctrine of Discovery. “There will be no [peace] or healing until we attend to the leak; until we deal with the injustice,” he said.

¹¹ The story of Number 9 Above is told in Leland Carlson, *An Alaskan Gold Mine: The Story of No. 9 Above* (Eugene, Oreg.: Wipf and Stock, 2015), and in Karl Olsson, *By One Spirit* (Chicago: Covenant Press, 1962), 373-378. Thanks to Krisann J. Foss for her research on these sources. **check.**

Native theologian Randy Woodley (Keetoowah Cherokee) writes, “Shalom is always tested on the margins of a society and revealed by how the poor, oppressed, disempowered, and needy are treated.”¹²

The prophet of ancient Israel cried out for justice when the people’s ability to live in the land they called home was stripped from them, crying out, “Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream” (Amos 5:24).

CALL

In recent years, Christians are finally beginning to acknowledge the harm caused by the Doctrine of Discovery. Denominations and organizations have issued statements repudiating it as inconsistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ, including the United Methodist Church, Presbyterian Church (USA), the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, and others.¹³

In September 2007, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous peoples. Although the United States and Canada were two of four countries that did not vote to adopt it at that time, President Obama endorsed it in 2010 as an ideal that was not legally binding. And in 2016, Canada adopted the declaration promising to implement resolutions fully.¹⁴ The declaration recognizes inherent human rights bestowed by Creator Jesus on Indigenous peoples, politically, economically, culturally, and socially, with rights to their lands and resources. While it is true that the Declaration is not legally binding, if supported, it can change unjust norms.

In February 2012, the World Council of Churches issued a statement denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery and affirming the human rights of Indigenous people.

This resolution calls upon the Evangelical Covenant Church to recognize and confess our complicity with the Doctrine of Discovery, to repudiate its unjust origin and narrative, and to partner together to support efforts on educational, environmental, and social justice in order for the Church to engage in restoration and reconciliation of broken relationship.

We also recommend the following commitments:

- 1) That resources be committed to develop, under the leadership of Indigenous peoples, an Indigenous cross-cultural exploration and immersion journey (a “Trail of Tears” similar to the “Sankofa” journey) to be offered annually for raising awareness, forging understanding, and deepening commitment.
- 2) That resources be committed to support Indigenous efforts on reservations in proximity to the Covenant Church, such as the ongoing Turtle Mountain church plant, in order to live into the U.N. Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Persons. This would include language preservation and economic and environmental priorities with respect to solar and wind power and clean water (i.e., Covenant World Relief designed water pumps for developing countries).
- 3) That the Covenant demonstrate ongoing respectful recognition that ours is a “guest status” in the land, and in order to deepen our relational connection with Indigenous peoples, the Covenant commit, at each national event, to honor the “host” peoples whose homeland we are meeting upon.

¹² Randy Woodley, *Shalom and the Community of Creation* (Grand Rapids: Erdmans, 2012), 15.

¹³ <https://religionnews.com/2018/08/22/denominations-repent-for-native-american-land-grabs/>

¹⁴ <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-justice/news/2020/12/government-of-canada-introduces-legislation-respecting-the-united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

RESPONSE

We confess with our Indigenous brothers and sisters that the whole of creation is the work of God, that all humanity is created in the image of God, and that God declares it all good. We confess that Christ came in the flesh to show God's love and mercy to humanity and all creation, and we lament the ways in which we have been complicit in marring the imago Dei in Indigenous peoples.

We acknowledge the damage done to the Indigenous inhabitants of the Americas through the taking of rights, property, and land. We acknowledge the cultural genocide of Indigenous peoples through sustained and systemic acts of injustice. We acknowledge the complicity of the Christian church (including the Covenant Church) in that dispossession, subjugation, and relegation.

We lament and repent of our complicity in the continuing oppressive effects of subjugation, relegation, and theft of culture and land, including but not limited to emotional, psychological, physical, sociological, educational, and economic damage. We repent offering our Indigenous brothers and sisters a theology of assimilation rather than a theology of wholeness.

We commit to stand in solidarity with our Indigenous brothers and sisters, pursuing a renewed strategy for mission together with a particular commitment to forging lasting partnerships of mutuality and nurturing a practice of *accompaniment with*, rather than *missionary endeavor to*, in all areas of ministry and at all levels of the Covenant Church.

We commit to develop resources to help our congregations and people understand and reduce the negative impacts of the Doctrine of Discovery and its consequences for Indigenous peoples in North America.

We commit to honor and follow the lead of Indigenous members and leaders in the Covenant Church as we seek truth, healing, reconciliation, and transformation.

We commit to long-term, stable funding for Indigenous ministries within the Covenant as a means of affirming and healing the imago Dei of Indigenous peoples. One measure already in place is the full recognition of the Indigenous Ministers Association of the Evangelical Covenant Church, to be seated as a full member and participant at the table of the Mosaic Commission with all of the rights and responsibilities therein.

We the Evangelical Covenant Church hereby repudiate the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ. Further, we condemn it as a marring of the image of God and as a violation of the inherent human rights that all peoples have received from God.

We the Evangelical Covenant Church will work toward eliminating the Doctrine of Discovery as a legal means for the continued subjugation of Indigenous peoples of their rights, culture, property, and land.

We the Evangelical Covenant Church will seek to support Indigenous people as they identify ways to affirm their inherent human rights and resolve wrongs in accordance with the 2007 United Nations "Declaration of Indigenous Peoples," signed by the U.S. in 2010, which repudiated the validity of the Christian Doctrine of Discovery.

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Documentary/Film Resources (annotated)

- End of the Line: Women of Standing Rock*, <https://intercontinentalcry.org/end-line-women-standing-rock/>
“They are the daughters and granddaughters of brave survivors. People who escaped genocide, only to be robbed of their lands and herded onto reservations. Children who were taken from their families and placed in non-Native boarding schools and foster homes where they suffered further abuse. Today, these women tell their own tragic stories. Stories ranging from forced sterilization to substandard medical care.”
- Indian Horse*, <https://www.indianhorse.ca/en/film>
“The dark history of Canada’s boarding schools or Indigenous Residential Schools and the indomitable spirit of aboriginal people.”

Somebody's Daughter: Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women, <https://www.somebodysdaughter-mmiw.com/>

"With historical points of reference, the victims' and their families' stories are told through the lens of the legal jurisdictional maze and socio-economic bondage that constricts Indian Country."

Dawnland, <https://www.pbs.org/independentlens/films/dawnland/>

"The untold story of Indigenous child removal in the U.S. through the nation's first-ever government-endorsed truth and reconciliation commission, which investigated the devastating impact of Maine's child welfare practices on the Wabanaki people."