

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

(1818–1895)

FAITH, FAIRNESS, AND FREEDOM

Jonathan Corrado and Margaret Wieland

FREDERICK DOUGLASS was a key luminary during the American Civil War (1861–1865) and the subsequent period known as the Reconstruction era. He and President Abraham Lincoln, to whom he became a trusted adviser, had a relationship of mutual respect (see ‘A consequential American relationship’, p. 41).

Douglass was born into slavery and remained a slave-labourer for the first 20 years of his life. After much contemplation and preparation, he successfully found a way to escape, eventually becoming a fearless public figure in the abolition movement.¹

Learning to read was generally forbidden to slaves under threat of severe punishment. But Douglass learned it in secret, from reading the precious words of the Bible. His writings and rhetoric reflect his ongoing commitment to Christian doctrine, at the same time as he was deeply involved in the politics of abolition. It was as a Christian that he did not hesitate to call out various contemporary versions of Christianity as distortions that supported the institution of slavery.

Douglass’s acceptance of the Bible’s teaching included the Genesis account of the creation of our first human parents. A very straightforward conclusion from this account is that all of Adam and Eve’s descendants are fully

human and have the same intrinsic value, being made in God’s image. In other words, there is no such thing as any ‘race’ that is somehow less human or of less worth than another. Such a conclusion was, however, unwelcome in large portions of society in Douglass’s time. It served to undermine a major justification for owning and trading in African people as if they were beasts of burden.

Biographical background

According to his own writings, Douglass was born near Tuckahoe, Maryland. However, he was unaware of his birthdate. He knew that he was born to Harriet Bailey, an enslaved black woman, and a white father who was presumably her slaveholder master. Obviously, his hapless mother could give no resistance to his advances.

When he was very young, before he even knew her as his mother, she was hired out long-term to a property some 19 km (12 miles) away. Such cruel

‘Slave-breaking’ involved physical and psychological violence to break the spirit of the slave.

separation of enslaved mothers from their infant children was very common at the time. She could only visit him rarely, and then only at night, having to walk the entire distance and return to be back in the fields at sunrise. She died when he was only seven; he had seen her only four or five times in his life.

Douglass lived in various slave-owning households thereafter. After being sold to a Thomas Auld, he served as a household slave. It was Auld’s wife Sophia who helped him learn to read by studying the Bible.²

Discovering this, Auld immediately forbade it, but Douglass kept on in secret by himself. When Auld later discovered this, and that Douglass was teaching other slaves to read using Scripture, he sold him to Edward Covey, a Maryland farmer. Douglass wrote that Covey “had acquired a very high reputation for breaking young slaves, and this reputation was of immense value to him.”³ ‘Slave-breaking’ involved physical and psychological violence to break the spirit of the slave. Some of these slaves were owned by others, who would pay Covey for his services to have them suitably ‘broken’ and demoralized before being returned. Douglass observed that “Covey ... was a professor of religion—a pious soul—a member and a class leader in the Methodist church.”⁴

Such stark hypocrisy helps to explain Douglass’s frequent fierce criticisms and rejection of much of organized religion. This was particularly directed towards southern white Christianity. Its practitioners would not hesitate to abuse Bible passages to justify their frequent and unbiblical savage oppression and complete dehumanization of the black lives they presumed to own. (He later also became disillusioned with the approach of many of the black churches in too-passively accepting this state of affairs in the nation.) In a particularly scathing passage, he wrote:

We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members. The man who wields the blood-clotted cowskin [whip] during the week fills the pulpit on Sunday.⁵

Douglass's words highlight how the underlying sin of chattel slavery (quite different from the bond-servant concept in, for example, Old Testament Israel), corrupted the American Church's operations. The practice of man-stealing, which is how African slaves were first captured, is specifically condemned in the Bible.⁶

His statement also exposes the obvious hypocrisy, something Jesus repeatedly and strongly condemned (Matthew 23:3, 13, 23, 27, 33).

The Bible—human value, individual effort, justice, and fairness

Rachel Ferguson, Professor of Business Ethics at Concordia University, Chicago, and a Christian, has written extensively on Douglass. Concordia is operated by the Lutheran Church of America's conservative Missouri Synod, which affirms biblical (six-day) creation. She defines his religious faith in terms of his belief in orthodox Christian doctrine, encompassing the Bible's teachings on justice.⁷ The American Constitution's declaration that all are created of equal value reflects one aspect of this—despite some of the historical violations in practice.⁸

As a director of the university's Free Enterprise Institute, Ferguson is not promoting equality of outcomes. Rather, she often references Douglass's famous commitment to individual effort and the rule of just law. She emphasizes his rejection of economic systems that violate the self-ownership and property rights of the individual (like slavery or certain forms of paternalism). Douglass would have been an enemy of systems in which the state owned the means of production, as in the former Soviet Union.



Anna Murray Douglass (1813–1882), Frederick's first wife. His 1884 remarriage was widely (and unbiblically) criticized for being 'interracial' (creation.com/interracial).

Flight to freedom

After suffering under slavery for 20 years, Douglass escaped with the help of his future wife Anna Murray, a free-born African American. At great risk to herself, she used her position as a laundress to obtain a sailor's uniform for him. Thus disguised, and carrying borrowed sailor's identity documents, he boarded a train out of Baltimore, Maryland, using money she had provided from her savings. He travelled by train, ferry, and steamboat through northeastern Maryland, Delaware, and Pennsylvania,

narrowly avoiding recognition at a critical river crossing. Upon reaching the safety of abolitionist agents in New York City, he sent word to Anna, who travelled to meet and marry him there.

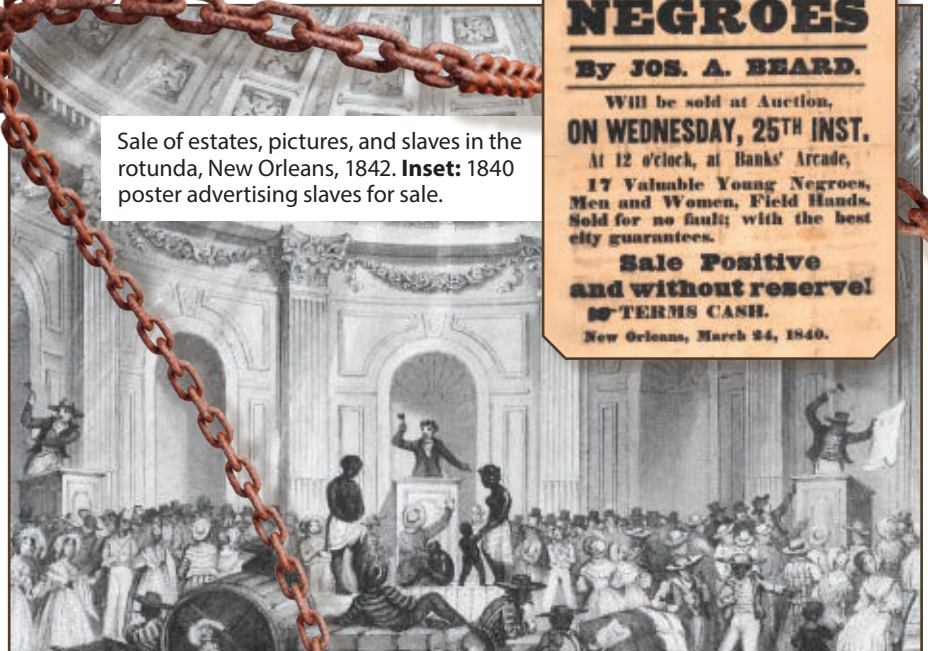
Laws forbade marriages between slaves, which of course violated biblical teachings. Douglass later wrote that "the slave owner who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution."⁹

Douglass's later life became increasingly connected to the politics of the era and the abolitionist movement specifically. Yet his faith informed his politics, not the reverse, despite accusations to the contrary. The accusations were more than likely related to the discomfort caused by his uncompromising presentations of the evils of slavery. These inevitably exposed the failings of white Christian society in this regard, even when this was not directly mentioned.

Opposition within the church

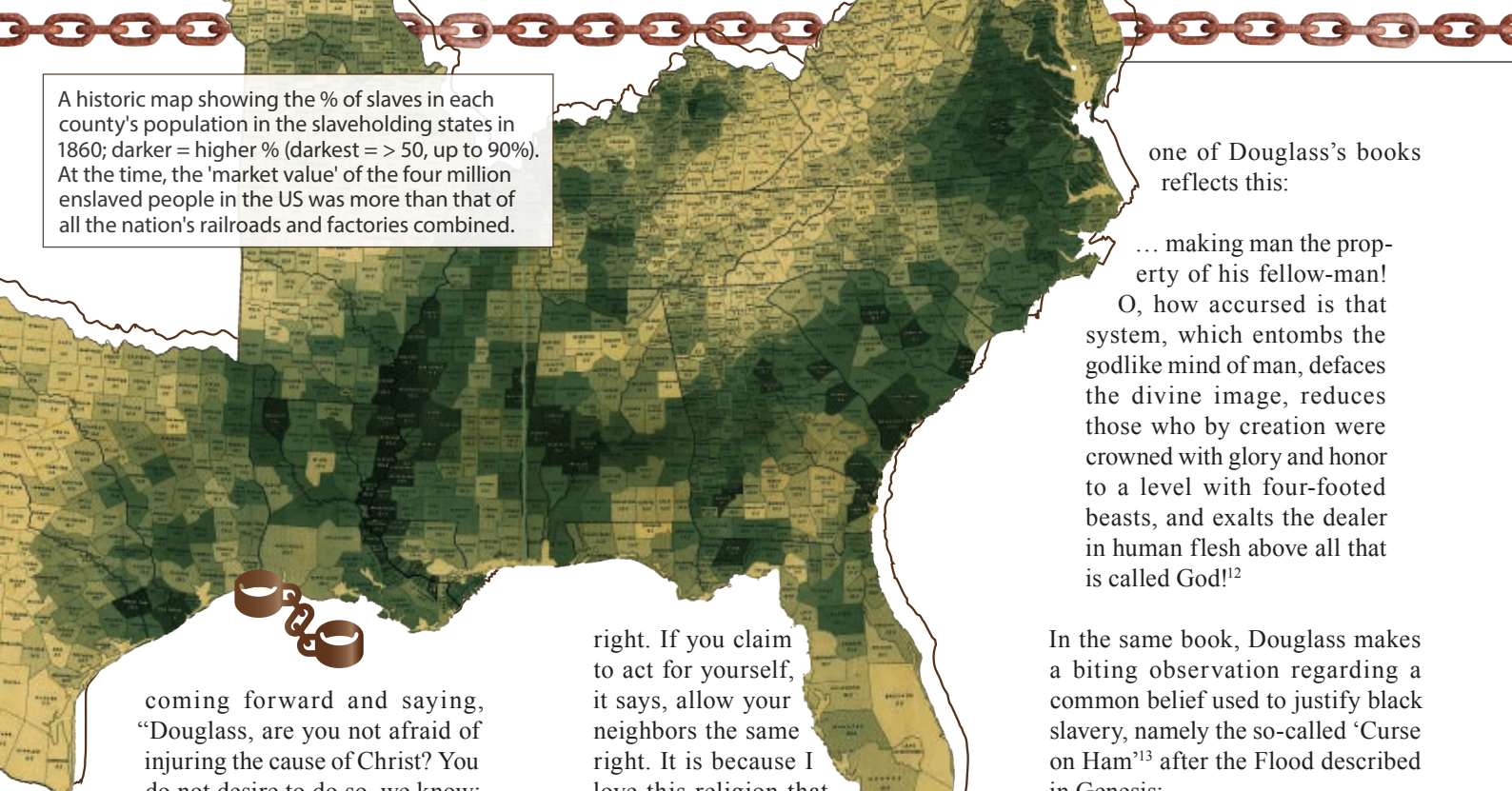
On one occasion, Douglass told how he and his compatriots were often stigmatized as "infidels":

I have found it difficult to speak on this matter without persons



Sale of estates, pictures, and slaves in the rotunda, New Orleans, 1842. Inset: 1840 poster advertising slaves for sale.

VALUABLE GANG OF YOUNG NEGROES
By JOS. A. BEARD.
 Will be sold at Auction,
ON WEDNESDAY, 25TH INST.
 At 12 o'clock, at Banks' Arcade,
 17 Valuable Young Negroes,
 Men and Women, Field Hands,
 Sold for no fault; with the best
 city guarantees.
Sale Positive
and without reserve!
TERMS CASH.
 New Orleans, March 24, 1840.



A historic map showing the % of slaves in each county's population in the slaveholding states in 1860; darker = higher % (darkest = > 50, up to 90%). At the time, the 'market value' of the four million enslaved people in the US was more than that of all the nation's railroads and factories combined.

one of Douglass's books reflects this:

... making man the property of his fellow-man!

O, how accursed is that system, which entombs the godlike mind of man, defaces the divine image, reduces those who by creation were crowned with glory and honor to a level with four-footed beasts, and exalts the dealer in human flesh above all that is called God!¹²

In the same book, Douglass makes a biting observation regarding a common belief used to justify black slavery, namely the so-called 'Curse on Ham'¹³ after the Flood described in Genesis:

If the lineal descendants of Ham are alone to be scripturally enslaved, it is certain that slavery at the south must soon become unscriptural; for thousands are ushered into the world, annually, who, like myself, owe their existence to white fathers, and those fathers most frequently their own masters.¹⁴

coming forward and saying, "Douglass, are you not afraid of injuring the cause of Christ? You do not desire to do so, we know; but are you not undermining religion?" This has been said to me again and again ... but I cannot be induced to leave off these exposures.

I love the religion of our blessed Savior. I love that religion that comes from above, in the "wisdom of God," which is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, and easy to be entreated, full of mercy and good fruits, without partiality and without hypocrisy. I love that religion that sends its votaries [devotees] to bind up the wounds of him that has fallen among thieves. I love that religion that makes it the duty of its disciples to visit the fatherless and the widow in their affliction. I love that religion that is based upon the glorious principle, of love to God and love to man; which makes its followers do unto others as they themselves would be done by.

If you demand liberty to yourself, it says, grant it to your neighbors. If you claim a right to think for yourself, it says, allow your neighbors the same

right. If you claim to act for yourself, it says, allow your neighbors the same right. It is because I love this religion that I hate the slaveholding, the woman-whipping, the mind-darkening, the soul-destroying religion that exists in the southern states of America.¹⁰

Frederick and Anna settled in New Bedford, Massachusetts, in 1840.¹¹ During this period, the couple joined the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, where he became an ordained minister and local preacher. In that time, Douglass discovered the writings of the 'white' abolitionist William Lloyd Garrison. Douglass became strongly involved in the abolition movement, particularly in New England.

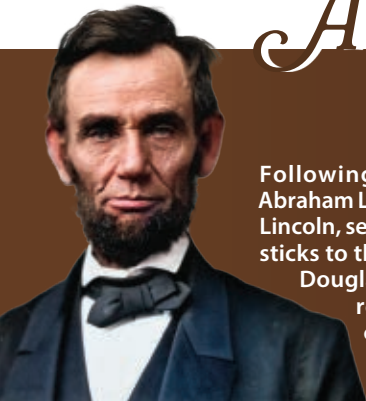
As an orator, Douglass's anti-slavery fervour, combined with his rhetorical skills, captured his audiences' attention. A recurrent theme of his was the role of the Divine Creator in human affairs.

Created in God's image

Constantly implicit in Douglass's perspective was the view that humanity represents God's special creation. And thus, it should be protected against any practice that violates the natural, God-given rights of men, women, and children. The preface by the abolitionist Garrison (mentioned earlier) to

This statue was unveiled in 2026, for the 250-year anniversary of the USA in Augustine, Florida, by Governor DeSantis. It was to commemorate the visit to the city of Douglass, aged 71, in 1889, 24 years after the Civil War. He was campaigning for equal rights in the face of the 'Jim Crow' repression laws that were becoming established in the South.

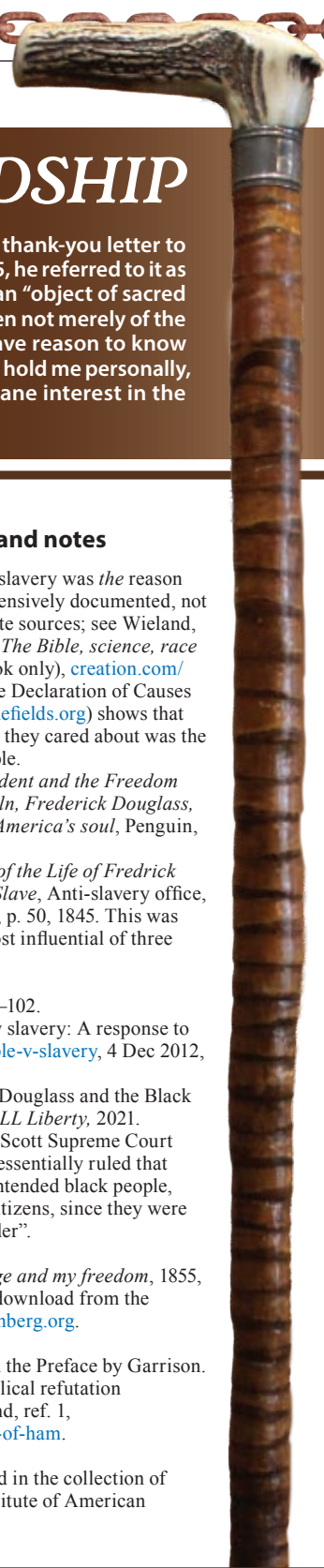




A CONSEQUENTIAL AMERICAN FRIENDSHIP

Following the assassination of U.S. President Abraham Lincoln in April 1865, his widow, Mary Todd Lincoln, sent one of her husband's favourite walking sticks to the abolitionist and statesman, Frederick Douglass. It was a powerful gesture of respect, recognizing the complex but ultimately close relationship that had developed between the President and Douglass.

Douglass treasured the gift. In a thank-you letter to Mrs Lincoln dated 17 August 1865, he referred to it as an "inestimable memento" and an "object of sacred interest".¹⁵ He viewed it as "a token not merely of the kind consideration in which I have reason to know that the President was pleased to hold me personally, but as an indication of his humane interest in the welfare of my whole race."



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After the Civil War, many abolitionists retired from active public life. But Douglass continued to devote his life to public service, going on to significant roles in U.S. governance and international relations. This included being on terms of mutual respect with, and occasionally being called upon for advice by, a number of Presidents following Lincoln.

Conclusion

Frederick Douglass was a key abolitionist and then statesman who waged a lifelong struggle against slavery. His powerful contributions to defeating the institution of slavery stemmed

from more than just his political commitment and rhetorical power. He had a strong faith and belief in the revealed character of a loving and holy God, creator of all. This, coupled with his lived experiences, led him to powerfully critique contemporary versions of Christianity as being distorted to support slavery.

Douglass believed that humanity was a special creation endowed by God with immutable rights. He consistently affirmed the moral teachings of the Bible, and displayed a personal commitment to them and to Christ. This contributed heavily to his lifelong dedication to justice and equal opportunity for all. ■

References and notes

1. The oft-denied fact that slavery was *the* reason the South seceded is extensively documented, not least through Confederate sources; see Wieland, C., *One Human Family: The Bible, science, race and culture*, CBP, (e-book only), creation.com/store/35-5-521, 2011. The Declaration of Causes of Seceding States (battlefields.org) shows that the only 'States' Rights' they cared about was the 'right' to own black people.
2. Kilmeade, B., *The President and the Freedom Fighter: Abraham Lincoln, Frederick Douglass, and their battle to save America's soul*, Penguin, NY, p. 7, 2022.
3. Douglass, F., *Narrative of the Life of Fredrick Douglass an American Slave*, Anti-slavery office, Boston, Massachusetts, p. 50, 1845. This was the first and possibly most influential of three autobiographical works.
4. Douglass, ref. 3.
5. Douglass, ref. 3, pp. 101–102.
6. Wieland, C., *The Bible v slavery: A response to critics*, creation.com/bible-v-slavery, 4 Dec 2012, updated 9 Apr 2022.
7. Ferguson, R., *Frederick Douglass and the Black Christian Experience*, *OLL Liberty*, 2021.
8. E.g., the infamous Dred Scott Supreme Court decision in 1857, which essentially ruled that the Constitution never intended black people, enslaved or free, to be citizens, since they were "beings of an inferior order".
9. Ferguson, ref. 7, p. 102.
10. Douglass, F., *My bondage and my freedom*, 1855, ebook available as free download from the Gutenberg Project, gutenberg.org.
11. Kilmeade, ref. 2, p. 30.
12. Douglass, ref. 3, p. xi, in the Preface by Garrison.
13. For a comprehensive biblical refutation of this belief, see Wieland, ref. 1, also creation.com/curse-of-ham.
14. Douglass, ref. 3, p. 9.
15. The original letter is held in the collection of the Gilder Lehrman Institute of American History (GLC02474).

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rubble.com/c/GovRonDeSantis

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