

# Repudiation of the Doctrine of Discovery

## Backgrounder



The Doctrine of Discovery refers to a set of Papal Bulls that justified the invasion and confiscation of lands, and the genocide of the original inhabitants of those lands who did not declare themselves to be Christians. Beginning in the mid-fifteenth century, the Doctrine of Discovery became the basis of colonization by Spain, Portugal, and England of many lands including North America.

According to leading Indigenous lawyers, the Doctrine was an effort to legalize conquest, the appropriation of land, and the annihilation of cultures. It provided the basis of agreements between competing European nations for land not yet inhabited by them, identifying such lands as free for the taking. (See R. Miller, J. Ruru, T. Lindberg, L. Behrendt, *Discovering Indigenous Lands: The Doctrine of Discovery in the English Colonies* (Oxford U. Press, 2010).)

Of particular importance to Christians is that the Doctrine was based not only on legal terminology but on the very notion of who God is, how mission is to be enacted, and the exercise of power and control over others. Imperial Christians made an idol of the imperial image of God based on a White male European conqueror. Christianity became defined by and aligned with the ruling empires of Western Europe, and therefore considered itself a superior religion (in fact, the *only* legitimate religion).

It followed that Christian mission was based on the occupation of presumably “empty (uncivilized) lands,” and extension of the gospel to the peoples of other nations considered pagans or infidels—at best inferior humans, at worst not human at all. This presumed superiority led to the subjugation of all conquered peoples in every imaginable way: spiritually, culturally, and especially economically, as well as militarily. Racism was entrenched.

With the call from Indigenous Peoples for the churches to acknowledge and repent of their participation in the implementation and running of the Indian Residential School system, The United Church of Canada, alongside many other Christian churches, began a process of self-examination of its history and legacy of colonization and its oppression of Indigenous Peoples.

This included an examination of this foundational Doctrine. The United Church of Canada General Council Executive (March 24–26, 2012) approved a motion that “The United Church join the World Council of Churches in denouncing the Doctrine of Discovery as fundamentally opposed to the gospel of Jesus Christ and a violation of the inherent human rights that all individual and peoples have received from God.”

The motion also commits the United Church to take a number of other steps, including urging “the government of Canada and governments around the world to dismantle all legal structures and policies that are based on the Doctrine of Discovery to enable Indigenous Peoples to determine their own aspirations and issues of concern.”

This repudiation was done with the recognition that the spiritual and ideological foundations of the Doctrine violated the essential gospel teachings of Jesus. These teachings actually call us as people of faith to challenge empire and dominant societal structures, care for and share God’s resources with all, and love our neighbours as ourselves, just as God loves us.

The 2012 repudiation by the United Church was [one step in our long journey](#) of listening, repentance, and the building of right relations that began with the 1986 Apology to First Nations Peoples offered in Sudbury, Ontario. Other significant steps on that journey include the 1998 Apology to Former Residential School students, Their Families and Communities; and becoming a signatory to the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement in 2007. This led to our full participation in the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada and our commitment to implement the TRC’s Calls to Action (Call 49 addresses the Doctrine of Discovery). By these latter decisions and actions the church recognized that its complicity in the Indian Residential School system was yet another way that the Doctrine of Discovery was lived out in history.

The TRC also calls on churches, all levels of government, businesses, and professional institutions to implement the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples as a framework for reconciliation (see Call 48). The right to self-determination, the upholding of treaties, and free, prior, and informed consent are principles of the UN Declaration. On March 31, 2016, the United Church made a [statement regarding the adoption of and compliance with the UN Declaration](#). In committing itself to making relationships of mutuality, equity and respect with Indigenous Peoples, the United Church has agreed to further engage its members about this history and what repudiation might mean.

For resources on this theme, search [www.united-church.ca](http://www.united-church.ca) for “doctrine of discovery.”