What Is American Heritage?”

At its heart, this moment is about how we define our shared story, how we understand what it truly means to be American. Heritage is often described as legacy and tradition, the story a nation chooses to tell about itself. But those choices reveal whose voices we value and whose we silence.

Ohio’s eighth-grade social studies Standard 2 asks students to “explain the economic and religious reasons for the exploration and colonization of North America by Europeans.” From the beginning, religion shaped both the vision and violation of this continent. Faith was the flag of exploration, but so too was power. The Shawnee, Wyandot, Delaware, and Mingo, the first Ohioans, felt the force of both. Europeans arrived invoking divine purpose, bringing the notion of Manifest Destiny, a belief that conquest was sacred and that domination could somehow be righteous.

This idea built the bedrock of settlement and, too often, of suffering. What began as pursuit of freedom from persecution became a project of supremacy cloaked in faith. The contradiction was there from the start: a land sought in the name of liberty founded upon the subjugation of others. This is not a political interpretation, it is the moral and historical reality embedded in the very standard Ohio already requires our students to learn.

“Removing the Shackles” and the Reality of Who Wore Them - (Click 42:00; 43:30)

Sponsors of the bill claim it will “remove the invisible shackles” from teachers. But long before there were invisible ones, there were iron ones, real shackles forged for human wrists and ankles. Africans were bound in chains, transported across oceans under the sanction of those who claimed the authority of Christ. The same faith that inspired charity and compassion was twisted to justify chattel slavery. Biblical verses such as “servants, obey your masters” were wielded to defend brutality. The slave ships were called “Jesus,” “Grace of God,” and “Liberty.”

To invoke shackles without naming those who actually wore them is to sanitize history. If we wish to talk about freedom, then we must confront the theology that made bondage seem moral. Today’s “invisible shackles” are the legislative ones, the fear among teachers that telling the full story will cost them their jobs or reputations. They are the modern echo of an older silencing: a refusal to see truth when truth is inconvenient.

The Civil War, the Cornerstone, and John Brown’s Faith - (Click 44:51–45:20)

When Representative Click said, “Let teachers teach the facts,” I agree wholeheartedly. Then let them teach all of them.

In 1861, Alexander H. Stephens, Vice President of the Confederacy, declared in his infamous Cornerstone Speech:

“Our new government is founded upon exactly the opposite idea [of the United States]; its foundations are laid, its cornerstone rests upon the great truth that the negro is not equal to the white man.”

That declaration was not misinterpretation, it was confession. It made inequality divine doctrine and turned racism into policy.

Against that creed stood John Brown, whose conviction was that God’s justice could not coexist with human bondage. His raid at Harpers Ferry was a desperate sermon to a deaf nation. Brown was condemned for treason, but his faith was not hate, it was holy discontent. His last words predicted that the sins of slavery would only be purged with blood.

Yet today, even references to Brown’s rebellion are being deleted from federal educational materials under directives such as the “Restoring Truth and Sanity to American History” order, as though moral courage that challenges injustice should be hidden. If faith is to be praised for shaping America, then we must choose which faith we mean, the faith that enslaved or the faith that liberated.

The War After the War: Memory, Myth, and the Daughters of the Confederacy

When the guns fell silent at Appomattox, a different war began, the war over memory. The United Daughters of the Confederacy and their allies fought to rewrite the nation’s conscience. They produced school textbooks declaring that slavery was benevolent and that enslaved people were “faithful servants who loved their masters.” They financed monuments across the South, each one a sermon in stone proclaiming white virtue and Black inferiority.

Through decades of organized propaganda, they transformed defeat into dignity and treason into tradition. These women did not merely raise statues; they raised children who believed those statues told the truth. Millions of Americans, north and south, were educated under this falsified version of history.

That mythology, that the Confederacy was noble, that slavery was incidental, is not dead. It survives every time a public official claims that “heritage” means pride without pain. It resurfaces when legislation seeks to restrict how educators can discuss race, faith, and freedom. To claim we are restoring honesty while perpetuating the same distortions that shaped the Lost Cause is not restoration at all; it is repetition.

Faith’s Light and Shadow: Birmingham to Charleston

Faith has always held both a light and a shadow. In its light, it guided abolitionists, suffragists, and civil rights activists. In its shadow, it justified slavery, segregation, and terror.

On September 15, 1963, at Birmingham’s 16th Street Baptist Church, four girls, Addie Mae Collins, Denise McNair, Carole Robertson, and Cynthia Wesley, were murdered by white supremacists who believed they were defending “Christian America.” Their deaths revealed the hypocrisy of a nation that could bomb a church on Sunday and claim moral exceptionalism

on Monday. Their sacrifice awakened the conscience of the country and propelled passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Fifty-two years later, in Charleston, South Carolina, nine Black worshippers, Rev. Clementa Pinckney, Cynthia Hurd, Susie Jackson, Ethel Lance, Depayne Middleton-Doctor, Tywanza Sanders, Daniel Simmons Sr., Sharonda Coleman-Singleton, and Myra Thompson — were murdered during Bible study at Mother Emanuel AME Church by a man who said he was defending "heritage."

Both tragedies expose what happens when faith becomes a weapon and myth replaces morality. The blood shed in those sanctuaries testifies to the enduring power of false heritage and selective memory.

The Civil Rights Act, Equality, and the Bill's Namesake - (Dovilla 47:30–49:10)

The sponsors claim this bill "restores honesty and depth" to civic education. Honesty requires depth and that means remembering that the Civil Rights Movement was not about "Black rights" alone but the restoration of human rights. Dr. King spoke of a "promissory note" that had come back marked insufficient funds. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 was an attempt to finally cash that check.

Yet the man whose name this bill bears called that act "a mistake" and described it as "America's new founding that embraced an anti-white agenda." How can equality be a mistake? How can justice be anti-American? If equality under the law is error, then what do we call the 345 years of enslavement, exploitation, and exclusion that came before it? How do we reconcile preaching Christian love while rejecting the legal recognition of shared humanity?

Those who invoke King, Douglass, and Sojourner Truth must remember what they actually taught: that faith divorced from justice is hypocrisy, and that the true measure of moral courage is how we treat those whom society deems expendable. To speak of "faith-infused civic engagement" while venerating someone who rejected equality is to honor belief while betraying its purpose.

The DEI Debate and the Modern Continuation of Misunderstanding

The rejection of diversity, equity, and inclusion is the latest chapter in an old American misunderstanding. It mirrors the same logic that justified segregation, that acknowledging inequality somehow creates division.

I know this personally. I have been called a "DEI hire," not because of incompetence but because of a social sickness that mistakes opportunity for charity. My grandmother was a sharecropper, descended from people who were born enslaved. My presence here is not a gift; it is the outcome of a nation's long, unfinished struggle to fulfill its own ideals.

DEI is not a political slogan but the modern form of a principle rooted in the founding itself, that all are created equal. The 3/5 compromise, the Reconstruction Amendments, and the Civil

Rights Act each sought to expand that ideal. Diversity and inclusion are the moral heirs of those efforts. To dismantle them is to deny the very evolution that defines American heritage.

Truth, Teachers, and the Price of Honesty - (Click 43:30; Dovilla 46:45, 47:30)

The sponsors insist that teachers fear retribution for discussing Christian heritage. But across this country, educators fear punishment for doing exactly what these legislators claim to support: telling the truth. Teachers have been removed for discussing slavery in its real context, for referencing systemic racism, for assigning readings by Frederick Douglass or Toni Morrison. Entire textbooks have been rewritten to make oppression seem optional.

To call for "accuracy" while criminalizing honesty is the very censorship our Constitution was designed to prevent. The First Amendment's promise is not the right to comfort; it is the right to truth. A republic built on self-governance cannot survive when self-deception becomes public policy.

Faith that fears truth is not faith at all; it is idolatry of the past. Civic education that excludes reality is not patriotism; it is propaganda.

Heritage, Government, and Hope

Heritage should unite us in truth, not divide us in comfort. Government should serve as an instrument of progress, not an altar of ideology. If this legislation truly seeks to "reduce ignorance of American history, hate, and violence," then let us tell the whole story because ignorance begins where truth ends.

Ohio helped shape this nation's conscience once before, sending soldiers to preserve the Union and educators to define public schooling. It can do so again by leading with honesty.

I did not ask to be here, nor to be discriminated against. I only ask what my faith teaches, to be loved by my neighbor as myself. That is the simplest and highest form of Christian heritage.

I love this country not because it has always loved me, or my people, or our history, but because I believe it can. That belief, faith in America's capacity to change, is the truest heritage we possess and the legacy we owe to every student who will inherit the story we choose to tell.

Quotes from the representative proponent testimony:

“It removes the invisible shackles that often hinder full transparency in the teaching of American history” (Click, 42:00).

“Without Christian History, there is no American History” (Click, 46:17).

“We’re afraid of our careers, afraid of a lawsuit. Superintendent said, ‘We’re not allowed to teach that stuff’” (Click, 43:30).

“The father back you go in history, our history books talked about our Christian origins. The Christian heritage here in America but the closer we get to the present the more we see that philosophy and historic facts have been omitted, left out and history is being rewritten. That leads to hate, violence..” (Click, 43:51).

“I think it’s time that we unshackle our teachers and let our teachers know it’s okay to teach the facts” (Click, 44:51).

“These are the historical facts that made American great that made us the most exceptional nation on the earth” (Click, 45:20).

“Throughout my career in public service…I viewed civil learning as the corner stone of a free society. Civic education, done well, does more than just teach how government works, it forms citizen that understand why it works and why our freedoms endure only when anchored in moral conviction” (Dovilla, 46:45).

“This is not about rewriting history, it’s about restoring honesty and depth to the way we teach it” (Dovilla, 47:30).

“The very moral vocabulary of the modern west are understanding of equality, compassion and the sanctity of every human life, flows directly from the Christian world view” (Dovilla, 48:05).

“…HB 486 carries a name that carries deep and somber meaning…devoted his life to awakening a generation to the connection between faith, freedom, and moral courage” (Dovilla, 48:56).

“His willingness to speak unapologetically about the spiritual foundations of our country and to challenge young people to see faith as central to civic responsibility left a lasting mark on many across America” (Dovilla, 49:00).

“Through this legislation, we invite teachers to tell the whole story of America, to discuss how the pursuit of liberty was not born only of intellect but of belief, not only of governance but of grace. To teach history in its fullness is to equip our students not merely with knowledge but with purpose. At a time where many young Americans struggle to see meaning in our shared story, we have an opportunity to remind them that the ideals of freedom, equality, and justice are not accidents of history, they are the fruit of faith infused courage” (Dovilla, 49:10.)

“This is what history records, this is what happened in history” (Click, 1:13:07).