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Author(s): W. Marshall Johnston.

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Response to Scott Key's "The Tragedy of Slavery: The Church's Response"

W. MARSHALL JOHNSTON

Students in my classes usually agree that Hallo and Simpson's definition of history is the wisest way to take an evidence-based, inductive, positivist approach to the discipline they are studying: "a temporal analysis of causality through texts and other documentary remains of the past." This definition nicely explains how we (or many of us) do history, and what distinguishes it as a discipline; however, a student in the discussion will often interject that he or she feels we should be able to learn lessons to illuminate the present if history is to have real value. After all, history itself—the discipline—is simply a matter of constant revision as methods and evidence change. I tend to see my own pursuit of history as purely reconstructive or inquiry-based, and I find myself blessed by student reminders of its larger function. I am blessed also to have been called upon to respond to an article that is similarly invested in using history to understand and educate the present; my colleague Scott Key (hereafter S.K.) and other faculty and students, in written and verbal exchanges, have shepherded me out of my parochial solipsism into an understanding of the need to see how each of our pursuits illuminates the present.*

I heartily agree with S.K.'s conclusion and call to action. Slavery was and is a scourge. I would add that we can't let the modern fascination with the perfectibility of man and belief in progress suggest that dangers of such evil institutions are past us—we must remain ever vigilant. We also must avoid whitewashing our own history because of a belief in American exceptionalism. S.K. points out the number of ways slavery still sears the modern world, a reality we in the West often fail to see in our own cities and fields: just last month there was the announcement of an Indonesian family held in slavery on Long Island. He is equally right about the unfortunate complicity of the church in the institution: as men lead the church, it is all too likely to be affected by the spirit of the day, and not look to the transforming spirit of the eternal truth. As to whether the state sponsorship of the church is especially to blame for such problems, I believe that is a subject for a separate study. Indeed, I think S.K.'s primary difficulties come in dealing with too big a picture.

In consideration of both the church and slavery, S.K.'s case would have been stronger if he had grounded his comment in clear definition. He addresses the history of slavery very broadly: from its ancient realities to the early modern transcontinental trade and its abolition by law. He enumerates forms of slavery from debt-bondage to serfdom to chattel status. It would be worthwhile to focus how he is defining the broad term, and then to explain the nuances of how the institution has functioned through the years. It is common practice among us ancient historians to define slavery in the ancient world as, "being in the wrong place at the wrong time." Though slavery was indeed often a terrible condition, especially in such places as mines and quarries, it does give a different context to comments like those of Paul—there was not a clear belief that slavery was a lower status on a chain of being.

If we look to slavery among the Greeks and Romans, we find that some realities of the condition illuminate the more recent form of the institution by contrast. The Greeks believed they should not enslave other Greeks, but even that idea was imperfectly followed. In any event, in the ancient world slaves were visually indistinguishable from free people. It certainly was the case that barbarians were thought more appropriate for slavery, but they were still valued for their ethnic origin and skills. Persian subjects, for example, were considered especially servile primarily because their land lacked the freedom of Greek city-states; as Aristotle said, man is an animal that belongs in a polis (a uniquely Greek way of living).

In the Roman world slaves could be educators and run households perfectly comfortably within their social system. The Romans understood the advantages of a Greek education: as a Roman poet said, when Greece was conquered by Rome, she in turn conquered the conqueror. Slaves frequently could win or work to their freedom, and they were at times paid a small amount: the word "peculiar" derives from the slave's purse. Thus, while slavery was usually bad luck, it did not always mean a bad life.

My upbringing in the American South has made clear to me how different the status of slaves in this country was from what had prevailed elsewhere in history. To this day (and even more so in my youth) there is still an attempt to explain what had happened in the time of slavery and Jim Crow by means of convenient fictions. We have—in many cases also to this day—ignored the role of the Klu Klux Klan in our cities and towns. When I have heard southerners talk about the institution and its aftermath, I have encountered tortured efforts to ameliorate what happened: "in the South no one minded

living near a black person, they just wouldn't elect them to office. In the North, blacks gained office, but were ghettoized." Of course the reality is that—again, to this day—there are communities of blacks near southern towns that are essentially living in subsistence conditions. This result of slavery has yielded another offensive rationalization in the South: the slaves (and ex-slaves under Jim Crow) "need our help" to run their lives and households. Of course I should point out that the North was complicit in these social conditions by having effectively condemned the South—blacks and whites alike—to a century of poverty.

Thus, the legacy of what a race-based slavery has done to us makes for a very troubled prism through which to look at the history of the institution. It is often said that we historians look into the well of time and see ourselves—our preconceptions—looking back up, and the understanding of slavery is an example of this problem. Though slavery was throughout history an unfortunate social status, how it was practiced in this country and in the "New World" was a very different matter. This practice may have been socially, historically, and geographically determined (according to some modern theoretical approaches), but nonetheless it gives us cause to be aware of how blind and destructive human institutions can be. We at FPU experienced how the sequel to slavery and the church continues to be a baneful influence this semester: a student who was trying to understand African-American history in the U.S., when asked how the vast majority of that community could be Christian, could only respond that current society is constructed in such a way that the identification can't be avoided.

The realities of American slavery of course make the church's complicity even more reprehensible, and they call us to be even more aware of ways in which the church might continue to use its interpretation of Scripture to treat minority groups unfairly. S.K. is very wise to point out that the church was not monolithic in its complicity. I would like to have seen him dwell more on how Scripture was used to support slavery, though he does get at the basic method: a confusion of the social conditions of the New Testament period with the transcendent message of Scripture. I would like to see, however, an overview of how the "curse of Ham" could gain the currency it did. Certainly such inquiry would provide a useful background to discuss issues in the present church such as the roles of women and the poor: S.K. nicely touches upon the radical message of Jesus in this area.

If we are to understand our role as Christians dealing with a history of acceding to this institution, we should first look to the evangelist Matthew

and understand that a blind legalism may well lead us astray when the Holy Spirit requires of us a higher calling. Matthew would have us not simply proof-text the law, but exceed it as followers of Christ. The dangers of not doing so are illustrated by our spiritual ancestors, the Hebrews: while they seem to have had an idea that all Hebrews had an equal role in the covenant, they nonetheless allowed forms of Hebrew slavery within some limitations. Then, by the time of the eighth-century prophets, it seems that the rich had sidelined the role and identity of the poor in the polity. There had come to be an idea that certain people were “less Hebrew”—and the kingdoms had prophets to speak the truth on the matter, much to our enlightenment if we have ears to hear.

S.K. also could more specifically define what we should think of as the church. He points out that at times the hierarchy of the church was indistinguishable from state interests. It is, however, the case that the idea of the monolithic Church is a tough one to use historically. He speaks of a change from the church of the martyrs to a state religion: that change was equally as much—at least conceptually—a change to a church of ascetics and missionaries as it was to a state organ. Though Constantine liked the idea of organizing the church by state parameters, and that organization is visible to this day in dioceses and hierarchy, he was unsuccessful, for example, in his main goal at Nicaea: agreement on core theology.

Perhaps if S.K. had said that at various times institutional churches—Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Anglican (he only touches upon the Eastern Churches)—involved in colonization had complicity in allowing practices that were seldom adequately resisted (he does cite some good examples of resistance to the *zeitgeist*), we would have a little more ground for agreement. However, how the complicity worked is a little slippery: S.K. points out that the popes were often quite anti-slavery in their views, and clearly had little control a world away. I guess my largest concern here is that the church is the body of all believers: He indeed calls us to be one and to work for His Kingdom. And yet we are fallen people. Thus there will always be institutional tension between the prophetic and the worldly.

The profit motive for slavery is a further area in which I would like to see S.K. more robustly support his ideas. He takes as source material very speculative, and theoretically driven, authors such as J. Diamond and H. Zinn, and we do not get a clear idea of why, or if, their narratives are compelling. In the ancient world the emergence of gigantic farms (usually called *latifundia*) in the Hellenistic period initially led to big slave economies, but

it is generally agreed that these farms in the early Roman empire tended to become share-cropped (to use a modern term), because it was cheaper to pay a pittance to a semi-free person than take care of a slave. Now, this concern might have been lessened by the supply of slaves brought to the New World, but even if so, can profit be the entire explanation?

For a piece with which I very much agree, I obviously have a few reservations, but I'm sure many can be seen as quite idiosyncratic. I would, for example, not use decades-old textbooks to support points unless the piece was overtly historiographic (that would be an interesting study!). I also fear that without firmer grounding in the primary sources and treatment of the differences among epochs, the piece appears encyclopedic rather than argumentative or advocacy, and it seems clear that S.K. wants (quite correctly) to convey advocacy and admonition. I commend S.K. for the hard work he has done bringing together this history, and I hope to see this conversation continue as we consider the church and its relation to slavery. I am most intrigued by how we can learn from the rationalizations that were used for slavery in order to listen to what the Holy Spirit is telling us about the church today.

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