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The Tragedy of Slavery: The Church's Response

SCOTT KEY

Slavery. The very word conjures up images of pain and suffering, of oppression and subjugation. Yet, prior to the eighteenth century, slavery was simply an accepted part of life for many cultures and civilizations throughout the world. The enslavement of human beings occurred for many reasons, from the punitive treatment of enemy populations conquered in war to discriminatory actions taken toward religious and political dissenters. Sometimes inherited class or ethnic distinctions automatically imposed slave status. Slavery took many forms, from the household slave system of ancient Greece to serfdom in the Russian Empire. Some forms allowed for measures of individual freedom. Often slavery provided the foundation for particular economic and political systems.

While the forms of slavery are as diverse as there are cultures in the world, the legitimacy of the institution was seldom questioned historically. Yet today, most people who identify themselves as followers of Jesus believe that slavery is morally wrong and attribute the abolition of slavery to the work of the church.

The church's response parallels, in some ways, the history of Christianity. As the church's story moved through the centuries, it became more complex as different groups emerged in different parts of the world. This article examines Western Christendom and explores the church's connection and response to slavery in the "New World." It begins as a unified story, then splits into Protestant and Catholic narratives as the Reformation impacts European colonialism and, ultimately, the church's response to slavery. Particular attention is paid to slavery in the United States.

Slavery and the Early Church

Jesus of Nazareth. Whether you see him as God the Son, a prophet or simply a wise teacher, his life altered human history. Jesus offered a new path to God and wanted his listeners to connect faith with their daily lives. Jesus expanded the understanding of who was human to include women and children, the poor and the sick, and all who had been marginalized. Since all human life was valuable, the actions of those who followed Jesus should reflect this. Jesus called his followers to connect belief and action and, thereby,

change the world. Those who follow Jesus should “in everything do to others as you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12). This new approach to life challenged religious and societal structures.

While Jesus did not specifically address slavery, slaves were viewed as marginalized human beings, not simply property. This radical message was passed on to Jesus’s followers. The Apostle Paul proclaimed, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:23). Paul did not condemn slavery or call for its abolition. He, in fact, supported it by commanding, “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ” (Ephesians 6:5). But, he also wanted to change the institution, commanding masters to, “stop threatening them... and...do the same to them” (Ephesians 6:9).

Paul was in a difficult position. The growth of the Church was a threat to the Roman Empire. Its existence was uncertain. Paul needed to “prove that Christians were good citizens and upheld traditional Roman family values: namely, the submission of wives, children, and slaves.”¹ His teachings do this, but they also include challenges to the social order by placing new expectations on husbands, fathers, and slaveowners. Masters could no longer do whatever they wanted with their slaves. Instead, Paul reminded, “You have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality” (Ephesians 6:9).

As the early church emerged, positions taken on slavery were affected by concern over survival and the expectation of Jesus’ imminent return. As time went on and the church grew, leaders such as Polycarp and Ignatius of Antioch spoke out against slavery and some Christians freed their slaves upon conversion.² Many Christians found slavery repugnant to the dignity of the image of God in all. However, this voice changed when Christianity was established as Rome’s state religion. Most church leaders supported the institution of slavery, in part, because the Roman Empire was dependent upon slave labor. As the decades rolled past, the church became inseparable from the state as the church of martyrs aligned with an earthly government that used military might to maintain control.³

Even though most church leaders were complicit on slavery, occasionally individuals spoke out and worked against it. For example, in a remote part of the Roman Empire, a Christian missionary named Patrick (who spent six years as a slave) declared slavery was sin and authored, “a letter excommunicating a British tyrant, Coroticus, who carried off some of Patrick’s

converts into slavery.”⁴ The influence of Patrick (and the church) helped end slavery in Ireland.⁵

After the fall of Rome, Church leaders continued to support slavery as a means to maintain societal order. Pope Gregory I (c. 600) wrote, “Slaves should be told . . . not [to] despise their masters and recognize that they are only slaves.”⁶ Slavery was an integral part of European economic and social life and Christians enslaved other Christians with little concern for the morality of the enterprise.⁷ This changed, however, in the eighth century, when the Muslim Moors raided coastal areas from the Mediterranean to Britain and carried large numbers of Christians to markets on the Barbary Coast. As a response, the church now spoke out against the specific enslavement of Christians, a first step toward an anti-slavery stance.⁸ But, Christians continued to enslave other peoples, for example, pagan Slavs, and Muslims.⁹

Slavery and the Medieval Church

While the institutional church prohibited Christian slaves, some individuals pushed for the end of all slavery. In the seventh century, Bathilda (the Queen Regent of Burgundy and Neustria) campaigned to stop the slave trade and free all who found themselves in this condition. In the ninth century, Anskar (a Benedictine monk who established the first church in Scandinavia) tried to halt the Viking slave trade. Venetian bishops worked to prevent the slave trade in the tenth century.¹⁰ While these efforts did not succeed, the prohibition on Christian slaves (and the subsequent conversion of most of Europe) led to the de facto end of slavery there. This prohibition was enforced by rulers and churchmen such as William the Conqueror, Wulfstan, and Anselm.¹¹

During the early Medieval period, the church promoted pilgrimages to the Holy Lands (Palestine) as a means to practice penance (essential for the forgiveness of sins) and renew one’s faith. Between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims risked disease, shipwreck, robbery, and enslavement. Simultaneously, Seljuk Turk Muslims gained control over the Holy Lands and threatened Europe. Church leaders including Bernard of Clairvaux and Pope Innocent III called for Palestine’s liberation and the resulting Crusades led not only to the enslavement of captured Muslims, but Orthodox Christians as well!

During this period, Christian Western Europe also began to expand trade into North Africa, where merchants encountered dark-skinned African slaves. Arab Muslims there had been involved in the slave trade for centuries with

three to four million black African slaves sent to Mediterranean markets between 750-1500 AD.¹² European traders saw a new way to make money and justified this form of commerce by viewing black Africans as inferior beings. Thus, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the church was required to further develop its ideas on slavery. This task fell to Thomas Aquinas, who made the distinction between “just” slavery (where owners work for the benefit of the enslaved) and “unjust” slavery (where owners work for their own benefit) and concluded that “unjust” slavery was a sin.¹³ The church’s support of “just” slavery was closely tied to its support of “just” war, a concept earlier developed by Augustine.

So, the church fell short of outright rejection of slavery, partly, due to the close connection between church and state. The threat from Muslims led the church to support the state through “just war” theology. While the church continued to forbid Christian slavery, the enslavement of non-believers was permissible. This position would prove crucial as the Muslim threat dissipated and European colonial expansion took center stage.

Slavery in the Age of Colonization

Africa has often been portrayed as a continent of “savages”¹⁴ but, in the early fifteenth century the Portuguese began their exploration of Western Africa and discovered advanced kingdoms with complex economic, political, and social systems.¹⁵ Instead of undeveloped cultures to conquer, the Portuguese found new customers for their luxury goods, such as textiles, jewelry, liquor (later tobacco), and iron.¹⁶ Africans traded gold, malaguetta pepper, textiles, ivory, and people for these luxury items.¹⁷ Prior to European contact, the majority of slaves were prisoners of war, criminals, or debtors. However, as the Portuguese and other nations began to bring black African slaves to Europe, a commercial slave trade was created with Africans procuring slaves from neighboring or rival tribes to sell to European buyers. Slavery was simply good business for everyone involved.

The number of black African slaves in Europe rose slowly throughout the fifteenth century and these slaves were integrated into the nations’ economies. During this century, the church’s position flip-flopped as Nicholas V and Innocent III affirmed the right to enslave non-believers,¹⁸ but Eugene IV, Pius II, and Sixtus IV condemned slavery outright, especially among indigenous populations in the Americas.¹⁹ While the church continued its march toward the outright rejection of slavery, Portugal and Spain colonized the New World and needed cheap, stable labor to maximize the production

and removal of raw materials and resources for the mother countries. Black Africans slaves were perfect because they were not Christian and were not considered civilized; they could be legitimately exploited.

Another part of the moral justification came through a changed understanding of “the curse of Ham” that ascribed servitude based on the darkness of one’s skin.²⁰ This was the curse placed on Ham and his descendents after Ham viewed his father Noah in a drunken, naked state. This notion—the darker one’s skin, the more inferior—would be the key in the expansion of the African slave trade for centuries.²¹

Slavery in Central and South America

By the end of the fifteenth century, the age of colonization moved into full gear with the voyages of Columbus. It was in colonization that the marriage between church and state found its fullest expression, and this marriage was perfected in Spain. Ferdinand and Isabella united their throne, defeated the Moors, expelled the Jews and seized their property, and placed a Spaniard in the Vatican. The expansion of their kingdom was not merely economic and political. It was interwoven with religion. They sent Columbus on a complex mission to seize territory, take wealth, and convert heathens. Columbus himself desired wealth and power and to extend the Kingdom of God. Thus, he claimed lands for Ferdinand, Isabella, and the church.²²

This approach to the extension of Christianity was conquering and enslaving lands and inhabitants. The marriage between church and state gave rulers support for their imperial ambitions and gave the church a means to spread the Gospel. The idea of religious liberty and choice had yet to emerge. Rulers decided the religious faith of their subjects throughout Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. This is largely how Christianity and Islam spread. This is how Christianity expanded in Central and South America. The subjugation of the New World was accomplished through soldiers and priests as inhabitants were stripped of their property and way of life in order to control and exploit colonial wealth.

The enslavement of the indigenous populations in Central and South America was, at times, challenged by the church. In the first decades of the sixteenth century, priests like Antonio Montesinos and Bartolome de Las Casas waged a campaign against the enslavement of native peoples and their efforts led Pope Paul III to tie slavery to Satan and threaten those involved with excommunication.²³ But, the need for more laborers trumped this position and led the Portuguese and Spanish to import increasing numbers of

black African slaves. By 1600, the Portuguese and Spanish had brought one million black African slaves to South America and the Caribbean to work on plantations and exploit the wealth of the region.²⁴

If rulers refused to abolish slavery, the Catholic Church could do very little about it. Popes threatened excommunication with little effect. Church leaders did not alter the official rejection of slavery, but their limited political power meant they had to settle for ameliorating slave conditions. For example, in the New World, the Catholic Church confirmed certain slave rights (e.g., their material and spiritual welfare) and imposed obligations on slaveowners (i.e., limiting their control). The Code Noir of 1685 is one example. It laid out the rights and obligations of slaves and their owners. Slaves should be baptized, allowed to marry, and guaranteed basic food and clothing, but they could not sell sugar cane, carry weapons, gather together, hold office, or participate in lawsuits. Masters were to care for their slaves and treat them as human beings.

The Black Code made a difference in the lives of slaves confirming that they were fully human in the eyes of God. This belief led to an accepted mixing of black, indigenous, and European populations—something that did not happen in North America. Slaves were also able to purchase their freedom and masters frequently granted manumission. This led to a large free black population that comprised the majority in Santo Domingo, Puerto Rico, Venezuela, and Caribbean Columbia. When Spain tried to reestablish racial segregation and a slave plantation economy through the Code Negro Espanol in 1783 it proved impossible because too many free blacks had been integrated into society.²⁵

The conditions and experiences of native and black African slaves in Central and South America were very different from their counterparts in North America. The Catholic Church declared that slavery was a condition of service not a matter of nature and worked to improve the conditions for black African slaves. This was not the Protestant approach. While this does not excuse the Catholic Church's complicity in the enslavement of millions, it illustrates the limited power of religious leaders when opposed by political leaders. The best example comes from the Jesuit Republic of Paraguay. For 150 years (1609-1768), the Jesuits worked with the indigenous Guarani to create a remarkable civilization with thirty-plus communities. This was still an effort to Christianize and civilize, but the Jesuits used persuasion, not force, and tried to protect the Guarani from colonial officials and planters. This experiment offended the elite. So, when Portugal and Spain re-divided

South America in 1750, both countries attacked and destroyed the republic. The natives were enslaved and the Jesuits expelled.²⁶

The Catholic Church was unrelenting in its official call to reject slavery. Individuals risked much and, at times, died to protect slaves. But slavery was simply too important to the economies of Portugal, Spain, and their colonies. The economic advantages of slavery outweighed its moral and religious repudiation. Would the same be true for slavery in North America?

Slavery in British North America

Many immigrant conquerors of North America came as religious refugees from Western Europe. As the seventeenth century unfolded, several small groups split away from state-supported Protestant churches and left Europe to practice their faith freely. Yet, the majority did not believe in religious freedom, *per se*. Rather, they continued to support a close connection between church and state. In all colonies, except Pennsylvania and Rhode Island, colonists established a “state” church and required that everyone conform to its doctrines and dictates. At times, government policy and colonial law conformed to religious beliefs. At other times, religious beliefs conformed to policy and law. In this regard, there was little difference between the Church of England in Virginia or the Presbyterian and Puritan (Congregationalist) denominations in other colonies.

There was little debate about the legitimacy of slavery. As the colonists in Virginia quickly discovered, the cultivation of tobacco (which proved to be their salvation) required much labor. The colonists considered enslaving the indigenous population, but these peoples were tough, resourceful, defiant, and initially outnumbered them.²⁷ They were also quickly decimated by diseases.²⁸ The only answer was to import labor.

The first choice was indentured servants from Europe, but there were two disadvantages. First, they proved to be an inefficient and expensive labor force since colonists could only get a few years of service out of them before they were free of work obligations.²⁹ Second, once free, the indentured servants became competition as they utilized their own skills to cultivate tobacco. In order to maintain their financial status, large landowners needed a long-term, stable labor force. The answer was black African slaves.³⁰

The first load of twenty slaves arrived in Jamestown in 1619 from the British West Indies.³¹ This was the beginning of the commercial slave trade to North America. Millions of black Africans died during forced marches from the interior to the west central African coast and during transatlantic

crossings. The slave trade brought ten-fifteen million black Africans to the New World, with the majority ending up in Central and South America. Still more than five hundred thousand black African slaves ended up in North America.³² Slaves became indispensable as the economies of the colonies developed and allowed southern colonists to create large plantations that sent vast quantities of cotton and tobacco back to Europe. The importance of slave labor created many dilemmas for the churches in the American colonies.

On the one hand, black Africans were non-Christian and subject to the “curse of Ham.” Yet, it was the work of the churches to convert non-Christians. But, Christian tradition said conversion made one a free man (or woman). Evangelism thus might lead to a continuous turnover of slaves as those converted were replaced by newly imported pagan slaves. This would be impractical and expensive. What was the solution? Between 1660 and 1700, the slave codes of six colonies (i.e., Virginia, Maryland, North Carolina, South Carolina, New Jersey, and New York) were altered to affirm that baptism was not a basis for freedom and that, regardless of religious status, slaves were required to serve for life (e.g., the Virginia slave codes of 1667 and 1682).³³ The churches could now actively convert slaves and slaveowners did not have to fear the loss of their property.

Throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the established churches seldom spoke out against slavery. In Virginia, the Church of England denied that there were any inconsistencies between Christianity and slavery. This meant that the church did not question the right of its members to hold slaves and made no effort to emancipate them.³⁴ The same was true for the Presbyterians, where the right of members to hold slaves was not questioned and no official action towards emancipation was taken before 1774.³⁵ While it was up to individual churches and ministers in the Puritan/Congregationalist congregations, here too there was little action taken against slavery. Even the non-established churches were silent. Lutherans initially opposed slavery but the need for labor led to a change in position where slavery was justified because slaves gained moral and spiritual advantages (i.e., salvation).³⁶ The Baptists and Methodists left action against slavery to individual ministers and members. In general, the positions of the churches expressed pragmatic concerns about the economic and social impact of emancipation.³⁷

The First Great Awakening of the 1730s and 1740s focused on religious revival and conversion. Preachers like Stoddard, Frelinghuysan, and Ed-

wards called individuals to “feel” and repent of their sin, then follow God. The message preached was one of spiritual, not social equality. Salvation was for all, but equality came only after death. This fit nicely into the policies and laws of Colonial America. The call was to individual change, not societal transformation. Still, a nascent abolitionist movement began to grow as individual Christians saw the moral inconsistency between slavery and Christianity at the same time as the power of mainline Protestant churches declined.³⁸

Earlier, two smaller denominations had openly advocated an end to slavery. In 1688, Quakers and Mennonites made the earliest pronouncement in Germantown, Pennsylvania.³⁹ The Quakers were consistent in their official opposition to slavery and were one of the first denominations to expel members for owning slaves. Other small denominations like the German Baptist Brethren (later the Church of the Brethren) also actively opposed slavery. These early voices had little impact, but the First Great Awakening increased this influence as the connection between the established churches and colonial governments was questioned. Perhaps the most powerful aspect of this early opposition was that it demonstrated that not all Christians or churches supported and defended the institution. Anti-slavery Christians listened to the viewpoints of slaves like Olaudah Equiano (1789) who asked, “O, ye nominal Christians! might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?”⁴⁰ If slaves had souls and needed to be saved, how could they be treated as less than human? While most churches did not change their official stance, the beliefs of individual Christians began to yield results.

Slavery and the Church in England

The period between 1750 and 1780 saw much promise for the abolition of slavery in the northern colonies, where there was less economic necessity for slave labor, as well as religious and moral critiques. While official church renouncement of slavery was slow, more and more Christians regarded slavery as inconsistent with Christianity. These individuals found allies with those influenced by the Enlightenment ideals of equality for all.⁴¹

Another important influence was the growing abolitionist movement in Great Britain. The colonies were very much influenced by the “mother” country. In the late eighteenth century, British Christians organized various societies to alleviate social ills, including slavery. John Newton was a powerful voice. Remembered for writing “Amazing Grace,” he was an ex-slaver

who, as an anti-slavery advocate and pastor, influenced many members of the Clapham Sect, a group of prominent and wealthy evangelical Anglicans dedicated to social reform that included William Wilberforce.⁴² The call to abolish slavery quickened in the 1780s. As a member of parliament, Wilberforce repeatedly introduced pieces of legislation aimed at ending slavery in the British Empire. In 1788, Wilberforce introduced a twelve-point motion detailing the atrocities associated with the slave trade.⁴³ While the motion was defeated, Wilberforce became convinced that the abolition of slavery was God's will and thus, his calling.

Wilberforce faced an uphill struggle. Powerful West Indies plantation owners, African merchants, ship owners and captains, and the British Crown were opposed, fearing the end of slavery might lead to a national recession and personal financial ruin. There was some legitimacy in this argument. The slave trade was essential to commerce in the New World.⁴⁴ Starting in the West Indies with sugar plantations and expanding into North America with tobacco, then cotton, the British used slaves for territorial expansion and financial gain throughout the seventeenth century. The slave trade was a key component in Great Britain's commercial and naval strength. When Britain gained a monopoly to supply slaves to Spanish colonies under a 1713 treaty, Britain became the leader in this form of commerce. At its peak in 1770 Britain transported fifty thousand slaves to the New World.⁴⁵

Oddly, the general English public cared little about Africans. It was the social and political elite that ended slavery in Great Britain in 1772. During the American Revolution, the British government promised freedom to any slaves that fought on their side. This offer enticed thousands of slaves to do so and many pro-British slaves fled to Canada in the early 1780s.⁴⁶ But, enormous profits kept the slave trade going. In 1806, as the supporters saw the end coming, there was a rush to transport a final forty thousand black Africans. After more than a decade of struggle, Wilberforce and his parliamentary allies abolished the slave trade in February 1807. The timing is crucial because a few months later the United States also outlawed the importation of slaves; however, the elimination of the primary source of transportation made the American ban as much a matter of practicality as morality.

In Great Britain, once the slave trade was abolished, the general public began to support the abolition of slavery itself. In 1814, more than one million signatures (about 1/10 of the British population) were collected calling for the abolition of slavery throughout the Empire. The perseverance of Wilberforce, the rest of the Clapham Sect, and countless others won the

day. In 1833, three days before Wilberforce died, the Emancipation Act was passed and slavery was abolished in the British Empire. The key abolitionists were Christians who believed that they had been called by God to destroy this evil.⁴⁷

Slavery in the United States

The experience of British Christians encouraged and motivated many American Christians. The early actions in Britain and the efforts of individual Christians placed pressure on many northern colonies to restrict slavery prior to the American Revolution. The culminating event was the banning of slavery by Rhode Island in 1774.

As the colonies moved towards independence, the issue of slavery illustrated the frequent disconnect between belief and action. The Declaration of Independence proclaimed the ideals of human equality coming out of the Enlightenment. Prior to and immediately after the War of Independence, prominent leaders such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson spoke out against the institution of slavery, even though they refused to free their own slaves.⁴⁸ Others such as Noah Webster, William Livingston, and Benjamin Franklin were active in anti-slavery societies. Many in the northern colonies opposed the continuation of slavery, but independence did not bring its immediate abolition.

The American Revolution was about democracy, political independence, and control over a growing economy. The English controlled the colonial economy through many rules and many taxes. The war changed those in control, but did not change the basic economic system. Wealth was concentrated in the hands of a few. The southern colonies depended on slave labor. The Constitutional Compromise of 1787, in which slavery was made legal and permanent, was necessary for the union to be achieved. The Constitution cemented the dehumanization of African slaves as they were considered only 3/5 of a person for the purpose of determining political representation and viewed as property. Yet, the struggle over the morality of slavery was apparent as limitations were placed on it. Slavery was forbidden, for example, in new territories through the Northwest Ordinances of 1787 and 1789. And, the importation of slaves was to end by 1808. Slavery was enshrined and protected in the original colonies, but would be prohibited as the new nation expanded.⁴⁹

While there was a growing consensus on the immorality of slavery, there continued to be a gap between belief and action. Washington, for example,

used the army to prevent slaves who had fought with the British from leaving the United States. Jefferson had a long-term relationship with a slave named Sally Hemings⁵⁰ and was capable of great cruelty when punishing his slaves.⁵¹ Some northern churches, such as Methodists and Presbyterians, denounced slavery, but did little to enforce the position. This gap between belief and action, in part, can be explained by the commonly held view that Africans were sub-human creations with an uncivilized nature, intellectual inferiority, and darkness of complexion.⁵² In theory, slavery was wrong—it was an embarrassment and abomination—but, in practice, it continued to be acceptable because Africans were inferior.

This belief even impacted the abolitionist movement. While northerners came to believe that slavery was wrong, this did not mean that they believed that black Africans should live freely amongst them. This mirrored the beliefs of British Christians who helped establish Sierra Leone for blacks discharged from military service as well as runaway slaves. In 1816, Rev. Robert Finley (a Presbyterian minister from New Jersey) founded the American Colonization Society to promote the emigration of free blacks to Africa. The rationale for these societies was that “blacks and whites” should not live together and that the removal of blacks would protect Americans. This view was held by James Monroe and James Madison, who helped establish the nation of Liberia where some fifteen thousand blacks emigrated to establish a nation for ex-slaves. Of course, the colonization approach did not win the day, but it highlights the problems associated with abolition.

As the United States emerged, religion again took a backseat to economics. This was particularly pronounced in the new territories where the focus was on free (or cheap) land, not religion. The rejection of religion moved many, especially Methodists, to action. Between 1800 and 1840, Charles Finney and other leaders of this Second Great Awakening expected that transformed lives would lead to a changed society because the Gospel was meant to do more than just get people saved. It was also to clean up society.⁵³ Influenced by British Christians who had established reform groups to address societal ills in the 1780s, American Christians from various churches organized hundreds of societies that touched every aspect of American life.

One of these causes was the abolition of slavery. Charles Finney proclaimed, “Let Christians of all denominations meekly but firmly come forth, and pronounce their verdict . . . and there would not be a shackled slave, nor a bristling, cruel slave driver in this land.”⁵⁴ As the 1830s progressed, the great revival and the anti-slavery movement at times became one and the same in the northern states as slavery was declared to be sin. “Sin could not

be solved by political compromise or sociological reform . . . it required repentance . . . otherwise America would be punished by God.”⁵⁵ Abolitionists established newspapers and distributed pamphlets to persuade slaveowners to repent and free their slaves. While northern abolitionists had little effect on the South, anti-slavery societies helped change the northern churches’ positions on slavery. The hope was that if the churches saw the truth they would encourage and, ultimately, require members to give up slavery. Tensions within denominations increased in the 1830s and 1840s, leading to several divisions that would ultimately mirror the split in the Union. For example, the Baptist movement was split into two large factions between 1841 and 1844 as southern members formed the Southern Baptist Convention. The Methodist Episcopal Church divided in 1844 when anti-slave clergy and laity formed the Wesleyan Methodist Church.⁵⁶

In the northern states, some churches became strong advocates for abolition. But, there was very little movement by southern churches.⁵⁷ Early opposition to slavery on moral and religious grounds gave way to pragmatic necessity. The economy of the southern states was primarily agricultural and was dependent upon slave labor. Even the 1808 ban on the importation of slaves had little effect as slave women continued to be viewed and used as “breeders” to increase the supply of needed workers. But, the evil extended far beyond this as thousands of slave women “were not only whipped and mutilated, they were also raped” by their masters.⁵⁸ “Sexual exploitation of enslaved women was widespread in the South. The presence of a large mulatto population stood as vivid proof and a constant reminder of such sexual abuse.”⁵⁹ While the churches did not approve widespread sexual promiscuity between white males and black females, this behavior was seen as the slaves’ own fault or that it was not happening despite the evidence all around. As Mary Boykin Chestnut testified:

God forgive us but ours is a monstrous system, a wrong and an iniquity! Like the patriarchs of old, our men live all in one house with their wives and concubines; and the mulattoes one sees in every family partly resembles the white children. Any lady is ready to tell you who is the father of all the mulatto children in everybody’s household but their own. Those, she seems to think, drop from the clouds.⁶⁰

Slaves were the lifeblood of the southern economy and culture. While state governments enacted laws to protect slavery, southern churches provided the moral justification. The churches turned to “the curse of Ham” along with other passages in the Old Testament (e.g., Lev. 25:44-46; Ex.

21:2-6, 7-11, 20-21) and New Testament (e.g., 1 Tim 6:1-5, Titus 2:9-10, 1 Peter 2:18-29) to demonstrate slavery was initiated by God. The Bible was used to prove that black Africans were inferior and meant to be slaves.

Although at first resistant, just as in the North, the biblical commission to convert “heathens” did lead the southern churches (especially the Baptist and Methodist churches) to eventually evangelize slaves. As conversions occurred, the churches took care to emphasize verses in the Old and New Testaments that supported slavery. However, they hesitated teaching slaves to read. Literacy might lead to discontent and discontent to revolution. One of the worst crimes a slave could commit was learning to read.⁶¹ Yet, an important part of Protestant Christianity is the need for each person to read the Bible and make a decision about whether to follow God. This led some southern Christians to covertly teach slaves to read. But, again, care was taken to emphasize verses that supported slavery.

The concerns of slaveowners proved accurate. As slaves learned to read, they resonated with biblical stories like Exodus, related them to their own experiences, and gave them entirely different interpretations. White Christians saw themselves as the *chosen people* led to the to fulfill a divine mission. African Americans interpreted the story through their own life circumstances. “America was more akin to Egypt than to the Promised Land, the firm belief was that God and God’s agents would deliver them from bondage.”⁶² The slaves saw much hypocrisy. Frederick Douglass, a mulatto slave who escaped and became a powerful voice for abolition, described his experience to an audience in Scotland, “It is quite customary to brand slaves . . . all this done by men calling themselves Christians; and not only this, but deeds of darkness too revolting to be told, and from which humanity would shudder.”⁶³ African-Americans gradually developed a sense of personal, if not social, equality with the slaveholders and worked for freedom.

Without the support of the majority of churches, it would have been difficult to condone, encourage, and participate in one of the most deplorable forms of slavery in human history. African slaves were kidnapped, sold like livestock, and forced to perform backbreaking work. Families were torn apart as young children were sold and sent away from their parents to distant places and husbands and wives were separated. Slaves were forced to endure beatings, rape, castration, branding, maiming, and murder. There was no legal recourse because slaves were not human beings; they were private property.⁶⁴

It is difficult to say whether the churches led or followed societal opinion.

Most likely, the churches did both. What seems clear is that from the early colonial period through the 1820s, the majority of churches were, at best, silent and, at worst, complicit on the issue of slavery. Of course, there were individuals who dissented, but for two hundred years, the majority of Christians did little to bring about the abolition of slavery.

Significant change occurred through the outgrowth of the Second Great Awakening, when individuals and eventually entire denominations spoke out and acted. The early American abolitionists hoped to end slavery through moral persuasion. But, unlike the experience in Britain, this approach did not work in the United States. As the moral and religious attacks intensified, southern churches and Christians deepened their defense. North and South used the Bible as the basis for contradictory positions.

The nation and the churches were at an impasse with no acceptable middle ground. Many framers of the Constitution hoped that their compromises would lead to the gradual elimination of slavery. Early abolitionists hoped for a peaceful resolution through moral persuasion or legislation. But, the struggle to end slavery was headed for a violent resolution. Frederick Douglass summed things up in 1857: “The whole history of progress of human liberty shows that . . . if there is no struggle, there is no progress . . . Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will . . .”⁶⁵ The South would not concede because slavery was central to the southern culture and economy. The North would force concessions through its power and army. These differences over slavery had religious overtones. “While there were other significant causes of the Civil War, the beginning of the end of slavery came through the death of hundreds of thousands of soldiers and civilians during this national conflict.

Conclusions

The tragedy of slavery is multi-layered and immense. Millions of black Africans and, subsequently, African-Americans suffered brutality. The pain caused by slavery did not end nor disappear with its abolition. Today, most Christians see slavery as a sin, but the church’s role and response to slavery has been complicated and disjointed.

In general, the church supported, promoted, and defended slavery when there was a close connection between state and church. When the church and prominent Christians gained economic and political power, they worked to retain it. From the time of Constantine through the nineteenth century, individuals and entire groups misused the Bible to justify subjugation and oppression.

Some denominations and individuals did not remain silent. The Catholic Church eventually spoke out against slavery. Many British and American Christians acted against it and some denominations used the Bible to argue against slavery, even as individuals often ignored these calls. While the role of Christians and different denominations was crucial, the lack of a unified Christian voice against slavery is part of the tragedy. The residue of slavery remained for more than a century with Christians on all sides.

Even after slavery was abolished, some Christians supported segregation and civil rights infringements through Jim Crow laws. Other Christians worked to end discrimination and usher in Civil Rights legislation in the 1960s. There is still a segment of the evangelical Christian population that continues to support anti-miscegenation as a general principle.⁶⁷ As late as 1976, President Jimmy Carter's home church, in Plains, Georgia, refused to allow black people to be members. While much has been accomplished, African-Americans still experience discrimination in areas such as education, employment, and home loans. The lack of a unified Christian voice still haunts America.

As the Christian community reflects (and repents) on the connection between Christianity and slavery, there may be lessons to learn and apply today. Namely, it takes both churches and individual Christians to speak out and act against injustice. It would be easy to assign slavery to the pages of history as a lesson learned, but slavery continues today with millions of people enslaved in different parts of the world.⁶⁶

The classic form of *chattel slavery* still persists. The human crisis in Sudan is, in part, due to the revival of a racially based slave trade where armed militias raid villages. In Mauritania, Arab-Berber masters hold as many as one million black Africans as inheritable property as a result of a chattel system established 800 years ago.

The most common form of slavery, however, is *debt bondage*. In poverty-ravaged areas, many families must borrow simply to survive. Human beings are used as collateral for these loans and, unlike most industrialized nations where debt dies with the debtor, debts are often inherited and generations are ensnared in slavery. In countries like Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and Pakistan, it is estimated that fifteen-twenty million people are enslaved to pay off debts that may go back generations.

In Southeast Asia and Eastern Europe the most common form is *sex slavery* where girls and young women are kidnapped, lured by offers of good jobs, or forced into prostitution to earn income for the family. If they resist, captors will rape, beat, and humiliate to break them down. Often, these vic-

tims are moved frequently and kept isolated with no documentation. They become sex slaves for tourists.

In the United States and other developed countries, the most common form is *forced labor*, where people are promised good jobs but instead are enslaved and forced into prostitution, domestic work, garment sewing, or agricultural work. Living in fear and ignorance, unable to speak the language, these terrified individuals wait to be freed.

The slaves of the past were seen as valuable commodities. Today, with booming populations and staggering poverty, there is an unending supply. Slaves are cheap. They are used then discarded. Slavery is efficient and profitable. It continues, and will always be, good business.

People of conscience need to awaken to denounce and act against all forms of modern slavery. Each of us can help stop the practice by buying “fair trade” products guaranteed to be slave-free (and conflict free) and giving producers a fair price, investing in companies that do not use forced labor, and supporting groups working to end slavery. The lesson of history is that it takes individuals, churches, and governments to speak out and act against injustice. Will the majority of churches and Christians remain silent or will there be a unified voice to denounce and act against all forms of slavery?

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