

THE BIBLE TEACHING ON SLAVERY

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Most thinking people agree that any institution that exploits and abuses people who are made in God's image, is not His perfect will. Slaves typically have three defining characteristics:

- 1) Their person is the property of another human being.
- 2) Their will is completely subject to the owner's authority.
- 3) Their labor is obtained against their will by coercion.

Slavery defined in these ways cannot be justified under any circumstances in any society. To enslave another human being is a sinful act.

Yet the Bible, in both the Old Testament and the New Testament, seems to endorse slavery. If the Bible does in fact approve of slavery, and we are agreed *that to hold another person as a slave is sinful*, then we have an example of a situation where living in obedience to the teaching of Scripture would lead us into sin! And if this is the case with slavery, then perhaps obedience to the teaching of Scripture could lead us into sin in other areas also. For example-to hold the Bible's teaching on the subordination of women, and on the evil of homosexual conduct-might mean that we are being misled into error by believing the Bible. Critics say, "You oppose homosexual activity and use the Bible to support your view, but the Bible you believe in, also supports slavery."

I have received several letters that either say (or imply) that because the Bible seems to support slavery, *we must move beyond what the Bible says*, and overcome slavery. And just so, they say, while the Bible seems to condemn homosexual activity, we must move beyond what the Bible says, and overcome prejudice toward homosexual activity. Furthermore, we must move beyond what the Bible says about the place of women in the home and the church and accept the views of feminist theologians. Critics of BRF

say that we use the Bible to repudiate homosexual conduct, but after all, the Bible could also be used as a rationale to bring back slavery and support the subjugation of women!

The writer in the Spring, 1993 issue of *Brethren Life and Thought* says that instead of using a trustworthy Bible as the basis for our decision making, “perhaps it would be better ... if we viewed Scripture as human records about God’s work in our lives.”

1. THE MEANING AND USE OF THE WORD “SLAVES”

The New Testament uses the word “slave” frequently. In the KJV the Greek word “doulos” is translated “servant,” and one who serves as a “servant” is usually translated “minister.”

There is a difference between a servant and a slave. A “servant” is one who is privately employed to perform household services—one who serves another. A “slave” is one who is bound in servitude to another person or group of persons as an instrument of labor—usually one who is coerced to serve.

The Bible says, *“Let as many servants as are under the yoke, count their own masters worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and his doctrine may not be blasphemed. And those who have believing masters, let them not despise them because they are brethren, but rather serve them because those who are benefited are believers and beloved” (1 Timothy 6:1-2, NKJV).* The words “servants under the yoke” indicate clearly that the reference is to slaves and not to privately employed household servants. Thus, many translations use the better English word “slaves” (for those bound in servitude to another), instead of the word “servants.”

2. PAST AND CURRENT EXAMPLES OF ABUSIVE HUMAN SLAVERY

Early American slavery was often abusive. People (usually from Africa) were brought into forced labor. When we read accounts of the nineteenth century American slave trade, we rightly feel angered. Early American slavery tore families apart and robbed people of their freedom and dignity. Slavery degraded blacks and subjected them to terrible cruelties.

The 1997 film called *Amistad* (the name of a slave ship that reached the coast of Long Island) is the true story of a bloody 1839 rebellion aboard a Spanish ship. Scenes in the film depict slaves being beaten, whipped, shot to death, and thrown overboard. These things shake us and cause us to weep.

Slavery is still practiced around the world. In Sudan, Christians are sold into slavery at \$500 a head. In China, Christians are being forced to perform slave labor in concentration camps. Parents are jailed for merely teaching their children about the Gospel. The Geneva based International Labor Organization released a report in March, 1993 that says, “Tens of millions of people around the globe, including children as young as six, are working in bondage in dangerous and degrading conditions that often involve 18 hour workdays, beatings, and sexual abuse.” The ILO reports that slavery like these practices exist in Sudan, Haiti, Pakistan, Mauritania, India, Thailand, Peru, Brazil, and the Dominican Republic. See *Time* magazine, March 22, 1993.

The ugly side of our own nation’s early history cannot be wiped away by piously hiding behind the Bible to justify what took place. Slavery, as practiced in early America and in some parts of the world today, was and is a gruesome and inhuman institution. In America, the grace of God, working outward from within – became a penetrating principle to transform the evil social practice. That needs to happen elsewhere. The fact is that the slavery which some theologians in the Old South were supporting – was a very different kind of slavery from that which is spoken about in the Bible.

3. THE USE OF SLAVES IN NEW TESTAMENT TIMES

The Scriptures seem to be ambiguous on the subject of slaves and slavery. Neither the Old Testament nor the New Testament condemns slavery or calls for its abolition. The New Testament, in fact, instructs slaves to obey their masters.

In the Old Testament era, no Hebrew could *permanently become* the slave of another. Slaves had to be freed when they paid the debt for which they were sold. Also, in the seventh year of their service, whether or not the debt was paid, they had to be released. And when the Year of Jubilee arrived, all slaves were set free.

Slavery in the Roman world did not generally involve inhuman treatment. Slaves often managed money, guarded children, cooked food, and sometimes were even family doctors. We generally associate the word “slave” with the ideas of forced subjection, involuntary service, and harsh treatment. Those terms are not accurate descriptions of slavery in the Roman Empire.

We need to know what slavery was like in New Testament times so that we can know how to apply the New Testament instructions to situations in our own day. Kent Hughes, in his commentary on *Ephesians* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, IL), page 206, documents much helpful information on Roman slavery. It is estimated that there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire, but the average slave was not abused and exploited. Some slaves did suffer at the hands of their owners, but slaves under Roman law could usually

count on being set free. While slaves remained their owner's property, they themselves could own property—including other slaves.

We note too that being a slave did not indicate one's social class. Slaves were accorded the social status of their owners. And outwardly, one could scarcely ever distinguish a slave from a free person. A slave could be a custodian, a merchant, a salesman, a teacher, or a government official. Slaves were often highly educated. There were a few slaves who were elders in the church, and thus had authority over the masters whom they served all week. Selling oneself as a slave was commonly used as a means of gaining Roman citizenship.

Roman slavery in the first century was far more humane and civilized than the African-American slavery practiced in the United States during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. This does not suggest that ancient slavery was not evil. Slaves were still considered property and could be bought and sold and severely punished—but understanding the nature of slavery in New Testament times helps us to understand why the apostolic writers were not as quick to attack slavery.

The Apostle Paul respected the civil law and the social patterns of his day and did not militate against the law of slavery. William Barclay, in his commentary, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, Westminster, 1960, says:

“In those early days, the Church did not emerge as the opponent and the would-be destroyer of slavery by violent and sudden means. And the Church was wise. There were something like 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire ... For the Church to have encouraged slaves to revolt and rebel and rise against their masters would have been fatal. It would simply have caused civil war, mass murder, and the complete discredit of the Church. (Instead), what happened was that as the centuries went on, Christianity so permeated civilization that in the end the slaves were freed voluntarily and not by force. Here is a tremendous lesson. It is the proof that neither men nor the world nor society can be reformed by force and by legislation. The reform must come through the slow penetration of the Spirit of Christ into the human situation. Things have to happen in God's time, not in ours. In the end, the slow way is the sure way, and the way of violence always defeats itself.”

The Bible teaching in **1 Timothy 6:1-2** is that *believers who were slaves* were to honor, respect, and obey their masters. The name of Christ whom they profess to worship would be defamed if they fail to follow that instruction. If the believer was the slave of a *heathen master*, he might be tempted to regard his master as bound for hell, while the slave is saved for heaven. That kind of intolerant superiority was not like the mind

of Christ. If the believer was the slave of *a master who was Christian*, the slave would be tempted to use the relationship as an excuse to do inefficient work and expect not to be punished. The New Testament teaching is that the slave does not have the right to be disrespectful, no matter who his master is.

The Apostolic Church looked upon slaves as brothers and as equals. The post-Apostolic Church admitted slaves to all the rights of the church, some of whom became priests and even bishops. Church collections (money offerings) were often used to purchase freedom for slaves. The freeing of slaves was considered a praiseworthy action.

4. THE EARLY CHURCH OF THE BRETHREN AND SLAVERY

American slave holding was practiced in all the early colonies. By the mid-1700s Brethren had settled in Pennsylvania, Maryland, and Virginia. Abolition societies began in several northern states, working together to promote the abolition of slavery. The early Brethren rejected *both slavery and the abolition societies*. The Church of the Brethren (German Baptist Brethren) Annual Meeting repeatedly insisted that Brethren may not own slaves.

If people who owned slaves desired membership among the Brethren, they had to free their slaves first and compensate them for the work they had done. Ministers who defended slavery were treated firmly and could be excommunicated from the church. Slavery was simply not tolerated by the nineteenth century Brethren.

In Roger Sappington's *The Brethren in the New Nation*, we read the following summary on page 256: "From the beginning of the church in Germany, Brethren expressed their opposition to human slavery, In Europe this belief had not been a problem of any kind, since human slavery was virtually unknown in northern Europe by 1700. In America, however, Brethren encountered a different situation, for human slavery was widespread, even among their Quaker neighbors in Pennsylvania. Like most Germans, however, Brethren usually found work in occupations where human slaves could not be profitably employed. Even after the Brethren began to move into the colonies south of the Mason-Dixon line, where slavery was more widespread, they generally settled on relatively small family sized farms in the mountain valleys which could be farmed without slaves rather than on the large plantations owned by the English which required slave labor."

We must remember that the Bible acknowledges the existence of institutions which it does not necessarily approve, including polygamy and slavery. God has never approved of the injustices and cruelties that have often been associated with slavery. The New Testament does not directly condemn slavery, but neither does it accept slavery as an

ongoing social fact. The New Testament deals with master/slave relationships so as to render slavery unjustifiable. Slaves and masters are brothers. In Christ, all are one; there is no bond or free (**Galatians 3:28; Ephesians 6:9**). The New Testament writers try to correct the injustices of slavery by encouraging improved attitudes on the part of both masters and slaves.

The New Testament does not advocate the overthrow of slavery by forcible revolution. Rather, it condemns and removes the abuses of slavery by striking at its roots, by lifting up the power of the Gospel to change hearts, and by setting forth principles for dealing with fellow human beings:

- 1) All human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and are worthy of respect (**Genesis 1:28**).
- 2) All human beings are loved by God who cares for us (**John 3:16**).
- 3) All Christians are to love their neighbors as themselves (**Matthew 22:39**).

The abuses of slavery have disappeared wherever the Word of God has been widely and faithfully taught. Christianity never had as its immediate goal an attempt to change society, but to change people. And to the degree that people change, to that extent, society and its structures change. And so, wherever *the true Christian message* has made deep inroads, slavery has been eliminated.

There is another kind of slavery that Christians need to think about. The Bible speaks of slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness. Jesus said, “**Most assuredly, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin**” (**John 8:34**). In a spiritual sense, people apart from Christ are slaves to sin. To keep on committing sin is to demonstrate that sin has control of one’s life.

The Apostle Paul said, “**To whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness**” (**Romans 6:16**). Then Paul thanked God that many who were once slaves of sin had now by the grace of God become slaves of righteousness. Christ can set us free from slavery to sin and will enable us to do righteousness.

The writers of the New Testament epistles refer to themselves as Christ’s slaves. See **Galatians 1:10, 2 Peter 1:1, and Jude 1**. The dedicated Christian is a servant (a bond slave) of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not free to do as we choose. We are committed to obediently serve God and to deal justly with our fellow human beings.

Concerning slavery as a social institution, neither Jesus nor Paul advocated social revolution which would lead to the immediate emancipation of every slave. Such a

sudden upheaval would have resulted in indescribable misery for many slaves who depended on their masters for a living. What the Bible teaches is that love coming from both sides (master and slaves) will melt cruelty into kindness, and in so doing, despots will be changed into kind employers and slaves will become willing servants. All will become brothers and sisters in Christ.