

# Christianity and Slavery

## Biblical Reasons adduced to defend Slavery

- Abraham, the “father of faith,” and all the patriarchs held slaves without God’s disapproval (Gen. 21:9–10).
- Canaan, Ham’s son, was made a slave to his brothers (Gen. 9:24–27).
- The Ten Commandments mention slavery twice, showing God’s implicit acceptance of it (Ex. 20:10, 17).
- Slavery was widespread throughout the Roman world, and yet Jesus never spoke against it.
- The apostle Paul specifically commanded slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 6:5–8, cf Colossians 3:22).
- Paul returned a runaway slave, Philemon, to his master (Philem. 12).

## Passivity and Conversion

From: <https://time.com/5171819/christianity-slavery-book-excerpt/>

Fair use extracts from this work as referenced on the above web site.

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Even apparent abuses, when looked at in the right light, worked out for the best, in the words of **Bishop William Meade of Virginia**.<sup>1</sup> Suppose, for example, that you have been punished for something you did not do, “is it not possible you may have done some other bad thing which was never discovered and that Almighty God, who saw you doing it, would not let you escape without punishment one time or another? And ought you not in such a case to give glory to Him, and be thankful that He would rather punish you in this life for your wickedness than destroy your souls for it in the next life? But suppose that even this was not the case—a case hardly to be imagined—and that you have by no means, known or unknown, deserved the correction you suffered; there is this great comfort in it, that if you bear it patiently, and leave your cause in the hands of God, He will reward you for it in heaven, and the punishment you suffer unjustly here shall turn to your exceeding great glory hereafter.”

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<sup>1</sup> The bishops quoted here were Episcopalians (Anglicans in North America).

**Bishop Stephen Elliott, of Georgia**, also knew how to look on the bright side. Critics of slavery should “consider whether, by their interference with this institution, they may not be checking and impeding a work which is manifestly Providential. For nearly a hundred years the English and American Churches have been striving to civilize and Christianize Western Africa, and with what result? Around Sierra Leone, and in the neighborhood of Cape Palmas, a few natives have been made Christians, and some nations have been partially civilized; but what a small number in comparison with the thousands, nay, I may say millions, who have learned the way to Heaven and who have been made to know their Savior through the means of African slavery! At this very moment there are from three to four millions of Africans, educating for earth and for Heaven in the so vilified Southern States—learning the very best lessons for a semi-barbarous people—lessons of self-control, of obedience, of perseverance, of adaptation of means to ends; learning, above all, where their weakness lies, and how they may acquire strength for the battle of life. These considerations satisfy me with their condition and assure me that it is the best relation they can, for the present, be made to occupy.”

## The History

Read an abbreviated but good account of the history here ....

<http://www.equip.org/PDF/JAF1361.pdf>

and here (the best reference I have found on the subject in antiquity but less helpful in analysing the return of slavery among the colonial powers in the modern era):

<https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/14036a.htm> (“Primitive Christianity did not attack slavery directly; but it acted as though slavery did not exist.”)

Finally this Wikipedia article has interesting information but it does not account for the early modern (16<sup>th</sup> C>f) rehabilitation of slavery in certain Christian (heterodox) traditions.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian\\_views\\_on\\_slavery](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christian_views_on_slavery)

So .....

## Why did some Christians revert to the practice and institution of Slavery?

3 main reasons: -

- (1) **Colonialization**, the rape of land, wealth and peoples for European profit and development was a major force in the rehabilitation of slavery. Much of Europe’s missionary activity from the 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards was on the back of colonial expansion. Russia was not exempt from this, particularly in its treatment of Asiatic and Alaskan peoples by wealthy prospectors and hunters. St Herman of Alaska is a shining example, however, (among many) of resistance to this abuse and the establishment of a truly indigenous Alaskan Orthodoxy.

- (2) **The marketing of slavery as a means of evangelisation**, being two more incompatible principles you could not imagine, corrupted many western Protestant churches that sought means of advancement through powerful political and economic forces. However, the Great Awakenings in America and then the Evangelical Revivals of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in the UK, reinforced by the Enlightenment, gathered a Christian inspired momentum for abolition in western societies. Abolition could not remove the racism though which was its enduring toxic legacy; a legacy that only started to unravel with the civil rights movement and the collapse of apartheid in South Africa. Slavery still exists today in the sex trade in the west and the restriction of the rights of indentured workers in the Middle East. It will be a long time before abolition is complete.
- (3) **The ubiquity of slavery in Islamic practice** corrupted the morals of those Christians who emulated this in global trade and development, or who acquiesced to it. The sin of the latter is, of course, the same as that of the former.

## **Recovering the Christian Mind**

What lessons are there to be learned in the collapse of Christian opposition to slavery and then its gradual reassertion and recover?

- (1) **A reassessment of the traditional principle in Protestantism of “Sola Scriptura”.**

The fact that so many (particularly) Protestant Christians found it so easy to justify the institution of slavery from the Scriptures should have served as a red flag to the inadequacy of this approach to biblical interpretation. Essentially, the doctrine of biblical sufficiency prevented many Christians from seeing how the gospel needed to be allowed to continue to reform human life in all its aspects, political, economic and personal. The insights and progress of centuries was undone almost overnight in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries. “Going back to the Bible” does not mean going back to slavery! Sola Scriptura meant that they could not see that. There is such a thing as Christian progress and the humanisation of political and economic structures. The failure to grasp that (so obvious in the Old Testament) contributed to the rise of secular revolutionary movements antagonistic to faith, especially Marxism.

- (2) **Speaking Truth to Power**

Tied in with the first lesson is the vital necessity of a prophetic voice, speaking God’s word of judgement against all the evils that beset our personal, social, economic and political life. Speaking truth to power means that you cannot at the same time be in bed with power. The churches need again to articulate the voices of the poor, the dispossessed, the brutalised and the marginalised. We need, after the fashion of Christ, to have table fellowship with them, not those who according to worldly standards “have their reward already.”