

## **Slavery, the Bible and Christianity**

How the Bible and Christianity have Influenced the Institution of Slavery

Pierre M. Eade

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Reading the passages in the Bible concerning slavery without understanding the cultural context of those writings can lead to misunderstanding and possibly rejection of the Bible or Christian faith. When these Old and New Testament passages are properly understood within their cultural and spiritual context, the reader will come to an understanding that the God of the Bible has been the greatest influence against unjust slavery in all of history.

The goal of this paper is to provide a survey of the Biblical passages on slavery as well as historical examples of how Christianity has played a significant role in overturning the institution of slavery in the world. We will begin by defining the words slave and slavery. Next, we will look into the Old Testament passages concerning the treatment of slaves to better understand the meaning behind these verses. Before moving onto the New Testament, we will briefly discuss the societal norms in Roman civilization regarding slaves to understand how they were treated and how they were viewed by the general population. This overview will help us more fully appreciate our survey of the New Testament scriptures including the words of Jesus regarding servitude, the words of the Apostle Paul in his writings to the churches in Rome, Galatia, Colosse and to Philemon. We will conclude with a brief summary of ways in which Christianity has eradicated the injustice of involuntary slavery over the course of history.

Interestingly, while some translations of the Bible use the word “slave” more frequently, it is only used once in the King James Version (Jeremiah 2:14). In most cases, the word translated as “slave” in these other versions is rendered as “servant” in the King James. The word translated in the Old Testament as slave or servant comes from the original Hebrew word *dbē* (‘ebed eh'-bed) meaning, “a servant: bondage, bondman, (bond-)servant, (man-)servant”.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> James Strong. *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson, 1996), 466.

In the New Testament, the word translated as servant in the King James and often as bondservant or slave in other translations comes from the Greek word, δούλος *doulos doo'-lo* meaning “a slave (literal or figurative, involuntary or voluntary; frequently, therefore in a qualified sense of subjection or subservience):--bond(-man), servant”.<sup>2</sup> Depending on the translation, the words slave and servant are used interchangeably and will be used in this paper interchangeably as well.

W.N. Kerr defines slavery as “a state of involuntary servitude”.<sup>3</sup> The problem with this definition is that all slavery was not involuntary, particularly in the life of Hebrew society. Paul Copan notes that “One could voluntarily enter into a contractual agreement (“sell” himself) to work in the household of another”.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this paper, based on the definition of slave and the understanding that slavery can be either voluntary or involuntary, we will define slavery as “a state of voluntary or involuntary servitude to another”. This definition and the addition of the term “voluntary” is of great significance especially when we contrast the picture of slavery in the Old Testament with that of contemporary Western views of slavery based on antebellum slavery in America.

It holds true that in the Old Testament, slavery was a legally prescribed institution among the people of God.<sup>5</sup> Modern day opponents of Christianity such as New Atheists have unfairly equated the passages of the Old Testament concerning slavery in America to the cruelty of antebellum slavery as a means of attacking the validity of the Bible and the Christian faith.<sup>6</sup> While time and space do not permit us to discuss the morality of slavery as an institution, we do

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<sup>2</sup> James Strong. *The New Strong's Complete Dictionary of Bible Words*, 606.

<sup>3</sup> W.N.Kerr, “Slavery.” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic), 1112.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Copan. “Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview”, *Enrichment Journal*, Spring 2011, [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201102/201102\\_108\\_slavery.htm.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201102/201102_108_slavery.htm.cfm).

<sup>5</sup> W.N. Kerr, “Slavery.” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, 1113.

<sup>6</sup> Paul Copan, “Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview”, *Enrichment Journal*.

know that the treatment of slaves in the Hebrew culture was distinctly more humane than that in the Near East.<sup>7</sup> In most cases, servants were like live-in employees who worked in their master's household and often became a welcomed part of their family.<sup>8</sup> "A wise servant shall have rule over a son that causeth shame, and shall have part of the inheritance among the brethren" (Proverbs 17:2).

God through Moses provided the Hebrew community with laws concerning how slaves were to be treated. The first law prescribed among the Israelites concerning slaves, known as the sabbatical year law, dictated that Hebrew slaves are only to be kept for six years and then released in the seventh (Exodus 21:2; Deut. 15:12).<sup>9</sup> Every fifty years, during the year of Jubilee, all debts were cancelled and servants were to be set free (Leviticus 25:40, 50). Unlike other cultures where slavery was a lifelong, inescapable and endless bondage, among the Israelites it was meant to be a temporary condition. While the position of servitude was by no means ideal, it was in place as a means of provision and safety for the poor to pay off their debts through service.<sup>10</sup>

If the slave was single when he entered into servitude, after six years or in the year of Jubilee, he would leave by himself. If he was married when he became a slave, he would leave with his wife (Exodus 21:3). However, if the slave's master gave him a wife during his time of service and they had children together, the wife and children would not be able to leave in the seventh year (Exodus 21:4). At this point, the servant would have a few viable options. First, he could accept his freedom and then wait for the time of release for his wife and children.

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<sup>7</sup> W.N. Kerr, "Slavery." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, 1113.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Copan, "Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview", *Enrichment Journal*.

<sup>9</sup> W.N. Kerr, "Slavery." In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, 1113.

<sup>10</sup> Paul Copan. "Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview", *Enrichment Journal*.

Secondly, he could accept his freedom and attempt to earn enough money to release his family.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, the slave could choose to keep his family intact by staying with his master (Exodus 21:5). However, in doing so, he would be obligated to stay forever.

When the servant chose to stay, the master would take the servant to the entrance of his household and pierce his ear with an awl, “probably with the intentions of inserting a ring or cord to which a tag would be attached indicating ownership”.<sup>12</sup> At this point, the slave would become a part of the master’s property and serve him for the rest of his life.<sup>13</sup>

Undoubtedly, these stipulations regarding a slave’s wife and children are some of the more difficult to rationalize at face value. Copan gives this advice to Western readers:

Westerners should not impose modern solutions on difficult ancient problems; rather, we need to better grasp the nature of Israelite servitude and the social and economic circumstances surrounding it. We are talking about voluntary servitude in unfortunate circumstances during bleak economic times. Israel’s laws provided safety nets for protection, not oppression.<sup>14</sup>

When a servant chose to leave his master, the master was mandated to give to his servant liberally from his possessions (Deuteronomy 15:14). It was in some sense an ancient form of our modern day severance or retirement plan. It was not contractually obligatory upon the master to provide this generosity, but out of reverence for the Lord and the blessings He had bestowed.

In Deuteronomy, we find two motive clauses for masters who release their slaves after their six years of service.<sup>15</sup> The Lord wanted his people to always remember the bondage he delivered them from in Egypt and how gracious He was to them (Deuteronomy 5:15). The

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<sup>11</sup> Paul Copan. “Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: Explaining Difficult Passages”, *Enrichment Journal*, Summer 2011, [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201103/201103\\_124\\_OTSlave.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201103/201103_124_OTSlave.cfm).

<sup>12</sup> Anthony Phillips. “The laws of slavery: Exodus 21:2-11.” *Journal For The Study of The Old Testament*. No. 30 (October 1, 1984): 51.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Paul Copan. “Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: Explaining Difficult Passages”, *Enrichment Journal*.

<sup>15</sup> Anthony Phillips. “The laws of slavery: Exodus 21:2-11.” *Journal For The Study of The Old Testament*, 55-56.

kindness of God shown to the Israelites in freeing them from the bondage of Egypt was to be reciprocated in kind by master to slave. We see this same desire for mercy in Jesus' parable of the unforgiving servant. "Then his lord, after that he had called him, said unto him, O thou wicked servant, I forgave thee all that debt, because thou desiredst me: Shouldest not thou also have had compassion on thy fellowservant, even as I had pity on thee?" (Matthew 18:32-33).

The second motive clause is given in verse 18 of Deuteronomy chapter 15. Releasing a slave would appear to be a detriment to the master economically. However the Lord points out that "fulfillment of this apparently uneconomic injunction to free the slaves would nevertheless result in God's blessing".<sup>16</sup> The motive clauses give us a glimpse of the wisdom, love, kindness and justice of the Lord to both the indebted slave as well as to the master.

In times of economic despair, a mother or father could choose to sell their own children into slavery.<sup>17</sup> We see examples of this in the Old Testament such as the widow who pleaded with the prophet Elisha for help as she was in danger of losing her two sons to creditors (2 Kings 4:1). The people of God cried out to Nehemiah because they had mortgaged all their possessions and now were in danger of having to sell their sons and daughters into slavery because of their poverty and inability to feed themselves (Nehemiah 5:1-5).

Selling a child to slavery was a last resort decision to be taken in "economically unbearable times".<sup>18</sup> A daughter could be sold to a master who would take her as a wife or concubine for himself or one of his sons. If the master was not pleased with the daughter and chose not to marry her, the law protected her from being sold to foreigners or being neglected of food and clothing. In any of these cases, the daughter was to go free without any payment of money (Exodus 21:7-11).

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<sup>16</sup> Anthony Phillips. "The laws of slavery: Exodus 21:2-11." *Journal For The Study of The Old Testament*, 56.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>18</sup> Paul Copan, "Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview", *Enrichment Journal*.

Unlike other ancient Near East cultures (ANE), Israel's law discouraged masters from harming their slaves.<sup>19</sup> In the case of physical harm, the slaves were to be set free (Exodus 21:26, 27). If a slave died as a result of a master's beating, the master was to be put to death as (Exodus 21:20). Kidnapping of slaves was forbidden and anyone found guilty of selling another person was to be put to death (Exodus 21:15). If a foreign slave were to escape and find freedom among the Israelites, they were not to return the slave to the master, but allow him to live within their gates without oppression (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). These laws were revolutionary in their time and distinct from other ANE cultures. Christopher Wright states:

No other ancient near Eastern law has been found that holds a master to account for the treatment of his own slaves (as distinct from injury done to the slave of another master), and the otherwise universal law regarding runaway slaves was that they must be sent back, with severe penalties for those who failed to comply.<sup>20</sup>

Copan suggests that if Bible-believing Southerners had followed the provisions of anti-harm, anti-kidnapping and anti-return laws found in the Old Testament, antebellum slavery would not have existed or been much less of an issue.<sup>21</sup> He states, "Even today, teams trade sports players to another team that has an owner, and these players belong to a franchise. This language hardly suggests slavery, but rather a formal contractual agreement to be fulfilled — like in the Old Testament".<sup>22</sup>

In summary, slavery was not prohibited in the Old Testament, but it was fashioned by God in a way that would provide the poor with a viable way to pay off debt and at the same time have provision of food and shelter. While by no means ideal, slavery was by far better in Israel than in other ANE cultures of the time in that it provided rights and protection to the slaves

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<sup>19</sup> Paul Copan, "Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview", *Enrichment Journal*.

<sup>20</sup> Christopher J.H. Wright, *Old Testament Ethics for the People of God*. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press), 292.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Copan, "Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview", *Enrichment Journal*.

<sup>22</sup> Paul Copan, "Does the Old Testament Endorse Slavery?: An Overview", *Enrichment Journal*.

themselves. While Western critics of the Bible and the Judeo/Christian beliefs may point to slavery as a reason for dismissing the faith, it would serve them well to first compare the Old Testament laws concerning slavery to other cultures of its time and even that of history.

Transitioning from the Old to the New Testament, we will begin by examining the Roman culture in which the life of Jesus and the early disciples unfolds. It is estimated that half the population of the Roman Empire were slaves.<sup>23</sup> The life of a slave could be taken without much thought.<sup>24</sup> If a master of a household was murdered, all of his domestic slaves were put to death without any legal ramifications.<sup>25</sup> It was not uncommon for a female slave to be offered to a guest for a night as a means of hospitality.<sup>26</sup>

Slaves were used by their masters as teachers, cooks, medical professionals, household workers or for brute physical labor.<sup>27</sup> Often, slaves were stereotyped as being “lazy, negligent, willful, cowardly, and criminal”.<sup>28</sup> However, some slaves were entrusted to carry messages for their masters or conduct some business affairs on their behalf, but the majority worked and stayed within the households of their masters.<sup>29</sup>

Slaves were traded as commodities by dealers and brokers.<sup>30</sup> Slave trading was lucrative and active especially in times of war when captives were taken in as slaves.<sup>31</sup> Masters could buy, sell, trade or release their slaves as they would a product they owned. “Slaves who were set free by their citizen masters also received limited rights of citizenship; their children born after

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<sup>23</sup> D. James Kennedy. *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson), 18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>27</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Craig S. de Vos. “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul’s Letter to Philemon”. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, Volume 23, Issue 82 (January 2001): 95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>31</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: The Westminster Press, 71.

manumission were considered full citizens”. Slaves who were set free had little chance for upward mobility within the society.<sup>32</sup>

In light of this cultural context, we understand slaves were treated more like commodities than humans. Some range of quality in the lifestyle of a slave in the Roman Empire depended upon their skill set and the treatment of their master. Slaves were not protected by the legal system or given much hope of positive change in society. This understanding gives us greater perspective as we look into the New Testament writings concerning slaves and bondservants.

While Jesus never taught directly about the institution of slavery, he did speak forthrightly about human oppression. “He explicitly opposed every form of oppression in His mission ‘to proclaim release to the captives ... to set free those who are oppressed’” (Luke 4:18. Isaiah 61:1). While Jesus did not press for some economic reform plan in Israel, He did address attitudes such as greed, materialism, contentment, and generosity”.<sup>33</sup>

At times, Jesus made reference to servitude as a didactic tool to teach people about the kingdom of God. He used the concept of a servant being freed of debt to teach about forgiveness (Matthew 18:23-35). He taught on faithfulness in his kingdom using a story of a slave who watches over his master’s goods (Matthew 24:45-51). He taught about stewardship using the story of a man who entrusted his servants with his goods (Matthew 25:14-30).

Jesus also presented countercultural ideas about servitude and the relationship of a disciple to their master and to the world. He taught his disciples that unlike the Gentile world in which they lived, they were not to seek prominence or power by positioning themselves over others. Instead, he taught that achieving greatness in God’s eyes required one to become a servant (Matthew 20:26, Matthew 23:11). This ideology was not only foreign to the world of

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<sup>32</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Paul Copan. “Why is the New Testament Silent on Slavery-or Is It?” *Enrichment Journal*, (Fall 2011), [http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201104/201104\\_108\\_NT\\_slavery.cfm](http://enrichmentjournal.ag.org/201104/201104_108_NT_slavery.cfm).

Roman civilization, it was also unconventional to many Jews who expected a Messiah that would come as a conquering king and establish the nation of Israel.

The Apostle Paul also used slavery terminology as a means of teaching spiritual truths. In his letter to the Romans, Paul taught that a person is slave to whomever he obeys. One could either choose to be a slave to sin or a slave to obedience leading to righteousness (Romans 6:16). Paul taught that the Gospel was God's means of setting people free from the spiritual slavery of sin (Romans 6:17-18). He encouraged his listeners to present their bodies and members as slaves of righteousness for holiness (Romans 6:19). Paul was teaching the church in Rome that they had been freed from the slavery of sin by God, but now were called by God to be a slave unto Him (Romans 6:22). Paul took this message to heart referring to himself as a (bond)servant to God and Jesus (Romans 1:1; Colossians 1:23; Titus 1:1).

Paul taught that one's spiritual status in Christ was greater than the social hierarchy of the society. In Christ, slaves were now equivalent to their masters, women were equivalent to men and Gentiles shared equal rights with Jews. "Within the group, at least in the early decades, there was a conscious rejection of the status-conscious norms of society, a rejection summarized in the admonition that within the community of the baptized there was 'neither Jew nor Greek...slave nor free...male nor female'" (Galatians 3:28; cf. James 2:2-12).<sup>34</sup>

Some have argued that Paul's statement, "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called" (1 Corinthians 7:20) as an argument against the manumission of slaves. Elisabeth Schüssler Firoenza does not agree with this interpretation based on verse 23 of the same chapter which reads, "Ye are bought with a price; be not ye the servants of men".

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<sup>34</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 55.

According to Firoenza, it is best understood that slaves who had no ability to find freedom should not “worry about it”, however if given the opportunity to be free, to by all means use it.<sup>35</sup>

The early New Testament church often gathered in the homes of affluent believers. In their gatherings, slaves of the master’s household were welcomed to participate in the entirety of the celebration. This shift was of great significance considering the Jewish religious customs.

The insistence on purity in table fellowship was typical of Jewish groups, especially the Pharisees and Essenes, but as Christian practice developed, the boundaries of that table fellowship changed, and ceremonial rigor was relaxed so that the whole Christian community, Jew and Gentile, slave and free, male and female, shared equally in the table of the Lord (Galatians 2:12-14).<sup>36</sup>

Baptism was a sign of the singleness of God and a means of breaking down the social barriers among believers.<sup>37</sup> According to Kerr, slaves could be baptized if the Christian master was willing to testify on his behalf.<sup>38</sup> “Slaves were attracted by the promise of spiritual, if not legal, emancipation and were converted as members of households or, sometimes, as individuals”.<sup>39</sup>

The most influential document within the New Testament regarding slavery is the book of Philemon. Although the shortest of Paul’s books (335 words in Greek text), it is also considered to be one of the most personal.<sup>40</sup> The traditional explanation of the situation holds that Onesimus ran away from his master Philemon.<sup>41</sup> Paul met Onesimus in prison and led him to faith in Christ (Philemon 10). In conformity to the Roman law, Paul sent him back to his

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<sup>35</sup> Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, In *Memory of Her: Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*, New York, New York: The CrossRoads Publishing Company, 1985, 221.

<sup>36</sup> John E. Stambaugh and David L. Balch. *The New Testament in Its Social Environment*, 59.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>38</sup> W.N.Kerr, “Slavery.” In *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, edited by Walter A. Elwell, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic), 1112.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>40</sup> Carlson, D.A. and Moo, Douglas J, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Second Edition*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2005), 588.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 588.

owner, Philemon.<sup>42</sup> In sending him back, Paul instructs Philemon who is also a believer in Christ to treat Onesimus “not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved” (Philemon 16).

In his book, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World*, Norman R. Peterson helps the reader understand the magnitude of Paul’s request:

Onesimus’s action, therefore, poses a threat both to the institutionalized social system and to the sociological structures it serves, and it is in this light that we can best appreciate the state of tension that surrounds the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon and encompasses people like Paul who have gotten involved with the guilty party. The tension persists until the relationship between the slave and his master is brought back into conformity with its structural ground by bringing the slave’s behavior into conformity with the pertinent laws. Onesimus must return to his master as a slave and endure whatever punishments the social system prescribes.<sup>43</sup>

Scholars disagree on whether Paul’s letter is meant to encourage the manumission of Onesimus. Some believe that Paul’s statement, “Having confidence in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say” (v.21), is a hint that Paul would like Philemon to give Onesimus his freedom.<sup>44</sup> Craig S. de Vos disagrees with this theory. According to de Vos, the legal act and structural change of manumission would not have changed the relationship between the master and slave. Paul did not desire to change the structural nature, but the perceptual and relational aspect of their relationship.<sup>45</sup> In either case, Paul’s request for Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother and no longer as a slave was without a doubt a “revolutionary concept” that went against the grain of the social norms in Roman culture.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Carlson, D.A. and Moo, Douglas J, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Second Edition*, 588.

<sup>43</sup> Norman R. Peterson, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World*. (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Fortress Press, 1985): 94

<sup>44</sup> Carlson, D.A. and Moo, Douglas J, *An Introduction to the New Testament: Second Edition*, 589.

<sup>45</sup> Craig S. de Vos. “Once a Slave, Always a Slave? Slavery, Manumission and Relational Patterns in Paul’s Letter to Philemon”. *Journal for the Study of the New Testament*, 93-102.

<sup>46</sup> D. James Kennedy. *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson), 19.

While seemingly radical in light of the culture to which Paul wrote, some critics of Christianity have expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of a direct challenge in the New Testament to the institution of slavery.<sup>47</sup> These critics of have accurately pointed out that Paul as well as the other New Testament writers did not directly oppose the institution of slavery. The counter-argument is that if Christianity directly opposed slavery, it would have proved as a disservice to the spreading of the Gospel message.<sup>48</sup> And once the Gospel spread, the seeds were sown for the eventual dissolution of slavery.<sup>49</sup>

This latter theory would seem somewhat idealistic if it weren't for the historical evidence of Christians who have been used to overturn slavery in their societies. The abolition of slavery throughout the world can in large part be credited to the faith and conviction of devoted Christians. During the second and third century, Christians frequently sought to set slaves free.<sup>50</sup> This was a courageous act that went against Roman law. Eventually, Roman emperor Justinian, who was a Christian himself, abolished all laws that prevented freeing of slaves.<sup>51</sup>

In the fourth century St. Chrysostom encouraged Christians to buy slaves, teach them a trade and then set them free.<sup>52</sup> Slavery was condemned by St. Patrick in the fifth century.<sup>53</sup> “By the twelfth century slaves in Europe were rare, and by the fourteenth century slavery was almost unknown on the Continent”.<sup>54</sup> William Wilberforce, a strong evangelical Christian, worked for twenty years to halt the slave trade from Africa to the West Indies and an additional twenty-five to free the slaves in the British territories.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> D. James Kennedy. *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born*, 20.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>50</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 274.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 274.

<sup>54</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt, *How Christianity Changed the World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 275.

<sup>55</sup> D. James Kennedy. *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born*, 21.

Unfortunately the historical record is not as clean for Christians as one would hope. Prominent church leaders such as the bishop Polycarp and Christian philosopher Athenagoras owned slaves and St. Bonaventure even saw slavery as a divine institution.<sup>56</sup> In America, every denomination had pro-slavery advocates who used the Old Testament as a means of justifying their position. These advocates and defenders were not uneducated or unsophisticated, but included presidents of colleges in the North as well as clergy from Yale and Princeton. At the same time, while it is true that some Southern ministers condoned slavery and even used the Bible to justify it, we know that two-Thirds of the members of the abolition society in 1835 were ministers of the Gospel.<sup>57</sup>

Not only did the individuals who sided for slavery error in their theology of the Old Testament, they also neglected to see the value and dignity of human life found in Scripture. They were guilty of what William Jones has coined as, “divine racism” – the belief that God shows special interest and favor to some humans and does not value all the same.<sup>58</sup> “There is no biblical support for the position that blacks (or any other race) are less than fully human or inferior humans”.<sup>59</sup> Involuntary slavery based on race is unjust and evil!

This study of slavery in the Bible and history has brought about several conclusions and assessments. For one, the Old Testament passages concerning slavery must be read in the context of the culture in which they were written. Slavery among the Hebrews was a means for the poor to pay off debt and find shelter and provision for their daily lives. It was intended to be a temporary arrangement. Unlike other ANE cultures, Israel’s laws gave rights to protect slaves and punishment to abusive masters. It is still difficult to grasp why slavery wasn’t out and out

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<sup>56</sup> Alvin J. Schmidt. *How Christianity Changed the World*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2004), 276.

<sup>57</sup> D. James Kennedy. *What if Jesus Had Never Been Born*, (Nashville, Tennessee: Thomas Nelson), 22.

<sup>58</sup> Millard Erickson. *Christian Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 1998), 559.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 561.

disallowed by God, but even more challenging is to think of a solution to end the cycle of poverty.

On a practical note, this study on slavery speaks loudly about the bondage of financial indebtedness. Many Americans who would oppose slavery in all forms have made themselves slaves financially through the accumulation of excessive consumer debt. We would be wise to heed the words of Proverbs 22:7, “The rich ruleth over the poor, and the borrower is servant to the lender”.

Through the words of Jesus, it is understood that servitude is required of all those who choose to follow to God. According to Paul, becoming a slave to God is more rewarding and beneficial than being a slave to sin. We will always be a slave to one or the other. Reading the stories of Christians who fought against involuntary and unjust forms of slavery is a great encouragement and reminder that the Gospel is the ultimate solution to the world’s problems.

Considering the errors of many educated American Christians to justify antebellum slavery in this country, it is a great lesson on the necessity to humbly seek the Lord in all matters of life. In the end, regardless of the many errors in judgment Christians have made, it is commendable to be a seeker of truth, for when you know the truth, the truth will set you free!

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