

Slavery in the Bible

Some Fundamental Principles

by

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Dr Trevor R Allin graduated from the University of Leeds with a 1st Class Honours degree in Phonetics, French, Spanish and Philosophy and History of Religion/Theology. Following studies in linguistics, he undertook original research on a South American indigenous language, for which purpose he lived within the indigenous community and studied the language with native speakers over a period of more than a year. The University of St Andrews subsequently awarded him a Ph.D. for his thesis “A Grammar of Resigaro”.

For many years he taught a range of languages up to and including “Advanced” level standard in state schools in England and in Germany, and in state-recognised schools in Scotland and Spain. He also worked full time over a period of many years supporting and inspecting qualified Modern Language teachers and giving them professional development training. Teaching and examination materials written by him for French, German and Spanish at a wide range of levels, up to and including “A” Level, have been published by mainstream U.K. educational publishers and examination boards, for whom he has written and marked examination question papers.

He is also the published translator of books from Spanish and German into English and is the author of “Curso de Griego Bíblico: Los elementos del Griego del N.T.”¹, the Spanish edition of the leading textbook on New Testament Greek, Jeremy Duff’s “The Elements of New Testament Greek”.² He has taught New Testament (Koiné) Greek to Spanish-speaking adult students in Spain and has delivered lectures in various places in Spain on the important early Greek manuscript of the Bible, Codex Sinaiticus.

¹ CLIE, 2019 See <https://www.clie.es/curso-de-griego-biblico>

² Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005

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1. The Power of the Gospel

The Bible says that when Christ died on the cross and was risen from the dead, “God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)³ This is absolutely at the core of Christianity. This is what the Christian faith is all about. Jesus Himself said, “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mark 10:45)

At the heart of the world’s problems was human rebellion against God. Jeremiah said “The heart is devious above all else; it is perverse — who can understand it?” (Jeremiah 17:9, NRSV)⁴

Jesus Himself said, “out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what defile a person.” (Matthew 15:19-20)

In the first letter to the Corinthians, the apostle Paul listed a series of bad characteristics of humanity (1 Corinthians 6:9-10). He then wrote, “And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.” (1 Corinthians 6:11)

This makes clear that in order to cure the sins of society, it is essential to start with the individual and that individual’s relationship to God. This is why the Apostle Paul also writes,

“[God] has committed to us the message of reconciliation. ²⁰ We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: be reconciled to God. ²¹ God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” (2 Corinthians 5:19)

This was in line with Christ’s command to His followers: “go and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you.” (Matthew 28:19-20)

Paul wrote, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known.” (Romans 15:20)

Jesus had said that the real slavery is to sin (John 8:34) and that “if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.” (John 8:36) So he did not start with the *symptoms* of the problems of society; He started with the *causes* of the problems of society.

The first believers recognised this and stated, “Christ has set us free.” (Galatians 5:1) On slavery, the Apostle Paul wrote:

“Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you – although if you can gain your freedom, do so. ²² For the one who was a slave when called to faith in the Lord is the Lord's freed person; similarly, the one who was free when called is Christ's slave. ²³ You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.” (1 Corinthians 7:21-23)

³ NIV: Scripture quotations are taken from The Holy Bible, New International Version, Copyright ©1979, 1984, 2011 by Biblica. All rights reserved. Anglicised edition first published in Great Britain 1979 by Hodder & Stoughton, an Hachette UK company. Revised and updated edition published 2011. Bible quotations in this article for which no other source is given are from the NIV, 2011, Anglicised edition.

⁴ NRSV: New Revised Standard Version Bible, Copyright © 1989, Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

The first believers focussed on preaching the gospel, not because they did not care about the evils of society; but because they cared passionately about them, which is why they often referred to such evils. But they knew that the best way of eliminating those evils was not to attack the *symptoms*, but to deal with the *cause*: humanity's alienation from God, and selfishness and evil in each individual, as that was the only way to solve the problems definitively.

So they did not mount a campaign against drunkenness, against exploitation of the defenceless, against slavery, nor against any other social evil; they mounted a campaign to preach the gospel and reconcile people with God, and they taught, as John the Baptist and Jesus Himself had taught before them, that when people are reconciled with God, their lives must change. Believers were to "Produce fruit in keeping with repentance." (Matthew 3:8)

Therefore, when people accepted the gospel, evil behaviour had to cease immediately. In fact, the gospel was more radical than that. Jesus said that evil *attitudes* had to change, too. (See, for instance, Matthew 5:28.)

So the Christian community was to be a model to the world of how society should be. Jesus said, "You are the light of the world. ... let your light shine before others, that they may see your good deeds and glorify your Father in heaven." (Matthew 5:14, 16)

2. Different Social Groups

We see this model made reality in the early Church: "there was no needy person among them. For from time to time those who owned land or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales³⁵ and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone who had need." (Acts 4:34-35)

This example shows how all believers were treated as equals. This is also made clear in the teaching by the first century believers, as we can see in multiple places in the New Testament.

1 Corinthians

In 1 Corinthians 12 we read:

"For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit." (1 Corinthians 12:13, NRSV)

The first part of the context, which consists of the previous verses in this chapter, tells us that the believers were experiencing and practising the supernatural gifts of the Holy Spirit, in worship, words of knowledge, prophecy, healing, speaking in tongues, interpreting tongues and much more. The fact that both slaves and their masters were sharing the same experiences, at the same time, in the same place, and as equals, is totally revolutionary in the culture of the time.

The next part of the context (the following verses in the same chapter) graphically describes all members as being equal, with no-one more important than anyone else. In fact, it even goes further than that. In verse 22 it tells us:

"the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable" (1 Corinthians 12:22, NRSV)

Could this be a reference to the slaves, the gentiles and even the women, whose equal stature is specified in other Scriptures? (see below).

In case the readers might miss the significance of this point, it is made even clearer in the next verse:

"those members of the body that we think less honourable we clothe with greater honour, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect" (1 Corinthians 12:23, NRSV)

This must be a reference to the slaves and "Greeks" (a euphemism for "Gentiles") in verse 13. It says that we must give them *greater* honour than other members and we must treat them *with greater respect*

than those who were more respected in the secular culture in which the Christians were living. This was radical and potentially subversive.

Contrary to the unsubstantiated claims made by promoters of the LGBTQI+ agenda, the New Testament definitely did *not* get slavery “wrong”. The Christian response to slavery was a revolutionary development in the history of the world and it inspired and empowered those who first fought against slavery centuries later.

Galatians

In Galatians 3, one of the earliest writings of the New Testament, we read:

“in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. ²⁷ As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”
(Galatians 3:26-28, NRSV)

Being “clothed with Christ” implied behaving as Christ behaved.

In verse 28 we note the fundamental equality of three contrasting pairs of people in New Testament Christianity:

“There is no longer	<i>Implication</i>
Jew or Greek	Differences of race, and of previous religion, become irrelevant among Christian believers
slave or free	Differences of social status are abolished
male and female	Differences of status between men and women cease, doing away with the causes of abuse in relationships.

for you are all one in Christ Jesus.”

Colossians

The same concepts are explained in the letter to the Colossians:

⁵ Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. ⁶ Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. ⁷ You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. ⁸ But now you must rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. ⁹ Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices ¹⁰ and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator. ¹¹ Here there is no Greek or Jew, circumcised or uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave or free, but Christ is all, and is in all.”

(Colossians 3:5-11)

Here we see again the equality of all believers, regardless which social category they belong to:

“Here there is no	<i>Implication</i>
Greek or Jew	Differences of race, or of previous religion
circumcised or uncircumcised	for Jews, the key dividing line in humanity was: the Jews – everyone else
barbarian, Scythian	These terms were used by both Greeks and Romans to designate people who did not speak “civilised” languages. The Scythians were particularly despised for being especially “barbaric” and cruel.
slave or free	Again, we have the repetition of the statement that within the church there was to be no difference between slaves and free people.

but Christ is all, and is in all.”

If this is the case, why did the Apostle Paul say things such as, “Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands” (Ephesians 5:22, see also Colossians 3:18) and “Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything” (Colossians 3:22)?

3. Disadvantaged Groups

Certain key facts need to be borne in mind.

As regards the role of women:

1. Historians tell us that in Roman culture (which affected most places where the gospel was preached in the first centuries of the Christian era), the average age of marriage for a man was thirty, whereas the average age of marriage for a woman was fifteen. This can have influenced some advice to women (but see below).
2. The context of instructions to wives is given in Ephesians 5:21, which is addressed equally to wives *and to husbands*: “Submit *to one another* out of reverence for Christ. (Ephesians 5:21)
3. The Greek text for Ephesians 5:22, which is addressed to wives, does not contain the word “submit”. This has been added by the translators, who consider that it is implied by the context.
4. A detailed and reliable source of information on the role of women can be found at the website of Marg Mowczko (pronounced “Moss-koh”). See here: <https://margmowczko.com/about/>

As regards slavery:

1. Our understanding of what “slavery” was is largely influenced by our awareness of the brutal treatment of slaves, especially in the USA, in the 18th and 19th centuries. However, in Roman and Greek society, slaves were often highly-respected members of the community, often well-educated administrators for wealthy people and for businesses. (See for instance Matthew 18:23-35.)
2. They were normally guaranteed a job for life, and on-going care when they were too old to work, or were unwell.
3. They were provided with good accommodation, usually in the same building as their master.
4. They received the same food (which often they themselves had prepared).
5. They were able to marry and have children.
6. Their family members were cared for.
7. Some of them received a good education, therefore being able to read and write and to administer the affairs of the person for whom they worked, including controlling finances and keeping accounts
8. On some occasions they were granted the status of “free man”.

It is for these reasons that many modern translations of the Bible render the Greek word δούλος [doulos], which historically meant “slave”, with the word “servant”, as to many modern ears the term “slave” carries connotations that were not normally present in the Roman and Greek world at the time when the New Testament was written.

There were of course abuses, but in a world where there was no public provision of care for the needy, remaining as a “slave” was often the best option, especially if the “master” became a Christian. (See more on this below.) *Real* freedom was only found in Christ (see Galatians 5:1).

4. New Testament Instructions and Warnings to Different Social Categories

The teaching of the New Testament on the treatment of and by people of differing status is very balanced. It must also be remembered that the letters in the New Testament were written *to believers*, who were already “new creations” in Christ (see 2 Corinthians 5:17) and whose lives were supposed to be characterised by “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, and self-control.” (Galatians 5:22-23, NRSV) Thus, the life of a believing “slave” of a believing “master” should have exemplified the best of the slave/master relationship. We do however realise that there were believing slaves whose masters were not yet Christians and believing men or women whose spouse was not yet Christian, and in both cases the believer was encouraged to act in such a way that the other person

would become attracted to Christ, which was the best way to achieve changes of their behaviour, where needed. (See, for instance, Titus 2:9-10.)

Two very similar passages are found in Ephesians and in Colossians. In each case, people are presented in two groups:

- those who have less power and
- those who have more power,

always starting with the person who might be at a disadvantage in any social interaction.

Ephesians Chapters 5-6

In Ephesians, as indicated above, the context is set in chapter 5 verse 21: “Submit *to one another* out of reverence for Christ.” This is the same principle that is seen in Romans 12:10: “Honour one another above yourselves.” If such guiding principles are applied in daily life, every person will be treated with respect, no matter how little power may be accorded to them by contemporary secular culture.

<i>Those with less power or no power</i>	<i>Those with more power</i>
Wives (5:22-24)	Husbands (5:25-32) Here we notice that the instructions to husbands are much more stern than those to wives.
Children (6:1-3)	Fathers (6:4)
Slaves (6:5-8)	Masters (6:9)

Ephesians 6:8 is addressed equally to those with power and those with no power: “you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free.”

And Ephesians 6 verse 9 is a stern warning to masters: “And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favouritism with him.” Here Paul is reminding readers with power and status in this world that they will be at no advantage, compared with the powerless, when standing before God’s judgment.

Colossians Chapters 3-4

<i>Those with less power or no power</i>	<i>Those with more power</i>
Wives (3:18)	Husbands (3:19)
Children (3:20)	Fathers (3:21)
Slaves (3:23-24)	Masters (4:1)

Those with less power or no power are given encouragement and advice that aims to minimise conflicts. Those with more power are warned that they must not abuse their position. See especially Colossians 4:1: “Masters, provide your slaves with what is right and fair, because you know that you also have a Master in heaven.” It is reasonable to conclude that this refers to respecting them, and the many practical consequences that flow from that, such as accommodation, food, clothing, care when unwell, entitlement to marry and have children, etc.

Comments on this by Larry W Hurtado are particularly revealing. Hurtado was for many years Professor of New Testament Language, Literature and Theology at the University of Edinburgh. His book “Destroyer of the gods”⁵ describes “How Christianity destroyed one world – and created another.”⁶ The quotations here come from chapter 5 of the book, which has the significant title “A New Way to Live”.

On the relationships between people with power and people with little or no power in the societal structures of their day, Hurtado says,

⁵ Hurtado, Larry W, “Destroyer of the gods”, Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2016

⁶ Taken from description on the back cover of the book

“As members of a body of Christian believers, those in the various subordinate social categories also heard the exhortations given to those in the corresponding dominant positions: husbands, parents, and masters. So, for example, in those circumstance in which the Letter to the Colossians was read in church gatherings, Christian wives were fully a part of the gathering and heard their Christian husbands exhorted to love their wives and “never treat them harshly” (3:19). Likewise, Christian children heard fathers ordered not to provoke their children (3:21), and slaves heard masters warned to treat their slaves “justly and fairly”, in the knowledge that they also had a heavenly Master to whom they were responsible for their conduct (4:1).”⁷

Hurtado continues:

“This discourse situation, this group social setting comprising believers of these various social categories, each of them addressed directly in the hearing of all the others in the group, is another distinguishing feature of early Christian behavioral exhortation.”⁸

These instructions were merely putting into practice the “Golden Rule” enunciated by Christ: “in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.” (Matthew 7:12) In the face of this instruction by Christ, treating people as slaves clearly had no part in Christianity from the very start.

In real-life situations, the best solution was not for Christian masters to sack their slaves, which would probably result in them either starving or being exploited, but to keep them as employees, while treating them as equals who fulfilled different tasks from the employer. This was indeed truly revolutionary and probably the best solution in the social structure of that time for “slaves” of Christian “masters”, where slaves were to be treated “no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother.” (Philemon 16)

Hurtado says,

“although it may seem to comfortable moderns that the early Christian texts are morally deficient in failing to summon slaves to rise up in revolt and in failing to demand that Christian masters immediately free all their slaves, neither was actually a realistic option at the time.”⁹

As regards the “weaker” members of the pairs listed in Ephesians chapters 5 & 6 and Colossians chapters 3 & 4, Hurtado says,

“Christian wives, slaves, and children were addressed as moral agents in early Christian texts and, perhaps just as importantly, as fellow members of the body of believers in which these various exhortations were delivered. We should not discount too hastily what this, even this modest conferral of dignity, could have meant in that ancient setting to those who were otherwise unable to change their situation.”¹⁰

So Paul did not suggest trying to impose a social revolution, which would have diverted attention from the core Christian message of salvation in Christ, and which could have led to an early annihilation of Christianity.

But he preached and taught a much deeper revolution: a revolution of hearts and attitudes, which would result in a social revolution in relationships between people. The result would favour the disadvantaged, protect them and give them status that was equal to the status of those who had more power in the social structures of the day.

⁷ Hurtado, op. cit., p. 179, emphasis added

⁸ Hurtado, op. cit., p. 180, emphasis added

⁹ Hurtado, op. cit., p. 178, emphasis added

¹⁰ Hurtado, op. cit., pp. 178-179, emphasis added

5. Appeals to Scripture in Support of Slavery

In the 18th and 19th centuries, some people in the USA and the UK sometimes appealed to Scripture to justify the maintenance of slavery. However, they could only do this by ignoring what the Bible actually says.

A popular source used by those opposed to the abolition of slavery was Paul's letter to Philemon, which those opposed to the abolition of slavery claimed supported the continuation of slavery. Philemon was a Christian leader in whose home the local church met (Philemon v. 2). He had a slave by the name of Onesimus, who was not a believer and there had clearly been some friction between Onesimus and Philemon, in consequence of which Onesimus ran away and managed to travel from western Turkey, as the country is now called, to Rome, where he met the Apostle Paul, who was a prisoner there, and was converted to Christ.

Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon with a covering letter. In the ancient world, it was possible to execute runaway slaves, but Paul is clearly confident that this will not happen, and he appears to have convinced Onesimus of this, too.

What does Paul say about slavery in that "covering letter"? It is indeed the case that he does not call for the abolition of slavery. But he "appeals" to Philemon on behalf of the one he calls "my son Onesimus". (v. 10) He describes Onesimus as "my very heart" (v. 12), and then he says, "if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me." (v. 17)

Paul has described himself as "a prisoner of Jesus Christ" and Philemon as "our dear friend and fellow worker" (v. 1), which indicates that Philemon was active in the spreading of the gospel and the teaching of believers, alongside Paul. Further, it appears from verse 19 that Philemon had come to faith in Christ because of Paul's ministry.

Philemon was clearly a man of means, with a home large enough to host gatherings of believers. He, like Paul, was obviously a free man, not a slave. However, we must remember that Paul was a Roman citizen, a status held by few non native-born Romans, and in terms of the New Testament church, he was an Apostle and already the author of many letters to churches, which were considered to have apostolic authority as messages from God.

So Paul's status in both secular and Christian circles was higher than that of Philemon, and Paul writes to Philemon, telling him to treat his runaway slave Onesimus *as if he were the Apostle Paul!*

Nothing could give a clearer indication of how first century Christians were supposed to treat "slaves". Paul even goes on to say, "I write to you, knowing that you will do *even more than I ask.*" (v. 21)

6. The Example of Ancient Israel

This opposition to slavery should not surprise us, when we remember that the greatest event in the Old Testament for the people of Israel was when, by the power of God, the whole nation was freed from slavery, an event constantly referred to in the Old Testament and commemorated both then and right through to the present day by the annual Passover festival.

7. Other Passages Where the New Testament Condemns Slavery

Indeed, we observe that in a list of evildoers, Paul includes "slave traders" (1 Timothy 1:10). The Greek word, ἀνδραποδισταῖς [andrapodistais], means "slave-dealer", "slave trader" or "enslaver". (See lexicons by Friberg, Gingrich, Danker, Liddell-Scott and others.)

Similarly, the book of Revelation condemns traders who among their cargoes have "human beings sold as slaves" (Revelation 18:11-13).

8. The Teaching of Jesus: Who is my Neighbour?

Jesus commended an expert in the Jewish law who quoted Leviticus 19:18 to him, “love your neighbour as yourself. The account then tells us, “But [the man] wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, 'And who is my neighbour?'” (Luke 10:29) In reply, Jesus told a story about a man who on a journey was attacked by robbers and left by the roadside half dead. (Luke 10:30-37) In Jesus’ story, a priest on the same road saw the victim, but “passed by on the other side.” (Luke 10:31), as did another devout Jew, a Levite (v 32). Jesus then described how a man from Samaria helped the victim (v 33). The Samaritans were in those times despised by the Jews, who considered them to be an inferior and impure race, and so Jews avoided contacts with Samaritans (John 4:9).

At the end of his story, Jesus asked the expert in the law, “Which of these three do you think was a neighbour to the man who fell into the hands of robbers?” (Luke 10:36) The man could not bring himself to use the word “Samaritan” or to attribute any good to Samaritans, so he avoided this by saying, “The one who had mercy on him.” Jesus replied, “Go and do likewise.” (Luke 10:37)

Jesus thus chose for his story someone from a race that was despised by the Jewish people of His day, and told them that such people were their “neighbours” and that they should love their neighbours *as themselves*.

Jesus thus made it absolutely clear that there was no place for racism among those who wished to be faithful to God and that *all human beings of any race or status were their “neighbours”, who were to be loved as much as anyone loved themselves*.

9. The Practice of the Early Church

It is therefore not surprising when we note that one of the leaders of the church in Antioch, who had the frequently-used name Simeon, was known, to distinguish him from other Simeons in the church, as “the Black One” (Acts 13:1). This would appear to be a reference to his racial origin. We note that not only was he *in* the church; he was one of the *leaders* of the church. See Fitzmyer on “The Acts of the Apostles”.¹¹

Jesus had of course instructed His followers to preach the gospel “to all nations” (Matthew 28:19). The Greek word that is here translated as “nations”, ἔθνη [ethnē], can also be translated as ‘people groups’.¹² So the gospel is for every people group and for every race.

It is thus clear that in the teaching of Christ, in the teaching of the rest of the New Testament, and in the practice of the early church, *all races were treated as equal*. Indeed, the story of “The Good Samaritan” was popular and well-known from the earliest days of Christianity, with commentaries on it being written by some of the earliest post-Apostolic leaders, who are sometimes referred to as “the Church Fathers”.¹³ This story has continued to be popular throughout the history of the church, right up to the present day, and its teaching was wilfully ignored by those who claimed that the Bible supported slavery.

Conclusion

We can thus see that people in past centuries who appealed to the letter to Philemon or to other parts of the Bible in order to “justify” slavery were not using Scripture fairly or honestly. If they had really read what it said and reflected on it, they would have realised that it does not support slavery, teaching on the contrary that “slaves” are to be honoured and respected.

¹¹ Fitzmyer, Joseph A., S. J., “The Acts of the Apostles”, New Haven & London: Yale University Press: The Anchor Yale Bible, 1998, p. 496

¹² See Danker, *Greek NT Lexicon*, as reproduced in the program Bible Works 10.

¹³ See, for instance, Fraser Pearce, “The Church Fathers on The Good Samaritan”, published 13 July 2019, here:

[https://fraserpearce.co.uk/2019/07/the-church-fathers-on-the-good-samaritan/#:~:text=St%20Ambrose%20writes%20of%20E%28%9Cthe,nor%20sleep%2C%20that%20keepeth%20Israel](https://fraserpearce.co.uk/2019/07/the-church-fathers-on-the-good-samaritan/#:~:text=St%20Ambrose%20writes%20of%20E%28%9Cthe,nor%20sleep%2C%20that%20keepeth%20Israel.). Accessed on 11.12.22.

New Testament Christianity focussed on solving problems by dealing with the causes. This would at a local level lead to immediate behavioural change, including of relationships between those with power in the societal structures of the day, and those with none.

Ultimately, this led to campaigns that came to prominence in the 19th century with the aim of abolishing slavery worldwide. It is significant – and not at all surprising – that these campaigns were led by evangelical Christians, *who were precisely those believers whose convictions were formed by the teachings of the Bible.*

In the 18th and 19th centuries, many people in positions of power in the UK and the USA had a significant knowledge of Scripture, even if they did not personally live in accordance with Christian teachings. It is therefore not surprising that some of those people used Scripture to try to justify their opposition to the abolition of slavery.

They therefore maliciously misused isolated Bible texts taken out of context, for their own advantage, to protect their privileged lifestyle, which was based on exploitation of others.

This abusive use of Scripture should not undermine our confidence that we can today understand the meaning of what the Bible says.

Some modern-day activists who are opposed to what the Bible says about sexuality claim that as “Christians” in past centuries “misunderstood” what the Bible said about slavery, perhaps Christians now misunderstand what the Bible says about sexuality.

However, it is clear that such so-called “misunderstandings” were in reality an abusive use of Scripture, and whether or not the people doing this were in fact genuine believers in Christ is not clear.

Therefore, to say that *their* misuse of Scripture in the past on the subject of slavery should cause us today to question our understanding of what the Bible says about sexuality is in itself a further abuse of historical evidence and a further misuse of Scripture by those who make such claims.

Some other campaigners against the Bible’s teaching on sexuality go further and claim that “as the New Testament got teaching on slavery wrong, perhaps it also got its teaching on sexuality wrong.” This shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the teachings of the New Testament and a lack of awareness of the reality of the transformed lives of those who became Christians, regardless of their previous social status.

That the Bible has always been opposed to slavery is abundantly clear. That Christians who read the Bible with an open mind can with confidence understand what it means is also clear.

A Personal Application

All this may sound very academic and impersonal, but the Apostle Paul said, “I am unspiritual, sold as a slave to sin. ¹⁵ I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. ... ¹⁷ As it is, it is no longer I myself who do it, but it is sin living in me. ¹⁸ I know that nothing good lives in me, that is, in my sinful nature. For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. ¹⁹ For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do — this I keep on doing. ... ²⁴ What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death? ²⁵ Thanks be to God — through Jesus Christ our Lord!” (Romans 7:14-25)

We are all bound by spiritual slavery to sin, but Christ can give us true freedom! If the Son sets us free, we will be free indeed! (John 8:36)