

## Paul Embraces Slavery

The Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant denomination in the US. The Catholic church is the only larger Christian group in America. Southern Baptist preachers taught that the Bible sanctions slavery, and cautioned that Christian slave owners should treat their slaves kindly. Generally they did so. Although Southern Baptists have since apologized for their role in antebellum slavery, the damage they had done was irreversible.

Where would Christians get the crazy idea that God sanctions slavery? Straight from the Bible. Jesus did not condemn slavery. Paul did not condemn slavery. On the contrary, Paul enthusiastically embraced it, and he had nasty things to say about anyone who disagreed with him.

I Timothy 6:1-4: **Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor, so that the name of God and the teaching may not be blasphemed. Those who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved. Teach and urge these duties. Whoever teaches otherwise . . . is conceited, understanding nothing.**

Colossians 3:22-23: **Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters.**

Titus 2:9-10: **Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back, not to pilfer, but to show complete and perfect fidelity, so that in everything they may be an ornament to the doctrine of God our Savior.**

American Christians generally obeyed Paul until 1865. Earlier, the Catholic church owned their own slaves, and they simply took slavery for granted. What decent, reasonable person would align themselves with a God that not only condones slavery, but demands it. Not just slavery, but excellence in slavery. Be-all-that-you-can-be, gung-ho slavery. Who wants to belong to a church that not only had no problem with slavery, but had their own slaves working in the fields to help generate revenue for the church? Not to mention all the slave labor that undoubtedly went into building many of the extravagant Christian churches, cathedrals, and monasteries.

Colonials and antebellum Americans were virtually all Christians. Good, devout, God-fearing, Bible-reading, hellfire-and-brimstone Christians, most. Except for a small minority of 19<sup>th</sup>-century abolitionists, Americans had no problem with slavery, at least on moral or religious grounds. If slavery wasn't common in the North, it wasn't because Yankees were against slavery per se. It just wasn't practical in the North. They made boatloads of money in the slave trade, however, and they kept right on doing so even after it became illegal -- right up to the start of the Civil War.

Nor did they have a problem with slave labor in the South, because it helped produce the cotton Yankees needed for their mills. Mills, by the way, which offered jobs only for whites, not for blacks. Yankees were as racist as any people who ever lived. They didn't want blacks in their neighborhoods, their schools, their churches, or anywhere else in their states. They had laws to back that up, too. Well enforced. They were good Christians, though.

By the way, even many abolitionists didn't have the best interest of blacks at heart. Some of them just used the slavery issue to put pressure on the South to accept the North's high tariff rates. Others who genuinely wanted to see blacks free also wanted them shipped off to some island or another country right away. They didn't want them in America -- especially not in the North, competing for "white" jobs. Abraham Lincoln was one of those Yankee racists who worked hard to get blacks shipped out of the country.

Contrary to popular propaganda, Lincoln never freed a single slave. The Emancipation Proclamation did not free a single slave. It wasn't intended to. He was a good Christian, though. And he's got a monument to prove it. Sure, he got 650,000 people killed in his illegal, unconstitutional, immoral, unnecessary war over money and power (not slavery, as he admitted many times), but as long as he sounds like a good Christian, it must all be good.

While Paul fully embraces slavery itself, he condemns slave traders.

1 Timothy 1:8-10: **Now we know that the law is good, if one uses it legitimately. This means understanding that the law is laid down not for the innocent but for the lawless and disobedient, for the godless and sinful, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their father or mother, for murderers, fornicators, sodomites, slave traders, liars, perjurors, and whatever else is contrary to the sound teaching.**

But that doesn't mitigate Paul's enthusiastic embrace of slavery itself. Let's take a closer look. Let's wade into the biblical weeds and get geeky to see if maybe Paul really doesn't mean what his words seem to clearly mean. Some suggest that maybe *indentured service* would be a more accurate label than *slavery* for what Paul is talking about.

1 Timothy 6:1 says: **Let all who are under the yoke of slavery regard their masters as worthy of all honor.**

The Greek word for *yoke* is *zugos*, a noun which means something which is coupled together. It is a metaphor for submission to authority. The Greek word for slavery is an adjective, qualifying the noun *yoke*. *Doulos* can refer to servants generally or slaves. It doesn't necessarily indicate bondage. Both servant and slave are used, depending on which translation you use. Most modern translations use the word *slave*, which seems clearly to be the intent in this and similar verses.

I say that because there are several passages that are similar to the ones I have already quoted in which Paul embraces slavery, such as 1 Corinthians 7:21 and Ephesians 6:5.

Here is 1 Corinthians 7:21: **Were you a slave when you were called? Don't let it trouble you -- although if you can gain your freedom, do so.**

The Greek word for *freedom* is actually a verb, *eleutheroo*, meaning to make free or to deliver from. So exegetically, contextually, and logically, it seems perfectly clear that Paul is talking about slavery, not a servant in some sort of employer / employee role, or in the role of an indentured servant, which is essentially a contract of labor in exchange for some sort of commodity or service.

Why would an employee want or need to gain freedom, which would mean unemployment? And if an indentured servant is under contract, why would Paul encourage him to break that legal agreement?

I think the most disturbing part of this whole slavery discussion is Paul's phrase in 1 Timothy 6:1, *worthy of all honor*. It's one thing to advise slaves to make the best of a bad situation, but Paul seems to go much further than that by bestowing honor upon slave masters, instead of ordering them to free their slaves. This would have been the perfect place to do that. *Slaves, do the best you can under the circumstances, and slave owners, free your slaves!* Paul doesn't say that, here or anyplace else in the New Testament.

Some make the valid point that it was not Paul's intent to attack the institution of slavery or any other such broad or controversial social or political practice, custom, or tradition. That wasn't Jesus' goal, either, and it is therefore not the focus of the Bible. So we wouldn't necessarily expect Paul to say something like *slavery is evil, and it must be stopped now!* although that would have been a fantastic thing for him to have said. But he could so easily have simply instructed Christian slave owners to set their slaves free now. That

would have been well within his scope of teaching, and it would have avoided the larger issue of slavery in general.

Paul didn't do that, and instead he goes out of his way to emphasize that slave masters, even (especially?) Christian slave owners are *worthy of all honor*. So what does that word *honor* really mean? The Greek word is *timao*, which may be used in the sense that Jesus honors the Father, or in the sense that a child honors his parents, or it may refer to just lip service to someone or something. The context rules out lip service, leaving one of the other options, the most likely being that of a child honoring is father and mother, well short of the reverence that the members of the Trinity would have for each other.

That is still an astonishing thing for Paul to say. Honor a slave master in the same sense that one would honor his own father or mother? Really? That's the part I have a hard time understanding, and I have found no reasonable exegetical escape route. Paul is saying just what he seems to be saying. There is no hidden meaning, no alternative explanation, no rational basis for doing anything other than taking this passage at face value. And that, no matter how you slice it, is at minimum letting slave masters off the hook, and more logically, placing them on the same level as one's parents. Which is a bizarre place of honor and respect for those who profit from such an evil institution, no matter how different the circumstances were when Paul wrote those words. Even more bizarre in view of Paul's condemnation of slave traders.

All of which is to say that I have done my due diligence on this topic. If there were a reasonable basis for concluding that Paul was talking about something other than actual slaves, or that he really simply meant to say obey one's master, rather than honor him, I would gladly have accepted that. But that just isn't what Paul said or what he meant. And what he said is so totally inconsistent with what God purportedly stands for and what the church tells us.

No wonder early church (Catholic) leaders practiced slavery without remorse. No wonder Protestant preachers (like Southern Baptists) later taught that slavery is sanctioned by God as stated in the Bible. Even if you insist that *endorse*, *embrace*, or *sanction* is too strong a word for what Paul said, surely you will admit that the door was left wide open for Christians to honestly accept that interpretation. How could that be?