

Slavery and Christianity: a taboo subject

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Western guilt at the Trans-Atlantic slave trade often expressed in translators' reluctance to use the word 'slave' hinders our understanding of key messages in the New Testament. Jesus chooses his words carefully and, when he means 'slave,' he says 'slave.'

Slaves in the Roman Empire were overwhelmingly domestic slaves or worked in the family business. There was a social expectation that slaves would be treated well.

Jesus' parables involving slaves only refer to the most trusted, high ranking slaves in a household and contain important messages about the kingdom of heaven.

Paul gets very close to saying that slaves are equal with their masters.

Though some Christians opposed the slave trade, the abolition of the slave trade resulted in compensation for the abusers rather than the victims and the rise of racism in the form of the view that white Western cultures were superior in all respects to non-white cultures — attitudes which persist to today and are embedded in many international organisations.

Christians today need to 'change the way they think' first of all about issues close to home like the treatment of women and people with disabilities and then about the treatment of non-white peoples abroad.

Examples of areas where we need to 'change the way we think' include global warming, war and agriculture. Acting on that changed way of thinking will not be easy but it took 50 years for the anti-slavery campaigners to achieve abolition of the slave trade in the British Empire.

The first step on our journey will be to confront the reality of slavery in the New Testament.

Translators of English bibles have generally tried to avoid drawing too much attention to slavery, particularly to references to it in the New Testament, partly because of western guilt about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and partly to avoid possible offence to those whose ancestors were victims of that trade. But this hinders our understanding of key messages in the New Testament and our capacity to reflect constructively on and to act constructively to remedy the consequences of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade.

The waters were further muddied by the publication of *Ben Hur* by Lew Wallace which presents a mythical picture of slavery in the Roman world. Neither the Greeks nor the Romans permitted slaves to serve in their armed forces; fighting for your country was only for free men.

The social and economic background

Before the invention of the wheelbarrow in around 1,000 AD, food production relied almost entirely on manual labour and it took the manual labour of five people to feed six. So societies with a leisured class needed to have thousands of people working to allow a small number to have leisure. In Athens, where Socrates and Plato could spend time talking, there were thousands of metics, or economic migrants, whose economic activity, along with the labour of the slaves, supported the leisured class. Sparta relied on the free *perioikoi* and the unfree *helots* to sustain their economy.

Where there wasn't a permanent underclass like the *helots*, people relied largely on wars and conquest to replenish the supply of slaves though Jewish law permitted a form of temporary slavery to pay off a debt. A significant change after the Roman conquest of Greece was the acquisition of a number of educated slaves who were put to work as clerks or private tutors of the younger children of wealthier families, there being no schools for young children.

The situation in the Roman Empire

The gradual expansion of the Roman Empire meant that there was a supply of slaves from conquered peoples but there were also slave dealers who profited like ship-owners during the Trans-Atlantic trade from importing slaves from other countries into the Roman Empire.

The overwhelming majority of slaves were domestic slaves or worked in the family business; however, professional slave owners could run gladiatorial squads or brothels. So where a slave ended up could depend on the demand for particular types of slave when they appeared in the slave market. Also slaves could be sold to pay off their master's debts. Their fate very much depended on chance and the sort of owner they had.

A young female slave might also find a friend of her owner offering to buy her to become his wife; if that went through, the woman would immediately be freed so that she could marry the person who had bought her while still a slave. Of course, the woman had no choice but there is a touching memorial in Lincoln to a Syrian slave bought by an Algerian soldier in the Roman army while he was fighting in Palestine to become his wife. He and his wife eventually ended up in Britain and were settled in the retirement village for Roman soldiers at Lincoln. These unions could become loving ones. This way the woman, of course, gets her freedom while quite young.

While there were no laws relating to the treatment of slaves in Jesus' time, though there was one about harbouring runaway slaves which Paul risked falling foul of had he not arranged for Onesimus' return to Philemon, the general expectation was that you would treat slaves well and that you would release them as a reward for good service. So it would not be uncommon for a slave to be allowed to earn money so that they had something to support themselves immediately after release. Released slaves were known as freedmen and often went on to have successful careers. The poet, Horace, boasts about this father having been a freedman and having built a successful career thereafter.

Slaves could also become indispensable to their masters, something parodied in the plays of Plautus and Terence and in the 20th century productions *A funny thing happened on the way to forum* and *Up Pompeii*. When the Emperor Claudius came to power, he appointed three of his slaves as top civil servants, though people at the time thought that was going a bit too far.

The linguistic background

Four words are typically used to indicate service in the New Testament:

doulos slave, an unfree person who serves as a chattel of his/her owner;

hyperetes servant, a free person who holds a formal position which involves serving others;

pais child, but which since the classical period had also been an affectionate term for servant;

diakonos carer, anyone whose service, whether formal or informal, involves caring for others.

When the bible was translated into Latin, the word *servus* was used for the first but this appeared in English as ‘servant.’ The word ‘slave’ comes from the French word *esclave*, whose origins are doubtful/disputed. So, when John Hawkins and Francis Drake took their first consignment of slaves from Africa to the Americas, they would have found no explicit reference to ‘slave’ in the bibles they used.

Jesus is a good Greek speaker — he cracks untranslatable jokes in Greek — and he is careful to use *doulos* when he means a slave, *hyperetes* when he means a servant and *diakonos* when he is referring to someone serving others but his careful choice of words only makes its way sporadically into many English translations of the bible.

The parable of the talents

Jesus demonstrates his understanding of a well-run Roman household in the parable of the talents (Mt 25:14–30). He calls the ‘servants’ ‘personal slaves’ (*idioi douloi*) in other words, slaves who carried responsibilities similar to the butler or manservant in an upper class English household. They would be expected to present their master in the most favourable light to those visiting the household and to those with whom the master had dealings outside the household. They would have every expectation of being released and might already have been allowed to earn some money on the side in preparation for this event.

In other words, Jesus is presenting a picture of the ways in which those in the kingdom of heaven will be expected to behave. They will be expected to present their master, Jesus, in the most favourable light to everyone at home and to those with whom they have dealings outside their homes. This point in the parable is completely lost by mistranslations of the original Greek.

Losing this point weakens the next part of the parable; the slaves are given responsibilities commensurate with their abilities with the expectation that they will use their gifts to enhance their master’s situation; two of them do so and are commended for it. One does not; in a Roman context, having become dispensable, he might be put back into the slave market and sold to the owner of a gladiatorial squad with a view to becoming a dispensable loser in a contest. In the context of the kingdom of heaven, he has demonstrated his unsuitability for the kingdom by failing to carry out the most basic responsibilities of a member of the kingdom.

The condemnation at the end of the parable only makes sense if we understand this parable as using the real situation of slaves in the Roman Empire as a metaphor for the real situation of people in the kingdom of heaven. According to Matthew, Jesus follows this parable with the parable of the judgement of the nations (aka. the parable of the sheep and goats) (Mt 25:31–46). Those on the left receive the same condemnation as the third slave.

Using ‘personal slaves’ in this parable illustrates the key points Jesus wants to make: they have been bought, as he bought us with his death, are expected to present him in the most favourable light to everyone they meet, as we are, and can reasonably be expected to gain their freedom, as we do through him. The parable is rich in symbolism all of which is lost in mistranslation.

Jesus’ use of ‘slave’ in other parables

Jesus uses ‘slave’ in the parable of unforgiving slave (Mt 18:21–35) and in the parable of the tenants in the vineyard (Mt 21:33–43). Note that, in both these cases, there is a presumption that these are trusted slaves, trusted enough to be lent money by their owner in order to earn some on the side in preparation for their release and trusted enough to represent their owner to others. Jesus never uses run-of-the-mill slaves, equivalent perhaps to a kitchen maid, footman or stable boy in an upper class English household, in his parables. In other words, he is using a particular group of slaves to provide a metaphor for being in his kingdom, not to make any particular points about slavery as an institution.

Jesus’ use of ‘servant’

According to the Gospel writers, Jesus only uses *hyperetes* twice, once in the Sermon on the Mount where he refers to someone ending up in a lawsuit where the judge hands them over to his servant and they are thrown into jail (Mt 5: 25) and once during his interview with Pilate when he says that, if his kingdom were of this world, his servants would have fought to stop him from being handed over to the Jews (Jn 18:36). However, in his speech to Agrippa and Bernice, Paul says that Jesus called him to be a *hyperetes* and witness (Ac 26:16) implying that Paul had been called to a formal position as a servant of Jesus.

Jesus doesn’t strictly speaking use *pais*, though the Gospel writers do, except when quoting Isaiah (Mt 12:18). He does however use *diakonos*, notably after rebuking James and John for their request for preferential treatment in the kingdom of heaven. He turns to the disciples and says:

Whoever wants to become great among you will be your carer (*diakonos*) and whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave (*doulos*) (Mt 20:26).

Perhaps the person who has made the most difference to the lives of everyone from international billionaires to subsistence farmers in East Africa over the past thirty years is Linus Torvalds whose Linux operating system runs in everything from supercomputers to household appliances including all the Android smartphones and many of the servers which enable them to communicate across the Internet. He remains an employee of the charity which manages the Linux operating system and spends his time taking great care that his creation, which is maintained and developed by an army of programmers, remains safe for everyone to use. Though he would probably dismiss the label and in the past was often obnoxious to anyone who did not share his diligence and commitment to the project, he comes close to what Jesus meant when he said, ‘Whoever wants to become great among you will be your carer.’

Collins (2001) surveyed nearly 1,500 US companies to find out how many had consistently improved their performance over 15 years. Only eleven had and, when he looked at the characteristics of their chief executives, he found that they were:

- modest, self-effacing people
- driven to make the organisation great
- diligent
- people who attributed success to external factors and failures to themselves
- people who set up their successors for even greater success.

None of them had a public profile; yet they were consistently providing the best returns on investment for their companies' investors. Like the first two slaves in the parable of the talents, their concern was to get the best results for those who had entrusted them with a responsibility. As Jesus said, 'whoever wants to be first among you will be your slave' — will serve your interests and not their own.

Jesus manages to sum all this up in his careful choice of words — a choice entirely obscured by translators.

Paul and slavery

Paul was fully aware that many Christian converts were slaves and his encounter with Onesimus in Rome led him to write a letter to the church at Colossae in which, approaching the end of his life, he seems to have come a conclusion which would ultimately justify the end of slavery:

... where there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free but Christ is everything and in everything (Col 3:11).

He follows this up with:

Slaves, submit to your masters in the flesh in everything, not giving an impression in order to please people but in singleness of heart, out of respect for your heavenly master (Col 3:22).

Masters, demonstrate justice and fairness to your slaves, knowing that you also have a master in heaven (Col 4:1).

In writing to Philemon he says:

... no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother, particularly to me, and so much more to you both in the flesh and in the Lord (Phil 16).

Once a slave is a brother their civil status no longer matters; all are equal under the Lord.

The abolition of slavery and the rise of racism

The churches as a whole, many of whose members were actively involved in the slave trade, did not rise up against slavery; instead it was the initiative of a number of groups in the 18th century. The sons of the Russia Company merchants who had been at the heart of a number of social initiatives in the mid 18th century (Taylor, 1985), Methodists and Baptists including John Sutcliff, a neighbour of John Newton, the former slave ship captain turned Anglican vicar, Dan Taylor and Abraham Booth (Brown, 1986) and intellectuals such as Erasmus Darwin and



Figure 1: Kneeling slave

Josiah Wedgewood, whose kneeling slave plate (figure 1) sold in thousands, (Uglow, 2002) all contributed to the arguments against the slave trade.

However, when slavery was abolished in the British Empire, compensation was paid not the former slaves but to their owners and the abolition of slavery ushered in a culture of racism which still continues to influence behaviour and decisions in the 21st century. Indeed, that racism went beyond the countries which had been the victims of slavery to all indigenous peoples whose cultures were devalued and in some cases subject to attempts to destroy them (Hudson, 2018). Far from seeing people from those countries

... no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother, ... both in the flesh and in the Lord,

they were and are seen as not entitled to be treated with 'justice and fairness.'

So what can be done today?

We can begin by adding 'men, women, abled, disabled' to Paul's list in Colossians 3:11. Though Paul is notorious for his instruction that women are to keep silent in church (1 Cor 14:34), this was written early in his ministry and, by the time he came to write the letter to the Colossians towards the end of his life, he had had a long and productive relationship with Aquila and Priscilla as they are listed at first. But very quickly the order changes to Priscilla and Aquila. It would be illogical for Paul to refer to 'slave, free' as equal while keeping women and people with disabilities as third class citizens as they were under Jewish law.

In 1793 Dan Taylor marked the death of his first wife, Elizabeth, with a sermon on equal rights for women in church. Yet 230 years later [Project Violet](#) found that women are still

not treated as equal in many Baptist communities and, though it has been possible to make websites fully accessible to people with disabilities since at least 2018, I am unaware of any Baptist organisation website which treats people with disabilities as equal.

The first step is to change the way we think — ‘repentance’ is a very poor translation of *metanoia*, an example of accepting a Latin word into our English bibles rather than looking at the original Greek. The next step is to change the way we act because, as James points out (Jas 2:14–19), you can only demonstrate that you have changed the way you think by acting in ways which demonstrate that you have.

In order to create a fully accessible website, you have to design it with people with disabilities who use a screenreader in mind; then you add CSS rules to display the content in a way which is attractive to sighted users. You have to ‘change the way you think’ about designing websites in order to take that first step; the second step then becomes very simple. Similarly, women are only going to be treated as equal when people change the way they think about women and act on that new way of thinking. If the children and young people in our congregations have not changed the way they think about girls and young women, whether abled or disabled, before they move on, they will continue to perpetuate the demeaning attitudes to women and people with disabilities which are current in our society.

I raise these issues because the Russia Company merchants whose sons were active in the anti-slavery movement had been active in addressing social issues in the UK — get your own house in order so that the next generation can try to sort out things outside it — and because, if we cannot demonstrate our ability to ‘change the way we think’ about issues in our own congregations, we are unlikely to be able to ‘change the way we think’ about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade in ways which will enable us to address the issues constructively.

Addressing the consequences of the slave trade today

We cannot address the consequences of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade without changing the way we think about it and the ways in which we act in relation to those who still suffer the consequences of the attitudes which allowed the trade to happen in the first place and replaced it with racism after it was abolished.

Woodiwiss (2009) argues that victims are frequently advised to revisit their abuse in order to obtain relief from current circumstances which have no connection with the abuse which they suffered in the past whereas what they need is relief from the current circumstances which are causing them harm. While the devaluing of human beings as part of the slave trade was continued through the racism not just towards former slaves and those living in the places from which they had been abducted but also towards indigenous peoples all over the world, we cannot undo the past but we can change the present by changing the way we think and act in relation to the descendants of those affected by the slave trade and the racism which extended to all non-white populations.

The countries which benefited from the slave trade also benefited from the industrial revolution and are major contributors to global warming. Indigenous people across the world are being harmed by Western economic policies as well as by the consequences of global warming. At least some economic migration can be attributed to the consequences of global warming; some can be attributed to wars created or encouraged and supplied by Western countries.

Western medicinal prescribing and recreational drug use encouraged the production of certain crops in countries like Afghanistan and Colombia (Coleman, 1986). Trying to stop the

production of these crops without offering alternatives to the farmers who produced them affected the economies of those countries and led to the creation of illicit organisations to support their continued production.

While Western economies continue to benefit from the manufacture of the technology to produce food, sustain wars and tackle drug traffickers, the victims of global warming, war and changes in Western drug use, like the victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, get little or no compensation for the harm done to them.

Perhaps one reason why Western peoples did not think through the consequences of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was that their bibles mistranslated what Jesus had to say about slavery. When Jesus chose to include slaves in his parables, he only chose those slaves who could expect to be freed and who, like Horace's father, might be able to pursue successful careers on their release. In two of the parables he explicitly refers to the slaves being able to handle money themselves, as slaves destined for freedom would be expected to do. Yet Western countries did not prepare those people who been slaves and those countries from which slaves had been taken for financial independence and the opportunity to manage their own lives in any way. They either abandoned them or continued to exploit them after the end of the slave trade.

Some people whose ancestors were involved in the slave trade have apologised and offered compensation to the descendants of the slaves their ancestors owned but apologies and offers of compensation from people with no connection with the slave trade may be seen by others as excuses for them not to do anything about the continuing harm which Western nations do to the descendants of slaves and indigenous peoples all over the world.

Global warming

Creation is sustained and renewed through millions of cycles, one of which is the cycle of gradual warming and cooling of the atmosphere. This normally takes place at a pace which enables all creation to adapt to the changes caused by the cycle. However, human action has intensified and accelerated the current warming phase to the extent that the global temperature is likely to exceed any temperature reached during any previous cycle and therefore present creation with challenges which it has never previously faced.

Most of the casualties and much of the damage caused by 'natural disasters' is caused by human failings, not by the event itself (Abbott and White, 2020). This will be true of the casualties and damage caused by too rapid global warming.

If we are to exemplify the principles set out by Paul in Colossians 3:11 there should not be a difference in human value between those living in areas from which slaves were taken — 'barbarian, Scythian' in Paul's terms — and those who took them. But those whose ancestors profited from the Trans-Atlantic slave trade continue to produce many of the carbon emissions which fuel global warming and to 'enslave' those countries which have not had the benefit of the industrial revolution with economic treaties which impoverish them to the benefit of industrialised countries.

The industrialised countries have a stranglehold on the World Trade Organisation and the United Nations which ensures that the voices of Pacific islanders threatened by rising sea levels can be ignored in the interests of the industrialised countries.

War

Across the world the racism which had arisen after the abolition of the slave trade was manifest in the lack of respect for the peoples across Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific by the importation of Indians as workers in and administrators of African, Caribbean and Pacific colonies and a failure to develop university education to prepare indigenous peoples for independence. Consequently, in many areas local militia arose to challenge the dominance of their racist rulers and this led to a culture in which military force rather than education became the dominant asset of governments, an asset for which industrialised countries in the cold war were all too ready to provide military hardware which brought revenue into their economies.

During the First War of Indian Independence/Indian Mutiny an insignificant Muslim group saw the brutality with which British soldiers overran Delhi, butchering everyone with a non-white skin, and drew their own conclusions about the need to use force to confront imperialist regimes. That group grew into Al-Qaeda (Dalrymple, 2006).

After the end of World War II the European Convention on Human Rights and the United Nations were supposed to ensure that the atrocities of previous generations were at an end. But the cold war led to numerous proxy wars and policies affecting client states of the other side which showed little respect for common humanity.

As the politicians who had served in World War II died, a new generation of politicians with no experience of the horrors of war began to see war as a way of ensuring the continuation of their racist views of people with a non-white skin, disregarding the suffering which would be caused to those without any interest in political power struggles or the fact that such suffering would lead to the migration of peoples affected by those wars both for economic reasons and as a result of political persecution.

Agriculture

Twice the amount of food needed to feed everyone in the world is produced but it does not reach everyone because of waste, overproduction by industrialised countries which drives down market prices and makes it uneconomic for farmers in many countries to produce food — in some countries drug production offers a far better income — and poverty — people cannot afford to buy the food that is available.

Much of this overproduction is created by monocultures which degrade the quality of the soil and industrialised farming which ignores the importance of local ecology in sustaining biodiversity. The lessons of the 1936 documentary film [The Plough that broke the Plains](#) were not heeded in the aftermath of World War II when policies to promote food production on an industrial scale in industrialised economies were pursued.

To compound the problem these harmful ways of farming have been promoted and exported to countries which have not benefited from the industrial revolution and ruined their local ecosystems.

Of course, many Christians have tried to compensate for these failures by their own governments by, for example, purchasing fair trade goods but, while a good start, that really only scratches the surface of what needs to be done. US and EU food subsidies lower the price of food for their citizens but at the cost of over-production, making it uneconomic for farmers in many countries to make a living from farming. Starvation and economic migration follow.

The 'refugee crisis'

The so-called 'refugee crisis' is a consequence of multiple policies by industrialised countries which place a higher value on their white-skinned populations than on populations with a different skin-colour.

We can only address this so-called 'crisis' by changing the ways we think about global warming, war and agriculture, by following through the line of Paul's argument in Colossians 3:11 that everyone must be seen as equal under God so that industrialised countries do not have a stranglehold on international organisations, that they adopt policies which ensure that the effects of the current cycle of global warming affect all peoples equally and not some peoples more than others, that they support the development of the means to enable countries to administer and develop their own peoples without recourse to war to settle disputes and that they encourage the development of agricultural production which sustains local economies rather than production which benefits only the industrialised countries.

In doing this we would begin the reverse the consequences of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the racism which replaced it following its abolition and we would be doing immeasurably more for the descendants of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and the indigenous peoples harmed by racism than all the reparations which the industrialised countries might make.

An impossible task?

It is easy to look at the magnitude of the task, the power which the industrialised nations hold, the benefits which their citizens obtain and the continuing racism which informs many of their policies and throw up our hands in despair. But the Trans-Atlantic slave trade was not abolished because people saw the power of Western countries, the commercial 'benefits' of the slave trade to their citizens and the attitudes of their fellow citizens as barriers to any change. It was abolished because individuals like the sons of the Russia Company merchants, Methodists and Baptists and various intellectuals all thought 'in a different way' about the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and came to similar conclusions about it being an affront to their humanity.

It was to be another twenty years before the slave trade was abolished in the British Empire and fifty years before the 1833 Act abolishing slavery in the British Empire. In the meantime, there had been many efforts to encourage other countries to join in these processes and it had not been easy to persuade British shipbuilders not to build ships which were manifestly intended to enable other countries to continue with the slave trade. It was certainly not an 'overnight' job in any sense of the word. Yet those who sought this change did not give up — because they thought that the abolition of slavery and the slave trade were the right things to do even though others might oppose their point of view.

It may be difficult to persuade the UK Government that it should be prepared to give up its seat on the Security Council to make way for a more 'equal' representation of countries on the Security Council; it may be difficult to persuade the Government to vote for the abolition of the veto on Security Council decisions and in favour of action to enforce Security Council decisions against countries with whom the Government hopes to have good relationships; it may be difficult to persuade the Government to withdraw from economic treaties which impose economic conditions or agricultural reforms which prevent countries from becoming financially independent and able to feed their own populations successfully; it may be difficult to persuade

the Government not to supply arms to countries which show scant regard for human dignity.

It is certainly going to be difficult, as it was with the slave trade, to persuade other countries to join us in taking action which ensures that the descendants of victims of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and indigenous victims of racism are treated as 'equal' with their former, and in some cases current, oppressors.

The first step is to change the way we think; the second is to act in ways which demonstrate that we have changed the ways we think. One way of demonstrating that is to start acknowledging the way in which Jesus used slavery to illustrate relationships in the kingdom of heaven and the way in which Paul addressed the reality of slavery for others when confronted with it at first hand and what that teaches us about what our attitudes should be to our fellow human beings.

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