

General Topics :: Slavery in the Bible- by Steve Gregg

Slavery in the Bible- by Steve Gregg - posted by TMK (), on: 2017/2/25 11:34

As I often do, I am posting an email I recently received, and the response I sent the inquirer:

Hi Steve,

I spent this past week end with a dear friend of mine. Just before I left he said that one of his biggest struggles was the fact that slavery was basically condoned in, not only the old but also the new testament. That Paul and for that matter Jesus, didn't say anything against it. He said that saying it was different culturally than today was no excuse as it was just as immoral then as it is now. I thought of Galatians 3:28...however that shows our equality in Gods eyes but doesn't doesn't go into the immorality of owning another person.

Thank you,
John

Hello John,

On what basis does your friend claim that slavery is, in itself, a moral evil? This seems to reflect what C.S. Lewis referred to as "chronological snobbery," in that it assumes modern values, opinions, and institutions are always superior to ancient ones. Slavery was an institution in every society in the world until the nineteenth century. There were obviously cases in which slaves were abused by their masters, just as there are cases where children are abused by parents, wives abused by husbands, and citizens abused by the police. Awareness of these facts does not (or should not) lead us to conclude that marriage, families and law enforcement are evil institutions, in themselves. The Bible forbids all such abuse, because it is unloving. "Love does not harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Rom.13:10).

Can slavery be a loving institution? Apparently. The Bible envisions a scenario in which a slave is offered his freedom, but chooses to remain a slave, protesting, "I love my master...I will not go out free" (Ex.21:5). In such a case, the slave is permitted to remain a slave for life. We can hardly imagine such a scenario, for two reasons:

- 1) We live post-enlightenment. This cultural revolution instilled in us the insistence upon human freedom and autonomy—a cultural shift which would inevitably result in the condemnation of slavery;
- 2) Slavery in America was combined with racism—a dehumanizing of black people as less-than-human, which is a despicable and ungodly attitude. In biblical times, slaves were often of the same race as their masters. Slavery was an economic institution, not the subjugation of one race by another.
- 3) The slavery with which most of us are familiar was involuntary. Africans were kidnapped, separated from their homes and families, and carried across the Atlantic to be sold as slaves to strangers, who often abused them. This kind of slavery was forbidden in the Bible, and those who perpetrated such activities would have been put to death under Jewish law (Ex.21:16; 22:21; 23:9).

Commonly, in biblical cases, men sold themselves or their families into slavery to avoid starvation or dire poverty. There was no government bail-out for failed businessmen, so a man in great need could indenture himself for seven years to a property owner, in order to pay a debt he could not otherwise pay. It was a more economically secure situation than unemployment, for him and for his family. All of a slave's necessary food, shelter, clothing and medical care were provided by his master (which is a more secure situation than that of many modern free men, whose employment does not guarantee any of these things). This was a desirable situation for many, who otherwise would go without such security.

Not all slavery in biblical times was voluntarily entered. In some cases, slavery was a result of war, where prisoners (especially women and children) were taken and, instead of being killed, or being left in poverty, they were kept as slaves, and sometimes as wives. This is different from kidnapping, since it is a means of preserving the lives of the families of slain enemy soldiers. It is culturally provincial for us to think that ancient people would have all the same feelings about such arrangements that modern Americans, who cut their teeth on notions of universal human freedom and egalitarianism, would.

ould have in like circumstances.

People often wonder why Paul did not condemn slavery. The answer often given is that slavery was so thoroughly ingrained in pagan civilization that it would have been too disruptive to banish it altogether. Instead, he depended upon the leveling influence of Christian principles to pervade and gradually change society, so as to make slavery socially unacceptable, and thus end it. This is, in fact, what eventually happened, in Europe and America, but it cannot be the right answer to the critic's question.

Idolatry and fornication were also deeply ingrained cultural norms in the Roman world, yet Paul did not consider it too disruptive for him to severely denounce such practices among Christians. Of course, Paul did not have the political power, nor the cultural influence to demand that the Roman Empire abolish slavery, even if he wanted to. However, he could certainly have commanded that Christians renounce the practice, as they were to renounce idolatry and fornication and that Christian masters should release all their slaves. Paul did not do this, but, instead, commanded masters to treat their slaves well (Eph.6:9; Col.4:1); , and slaves to submit to their masters (Eph.6:5; Col.3:22). He saw nothing immoral about the institution itself, and gives no indication that it should be abolished. Why not?

Paul, like everyone else of his day, knew very well what most modern people do not even fathom—namely that being in slavery was the only way that many slaves could survive. In a large percentage of cases, they had sold themselves into slavery in the first place in order to seek security in a world where they had proven themselves incapable of meeting their financial obligations. It would have been cruel to abolish slavery, thus forcing them out of their employment, just as it would be cruel to do so to people today, who depend upon their employment to provide for themselves and their families.

In every case, the Bible requires masters to treat their slaves justly (Col.4:1; Eph.6:9), as human beings, and even as brothers (Philemon 15-16), which was not the custom among pagans. Paul likewise commanded Christian slaves to be dutiful and submissive to their masters, and went on to say that those who teach otherwise are "proud, knowing nothing" (1 Tim.6:1-4).

As very provincial people living in a particular time and culture, we find any suggestion of slavery intolerable—largely because we don't know what we are talking about. This is a perfect example of how our sentiments, in conflict with scriptural teachings, are the result of ignorance.

Whether slavery is permitted or not, there will always be some people who are economically dependent upon others, and who must submit to those who support them. This applies to children, stay-at-home moms, employees, the disabled, etc. The Bible addresses all of these cases, and none can improve upon the instructions given to those in such a state. As much as we value human freedom, the Christian faith calls upon us to surrender our rights and to be slaves of God (Matt.16:24; Luke 17:7-10; 1 Cor.7:20-24).

Those who chafe under the obligation to submit to parents, husbands, governmental laws, or masters reveal a lack of the normative submissiveness that Christian disciples throughout the ages have known to be their rightful response to authority, under God (Tit.3:1). The slave who serves his master well is seen as serving God in that role (Eph.6:5-8; Col.3:22-24; 1 Tim.6:1-2), just as everyone else who serves God must do so in the spirit of self-denial and cheerful submission. Those who do not know this do not yet understand the nature of Christian discipleship.

I hope this may help clarify the matters with which your friend is wrestling.

In Jesus,
Steve Gregg

Re: Slavery in the Bible- by Steve Gregg - posted by passerby, on: 2017/2/26 7:39

The slavery in America as a British colony then, and before the American civil war, where people were abducted, put into forced labor, treated with no respect and dignity was far from the concept of slaves tolerated in ancient Israel—if one will look at them closely, as pointed out earlier. Let that be clear.

Re: Slavery in the Bible- by Steve Gregg - posted by ginnyrose (), on: 2017/2/28 13:33

Well said...

It is also helpful to note in the WORD how slaves related to their masters when mentioned. Perhaps this could teach us something? Many times the relationship between the master and the servant is consistent with the modern day boss/employee one.

Sandra

Re: - posted by drifter (), on: 2017/2/28 15:07

"Many times the relationship between the master and the servant is consistent with the modern say boss/employee one."

I agree completely.

Re: - posted by TMK (), on: 2017/2/28 15:11

--or like the domestic servant/aristocratic class portrayed in shows like Downton Abbey or Remains of the Day.

Re: - posted by Sree (), on: 2017/2/28 15:41

I have answered this question so many times. We still have some kind of master slave society. We have only succeeded in abolishing this term slavery. For example, I have to still submit to my manager in office. If I have a family emergency, I still need my manager's permission to leave work. Even for sickness I need his permission. Is it not some kind of master-slave relationship?

Even today a boss can still ill treat his report-tees. So do we need to avoid all boss employee relationship?

Slavery was the system when Bible was written. Bible gives so much rights to slaves. It even gives them freedom after certain years of service. The new Covenant also asks masters to treat slaves well (Eph 6:9).

Also the moment someone calls something immoral, then he has to agree on morality and a source for these morality. Hence they cannot be atheist.

Re: - posted by deltadom (), on: 2017/2/28 17:30

Darwin, slavery, and abolition

<http://creation.com/darwin-slavery-and-abolition>

Slavery in Islam

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sLIAnARzh_Y