

“The Bible supports slavery.” – Thailer Jimerson

You’ve heard it. I’ve heard it.

The times we occupy happen to be times where biblical authority is no longer taken for granted. More and more Christians have to take more pains to explaining why the Bible should be believed and obeyed.

One argument for the irrelevance of scripture is the claim that the Bible supports many things that today we know are wrong. For example, slavery. “The Bible supports slavery, so why should I read such a book?”

I want to take a moment to challenge this widely held, and commonly stated, belief.

First, what do we mean by “slavery”? What scene comes to mind when you make the claim that the Bible supports the institution of slavery? Is it chattel slavery, that is, the African slave trade? That mental image is the first reason why the claim that the Bible supports slavery is, at best, misleading. When the Bible talks about slavery it’s talking about indentured servanthood. Back then, when a family incurred debt, they couldn’t declare bankruptcy – they had to pay their debts. One way to do this was to work for that family for x number of years. When the Bible speaks of slavery it is not supporting the idea of kidnapping massive quantities of people from the native lands, to pack them like sardines into trade ships and to sell them as property in foreign lands. Also, it was never based on the pigment of skin.

Actually, one of the best questions to ask in response to this common notion is “Have you actually ever read the Bible?” Because here what the Bible actually says on the issue.

NEW TESTAMENT

1. 1 Timothy 1.10 – In this passage, the apostle Paul points out that kidnapers or “enslavers” are sinners and under the condemnation of God.
2. 1 Corinthians 7.21 – Here Paul speaks to various Christians called under various circumstances. Some people were converted as slaves. What is his suggestion to slaves who can gain their freedom? “Avail yourself of the opportunity.”
3. Philemon – This whole letter can be seen as an argument against slavery. Though Paul never explicitly denounces the practice of indentured servanthood, with his God-inspired words he does place a ticking time-bomb near this widely

established ancient institution by encouraging the slave owner Philemon to receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

OLD TESTAMENT

1. Exodus 21.2 – Every seven years, no matter how much the slave owed you, he was to be freed. In fact, God supported the nationwide cancelling of debts in the year of Jubilee where all “slaves” were freed.
2. Exodus 21.26 – If the master were to abuse the “slave” by knocking a tooth or an eye, the slave was to go free. In other words, you could never abuse your servants.
3. Deuteronomy 23.15 – (Here’s a crazy one for you.) If a runaway slave comes to you, you’re not allowed to return him to the master!

Here’s the thing, the Bible was written in the midst of times where ideas and practices were widely established and couldn’t have been overthrown in a night – such was the case with indentured servanthood. To have rid the world of such a concept then would be like removing the idea of credit, or credit cards, from our economy in a night. It’s not going to happen.

But here’s the big question, the big point. How can we, with integrity, make the claim that the Bible actually supports the institution of slavery when the grand narrative of the Hebrew Bible – the story they heard year after year after year – was the story of the GOD OF THE SLAVES, who, ultimately, freed them from the chains of Egypt?

So, does the Bible support slavery? No. No, it doesn’t.

As a matter of fact, it was the Bible that inspired the world’s greatest abolitionists of slavery such as John Newton and William Wilberforce. But that’s a side of the story that we don’t hear that often. And that’s probably because it would show how the Bible was relevant then, and how it possesses great relevance for all sorts of justice and Jesus-exalting goodness today.