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## INTRODUCTION

### The Bible and Slavery—What’s the Problem?

ACCORDING TO INTERNATIONAL LAW, slavery is illegal. Nevertheless, throughout the world today, millions of men, women, and children are sold as slaves to work as domestic servants, in factories, in the construction industry, and in prostitution. The perpetrators of these terrible crimes make huge profits, and the suffering they cause is immense. Victims are tortured and raped, families are split up, and children denied education. How should Christians respond to this? The answer seems obvious. Christians of all traditions are agreed that slavery is unacceptable, and we would be quick to condemn any leader or preacher who ventured to say otherwise. We uphold the United Nations’ Declaration that freedom is a human right: no one should be able to view another as his or her property. We believe that no one should be able to force another person to work without pay or by means of coercion and deceit. If we are asked for a theological reason for our reaction to slavery, we say that it goes against everything we understand about our loving God who demands justice in his world. Since redemption is at the very heart of our faith, it follows that slavery is incompatible with all that Christianity stands for. And if we are asked how we know this, we would say that we read it in the Bible.

All this, of course, is true. But unfortunately, the Christian church has not always been quite so certain that slavery is wrong. Throughout much

of its history, Christians actively supported and participated in the slave trade, and thought nothing of owning slaves themselves. Not only that, they would probably have said that owning slaves was consistent with biblical teaching. Astonishing as it may seem to us today, it is only just over two hundred years since Christians changed their minds about slavery, and their understanding of what the Bible had to say about it.

The truth of the matter is that both views are to be found in our Scriptures. The Bible does, of course, teach that Christ is the redeemer and that freedom is central to our faith as Christians. The Bible does speak of God's great love for his people, and it does teach us that injustice is unacceptable to Him. But it also contains passages in which slavery seems not only to be condoned, but even to be commanded. Leviticus 25:44–46 contains direct instruction that slaves may be taken, not from amongst the Israelites themselves, but from neighboring countries.

As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness.

In Numbers 31, the Israelites attack the Midianites, and are told by Moses that they should kill all the men and women that they capture, except for the virgins, whom they can keep for themselves (Num 31:18). In the New Testament slavery also seems to be condoned, and even encouraged. For example, in a series of instructions aimed at maintaining good order in Christian households, Colossians 3:22–24 says this:

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 your masters, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ.

In its exhortation to slaves to obey their masters “wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord,” this passage seems to discourage any idea that slavery might not be according to God's will. Furthermore, neither Jesus nor Paul

ever says that slavery is morally wrong, let alone suggests that it should be abolished.

If we are honest, then, we have to admit that we have something of a dilemma. How can we believe that God speaks to us through the Bible while at the same time believing slavery to be morally wrong? How can we say that this book, which reflects beliefs that are quite contrary to those we believe acceptable today, has authority in our lives? We could, of course, decide to ignore the passages in which slavery is upheld, concentrating only on verses such as Galatians 3:28 in which it is said that

There is no longer Jew nor Greek, there is no longer slave nor free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.

But this seems to be a rather selective, if not dishonest way to read the Bible. We could, as some do, declare that the Bible is completely irrelevant in the twenty-first century, and throw it out altogether. But this would be to go against centuries of Christian tradition, and indeed, the experience of millions of readers of Scripture throughout the world. The church has always held that the Bible provides us with a faithful witness to Christ, the foundation of our faith, and that God speaks to us through it. Clearly, we have to think things through a bit further, and it is my hope that this book will help Christians do exactly that. Specifically, I want to consider this question: what, if anything, can the Bible possibly have to say to us about contemporary human trafficking? I do this in the conviction that there is an urgent need for Christians to respond to and become involved in tackling modern-day slavery. Just as the abolitionists responded to the great injustice of the slave trade in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, so must we respond to the global crime which is human trafficking. But I also do this in the belief that God continues to speak to us through the Bible, and that it therefore must have an important part to play in our thinking about trafficking. If we believe that it is God-inspired Scripture, then we must listen to what it says.

With all this in mind I propose to look at important passages in both the Old Testament and the New Testament to see what they might have to say to us about slavery today. In doing so I hope to show that there is a great deal that can be learned from the Bible about how Christians should respond to human trafficking, and indeed, that we should be doing much, much more to combat it.

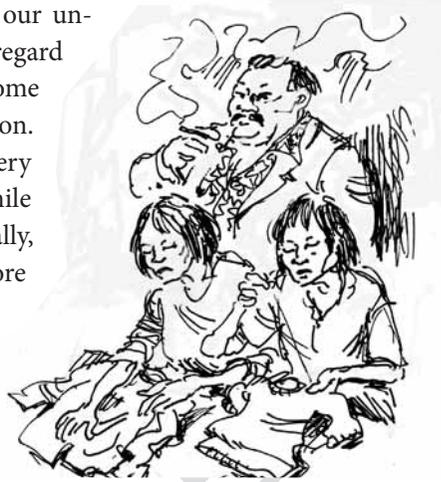
## Bridging the Gap

Before we do this however, it is important to do some groundwork. The problem I have been outlining—that the Bible seems to accept slavery while most people today think it morally unacceptable—points to the fact that the Bible itself comes from an entirely different age to our own. The life experiences and worldviews of its writers are quite different from ours, and this raises a crucial question. How are we to bridge the gap between the biblical world and the twenty-first century? For most Western Christians, for whom slavery is a thing of the past, it is clearly not appropriate to lift statements like “slaves obey your masters” and apply them directly to our situation today. We obviously cannot condone the idea that we should kidnap people from neighboring countries and make them our slaves, as it says in Leviticus 25, or carry out the command in Numbers 31 that armies in wartime should steal girls to use them as sex slaves. So what should we do with texts like these?

Fortunately, we can look to history to help us in our difficulties. In the nineteenth century, the Transatlantic slave trade was abolished, and Christians played a crucial role in achieving this goal. They believed that buying and selling people to live and work as slaves in Caribbean and American plantations was morally unacceptable, and they campaigned tirelessly to ensure that the practice was stopped. At the same time, however, these Christians also believed that God reveals his will to his people through the Scriptures. How did they reconcile the two views? And how did it come about that Christians changed their minds about slavery? In chapter 2, I will tell the story of how this was achieved. I will give a brief outline of the history of abolitionism and consider what role the Bible played in it. What lessons can we learn for today’s fight against slavery? As we shall see, it took a long time, and even a civil war, before people began to change their thinking and believe that slavery should be outlawed. Slowly and painfully, Christians began to see that while the Bible could be used to condone and support slavery, the injustice of it, and the suffering it caused those who were its victims, could not be reconciled with the central truth of God’s love for his people and the fact that Jesus’ offer of salvation was made to all men and women, regardless of race.

## Christians and Slavery Today

Not only do we need help with our understanding of Scripture with regard to slavery, we also need to have some knowledge of the current situation. The achievement of the anti-slavery movement was immense, but while laws were changed internationally, the truth is that there are now more slaves in the world than ever before. Certainly, slavery has always been a global problem, and we are today much more aware of its scale than ever could have been the case in



the eighteenth century. However, contemporary slavery is a far more complex problem than it was for the abolitionists in Europe and the United States. First, while slavery may be illegal in international law, not all countries are as compliant with that law as they might be. Some governments turn a blind eye to slavery, and corrupt officials benefit from its profits. Second, when the transatlantic slave trade could be abolished by means of law, today the slave trade is a highly sophisticated clandestine enterprise, and much more difficult to tackle. Traffickers use the internet and social media to communicate and recruit their victims. They often work hand in glove with corrupt governments and businesses. It is also a highly dangerous world to try to face, for the gangs that operate in it will go to any lengths to protect their highly lucrative business. All this shows that it will take far more than merely changing the law to get rid of today's slave trade. These problems require concerted and cooperative political initiatives. Of course, Christians are engaged in these discussions at all levels, and it is essential that, in addition to their professional expertise, they have a good understanding of why they are doing this work—in other words, that they have a good grasp of the theology underlying their efforts. Part of the reason for writing this book is to address this need. I hope to show not only that a study of the Bible can provide spiritual food for those involved in anti-slavery work, but also that it has much to say that can inform their efforts at all levels.

There is, however, a third element in modern-day slavery that makes it quite different from anything the abolitionists had to face. A very large number of women and children are trafficked into prostitution. Their traffickers force them to work in private apartments, bars, clubs, and massage parlors, or on the streets. Of course, this is nothing new, for slavery and prostitution have always been part of the same world. Slaveholders have always felt they have a right to do whatever they want with their slaves' bodies. However, the sheer numbers involved in this trade today make it into something that is a distinctive aspect of human trafficking, not least because of the profits to be made from the prostituting of children. The question is, how should this be tackled?

It might seem that the straightforward answer to this would be that we should abolish prostitution. We might not be able to do much about prostitution in private apartments, but surely if the brothels, sex clubs, and massage parlors, not to mention street prostitution, were declared illegal, and made the target of police activity, then this would go a long way to reducing human trafficking? In other words, if we abolish the sex industry, a large sector of the human trafficking business would be drastically diminished. However, again, the situation is rather more complex than this.

First, not all are agreed that the sex industry is a bad thing, and in fact there is considerable debate about the issue amongst academics, activists, and policy makers. Some think that to make the sex industry entirely illegal would simply result in more illicit, dangerous prostitution, into which many more people will be trafficked. Others think that prostitution should be legalized. The argument here is that if prostitution was to be considered a job like any other, with taxation and good healthcare for prostitutes, then profits would be reduced, and trafficking with them. How should Christians contribute to this discussion? It is a very important question for the reduction of human trafficking. Should prostitution always be declared a sin, and even if the answer is yes, should it be illegal? Might legalizing it reduce suffering?

There is a second factor. While most of us in the West might think that prostitution is wrong, for people in other countries it may be the only way the poorest people can live. In some Asian countries, for example, families find that they have to sell their daughters into prostitution, and for many women this may be the only way they and their families can survive. Are we to take this away from them? Moreover, in some countries a visit to a brothel is acceptable entertainment for businessmen and their guests. In

other words, it is part of corporate entertainment. What are we to say about such cultural differences? What all this boils down to is the fact that while the world today is agreed that slavery is wrong, it is not at all agreed that prostitution and the sex industry, which has such a large part to play in contemporary human trafficking, are wrong. It is important, therefore, for Christians to think through these issues in an informed manner.

But there is another issue. Often, Christians have preconceived ideas about prostitution, ideas that can prevent them from becoming involved in anti-trafficking work. While there are many Christian communities and churches that are willing to engage with the problem, many more are too frightened or apathetic to think about it because of its associations with sin and shame. In my experience, some churches simply do not want to talk about it at all, considering it too distasteful a topic to discuss. The problem is, of course, that as soon as sex is introduced to the discussion, all sorts of prejudices and embarrassments come to the surface, and these can hamper reasoned discussion of the topic. This attitude can not only result in ignorance and lack of interest, but in actual cruelty towards those who have been caught up in this type of modern-day slavery. In some cultures, for example in Eastern Europe, it is not unknown for churches to reject women who have been trafficked into the sex trade on the grounds that they have brought dishonor into their community.

Of course, throughout Christian history there have been many who have been rightly very distressed by the particular suffering endured by women and children in prostitution, and have believed it their calling to do something about it. The problem here has been, however, that throughout its history, the church itself has tended to view women in prostitution as shameful, in need of being reformed and punished. Even today, there are many ministers and clergy who take the view that all those caught up in prostitution need to repent, and leave their lives of sin. As we shall see, this is a blinkered view that tends to disregard the reasons for prostitution and the experience of those caught up in it. On the other hand, there are those who feel that prostitutes are “special cases” in God’s sight. For example, more than one minister has expressed the view to me that prostitutes are “especially beloved by God.” This kind of reaction, although often grounded in compassionate concern, is often instinctive and uninformed, unconsciously influenced by centuries of tradition and cultural attitudes, rather than by anything the Bible might have to say.

In view of this, it is important that Christians be clear in their thinking with regard to prostitution in order to be able to contribute to any discussion on contemporary sex trafficking. How much of our thinking is an uninformed reaction to a difficult and seldom discussed topic? What does the Bible say on the matter? How far can the Bible help us formulate a Christian response to sex trafficking today? The second part of the book will set out to try to help us to find a biblically informed response to the problem of the sex industry and its relationship to human trafficking as a whole.

## Outline of the Book

I have been suggesting that there are two problems with regard to the discussion of the Bible and human trafficking. The first is that there is a gap between the worldview of the Bible and that of Christians today with regard to human trafficking. The second is that there is a great deal of confusion and poor thinking on the part of many Christians with regard to the prostitution that is such a large component of contemporary human trafficking. In this book I would like to tackle both issues, and to clear the way for churches to become involved in combatting human trafficking in all its forms.

In order to tackle the first problem, I will first tell the story of the place of the Bible in the abolitionist debate. What can it teach us with regard to anti-slavery work? How did the abolitionists bridge the gap between the Bible and their own situation? We will see that they have valuable lessons to teach us about how we read the Bible. Then, using what we have learned, we will look at the biblical texts themselves. Chapters 4 and 5 will be concerned with what the Bible has to say about slavery in general, and chapters 6 and 7 will be concerned with biblical views on prostitution. In each case, we will conduct a survey of important passages that deal with our topics. However, in each case, we will also pay particular attention to the kind of literature we are reading. For the Bible is made up, not only of many different books by different authors at different times, but also various types of writing, for example, prophecy, law, narrative, poetry, and letters. It will be very important for us to bear this in mind as we try to understand the nature of the biblical texts and what they have to say to us today.

My aim is to encourage Christians to be actively involved in combatting human trafficking throughout the world, and to enable them to have a deeper understanding of why and how they might do this. With this in

mind, I have provided study questions at the end of each chapter in the hope that they will help Christians, both as individuals and in groups, to think more deeply about why and how they should respond to the calamity that is slavery. These questions are intended to be used selectively. If you are meeting in a group, you may find it worthwhile to choose only two or three questions to be discussed at any one session. The same applies to the discussion points that are given in the conclusion. At the end of the book, I have given a list of further reading and online resources with a view to enabling readers to explore the subject further.

Before we start our study of the biblical material, however, it is important that we know something of the nature of contemporary human trafficking. So, in the first chapter, I will give an account of the various types of slavery that are to be found in the world today. As we shall see, the problem is a global one that causes incalculable suffering to the most vulnerable people.

SAMPLE