THE BIBLE IN THE AMERICAN SLAVERY DEBATES: TEXT AND INTERPRETATION

CARL E SANDERS II

CARL SANDERS is Associate Professor and Chair of the Department of Biblical and Theological Studies at Washington Bible College in Lanham, Maryland. He is author of *The Premillennial Faith of James Brookes: Reexamining the Roots of American Dispensationalism* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2001).

IN THE PERIOD LEADING UP TO THE CIVIL WAR, CHRISTIANS IN THE UNITED STATES WERE ENGAGED IN INTENSE BATTLES OVER THE ISSUE OF SLAVERY. AMERICAN EVANGELICALS' OPINIONS ON SLAVERY WERE DIVIDED INTO TWO BROAD CATEGORIES. The first party regarded slavery as intrinsically evil. Radical abolitionists like William Lloyd Garrison believed in the evil of slavery despite biblical teaching which seemed to contradict that belief. Less extreme abolitionists like Albert Barnes believed the spirit of the Bible opposed slavery, despite the appearance that Scripture tolerated the institution. On the other side were those who defended slavery. The most vocal members of this group, centred on the Southern states where slavery was prevalent, included renowned churchmen and theologians like Robert Dabney and James Henry Thornwell. They argued that the Bible positively endorsed slavery. Others, like Charles Hodge of Princeton Seminary, advocated a moderate path, seeking for a gradual end to slavery. Hodge and like-minded abolitionists had serious reservations about the advisability of slavery, at least as practiced in the United States. These debates over slavery led not only to dissension and strife in individual congregations, but also contributed to schism in every major denominational body in the United States.

Fundamental to these debates was the Bible. Each position used the Bible to buttress their view. As Mark Noll pointedly observes, all agreed the Bible was authoritative and 'read it in the same way'.[1] However, a fundamental disagreement about how to interpret the biblical text separated these parties. These hermeneutical differences led to different conclusions about the moral and ethical status of slavery, and provide an interesting historical parallel to contemporary debates about the application of Scripture in current ethical controversies.

The defenders of slavery in many ways had the easier task as they 'believed that the Bible endorsed and legitimated both the institution and the practice of slavery. In the nineteenth century the best Reformed theologians developed this tradition into an impressive biblical theology of slavery. They quoted extensively from the Old and New Testaments, they argued lucidly and convincingly, and they were able to integrate scriptural teaching into a coherent system.'[2]

The defenders of slavery accepted the statements of Scripture at face value, and deduced from those plain teachings that slavery was not merely to be tolerated, but perhaps even embraced and lauded. Fundamental

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to their argument was the simple fact that the Bible nowhere condemns slavery. This observation was not, however, a simple argument from silence. The defenders of slavery noted that slavery was woven into the warp and woof of biblical revelation, especially in the Old Testament. Slavery as a practice existed throughout the entire Old Testament history, but was never condemned. In fact, slavery was mentioned without disapproval in the ten commandments. If the summation of the moral law of God included slavery, how could it be an absolute evil? God's perfect moral law could not tolerate such a taint! The defenders of slavery recognised that the Old Testament law regulated slavery. Biblical teaching did have something to say about how slave-owners *treated* their slaves, but nothing about ending the practice. Beyond the Bible, they could not and would not go.

Their interpretation of the New Testament reached similar conclusions. Slave-owners were told to treat their slaves properly in various New Testament passages (e.g. Eph 6), but slavery was never condemned. Never was there a suggestion that Church discipline should be exercised for simply owning slaves. Paul's handling of Onesimus in the letter to Philemon similarly lacks any suggestion that Philemon had committed a sin in owning Onesimus. While Paul seems to request Onesimus' freedom as a personal favour because of his usefulness, even then there is no command against slavery. When added to the fact that slavery is used as a model or pattern of the Christian life throughout the New Testament, the pro-slavery party believed they were on solid ground in defending the moral propriety and biblical basis of slavery.

In hindsight, especially in this anniversary year of Wilberforce's success in ending slave traffic in Great Britain, the conclusions of the pro-slavery party may seem implausible to those whose Christian conscience has been shaped by events of the last few centuries. Indeed, outside of the American context, few seemed persuaded by their arguments, largely because Christians outside the United States did not share the distinctive American approach to Scripture. As Noll notes, the American consensus resulted from dual presuppositions shared by virtually all American evangelicals: (1) that the entire Bible had universal and eternal relevance, and (2) that the Bible should be read in a literal, common-sense way. For many Christians in the United States, the choice seemed to be between retaining orthodoxy and slavery on the one hand, or adopting heresy (by abandoning biblical authority) and abolition on the other hand! Because of these assumptions, pro-slavery arguments carried the day in the United States in the first half of the nineteenth century. Abolitionists went so far as to say that the greatest obstacle to their cause was the text of the Bible![3]

The opponents of slavery were required to be more creative and imaginative in their interpretive approach. They could not appeal to explicit anti-slavery texts, so they relied on broader theological and ethical arguments. Cumulatively, they made an intriguing, but not universally persuasive, case against slavery. Abolitionists used two major strategies for biblical application to the slavery debate.

The first general strategy by abolitionists sought to distance modern slavery from the biblical institution. Many argued that the differences between Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman slavery and that found in the United States were so profound that biblical slavery texts were largely irrelevant to the modern practice. If biblical slavery were some more general servitude, perhaps similar to indentured service, its presence in the Bible could not be used to defend the contemporary practice of slavery. Drawing on the Old Testament texts prohibiting 'man-stealing', abolitionists argued that slavery which deprived persons of fundamental rights (e.g. by putting them in slavery through capture or kidnapping) was, in fact, prohibited by the Bible. This argument cut to the heart of the origin of most contemporary slavery.

A second hermeneutical strategy employed by abolitionists depended on broader, more general biblical and theological principles. The creation story described humans as created in the image of God, made to rule over the earth (e.g. Ps 8). Slavery stripped humans of their God-given dominion and was thus incompatible with God's creative intent. The Exodus and its liberation motif were further evidence of God's fundamental attitude toward slavery. God's deliverance of enslaved Israel became a model of universal deliverance. Abolitionists noted that the regulations on slavery in the Bible were far more stringent than those found in surrounding Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman cultures. These ameliorating principles pointed to the spirit of the Mosaic Law, rather than its letter. The provision in the Old Testament for cities of refuge provided additional support for the abolitionist case; the concept of Israel as a place of asylum for runaway slaves suggested that God's divine law carried an implicit bias against slavery. Others observed that

NOTES

1. Mark Noll, 'The Bible and Slavery', in *Religion and the American Civil War* (New York: Oxford, 1998), pp. 43–73.
2. Kevin Giles, *The Trinity and Subordinationism: The Doctrine of God and the Contemporary Gender Debate* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2002), p. 230.
3. Noll, 'The Bible and Slavery'.
4. Albert Barnes, *An Inquiry into the Scriptural Views of Slavery* (Philadelphia: Parry & McMillan, 1846), p. 115.
5. John Henry Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century* (New York: W.I. Pooley & Co., 1864), pp. 16–17. Quoted by Willard Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War & Women: Case Issues in Biblical Interpretation* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1983), p. 31.
6. Bledsoe, quoted by Swartley, *Slavery*, p. 49. The capitals are as quoted by Swartley.

'the majority of American evangelicals before the Civil War [thought it] impossible to condemn slavery on purely biblical grounds'

FURTHER READING

DM Doriani, *Putting the Truth to Work: The Theory and Practice of Biblical Application* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2001)

S Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids/Leicester: Eerdmans/Inter-Varsity Press, 1988)

WJ Larkin, Jr, *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Lanham, MD: Wipf & Stock, 2003)

IH Marshall, *Beyond the Bible: Moving from Scripture to Theology* (Grand Rapids/Milton Keynes: Baker Academic/Paternoster, 2004)

WJ Webb, *Slaves, Women & Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Doweners Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001)

NT Wright, *The Last Word: Beyond the Bible Wars to a New Understanding of the Authority of Scripture.* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2005)

▶ slavery was so deeply embedded in the Ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds that it was a practical impossibility (due to the hardness of human hearts) to immediately ban slavery; instead, slavery needed to be eliminated via more gradual and often indirect means. The silence of the Old Testament was thus not approval, but tolerance of slavery until it was possible to offer a viable alternative!

Albert Barnes wove together a number of these arguments, illustrating the cumulative and suggestive nature of abolitionist interpretation, especially with regard to the spirit of Old Testament teaching. He explained: 'There may have been reasons, perhaps a part of them unknown to us, why Moses tolerated slavery, but which would be entirely consistent with the belief that he regarded it as an evil system and one which he wished to have abolished as speedily as possible … If it existed all around him in harsh and oppressive forms … If by such an arrangement they [pagan slaves] might in fact become incorporated into the Hebrew commonwealth … If Palestine were made an asylum … If it should appear that an arrangement was made by which perpetual slavery would be impracticable, and the whole system ultimately abolished.'[4]

The New Testament material, while less extensive, provided further implicit support for the abolitionists. The New Testament passages referring to slaves as brothers undercut the social distinctions inherent in slavery. More importantly, abolitionists argued that the principles shaping Paul's approach to the slavery issue in Philemon would, if fully developed, lead to the end of slavery. Though Paul did not directly condemn slavery, a careful reading 'between the lines' showed that Philemon and later readers should draw an anti-slavery lesson!

Fundamental to the abolitionist argument was their attempt to move beyond the specific wording of the text (which could easily be construed to tolerate slavery) and instead to appeal to its spirit. This spirit of Scripture embodies the principle of love which motivates Christian action against the oppression of slavery, the concept of justice which slavery intrinsically violates, the dignity and value of each human person which slavery denied, and the fundamental spiritual equality which slavery repudiated.

Interestingly, both sides of the argument sometimes appealed to non-biblical arguments to buttress their case. Abolitionists regularly appealed to American political principles. They argued from natural law, reason (as the measure of justice) and political ideals (including the notion of liberty). Particularly in the aftermath of the American Revolution, where such concepts characterised the fundamental social values of the United States (at least in principle), these ideals became important in the American debate over slavery. Defenders of slavery appealed to pragmatic economic and social considerations. The stability provided by the established social order, for example, could be argued in slavery's favour, even if slavery might not exist in a utopia. There were also vigorous debates about the relevance and significance of scientific data on the slavery question. Evidence that certain races were inferior intellectually or morally could be used to support slavery; indications of the unity of the human races worked against racially justified slavery.

Despite occasional uses of non-biblical arguments by both sides, there is little doubt that abolitionists extended their biblical arguments further beyond the specific teaching of the Bible. Defenders of slavery repeatedly argued against them based upon this reality. John Henry Hopkins objected: 'The Bible's defense of slavery is very plain. St. Paul was inspired and knew the will of the Lord Jesus Christ, and was only intent on obeying it. And who are we, that in our modern wisdom presume to set aside the Word of God … and invent for ourselves a "higher law": than those holy Scriptures which are given to us as a "light to our feet and a lamp to our paths," in the darkness of a sinful and polluted world?'[5]

Bledsoe similarly remarked: 'THE HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION FURNISHES NO EXAMPLES OF MORE WILLFUL AND VIOLENT PERVERSIONS OF THE SACRED TEXT THAN ARE TO BE FOUND IN THE WRITINGS OF THE ABOLITIONISTS. THEY SEEM TO CONSIDER THEMSELVES ABOVE THE SCRIPTURES: AND WHEN THEY PUT THEMSELVES ABOVE THE LAW OF GOD, IT IS NOT WONDERFUL THAT THEY SHOULD DISREGARD THE LAWS OF MEN. Significant manifestations of the result of this disposition to consider their own light a surer guide than the word of God, are visible in their anarchical opinions about human governments, civil and ecclesiastical, and on the rights of women, which have found appropriate advocates in the abolition publications.'[6]

It is precisely this kind of argument that so persuasively convinced the majority of American evangelicals before the Civil War that it was impossible to condemn slavery

on purely biblical grounds. Evangelicals could follow the Bible or put some other authority over the Bible, and they chose for the most part to follow the letter of the Bible, rather than its spirit. Committed to the eternal and universal relevance of the text as well as to a common-sense hermeneutic, they were unable to consider available alternative frameworks that could have maintained orthodoxy while providing a critical yet biblical perspective on slavery. When combined with powerful American cultural assumptions about race, most American evangelicals were unable to find resources to address the slavery question effectively.

Since the Civil War, historical perspective has shifted so that most American evangelicals now accept the idea that fundamental biblical and theological principles implicitly entail the end of slavery. Since the time of the slavery debate (and in part because of it), Christians have become more aware of the social and historical contexts in which Scripture was written, as well as the progressive nature of revelation. The difficulty of applying the biblical text to complex social issues has also become clearer. The American slavery debate is thus a reminder of the necessity that we must interpret the Scripture, not merely repeat its words. Only through careful and sensitive interpretation can we truly be subject to the authority of Scripture. ■