

How to set captives free

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The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. [Jesus, Luke 4:18-19]

200 years ago. On March 25th 1807, the British Parliament outlawed the slave trade, and a 'cascade effect' would soon make it illegal throughout the Empire (1833) and in the United States (1865).

The erosion and eventual destruction of this worldwide economy of free labour began in 1787, when twelve Christians met in a London print shop. They were joined by other Christian leaders such as John Newton (of 'Amazing Grace' fame) and John Wesley. With evangelical Christian William Wilberforce as their parliamentary spearhead, the rest was history. But history always looks easier in hindsight: this was a long struggle against influential enemies with serious commercial interests.

For modern people, an unnerving aspect of the struggle was its overt appeal to Christian theology. John Coffey (see 'sources' below) has shown that the abolition struggle was faith-based activism at its most focussed. If it happened today, it would be shouted at with cries of 'keep religion out of politics' and 'stop imposing your values on us.' Yet everyone now looks back and agrees that truth and reality were with the abolitionists all along.

The purpose of this briefing is not to revisit that history; we could not improve Coffey's excellent summary. Rather, we want simply to show the way the logic of the Bible and Christian theology helped to persuade a world to free the slaves. We will end by suggesting that it can do so again.

The liberator of captives. Jesus' inaugural proclamation of 'freedom for the prisoners' is a much-loved anthem among 'social justice' Christians. But their use of this text is a little misleading, for on the face of it, Jesus was not all that effective. He did heal some blind people [Luke 7:21, 18:43], but he is not really on record as helping a poor person out of their poverty, and he remained quite poor himself. He does not even attempt to visit the imprisoned John the Baptist, let alone set him free. Indeed Jesus' agenda abruptly shifts when he 'sets his face' toward Jerusalem [Luke 9:51] and starts the long journey toward death, resurrection and ascension.

Observations like these lead 'conservative' Christians to conclude that Jesus' declaration of liberty was symbolic of a deeper need: the necessity for Jesus to fight our eternal enemies of sin, death, and alienation from God. It cannot be denied that there is something to this conclusion. We do not see Jesus' followers fighting Rome for the liberation of captives. Rather, they say they are attacking spiritual strongholds, such as bloody-minded opposition to God [e.g. 2 Cor. 10:4-5].

However it is also misleading to end the story there. For oddly, Jesus *does* set literal captives free. But he goes about it in a most surprising way.

A man labours for another man, who thinks of him as property. A word then comes to them both. Each may now find release from sin, death and judgment, in Jesus Christ. They gather where *all* eat of the bread and drink of the cup that drives home their equivalence before God. Both are sinners whose shame is mercifully pardoned; and now, they can no longer see each other as they once did. Each now sees a 'brother' in Christ—a radical, extraordinary, unheard-of idea between slaves and masters. (We search the writings of Aristotle in vain for anything remotely similar.)

The apostle who delivered this word now writes to them both, urging the slave to work for the master 'with all your heart, as for the Lord.' He may think of himself as free from his master while *giving himself back* to the master, for the sake of his true Master; and the master has 'a Master in heaven' and so must be just and fair [Col. 3:22-4:1]. Paul also speaks of the slave Onesimus with deep fondness, as 'my very heart'. We don't quite know the full story, but Onesimus is returned to his master Philemon 'no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother' [Philemon 12, 16].

The notion that one man owns the other as property has disappeared in a puff of fiction. They were always just people who needed each other's help. We cannot see it any other way now, for the gospel of Jesus gives 'the true description of the relation' between a master and a slave, and 'the legal construct could only lose its credibility' [O'Donovan]. *Captives have been set free.*

Did it take too long for the institution of slavery to disappear? That story is too long to tell here. Briefly though, ancient slavery absorbed dislocated and property-less people, with varying degrees of care or abuse. The Hebrew experience of making ‘bricks without straw’ [Exodus 5] looms large in biblical memory, hence the Jewish form of the institution was gentler and became a kind of familial belonging—almost an adoption [e.g. Deut. 15:12-18]. We also need to remember that alternative economic structures and labour-relations had not even been dreamt of in ancient times; only in the feudal era was ancient slavery eventually replaced by different economic institutions. It reappeared in the colonial era as a brutal form of property ownership that relied upon pseudo-scientific notions of racial inferiority.

This is a complex story of the emergence of new economic and labour-force ideas, with regular moments of abuse woven throughout. But a distinctive Christian contribution is also woven through it: ‘that the church itself was a society without master or slave within it, and that this society of equals was so palpably real that the merely legal and economic relations of master and slave had only a shadowy reality beside it.’ [O’Donovan.] From the earliest days of the Christian church, slaves spoke the truth in public, were free to marry each other, and sometimes led Christian assemblies. The reality that was stitched into creation of every human ‘in God’s image’ [Genesis 1:27] had become obscured by sinful abuses; but when the gospel forms churches, that reality is lit up brightly again. ‘Equality before God is no longer a hidden, metaphysical reality, but a social one.’ [O’Donovan.]

Hence in the eighteenth century, the abolitionist slogan became obvious. It was deeply rooted in the Christian theology of creation and redemption: ‘Am I not a man, and a brother?’ asked a chained black figure. Some argued against the abolitionists that various forms of slavery existed in the Bible. They did not prevail, for the ancient world of the Bible had no obvious alternative to slavery; but the colonial period *had* discovered better ways to share labour. Colonial slavery was no return to the Bible, just a cheap and sleazy exploitation of a labour force that could not resist. It could not stand before the Lordship of Jesus Christ, for the same reasons as James declares:

Look! The wages you failed to pay the workmen who mowed your fields are crying out against you. The cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord Almighty. You have lived on earth in luxury and self-indulgence. You have fattened yourselves in the day of slaughter. You have condemned and murdered innocent men, who were not opposing you. [James 5:4-6]

Today. Christians sometimes argue over the degree to which the term ‘slavery’ applies to modern labour relations. Is it permissible, say, to set up a low-paid labour force in a community where no other jobs are available? Does this kind of entrepreneurial practice assist a community or exploit it? Discussions about where slavery stops and valid labour relations begin can be heated and difficult.

But these discussions should not blind us to the reality that true slaves still exist. They are controlled by people who do not care for their interests. They have no freedom, are utterly dependent, and are exploited to brokenness or death. They include prostitutes, miners and child soldiers in Asia, South America, Africa and even in the cities of the modern west. The callous indifference of their traffickers remains an ongoing feature of a corrupt and fallen world [cf. ‘slave traders’, 1 Tim. 1:10].

Indeed whereas colonial slaves were treated as a valuable investment, like an ox, the treatment of these modern slaves is even more demeaning. There is a worldwide glut of displaced people, and modern people-trafficking is cheap; so ‘just like used batteries, once the slave exhausts his or her usefulness, another can be procured at no great expense’ writes David Batstone. Legal slavery may have been abolished, but we now face an era of ‘disposable people’.

They need to hear the good news of the one who liberates captives into a company of brothers and sisters, setting them free ‘in Christ’. Their captors need to hear of the Lord who demands their repentance before the ‘day of slaughter’. Even they need to be set free, from greed, sin and death.

In response to the magnificent anniversary of the achievement of Wilberforce and his circle, we could pray for God to raise up a new generation of gospel-shaped abolitionists who know the one who liberates eternally, with unheard-of consequences for social life in the present.

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Sources/Further Reading:

- John Coffey, 'The abolition of the slave trade: Christian conscience and political action.' *Cambridge Papers* 15 no. 2 June 2006. Online: http://www.jubilee-centre.org/cambridge_papers/index.php.
- O'Donovan, Oliver M.T. *The Desire of the Nations: Rediscovering the Roots of Political Theology*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 263-66.
- O'Donovan, Oliver M.T. *The Ways of Judgment: The Bampton Lectures, 2003*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005, p. 248.
- Batstone, David. *Not For Sale: The Return of the Global Slave Trade—and How We Can Fight It*. New York: HarperCollins, 2007, p. 11. See also online: <http://www.notforsalecampaign.org>.

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