Is the Darwinists’ Claim that the Bible Condones Slavery Accurate?

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The critical influence of Darwinism on modern racism has been well documented by creationists and others. When Darwinists attempt to refute the works of those who have documented the important role of Darwinism in the history of modern racism, they often admit the racist history of Darwinism, but retort that the record of Christians is not much better (or they try to claim that it is worse). A common example used to support this contention is the claim that certain scriptures condone slavery. For example, in an article judged “the best American writing,” Nobel laureate Steven Weinberg lists his reasons for rejecting belief in God. One reason was “Christianity, like other world religions, lived comfortably with slavery for centuries, and slavery was endorsed in the New Testament” (2000, p. 247).

An example of these scriptures that “endorsed” slavery is Ti 2:9, which says “let slaves be in subjection to their masters.” The meaning of these scriptures, especially the word slave, is critical to understanding this controversy. For example, in the King James version, the most widely used version in the 1700 and 1800s in America when slavery existed, the word slave was used only once (Jer 2:14), and the word slaves also was used
only once (Rev 18:13). Conversely, servant, servants, and other similar words were used almost a thousand times.

Therefore, the question “Does the Bible condone slavery” first requires defining the word *slave*. The term slave has referred to a large assortment of people involved in a wide variety of social systems throughout history. Professor Jewett noted that when the New Testament was written the term slave had a formal bureaucratic meaning for the Roman audience. The Roman bureaucracy that was rapidly developing at the time Paul wrote this letter was made up of highly trained and highly paid slaves of Caesar. These persons were preferred in the imperial offices because they were loyal to the emperor alone, hoping for their freedom after some years of loyal service. Many of the slaves serving in the imperial bureaucracy became fabulously rich because of their handling of imperial finances. Also, during the time Paul wrote, the expression “slave of Caesar” was often used for imperial ambassadors or representatives of various kinds. Such persons carried the majesty and power of the emperor with them as they represented him in foreign courts (1997, pp. 11-12).

In Bible times, therefore, the term in Rome had a meaning very different than it does for many persons today. In Rome, a slave status could actually be an honor—a position of trust and authority, that could even lead to becoming emperor, as sometimes happened then. Although many slaves were labors (as were most people then), some slaves were the “equivalent of Ph.D’s” who worked as teachers (Strobel, 1998, p. 167). The pre-civil war slavery system in the southern United States was in many ways very different than many historical slave social systems. Therefore, to conclude that the Bible condones slavery implies something very different in modern America than in ancient Rome. Historically, slaves were usually prisoners of war that were sold after one side lost—an act that often saved their life because many would have been executed if they were not worth money as slaves (Agate, 1961, pp. 602, 611).
The Christian Greek Scriptures emphatically condemn mistreatment of one’s fellow humans, and this teaching was a major factor in the overthrow of the notorious American slavery system. Many of those in the antislavery movement, as is also true in the modern American civil rights movement, were motivated by biblical teachings and Christianity. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr., Rev. Jessie Jackson, and many others were very clear as to the source of their opposition to the many injustices committed for decades by the American government and people against Blacks living in America. Carroll and Shiflett note that

Christianity’s importance to abolitionists may have been equaled only by its importance to slaves themselves, who were sustained by its message of hope and its assurance of a liberty that transcended their current bondage (2002, p. 47).

And Walvin concludes that the

simple message of the brotherhood of Christ, of the equality of all believers and the fraternity of the life-hereafter sent a fizz through the slave quarters—and a cold chill through the slave-owning community (quoted in Carroll and Shiflett, 2002, p. 47).

Furthermore, both

religious belief and public commitment was common at all levels of the antislavery campaign. Robert William Fogel observes that even “the principal architects of the secular appeal—including John Quincy Adams, Joshua R. Giddings, and Salmon P. Chase—were deeply religious men” who also realized that “the evangelical movement was a major political constituency that could not be won the the antislavery banner by purely secular appeals” (p. 47).

In Ireland, Christianity eventually helped to revolutionize the world, replacing the old values of a warrior society with the new values of Christianity. Within St. Patrick’s lifetime, warriors cast aside their swords of battle, intertribal warfare decreased markedly, and the slave trade ended. A culture of battle and brute power was transformed by an ethic that sanctified manual labor, poverty, and service. A culture of
illiteracy and ignorance became a culture of learning (Colson and Pearcey, 1999, p. 301).

One well-known example of the effect of Christian teachings on slave traders was John Newton, who was a prosperous African slave merchant until he became a Christian. He then “swore off the slave trade” and went from “slaver to sermonizer” (Browne, 2003, p. 148). He eventually wrote the Christian classic “Amazing Grace,” which says much about his changed heart (Turner, 2002).

Newton was only one of many persons motivated by the Bible to fight the modern form of slavery. As late as the nineteenth century in the West, evangelicals often took the lead in ameliorating many social problems of society including, especially, slavery (Conkin, 1998, p. 63). They were more active than even other Christians, and were far more active than non-Christians. It is noteworthy that even the socialist publication New Internationalists (June, 1989, p. 31) admitted that “individuals of conscience” such as clergyman William Wilberforce in Great Britain, and William Ellery Channing in America, did more than any other group to bring slavery in Britain and elsewhere to an end (Belmonte, 2003, p. 10).

Called “deeply Christian, vibrantly evangelical,” William Wilberforce wrote in his diary when he was 28 that “God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and Reformation of [Morals]” (quoted in Piper, 2002, p. 37). Wilberforce fought battle after battle in Parliament to end slavery, most of which he lost. He was indefatigable, though, and finally prevailed after 20 years. A Gordon College professor wrote that, as a result of his stand against slavery, Wilberforce was “vilified in the press, physically assaulted, received death threats” and even once had to travel with an armed bodyguard (Belmonte, 2003, p. 11). As a result of his tireless work,
in 1807 the slave trade became illegal in Britain. “Before this great cause,” he said, “all others dwindle” (quoted in Piper, 2002, p. 37).

The slavery system in Jesus’ day was also different in other ways. Every major world culture until modern times had a slavery system, and in Rome most middle and upper class citizens owned slaves. Strobel notes that the apostle Paul, in a letter to Philemon about a runaway slave named Onesimus, doesn’t recommend to Philemon that he try to overthrow slavery (all that would do would be to get him executed), but, instead, he tells Philemon to treat Onesimus as a brother in Christ, just as he would treat Paul himself. To make matters perfectly clear, Paul emphasizes, “Remember, you owe your whole life to me because of the gospel” (1998, p. 167). In other words, Philemon should treat Onesimus as one to whom he owed his life!

Slavery was also in many early societies a way to get out of debt and back on one’s feet—one sold himself and his family into slavery to pay off debts. This may not seem just, but in most societies, little extra money or resources existed for social programs, and few poor workers could be tolerated. All able-bodied workers must work, or starve. And, no matter how far in debt one was, under this system one could get back on one’s feet. Furthermore, every seventh year under Jewish law all slaves were to be freed. Agate notes that, among the Hebrews, slavery “was inspired by a more humane spirit than in either Greece, or Rome” (1961, p. 602).

Conversely, it is quite true that the church and its adherents did not always act very Christian in treatment of others. Many abuses existed, even in Christian countries. Some of the reasons for this include the fact that, when the persecution of Christianity ended there was always a tendency to slip back into the standards of a world still largely heathen at heart, for the structure of ancient society lasted beyond
the conversion of Constantine.... It is not surprising, therefore, that the Church, and the Fathers who were her spokesmen, tended to palliate and even to compromise with, rather than to oppose, the evils of slavery, and that the thought of a spiritual society in which all earthly distinctions are of little account was not so clear to the minds of a later generation as it was to St. Paul, or to master and slave who died together in the Roman amphitheatre. It was easier to say, therefore, that the ‘true slavery is the slavery of sin’ than to grapple with the evils of an institution inseparable from ancient society (Agate, 1961, p. 603).

The fact that some people failed to live up to the ideal does not negate the ideal taught in the Scriptures. People tend to condemn the ideal on the basis of those who fail to live up to it.

**Slavery Today**

Today, a form of slavery exists that is in many ways worse than many, if not most, systems that have existed in history. These modern-day “slaves” are not called slaves, but are forced to work in very poor conditions, often for over 12 hours per day, and are paid as little as 50 cents (American) a day. If they complain, they are often released without just cause because their employers know that 10 qualified people are often waiting for their job, each one anxious to take their place. In the old American slavery system, the slave owners had a considerable investment in their slaves and, therefore, for selfish reasons, slave owners were usually very concerned about the health and welfare of their slaves. This contrasts to modern slavery, which has little regard for the welfare and future of its easily replaceable and expendable workers.

This modern form of slavery encompasses close to one billion humans, and has made a tiny minority of owners so wealthy that the wealthiest 358 persons in the world are worth more than the combined annual incomes of the poorer countries that are home to 45% of the entire world population (Kawachi and Kennedy, 1997, p. 1037).
The more common sin of Christians, both then and now, is to ignore or even violate the teachings of their own holy Scriptures. The New Testament, especially, in no uncertain words, condemned the modern form of slavery, both as practiced in pre-civil-war America and that practiced today. It also condemns the mistreatment of any and all humans (and even teaches that Christians are to love their enemies—see Matt 5:43)! And “if your enemy is hungry, feed him, if he is thirsty, give him something to drink” (Romans 12:20). One reason why Christians negate Christ’s teachings is because they try to follow rules, but ignore the point of the rule. This is critically important when considering the question of slavery.

**A Christian’s First Obligation**

Most large countries have enacted hundreds of laws, ordinances, and regulations. Many of these are necessary for a nation to function, but many are counter productive and some are harmful (or even ludicrous). A law in Chicago makes it illegal for ugly people to show themselves in public. In Pennsylvania, is it illegal to deposit candy on a grass lawn. Reis and Trout note that

The U.S. congress passes some 500 laws a year [and]...regulatory agencies promulgate some 10,000 new rules and regulations in the same amount of time. The code of federal regulations now contains more than 80,000 pages. And it is growing by 5,000 pages a year. At the state level, over 250,000 bills are introduced each year and 25,000 pass the legislatures to disappear into the labyrinths of the law (1981, p. 13-14).

Many governments and legislators are openly preoccupied with making laws. They behave as if more laws are the solution to most every social problem. Churches, sects, and religious denominations are likewise often overly concerned with making endless rules. The Jews are noted for their incredibly detailed Talmud law, which specifies in great detail what one can or cannot do in almost every situation. One of the most notorious examples is forbidding the trimming of fingernails
on the sabbath unless the hangnail was causing bleeding: only then could one put the clip to it.

**The Spirit of the Law**

In our desire to obey the *letter of the law*, we sometimes forget about the *spirit of the law*. The Jews’ preoccupation with obeying laws to the detriment of people created problems in the early Christian church. Understanding the Scriptures helps us to understand the *purpose* of law and how we should view the law. Exceptions and mitigating circumstances almost always exist for human laws, even state and federal laws. Although it is illegal to drive faster than 45 miles per hour on most American city roads, few judges would convict a man stopped for driving faster to transport his severely hemorrhaging wife to a hospital. The police may well escort her to the hospital (or better yet, chauffeur her themselves).

The basic principle Christians are to follow is summed up in 1 Cor. 9:1 where Paul says, “Am I not free [of law]?” Paul then adds at 1 Cor. 9:9 “For it is written in the law of Moses ‘Thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of an ox that treadeth [threshes] out the corn.’” Paul then asks, “Is this law for God’s sake or is it altogether for our sake that God makes the law?” He answers his own question in verse 9-10: “In fact it is for our sake that the law was written.” This principle is illustrated at 1 Cor. 8, using as an example food offered to idols, the eating of which was an abominable practice to the Jews. Paul’s words were: “Now concerning eating food offered to idols, we know that an idol is nothing...and that there is no God but one. But *food will not commend us to God.* If we do not eat, we will *not* fall short and yet... if we eat we have done nothing which merits praise for ourselves” (1 Cor. 8:4-5; 9).
Paul then stresses that what is important is not if we eat food sacrificed to idols, but our relationship with our brothers. If eating something causes a person to stumble, we should not eat—but there is nothing wrong with eating anything that is not harmful to the body if the eating does not cause others to stumble. Paul sums up the principle in 1 Cor. 10: 23: “All things are lawful, but not all things build up. Let each one keep seeking not his own advantage, but the advantage of the other person.” In other words, the rule for our behavior should be directed principally toward helping our fellow humans—serving them (and thereby serving God). Paul’s point is that laws and rules are designed to aid us achieve this, but if they impede us in helping others, they should be changed: “We should obey God as ruler rather than men” (Acts 5: 25). This fact no doubt motivated those opposed to slavery such as Samuel Wilberforce.

A fact that should be stressed when considering law is that we have all sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God (Romans 3:23). We have all not only have made mistakes, but have at times transgressed God’s law. The Scriptures admonish: “If we make the statement ‘We have no sin,’ we are misleading ourselves...If we make the statement, ‘We have not sinned,’ we are making God a liar...’ This principle is probably best illustrated in the well-known account of Christ and the adulterous woman as recorded at John 8:1-11. A harlot was caught in the act of adultery and brought to Christ by a mob for His judgment. The Scribes and Pharisees were adamant in their desire to stone her to death as punishment. Christ, though, calmly asked the person among them without sin to cast the first stone: “He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone at her.” No one did. Realizing His point, the mob all quietly left. Christ then told the woman to go and sin no more.

You Must Forgive Others as God Has Forgiven You
Because Christians are commanded to have an infinite capacity to forgive others does not mean that we are to condone any and all behavior. The Scriptures are very clear as to how misbehavior is to be dealt with. A well-known example is the Christian man who regularly committed adultery with his stepmother and openly bragged about it. Paul said this behavior was considered vile even among non-Christians. Paul firmly stated that Christians should not condone this behavior and, further, that they were to clearly communicate their condemnation to the man. He stressed at 1 Cor. 5: 9-13 that they should do this by no longer “mixing with and calling and treating those [persons who refuse to obey Christian principles] as brothers.”

A short while later, though, in 2 Cor. 2: 6, Paul tells us that this reprimand was effective in changing the man’s adulterous behavior. He states, “This rebuke given by the majority is sufficient for such a man, so that, on the contrary now, you should kindly forgive and comfort him, to ensure that he is not swallowed up by being overly depressed.” The man had changed his ways, which was the purpose of the social ostracism. Now that he had repented, Paul admonished the Corinthians that they should “confirm your love for him.” The Bible, for this reason, stresses that we should have infinite love and forgiveness, yet at the same time try to help those who are sinning. This means our love should be unconditional, yet should not condone or encourage sin. God does not discipline someone merely because they broke a law (as is often the case in the world) but, as the Scriptures state in numerous places, God disciplines those He loves. In other words, under the law of love, punishment is not for retribution but for reformation and rehabilitation.

Conversely, many of the same people who condemn Christianity for allowing slavery also condemn God for creating hell for sinners. Yet, allowing evil and doing nothing is condoning it—saying that evil does not matter. If God has moral judgments, a
just God would reward good and punish evil, even though humans have the freedom to do either. If God ignores evil, He is neither just nor moral (Strobel, 1998, p. 165).

Obeying the Spirit of the Law Over the Letter

Tragically, all too often Christians become so caught up in obeying the letter of the law that their conduct is such that they are oblivious to the whole purpose of the law. This is why, when asked which commandment was most important, Christ answered, “You must love God with your whole heart, whole mind and whole strength” (Mark 12: 29). The second commandment is “that you must love your neighbor as yourself.” Christ clearly emphasized that no other commandment is greater than these. This is why Matthew states, “The whole law is succinctly summarized in this single commandment.” To love God and our fellow humans is a Christian’s first obligation. One who loves his neighbor obviously would not steal from him, commit adultery with his wife, nor lie to him or abuse him under a slavery system. If we all loved our neighbor as our self, little need would exist for the millions of laws on the books of the world’s nations today. Laws are needed only for lawbreakers. As Black notes, there is “more law in societies where social control is comparatively weak...law varies inversely with other social controls” (1976, p. 6).

It is true that many of a country’s laws must be obeyed if, for no other reason, than to ensure that the nation’s social system works smoothly. In the United States, a postcard must be a certain size before it can be mailed because the mail handling equipment will handle mail that is only a certain size. If it is smaller, then the card may jam in the machine. It is obviously foolish to transgress these laws, which are actually “regulations” designed mostly to facilitate expediency and lower costs. Few of us have problems obeying these laws anyway.
The laws with which we generally have problems are those that relate more to the “love thy neighbor” command. The most common crime in almost all nations is some form of thievery, which is obviously a violation of this commandment because loving one’s neighbor precludes stealing from him. Other common crimes include assault and battery and various types of larcenies such as passing bad checks. A review of The Uniform Crime Report (a systematic tally of crime in the United States) vividly illustrates that the vast majority of crimes would not occur if we truly loved our neighbor. The major exception would be the drug-related offenses—but even here, if the drug-users’ neighbors loved them, they would less likely be an abuser!

We must agree with King Solomon who wrote in the last verse of Ecclesiastes: “The conclusion of the matter after everything has been heard is, ‘Fear the true God and keep his commandments.’ This is the whole obligation of man and God himself will bring every sort of work into judgment as to whether it is good or bad.” And we must temper this scripture with John 15:11-14 which states: “These things I've spoken to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be made full. This is my commandment, that you love one another just as I have loved you. No one has love greater than this, that someone should surrender his soul on behalf of his friends. You are my friend if you do what I command you.” This type of command was a strong reason the Western form of slavery ended.

And In Conclusion

The claim that the Scriptures justify pre-mid-1800s slavery as practiced in America, and therefore that Christianity is discredited, is erroneous. Yet, this is the conclusion that many critics of Christianity (and theism) have advocated. Weinberg, quoted above, after giving this (and “the harm done by religious enthusiasm”) as major reasons to reject theism and accept atheism, concludes
One of the great achievements of science has been, if not to make it impossible for intelligent people to be religious, then at least to make it possible for them not to be religious. We should not retreat from this accomplishment (2000, p. 248).

As we have now seen, his thesis is faulty as, likewise, is his conclusion.

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**References**


