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Social Reform

THE BIBLE AND REFORM

At first glance the Bible appears to be conservative, if not reactionary, on matters of social reform. Paul encourages the escaped slave Onesimus to return to his master, Philemon, encouraging the two to recognize each other's faith. There is no hint that Paul thinks slavery to be morally wrong. At the end of some of his letters Paul tells wives to submit to their husbands and slaves to obey their masters (Eph. 5:22–6:9; Col. 3:18–22; Titus 2:9). To the Corinthians he urges believers to 'lead the life that the Lord has assigned', and not seek to change status. He does say that slaves should take the opportunity to become free if it presents itself, but otherwise remain content, knowing that a slave is 'free in the Lord' (1 Cor. 7:17–24).



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Seen this way, the Bible is a conservative book. It enjoins all Christians to submit to authority, whether it be the civil magistrate or the elder of the church (1 Pet. 2:13; Heb. 13:7). Rather than revolution, enduring persecution is the proper Christian alternative to oppression. Yet that is only half the story. The other half is that because of its fundamental principles of impartiality, equality and justice, the Bible is actually a revolutionary book (revolution with a small 'r'). That is why the Bible has been one of the greatest agents for social reform in all history.

Understanding the Bible on social ethics must involve a good deal more than selecting a few texts. As we have already seen the Scripture has much to say about social justice and about treating fellow human beings with dignity because they bear God's image. While one does not find abundant numbers of texts urging the end of slavery, the entire thrust of the Bible is toward the full recognition of human dignity. That reading is what inspired reformers such as William Wilberforce to lead the charge against slavery in the British Empire in the early nineteenth century. That same reading informed those who fought for the end of child labor, the abuse of women, and the scarcity of health care.

While, indeed, the Bible is generally conservative on submission to authority, there are plenty of indications





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that conscience must be followed even when the civil authorities command immorality. Jesus Himself often defended the oppressed, in disregard for the rules and regulations imposed by the religious leaders of His day. He dignified women of ill repute (Luke 7:37ff.; John 4:17ff). He healed the poor and oppressed (Matt. 11:5). He could also reach out to oppressors. The story of Zacchaeus describes one of the hated tax-gatherers as being summoned by Jesus and having his life turned around. When the Sanhedrin, the council of supreme Jewish authority, ordered the disciples to stop proclaiming the name of Jesus, their answer was: ‘Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard’ (Acts 4:19-20). The early Christians were willing to be persecuted, even put to death, rather than disobey God’s commands.

SLAVERY

Reading the Bible for its ‘conservative’ message has led some to justify slavery. Seeing that slavery existed in ancient Israel meant they could justify holding slaves in modern times. True enough, in the Old Testament provision was made for the purchase of slaves as long as they were from outside Israel (Lev. 25:44-6). Yet slaves had both civil and religious rights. A slave could get free



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after serving for six years. If captured when married, the marriage was honored. Slaves observed the Sabbath. Upon circumcision the male slave could participate in all the religious feasts.¹

Modern chattel slavery has almost nothing in common with slavery in the ancient world, and particularly in ancient Israel. The first *modern* slave-trade dates back at least to 1444, when a Portuguese ship prepared to land their cargo of 235 African slaves near Lagos, Portugal. From then on the slave trade grew until it reached astonishing proportions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in North America. The trade was based on man-stealing, a practice strongly condemned in Scripture (1 Tim. 1:10). And no civil rights were accorded the slaves. Modern slavery was based increasingly on race, a concept that developed during the Enlightenment.

While the church was slow to see the full evil of modern chattel slavery, when it awakened to it change was relentlessly fought for. The historian G. M. Trevelyan once said that abolition is ‘one of the turning points in the history of the world.’

1. There were some differences between male and female slaves in the Old Testament. See, ‘Slave, Slavery’, in *The Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, Merrill C. Tenney, gen. ed., Moisés Silva, rev. ed., vol. 5 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), pp. 533–41.



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Undoubtedly one of the most significant episodes in the abolition of slavery occurred in Great Britain at the turn of the nineteenth century. The British had become involved in the slave trade in the sixteenth century, and by the eighteenth much of the economy of the British Empire (as much as 80%) depended on sugar, tobacco, and cotton grown in the New World by slaves. British ships were sold to the French, the Dutch, the Spanish and the Portuguese for their own slave trade. The merchants would bring goods to West Africa in order to purchase slaves, transport them across the Atlantic, and put them to work in the West Indies and other parts of North America in order to grow these products which would be sold not only to Great Britain but around the world. To give some idea of the horrors of the slave trade, it is estimated that in a given year during its heyday some forty thousand men, women and children were carried across the Atlantic Ocean. Close to 20 per cent of them died during the mid-passage, and many more upon arrival. The working conditions on the plantations varied from the horrific to the bearable. Families were separated, and slaves worked in the hot fields under the control of brutal foremen.

The Quaker Christians were the first to campaign against slavery. They wrote numerous tracts and presented petitions to the British Parliament beginning in 1783. Considered somewhat eccentric, the Quakers were not always listened



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to. But one remarkable person did command the respect of Parliament. Perhaps the greatest social reformer of the last few centuries is William Wilberforce (1759–1833). Independently wealthy, he was rather a decadent young man. In 1780, while still a student at Cambridge University, he became a Member of Parliament. In 1783 he met the Rev. James Ramsay, a ship’s surgeon who had witnessed first-hand the atrocities of slavery on the plantations in the Leeward Islands. Ramsay wrote an influential *Essay on the Treatment and Conversion of African Slaves in the British Sugar Colonies* (1784) which had the double effect of raising the concern of the British and angering the slave-owners.

The story has been told a number of times.² Sometime around 1785 Wilberforce became an evangelical believer. He associated with ‘non-conformists’, that is Christians outside of the Anglican Church. His friend and collaborator, Thomas Clarkson, also a believer, had written a prize-winning essay on slavery while at Cambridge. He had been urged by the Quakers to draw a commitment from Wilberforce to work through the Parliament for the abolition of slavery. Another friend, John Newton, was a former slave trader and now an Anglican minister. He urged the young Wilberforce to stay in

2. Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace: William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007). His own writings have also been published. See *A Practical View of Christianity* (Peabody, MA: Henderson, 1996, 2011).



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Parliament and continue to fight the cause from within. His greatest friend, William Pitt, the future Prime Minister, also urged him to introduce legislation into Parliament against the slave trade. Wilberforce's diaries record that he resolved to dedicate his life to two major causes. In 1787 the entry reads: 'God Almighty has set before me two great objects, the suppression of the Slave Trade and the Reformation of Manners [an older expression for moral values].'



A group called the Society for Effecting the Abolition of the Slave Trade was organized on May 22, 1787. For the first time Quakers, other non-conformists and Anglicans came together, united against the slave trade. Wilberforce joined the group officially in 1791. This society tirelessly campaigned, wrote, preached, and stirred as much public consciousness as possible. Despite a great deal of opposition, principally from those who recognized the great loss of profits that would occur should slavery end, eventually the tide was changed. An important contribution to the campaign was by the great chinaware maker Josiah Wedgewood. The design of a slave in chains kneeling with hands raised was engraved into a medallion. The inscription, 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?' spoke louder than many words. The Society tried to influence other European nations committed to the slave trade. They published books by ex-slaves, the most influential of which was Olaudah Equiano's *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the*



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African, published in 1789. Equiano was bought by Michael Pascal of the Royal Navy, and sent to work in the British colony Virginia. He was later able to purchase his freedom. He became an evangelical Christian, strongly influenced by the evangelist George Whitefield. His book described the cruelty of the treatment of slaves in Virginia. It caused a sensation, and helped many British people become aware of the evils of this institution.

The work of the Society is considered the first of its kind, a grass-roots effort for human rights, wherein people from a variety of backgrounds and social classes worked together, without pay, to end social injustices. Despite numerous battles with illness, Wilberforce was able to campaign in Parliament with legislation, powerful speeches, and tireless lobbying, drawing on evidence from various testimonies about the horrible conditions of the mid-passage across the Atlantic, and the wretched ways in which slaves were used.

It is important to underscore the radically *Christian* nature of these campaigns. Wilberforce was soundly converted, in part through his fellow advocate Isaac Milner in 1784. He records that hitherto he had neglected ‘a sense of my great sinfulness in having so long neglected the unspeakable mercies of my God and Savior.’ The next year he was dissuaded from entering the ministry by William Pitt, who told him, ‘Surely the principles as



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well as the practice of Christianity are simple, and lead us not to meditation only but to action.³

In 1792 slavery was abolished in Great Britain. The hope was to follow this domestic model abroad. The English poet and hymn-writer William Cowper wrote these lines: ‘We have no slaves at home – Then why abroad? Slaves cannot breathe in England; if their lungs receive our air, that moment they are free. They touch our country, and their shackles fall. That’s noble, and bespeaks a nation proud. And jealous of the blessing, Spread it then, And let it circulate through every vein.’⁴ The slave trade throughout the Empire was abolished by an act of Parliament on March 25, 1807. Slavery itself, though unsupported by British law, remained a practice until the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, voted in three weeks before Wilberforce’s death.

The principal arguments advanced by Wilberforce and the other abolitionists were biblical. The trade was morally appalling, and an affront to the dignity of human beings as God’s image-bearers. Owners and traders were greedy and avaricious. In a speech to the House of Commons in 1787 Wilberforce said: ‘So enormous,

3. William Wilberforce, *Private Papers* (1897 reprinted, Nabu Press, 2013), p. 13.

4. *William Cowper: Selected Poems*, ed. Nick Rhodes (Oxford: Routledge, 2003), p. 84.



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so dreadful, so irremediable did the Trade's wickedness appear that my own mind was completely made up for Abolition. Let the consequences be what they would, I from this time determined that I would never rest until I had effected its abolition.' His Christian principles led him not only to fight for abolition but to set up what he called 'true commercial principles', and even some compensation to the owners for the loss incurred. It must be stressed that Wilberforce did not act alone. We have noted the significance of his friendships. We should also note the importance of his networks. Among the most important were the Clapham Group, Anglicans who were members of Holy Trinity Church, on Clapham Common, then a village to the south of London. They shared various convictions but also prayed together and collaborated on various projects. Today we would call them a 'support group', without which some of Wilberforce's energies might not have been what they were. So, while Wilberforce was an extraordinary individual, the power of such networks is almost always present when reformers are successful. It is said, again by Trevelyan, that one result of this kind of collaboration was the strengthening of the British political process.

CIVIL RIGHTS IN NORTH AMERICA

Things went in a different direction in North America. Despite many attempts by abolitionists to counter slavery,



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they were unsuccessful. Officially the slave trade was forbidden in most states, and yet a lively black market ensured the smuggling in of slaves in large numbers. Slavery was so entrenched, particularly in the South, that neither the rhetoric of the abolitionists nor the pleas of authors, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, with her best-selling *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), could convince southerners to give up the practice. A bloody civil war ensued.

Although the Emancipation Proclamation of 1863, and then the terms of surrender by the South at the end of the American Civil War in 1865, spelled out provisions for the full equality of racial minorities, particularly black people, the decades that ensued saw the rise of policies which kept minorities from full participation in society. Three major barriers were erected which ensured segregation and injustice. The first was court-sanctioned segregation based on race. In a case known as *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) the United States Supreme Court upheld a State of Louisiana statute requiring separate accommodations on public transportation for people of color. The effect of this decision was to enact the policies based on the doctrine of 'separate but equal', a piece of fiction which kept blacks in ghettos of sorts, including separate schools, separate hospitals, and so on. Second, there was the disenfranchisement of minorities, particularly in the Southern states. Blacks were kept



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from being registered to vote, or suppressed altogether. Third, acts of private and vigilante violence against black people, including lynching, continued, unimpeded by government or law.

From this time until the 1950s attempts were made at civil rights reforms by groups such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). A landmark Supreme Court decision in 1954 had the effect of reversing *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Called *Brown v. Board of Education*, it declared that keeping races separate in matters of education was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment of the United States Constitution which calls every human being equal. Still, change only occurred slowly. People responded to the decision and others like it by ignoring it. Thus, very little was changed.

At that point the black leadership developed a strategy of non-violent resistance. This led to boycotts, such as the one in Montgomery Alabama, kindled by Rosa Parks's refusal to move to the back of a public bus (1955). The dynamic leader Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968) was one of the main organizers of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in the United States (SCLC). The group aimed to effect the end of segregation, the unjust separation of blacks and whites in the American South. The *Christian* aspect of the Conference was a critical part of the strategy. King's



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primary inspiration was the Christian faith. He was also impressed with Mahatma Gandhi's teachings on non-violence. An ordained Baptist minister, he was trained in theology and a keen observer of trends and of human nature. King and the SCLC led many different marches. He was often arrested and put into jail. His home was burned down three times. He was stabbed once.

In early April, 1963 King and his colleagues staged a number of sit-ins and marches against racism in Birmingham, Alabama. The local judge ordered the cessation of all such demonstrations. King politely replied that they would not. So he and several colleagues were thrown into a stark jail. He was given a newspaper in which he read a letter from eight white clergy criticizing him for being an outsider and lacking proper patience. In response, King wrote one of the seminal texts of the Civil Rights movement, now known as the 'Letter from Birmingham City Jail'. By disobeying local laws, they were obeying the higher law of God. The major themes of the letter include an appeal to the white clergy to the effect that the cause of equality could be delayed no longer. 'Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere,' says the letter. Repentance will be called for not only for the hateful words of bad people but for the silence of good people. The letter cites the importance of good motives as well as good actions.





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King quotes T. S. Eliot to the effect that there is no greater treason than to do the right deed for the wrong reason.⁵

The most memorable civil rights demonstration was the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom (August 28, 1963). Some 200,000 to 300,000 people participated, blacks and non-blacks alike. The high point was Martin Luther King, Jr., standing before the Lincoln Memorial and delivering one of the greatest speeches of all time. Known now as the 'I Have a Dream' speech, it was the key factor leading to the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which outlawed all forms of racial discrimination and paved the way for the right to vote without any qualification based on race.

What many people do not remember is the difficulty it took to organize this rally. Various factions with differing agendas had to be urged to come and be represented. The somewhat awkward title of 'jobs and freedom' was a rallying point. Christians felt that only with a united witness could they persuade the country. Dr King's speech was full of biblical allusions. They were in the King James Version, used by most evangelicals in the 1960s. Prominent among them are Amos 5:24: 'But let justice roll down like

5. A recent annotated edition of the letter is Peter A. Lillback, *Annotations on a Letter that Changed the World from a Birmingham Jail, 04-16-63* (King of Prussia, PA: The Providence Forum Press, 2013).



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the waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream'; Isaiah 40:4-5: 'Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low...'; Psalm 30:5: 'Weeping may tarry for the night, but joy comes in the morning'; and Galatians 3:28: 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free...'. Like Abraham Lincoln before him, he combined biblical stories such as the exodus with the modern issue of justice and emancipation.

Simply quoting Scripture does not make a speech Christian, any more than the ability to use biblical images makes a movement Bible-based. Indeed, the Civil Rights movement was something of a mixed bag. And yet the Southern Christian Leadership Conference originated in the black churches. The church is the institution that brought enslaved Africans through their suffering, and declared their essential identity as human beings, God's people from whose love nothing could separate them (Rom. 8:38-9). Using the name 'Christian' was a deliberate choice, as the organization wanted to stress the spiritual nature of its work from the beginning. Among the principles reflecting these foundations were: (1) The desire for white Southerners to feel involved. Not all Southerners were racist, and the SCLC wanted whites on their board. By dropping the word 'Negro', which was in the original title, whites felt more welcomed. (2) Black Americans were encouraged to seek justice, not revenge. (3) The philosophy of non-violence





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was to be respected. The SCLC motto was, ‘not one hair of one head of one white person shall be harmed.’ This last principle was controversial. Later civil rights groups, such as the Black Panthers or the Nation of Islam, did not eschew violence. But the SCLC wanted no one to be able to call them violent, believing, as they did, that Jesus was a non-violent reformer.

After the heyday of the SCLC, other movements helped bring a measure of equality and justice to the American South. And ‘although the SCLC has not forgotten its original goals, the focus has shifted to new causes, including health care, job-site safety, and justice in environmental and prison system matters, as well as fair treatment for refugees.’⁶ The SCLC’s Christian character is still central to its identity. Is Christianity practical? Very much so. The SCLC was undoubtedly called ‘for such a time as this’ and life after the 1960s for black people, while still full of difficulties, is very different from what it was, thanks in large part to the Christian approach to reform.

6. Elizabeth B. Cooksey, ‘Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC)’. *New Georgia Encyclopedia*, 30 August 2013 [<http://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/history-archaeology/southern-christian-leadership-conference-sclc>].



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Health Care

HOSPITALS

A different kind of social reform, but no less important, is health care. The Bible teaches that one of the devastating effects of the fall is disease and disability. While disease may be the result of specific divine judgment for specific sin, often the two are only indirectly related. At times disease is allowed by God to teach us something. In the case of Job, who suffered so greatly, there was a confrontation in the supernatural realm between God and Satan. Satan's challenge was that Job was faithful to God only because God had made him comfortable. When his health was taken away, Job remained faithful, thus encouraging all of the subsequent generations who read the book that carries his name. Disease in the Bible is sometimes