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The Biblical Argument for Slavery: Can the Bible Mislead? A Case Study in Hermeneutics

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No Christian theologian living today would support slavery. The slave has three defining characteristics: his/her person is the property of another human being, his/her will is completely subject to his/her owner's authority, and his/her labour is obtained by coercion.¹ I would think we are agreed that slavery so defined cannot be justified under any circumstances in our society. To enslave another human being would be sinful. Things were very different, however, in the ancient world. In the ages when the Bible was written slavery was a universal phenomenon. It was part and parcel of the culture and people accepted it as a fact of life. There were a few pagan moralists who spoke against the abuse of slaves, but in the ancient world there was never anything like an abolition of slavery movement.²

Slavery was not judged to be a moral evil.

So far so good but now it must also be noted that the Bible, in both the Old and New Testaments, endorses slavery.³ This claim is often rejected today and it will need to be proved conclusively, but if it is true, then here is an example of a social structure endorsed by the Bible which can no longer be condoned. If the Bible does in fact approve of slavery, although we modern day Christians are agreed that to make another person a slave or to own a slave would be

¹ Definition taken from D. B. Davies, *The Problem of Slavery in Western Cultures* (Cornell University Press, 1966), 31.

² See M. Finley (ed.), *Slavery in Classical Antiquity: Views and Controversies* (Cambridge University Press, 1960); S. Bartchy, *Mallon Chresai: First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Cor 7:21* (Montana: Scholars Press, 1973), et al.

³ See the descriptive article on slavery in the OT and NT in the *New Bible Dictionary* (2nd ed., London: IVP, 1986), 1121-1125.

sinful, then we have an example where following the Bible literally could mislead. In this instance obedience to the clear teaching of Scripture would lead us into sin. If this is so in this case, then perhaps it could be so in other matters as well. Many Christians, as we all know, believe that a clear parallel is to be seen in biblical comments about the subordination of women. It is claimed that the Bible's teaching on this matter is to be understood largely in the same way as the Bible's teaching on slavery. In both cases the Scriptures reflect social realities accepted by every one at the time when written and endorses them. The Bible gives directives to ensure the welfare of woman and slaves but does not demand their emancipation. Today another standard is required. Human beings should not be enslaved and women should be respected as the social equals of men. In these matters we should not follow the letter of Scripture.

If it can be shown that the Bible does in fact unambiguously endorse both the institution and the practice of slavery, although we cannot now accept slavery in any form, then we will have discovered something about the nature of biblical revelation which will help resolve the present debate about the status and role of women. We will have learnt that Scripture can endorse social structures no longer acceptable, just as we have learnt that the Bible can endorse scientific ideas no longer tenable. The Bible is authoritative in matters of faith and conduct but not necessarily in science, or on how to order social relations.

The Bible does not endorse slavery.

Those who argue today for the permanent subordination of women are united in holding that the Bible does not endorse slavery. They are aware that their opponents make this claim and that if it is allowed it would completely undermine their case. They claim that the Bible only regulates the existing institution of slavery to ensure the care of slaves and lays down principles which look to its abolition. For example Knight asks: 'Does Paul's instructions for slaves and masters mean that the Scriptures regard this relationship as a God-ordained institution to be perpetuated? The answer with which we must respond,' he says, 'is no. The apostle Paul instructs men and women in the situation in which they find themselves without implying that he as the spokesman for God desires to perpetuate this situation.'⁴ Similarly Hurley writes, 'The New Testament treats parent/child and husband/wife relations as ordained of God.

⁴ *The New Testament Teaching on Role Relationship of Men and Women* (Baker: Grand Rapids, 1977), 22.

Nowhere, however, does it suggest the same for slavery.' And, 'Paul does not endorse slavery, but rather regulates it and indicates its undesirable nature.⁵ Parallels in thought can be found in Clark⁶ and in more than one place in the recent large symposium edited by Piper and Grudem.⁷ Even John Stott quite explicitly takes this position.⁸ All these writers who support the permanent subordination of women insist that the Bible does not endorse slavery. Piper and Grudem boldly say the claim that biblical teachings on slavery and the subordination of women are similar is 'superficial and misguided'.⁹

There is no ambiguity at all in the above assertions. These well informed authors insist that the Bible does not support slavery. Many evangelicals would unquestionably accept the word of these conservative Christian leaders. If they say the Bible only regulates slavery and nowhere endorses it then that settles the issue. A little knowledge of history, however, muddies the water. Most theologians until late last century held that the Bible sanctioned slavery. This view is clearly expressed by Clement of Alexandria, Origen, Augustine, Chrysostom, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin and many others.¹⁰ Stuhlmacher maintains that the suggestion that the Bible only allows for slavery while laying down principles for its eventual overthrow originates, as a scholarly exegetical opinion, in the 1875 commentary on Philemon by J. B. Lightfoot.¹¹ (This was of course an often given, popular opinion of emancipationists.) He argues that Lightfoot departed from the well grounded and critical understanding of Paul's view of slavery as something to be accepted,¹² because he stood in the midst of the nineteenth century British empire emancipation movement. He implies that Lightfoot unwittingly imposed his own moral values onto the text. In his own discussion of

⁵ *Man and Woman in Biblical Perspective* (London: IVP, 1981), 159.

⁶ *Man and Woman in Christ* (Michigan: Servant, 1980), 153–160.

⁷ *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood* (Wheaton: Crossway, 1991), 65–66, 176–67.

⁸ *Issues Facing Christians Today* (2nd ed.; London: Collins, 1990), 267.

⁹ *op. cit.*, 66.

¹⁰ See A. Rupperecht, 'Attitudes on slavery among the Church Fathers', in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. R. N. Longenecker and M. C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 261–277; J. Kahl, 'The Church as Slave-owner', in *The Misery of Christianity* (London: Penguin, 1971), 28–33. See also P. Stuhlmacher, *Der Brief An Philemon* (Neukirchener: Benziger, 1975), 58–66 which has an excursus on how theologians have understood Paul's teaching on slavery.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, 64.

¹² For an endorsement of this see, J. M. G. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *NTS* 37, 1991, 161–186.

this matter Lightfoot says that the lead given in the emancipation of slaves is, 'one of the greatest moral conquests which England has ever achieved.'¹³

The biblical case for slavery

The argument that the Bible unambiguously endorses slavery has a long history but the case was not developed in any way until the 18th and 19th centuries. Only at this time did a detailed and well argued 'biblical theology' supporting slavery emerge. It was constructed by evangelical scholars living in the slave holding states in the south of the United States who were bitterly opposed to emancipation. They argued that the Bible from cover to cover endorsed slavery. Their opinion is summed up in the Old School (Presbyterian) General Assembly report of 1845 which concluded that slavery was based on 'some of the plainest declarations of the Word of God.'¹⁴ Those who took this position were conservative evangelicals of reformed persuasion. Among their number were the best conservative theologians and exegetes of the day, including, Robert Dabney, James Thornwell and the great Charles Hodge of Princeton—fathers of twentieth century evangelicalism and of the modern expression of the doctrine of biblical inerrancy.¹⁵ As late as 1957 John Murray of Westminster Theological Seminary was still arguing that these men were basically correct in their understanding of the Bible. He too argued that the Bible allows for the institution of slavery.¹⁶

These southern evangelicals contended relentlessly that slavery was explicitly endorsed by both Testaments and to oppose that institution was a denial of the authority of Scripture.¹⁷ In the protracted debate with other Christians the southerners were able to

¹³ *St Paul's Epistle to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, rev. ed. 1879), 320. It is interesting to note that the next scholarly English commentary on this epistle dissents from Lightfoot's opinion, calling it 'a mistake'. See M. R. Vincent, *The Epistle to the Philippians and Philemon* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1897), 166.

¹⁴ Quoted in J. Murray, *Principles of Conduct* (London: IVP, 1957), 260.

¹⁵ See D. F. Wells, *Reformed Theology in America* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), 1985.

¹⁶ Op. cit., 93–102. Murray accepts that Scripture endorses slavery but to safeguard himself he takes up the argument popularised by Thornwell that slavery is only the property of one man in the labour of another, not the property of man in man. This is an absurd bit of special pleading. Slavery by definition involves owning the person and his labour.

¹⁷ By far the best account of this story is H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . Racism in Southern Religion, 1780–1910* (North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1972). See also W. S. Jenkins, *Pro-Slavery Thought in the Old South*, (Mass: Peter Smith, 1960); W. M. Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women* (Ontario: Herald, 1983), 31–66.

refine their arguments to such a point that their opponents found appeal to the Bible pointless. Because these defenders of slavery had the very highest doctrine of Scripture and developed their argument in the face of unmitigated opposition what they concluded is of utmost importance. In outlining the biblical case for slavery I will therefore briefly summarise their case. The written defences of slavery from the pens of these evangelicals were legion but they are not easily obtainable today. The most accessible original sources I discovered were the collection of essays in the reprinted book, *Cotton is King and Pro-Slavery Arguments*, first published in 1860,¹⁸ and the Banner of Truth reprints of the writings of Robert Lewis Dabney,¹⁹ James Henry Thornwell²⁰ and Charles Hodge.²¹ No one can really appreciate how certain these evangelicals (and others I will quote from secondary sources) were that the Bible endorsed slavery, or of the vehemence of their argumentation unless something from their writings is read. I can only give a pale reflection of their righteous zeal for 'the biblical case for slavery'.

1. Slavery established

The curse of Noah was seen as the divine initiation of slavery. After he awoke and discovered that one of his sons, Ham, had seen him naked Noah cursed him and through him his son Canaan saying: 'a slave of slaves shall you be to your brothers' (Gen 9:25). In the first

¹⁸ (Ed.) E. N. Cartwright, reprinted by 'The Basic Afro-American Reprint Library', 1968.

¹⁹ *Discussions of Robert Lewis Dabney*, vols. 1-3 (London: Banner of Truth, 1981). Dabney's biblical arguments for slavery can be found in vol. 3, 33-38. When read with his two essays in volume 2 which outline his opposition, firstly to the ordination of women and secondly, to the ordination of negroes we catch a good glimpse, first hand, of the opinions of the man, Archibald Alexander, the great reformed scholar called, 'the best teacher of theology in the United States, if not in the world'. (This quote is taken from the dust jacket of the reprint). I was not able to obtain his 'full biblical case for slavery' entitled *The Defence of Virginia and the South*, to which he refers in the above essay.

²⁰ *The Collected Writings of James Henry Thornwell*, ed. D. M. Palmer, vols. 1-4 (London: Banner of Truth, 1986) and *The Life and Letters of James Henry Thornwell*, ed. B. M. Palmer (London: Banner of Truth, 1986). His defence of slavery is mainly found in vol. 4, pages 387-436. He also refers to other writings of his on this matter which were not available to me.

²¹ Dabney and Thornwell argue that the institution of slavery is endorsed by the Bible and therefore pleasing to God but it is to be noted that Hodge was more moderate. He only argued that the institution was allowed in Scripture and therefore by God. His extended defence of slavery is found in his essay in *Cotton is King*, but also given briefly in his commentary, *Ephesians* (London: Banner of Truth, 1964), 365-366.

instance this story was quoted to prove that God himself instituted slavery. Thus Alexander McCaine, a southern evangelical, quite typically concluded, Noah 'spoke under the impulse and dictation of heaven. His words were the words of God himself, and by them was slavery ordained. This was an early arrangement by the Almighty, to be perpetuated for all time.'²² John Murray also sees slavery being prophetically established in this story.²³ The second deduction drawn from this passage was that it made the white races supreme and the black races their servants. Ham according to a long tradition, was taken as the father of the black races of Africa, Shem the father of the Semites and Japheth the father of the white gentile peoples. This interpretation is not given in recent commentaries but I find it clearly spelt in my copy of Griffith Thomas' commentary on Genesis coming from about 1920.²⁴ Here we need to recall that until very recently most white people thought that they were ordained by God to lead the black races and for this reason this interpretation of the Noah story seemed very natural. In South Africa, the Reformed Church also repeatedly appealed to this text to support the right of whites to rule over blacks.

2. Slavery practised

The fact that all the patriarchs had slaves was taken to be of great significance. Abraham, 'the friend of God' and 'the father of the faithful', brought slaves from Haran (Gen 12:50), armed 318 slaves born in his own house (Gen 14:14), included them in his property list (Gen 12:16, 24:35–36), and willed them to his son Isaac (Gen 26:13–14). What is more, Scripture says God blessed Abraham by multiplying his slaves (Gen 24:35). In Abraham's household Sarah was set over the slave, Hagar. The angel tells her, 'return to your mistress and submit to her' (Gen 16:9).²⁵ At God's command Joshua took slaves (Josh 9:23), as did David (1 Kings 8:2,6) and Solomon (1 Kings 9:20–21). Likewise, Job whom the Bible calls 'blameless and upright', was 'a great slaveholder'.²⁶ If these godly men held

²² *Slavery Defended From Scripture*, 1842, quoted in *In His Image*, 130.

²³ *Principles of Conduct*, 96.

²⁴ *Genesis: A Devotional Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, reprint 1953), 95–99.

²⁵ See A. B. Bledsoe, 'Liberty and Slavery', in *Cotton is King*, 338–340; T. Stringfellow, 'The Bible Argument: or Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation', *ibid.*, 464–472, or in more detail, J. H. Hopkins, *A Scriptural, Ecclesiastical, and Historical View of Slavery, from the Days of the Patriarch Abraham, to the Nineteenth Century*, (New York, 1864), 76ff.

²⁶ So Stringfellow, *op. cit.*, 470–471. He refers to Job 1:15–17, 3:19, 4:18, 7:2, 31:13, 42:8 etc., where Job speaks of his slaves.

servants in bondage, it was impossible therefore to consider slave holding a sin. Bledsoe is only one of many who concluded just the opposite. The 'sin of appalling magnitude' was not slave holding but the claim by the abolitionists that slave holding was a sin. To suggest such a thing was 'an aggravated crime against God'.²⁷

3. *The moral Law sanctioned and regulated slavery*

The fact that slavery is twice mentioned in the ten commandments (the 4th and 10th) was also seen to be very important in revealing the mind of God. The ceremonial law was temporary but not the moral law.

This perfectly reflected the mind of God. These Christians recognised that here as elsewhere in the moral law God was regulating slavery and instructing masters how to behave towards their slaves. They thus asked the question of the abolitionists: would God regulate something in the moral law which was intrinsically wrong? The importance of these references to slavery in the decalogue is seen in the address 'to all the churches of Jesus Christ' put out by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the Confederate States of America in December 1861. It began, 'God sanctions slavery in the first table of the decalogue, and Moses treats it as an institution to be regulated, not abolished; legitimated and not condemned.'²⁸ Because the opponents of slavery argued that God only permitted slavery, in a way similar to divorce, Leviticus 25:44–46 became a key text in the biblical case for slavery. In this passage of Scripture, which has God himself speaking, the Jews are told, 'you may also buy male and female slaves from among the nations . . . you may bequeath them to your sons after you, to inherit as a possession for ever.' If I may quote just one typical example, the Revd James Smiley, an old school Presbyterian, took this to mean that God had given 'a written permit, to the Hebrews, then the best people in the world, to buy, hold and bequeath, men and women, in perpetual servitude.'²⁹ Charles Hodge summed up the conclusions of these evangelicals when he wrote, 'the fact that the Mosaic institutions recognised the lawfulness of slavery is a point too plain to need proof, and is almost universally admitted.'³⁰

²⁷ Op. cit., 340.

²⁸ Quoted in *In His Image*, 196.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132. For a similar opinion see also Bledsoe, 340, and Stringfellow, 476 in *Cotton is King*.

³⁰ See his essay, 'The Bible Argument On Slavery', in *Cotton is King*, 859.

4. Jesus accepted slavery

The Gospels do not record a single word by Jesus which could be read as explicitly endorsing slavery, a point abolitionists were quick to note. But the evangelicals who adamantly held that the Bible sanctioned slavery had a reply. They noted that in the Gospels the specific word for a slave (*doulos*) is found over 70 times. In some of the best known parables slaves are prominent characters (see Matt 13:24–30, 18:23–35, 22:1–14, Lk 12:35–40, 14:15–24 etc),³¹ and Jesus often encountered slavery (eg Lk 7:2–10, 22:50 etc). But not one word of criticism did the Lord ever utter against slavery. He was quick to attack moral evil but not slavery. His silence, rather than being a criticism of slavery, the southern evangelicals argued, showed that he approved of slavery. Stringfellow, sums up the case thus. ‘I affirm then, first (and no man denies) that Jesus has not abolished slavery by prohibitory command: and second, I affirm, he has introduced no new moral principle which can work its destruction, under the Gospel dispensation: and the principle relied on for this purpose, is a fundamental principle of the Mosaic law, under which slavery was instituted by Jehovah himself.’³²

5. The apostles upheld slavery

If Jesus did not comment directly on bondage it was different with the apostles. In no less than seven passages they speak directly in support of slavery, usually demanding that slaves accept their lot in life and telling masters to treat their slaves kindly (see 1 Cor 7:20–21, Eph 6:5–9, Col 3:22–25, 1 Tim 6:1–2, Tit 2:9–10, Phlm 10–18, 1 Peter 2:18–19). For many evangelicals who felt their conscience was bound by the letter of Scripture it was clear that the apostles endorsed slavery. In most instances their instructions to slaves were given in parallel to instructions to wives to be subordinate and children to be obedient. They reasoned that to reject the comments about slavery called into question the authority also of husbands and parents. It was obvious that the apostles held these matters to be of equal force.³³ In commenting on the related exhortations in

³¹ For a modern rediscovery of this see M. A. Beavis, ‘Ancient Slavery as an Interpretative Context for the New Testament Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1–8)’, *JBL*, 1992, 17–35.

³² *Cotton is King*, 480.

³³ As we have noted, most modern day supporters of the permanent subordination of women claim the addresses to slaves are somehow different. This claim is exegetically fallacious and was opposed by the pro-slavery theologians. As far as I

Ephesians, Hodge wrote, 'what the Scriptures teach, is not peculiar to the obedience of the slave to his master, but applies to all the other cases in which obedience is regulated . . . it applies to children in relation to their parents and wives to their husbands. Those invested with lawful authority are the representatives of God. The powers (ie those invested with authority) are ordained by God.³⁴ The instructions to slaves, Hodge and the others also noted, were grounded on weighty theology. For this reason they argued, they were not simply directives applicable only to a past age. Slaves were to be subservient and content with their lot because this was how they were to serve Christ (Eph 6:5, Col 3:22), honour God (1 Tim 6:1, Tit 2:9) and learn the Christian virtue of suffering (1 Peter 2:18). The example of Onisimus, which the abolitionists were wont to quote, was shown to point in the opposite direction. That Paul sent this Christian slave back to his Christian master proved that the institution of slavery was sacred to the apostle. But one text above all the others clinched the pro slavery argument. In 1 Tim 6:1–3 slaves are told to accept their status and obey their masters because this is commanded by 'our Lord Jesus Christ'. This text played the same role as 1 Tim 2:11–14 has in the debate about women. If we are committed to obey every word of Scripture then these two texts do not leave much room for emancipationists.

The essence of 'the biblical argument for slavery' was that 'human bondage' was grounded in the unchanging moral law, accepted by Jesus in the Gospels and unambiguously endorsed by the apostles. It therefore could not be sinful to buy, own, or sell slaves. There were other forceful arguments in favour of slavery which did not explicitly quote texts, though they often built on biblical ideas, but these are of less interest to us. One of the more important ones was the constant appeal to a God-given order of things. It was maintained that God had appointed some to lead and some to follow and to suggest that all were equal was absurd. Dabney thus wrote, 'men are not naturally equal, in strength, talent, virtue, or ability; and different orders of human beings naturally inherit different sets of rights and franchises'.³⁵ Or again, 'the negro . . . is a subservient race; he is made to follow, and not to lead'.³⁶ Similarly, the Vice President of the Confederate States, Alexander Stephens, asserted, 'the negro is not equal to the white man; slavery—subordination to the superior race

can see they were united in seeing these injunctions as of one kind. For example see Bledsoe, 354, Stringfellow, 480–481, Hodge, 848–849, in *Cotton is King*, and Thornwell in *Collected Writings*, 4, 386.

³⁴ *Ephesians*, 366.

³⁵ *Discussions*, 116.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 203.

—is his natural and normal condition,' and this is 'in conformity with the ordinance of the creator'.³⁷ Thornwell also concluded that God himself ordered society placing 'masters and servants (he is referring to slaves), each in their respective spheres'.³⁸ Ones position he attributes to 'divine providence'. Because this ordering comes from God there can be no thought of injustice. The slave has been 'assigned to a particular position in this world' by the Almighty.³⁹

The force of this cumulative argument, based so heavily on biblical exegesis, may not strike us today. It could be that we are so convinced that the Bible does not support slavery, or not care if it does for the whole issue seems somewhat irrelevant to us, that we fail to see just how compelling these arguments were in their day—and for that matter still are. The opinions of the proponents may bring this home to us. For example, in 1835, the Presbyterian Synod of West Virginia fiercely assailed abolition, calling it 'a dogma', contrary 'to the clearest authority of the word of God'.⁴⁰ In 1845 the Old School, Presbyterian Assembly stated that slavery was based on 'some of the plainest declarations of the Word of God'.⁴¹ Thomas Smith, added, 'upon this rock (the Bible) let the South build her house, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it'.⁴² Robert Thornwell in an even more combative spirit said, 'our policy is to push the Bible argument (for slavery) continually, drive abolitionism to the wall, to compel it to assume an anti-Christian position'.⁴³ Finally, we quote Charles Hodge. He wrote, 'if the present course of the abolitionists is right, then the course of Christ and the apostles was wrong.' To call slavery sinful, he added was, 'a direct impeachment of the Word of God'.⁴⁴ Such quotes could be multiplied many times over. These southern evangelicals, steeped in reformed theology, committed to the authority of Scripture, were totally convinced that the Bible endorsed both the practice and the institution of slavery. Nothing upset them more than the repeated attacks by those wanting to abolish slavery. How could anything clearly taught by Scripture possibly be wrong, let alone sinful, they asked? The only conclusion they could draw when the abolitionists attacked them for enslaving the Negro was that these people did not

³⁷ Quoted in *In His Image*, 183–184.

³⁸ *Collected Writings*, 4, 428.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 430.

⁴⁰ *In His Image*, 79.

⁴¹ Quoted in Murray, *Principles*, 260.

⁴² Quoted in *In His Image*, 172.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁴⁴ See *Cotton is King*, 849.

stand under Scripture. Frequently they called them 'heretics' and 'infidels'.⁴⁵

The bitter ill will between the pro and anti slavery forces in the Presbyterian church led to a split in 1838 between the conservative 'Old School' supporters of slavery and those committed to the abolition of slavery, 'the New School', who the southerners thought were not true Calvinists. This schism, the pro slavery group claimed, was a result of doctrinal differences, mainly centring on the authority of Scripture. But historians have generally concluded that the real issue was the differing attitudes to slavery.⁴⁶ Later when war broke out between the North and the South many of the southern clergy took up arms against the 'infidel' Yankee because they believed the truth of Scripture was at stake. R. J. Dabney was chief of staff for T. J. (Stonewall) Jackson.⁴⁷ These men were willing to kill or be killed because, for them, the authority of Scripture was the fundamental issue. The loss of the war did not change their mind. Southern evangelicals remained virtually united until very recent times in their belief that the Bible set whites over blacks.

Hermeneutical reflections

I do not think any Christian today would endorse slavery under any circumstances and certainly not as it was practised in the old south. In that context it degraded the blacks, excluding them from having any control whatsoever over their own life, and subjected them to terrible cruelties. They were slaves in perpetuity, their children were born into slavery, they were forbidden formal education, they were severely punished for any act of disobedience, their families were commonly split up as children were sold off, and the women were always vulnerable to the sexual advances of white men which they were powerless to resist. These things were, as a general rule, the norm. I do not have to mention the additional abuses which were very common, for slavery in the old south was by its very nature a terrible thing. It was a 'heinous sin' as the abolitionists repeatedly proclaimed.⁴⁸ Nevertheless, learned, devout evangelical Christians,

⁴⁵ *In His Image*, 187–197; Thornwell, *Collected Writings*, 405.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 89–91

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 189ff.

⁴⁸ There are several excellent collections of documents which describe North American slavery. Possibly, the most significant is Theodore Weld's, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses*, 1839, republished in *Slavery In America*, ed. R. O. Curry (Illinois: Peacock, 1972). See also W. L. Rose (ed.), *A Documentary History of Slavery in North America* (Oxford University Press, 1976); N. R. Yeldman (ed.), *Life Under the 'Peculiar' Institution* (New York: Rinehart and Wilson, 1970), et al.

with the Bible in their hand supported slavery with missionary zeal. True, they were opposed to gross cruelty to slaves and to the sexual exploitation of the women, but not to the institution itself. But in supporting the institution they also allowed for the worst of the abuses to continue unchecked. When this terrible injustice was constantly before their eyes and their fellow Christians were crying out to them to show some insight and compassion, why was it, we must ask, that these evangelical Christians were so blind and hard? It would be difficult not to see self interest as the root cause but the stated cause was always the Bible's teaching. In trying to evaluate 'the biblical case for slavery' it would seem that there are only three possibilities:

1. Those evangelicals who supported slavery with such fervour last century were mistaken in their interpretation of the Scriptures. The Bible does not in fact support the practice or the institution of slavery. In claiming the Bible's authority for slavery these men endorsed the worst social sin of their day in a terrible example of the wrong use of Scripture. This is the position taken by most of the present day opponents of the full emancipation of women. They insist that the Bible does not endorse slavery, it only allows for it and lays down principles which led to its downfall. If this is the case, as many have believed since Lightfoot's pioneering exegesis, then it is admitted that the most learned and devout of conservative evangelicals can seriously err in interpreting Scripture. Wrongly understood the Bible can mislead even 'Bible believing Christians'.

2. Those evangelicals who supported slavery, quoting the Bible in support, were right. The Bible does endorse slavery, simply regulating its worst excesses. The last well known evangelical theologian, to my knowledge, basically to take this position, was John Murray in *Principles of Conduct*, published in 1957, well before the women's debate led to an about turn by many conservative evangelicals in regard to the Bible's teaching on slavery. If this position is taken, and at the same time it is asserted that Christians should obey every word of Scripture, then slavery should not be condemned. The word of God should be our standard, not modern ideas of equality, social justice, or personal rights. I suspect no one wants to take this line today, although, as we have seen, it has a long and distinguished history and last century was given classic formulation by some of the most ablest of evangelical theologians.

3. Those evangelicals who supported slavery by appealing to the Bible were basically correct in their exegesis of the passages to which they referred but wrong in their doctrine of the Bible, in viewing it as a timeless set of oracles without historical conditioning; in concentrating only on those texts which seemed to support their beliefs, and

in believing that every word of Scripture has to be obeyed whatever the situation.

None of these options offers a great deal of encouragement to the present day conservative evangelical opponents of women's emancipation. If the first possibility is endorsed, then it is admitted that evangelicals with the very highest doctrine of Scripture can wrongly interpret it. They can build a weighty theological position based on the Bible, drawing on many texts, even some from the moral law, but be totally mistaken. If the second possibility is endorsed, then it is admitted that the Bible can at least at one level approve behaviour allowable at one point in history and not at another. In other words it can be quoted to prove things which are no longer acceptable in Christian ethics. If the third possibility is endorsed, then it is admitted that the doctrine of Scripture, given classic definition by these southern evangelicals, can no longer be embraced as it was formulated. We can still hold to a high doctrine of the divine inspiration of Scripture but we cannot hold that this means every word in the Bible is literally the timeless, always authoritative word of God, or that the Bible always speaks with only one voice on important matters.⁴⁹ Each of us must choose one of these options. Honesty demands that we 'come clean' and admit where we stand. When this is done, and only then, can an open and forthright discussion take place on the force of those texts which are quoted to 'prove' that the Bible endorses the permanent subordination of women. The three options outlined in regard to slavery are the same options on the table as we discuss the Bible's teaching on the status and role of women.

If the third option explains the situation best of all, then something more needs to be said about how to avoid making the same mistakes with the Bible that these conservative evangelical supporters of slavery made. These men appealed to the Bible as if it were a set of timeless oracles or propositions not recognising that in fact it reflected the culture of its authors and their presuppositions at least to some degree. In doing this they ascribed divine authority to the historically limited insights of the biblical authors on a matter such as slavery, failed to note that on most issues addressed by the Bible various answers are given to complex questions and missed the fact that the slavery they were supporting was a very different reality to

⁴⁹ See G. C. Berkouwer, *Studies in Dogmatics: Holy Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), especially 170–194. For earlier evangelical opinion which maintained a high view of Scripture but rejected the Warfieldian approach see chapters 7 and 8 in J. B. Rogers and D. K. McKim, *The Authority and Interpretation of the Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row), 1979.

that spoken about in the Bible.⁵⁰ In regard to slavery and the subordination of women the truth of the matter is that while the Bible supports both at one level, at another level there is a critique of both these oppressive structures. There are within Scripture great principles laid down clearly, for those with eyes to see, which point beyond the advice given to particular people at particular times on these matters. All human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and are therefore worthy of equal respect; all human beings share in the divine mandate to exercise authority in God's world (Gen 1:28); all human beings are loved by God (Jn 3:16); all Christians are to love their neighbour as themselves (Matt 22:39)—a thought which does not give much room for slavery or 'keeping women in their place'; all believers are one in Christ etc. Strangely those with the highest doctrine of Scripture are often the ones who find applying these truths the most difficult. Like the Pharisees they so concentrate on the letter of Scripture that they miss the spirit. When the Bible is read on the 'flat' as the supporters of slavery did, and the advocates of the permanent subordination do today, then the Bible becomes an irrefutable means to legitimate the status quo—a tool in the hands of those who hold power to maintain their privileges.

One final matter: although modern day opponents of women's emancipation insist that the Bible's teaching on slavery and the permanent subordination of women should not be equated, for the former is only passing advice regulating an existing social reality, while the latter is forever binding because it is based on an unchanging order of creation, the truth is the reverse. The biblical case for slavery is the counterpart of the case for the subordination of women, the only difference being that the case for slavery has far more weighty biblical support. There are two reasons for this. In the first place, the theology of slavery could be grounded in the moral law of God and via I Tim 6:1–3 on the teaching of Jesus whereas the subordination of women can only be grounded on a man made theory of static, created orders, an idea I have shown elsewhere the New Testament itself rejects.⁵¹ And secondly, the slavery case is stronger because the internal biblical critique of slavery is less profound than that against the subordination of women. The fact that the Bible insists that all people are made in the image of God

⁵⁰ Bartchy, op. cit., brings this out well. It is important to note that for example, colour did not necessarily divide slave and master in the ancient world, slavery was not always a permanent state, and some slaves held positions of great responsibility, even high office. None of these things were so in southern USA last century.

⁵¹ See my *Created Woman* (Canberra: Acorn, 1985).

(Gen 1:28) and the apostle says that in Christ there is neither slave nor free (1 Cor 12:13, Gal 3:28, Col 3:11) was easily answered by the supporters of slavery. These passages, they said, only spoke of spiritual equality. The advocates of women's permanent subordination have a far bigger challenge. Jesus, the Lord of the Church, gives no support whatsoever to the idea that women are subordinated to men and says much to the contrary; Paul at times grants women freedom to minister to both men and women, and in Ephesians 5:21ff the apostle seems to be trying to reform patriarchy rather than endorse it. He defines the husband's lead in terms of costly self sacrifice.⁵²

Finally, the question of whether or not history is being closely repeated needs to be asked. There are so many parallels between the biblical arguments for slavery and the permanent subordination of women that an affirmative answer seems demanded. In both debates the Bible has been made the ultimate guide in deciding the issue; in both cases those who have devised the biblical theology in support of the status quo have been preserving their own privileges; in both cases the most articulate proponents of the case for the permanent subordination of blacks or women have been evangelicals of reformed persuasion; in both cases a significant body of Christian opinion has been strongly against the subordinationists and their theology; in both cases the opponents have believed the subordinationists have used the Bible to support what is morally insupportable—in the case of slavery in fact to endorse the worst social sin of their day; in both cases common sense has suggested that the subordinationist position is bound to fail; in both cases the subordinating policy has caused untold pain to those in subjection; in both cases the argument has marred Christian fellowship (At present Australian Anglicans are waiting to see if those among them who believe the Bible supports the permanent subordination of women will break away as their Presbyterian counterparts did in North America last century. This has been threatened.) One final tantalising question: in a hundred years time will the spiritual heirs of those who now insist on the permanent subordination of women in the home and the church argue that such an idea simply cannot be supported from the Bible? I suspect this will be another parallel but I will not be here to know.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 23ff.