

# Racism, the Oppression of Black People, and a Biblical View of Slavery and Equality.

## Introduction.

In this article, I have tried to cover some of the main aspects of this multi-faceted issue in a way which will promote further discussion and exploration.

With a topic as complex as this, it is not possible to tie up all of the loose ends in this ongoing debate, but I hope and pray that what I've written will act as a catalyst in challenging some of our attitudes and behaviours. This has certainly been my own personal experience as I have researched and compiled this piece.

I pray too that there will be a greater resolution of present tensions and difficulties and that, whatever our racial background, there will be a growing sense of us working together for the glory of God and the benefit and harmony of our communities.

I should point out that I am only dealing in this article with the Atlantic Slave Trade as it impacted African people themselves and those black people of African origin and descent who now live in America and Britain. I realise there were other systems of slavery which affected black people in Asia, the Middle East etc.

Subjects covered include:

- The Atlantic Slave Trade – those involved and why.
- An example of oppressive white theology and an examination of black liberation theology and how it arose.
- Current debates about what to do with statues from our colonial past; the 'Black Lives Matter' campaign; unconscious racial bias; undesirable legacies arising from slavery.
- A Biblical view of slavery and equality.
- The situation in Britain today.

## The Atlantic Slave Trade.

It is estimated that between 12 and 13 million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic with many more millions dying in the so-called factories (barracoons) in Africa before they were transported. 2 million died in transit and more millions died in camps in the Caribbean and the Americas before they could be sold.

The Transatlantic Slave Trade was started by the Iberian nations, Portugal and Spain, under the agency of Christopher Columbus towards the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century. It was then developed, as part of the colonial expansion, by Britain and France. So, Atlantic Slavery was the invention of 'Christian' nations. The slave trade created untold wealth for the trading nations whilst despoiling the continent of Africa.

These nations required more and more slaves to work in the sugar, cotton and tobacco plantations of the Caribbean and the Americas to feed the ever-increasing appetites of the European nations' coffers.

I have, as I write this, a copy of a leaflet which brings tears to my eyes and which can make me feel physically sick when I read it. I would like to rip it up and throw it in the bin, but I think it is more important that I retain it as a reminder. It reads:

**"To be sold, on Thursday the third Day of August next,**

**A Cargo of Ninety-Four**

**Prime, Healthy**

**NEGROES,**

**Consisting of**

**Thirty-nine MEN, Fifteen Boys,**

**Twenty-four WOMEN, and**

**Sixteen GIRLS.**

**Just Arrived,**

**In the Brigadine DEMBIA,**

**Francis Bare, Master, from SIERRA-**

**LEONE, by**

**DAVID & JOHN DEAS"**

This sale took place in Charleston, South Carolina (which was a British Colony at the time) in 1769. A 'Brigadine' was a 2-masted sailing ship and this one was called Dembia. Francis Bare was the Master of the ship and David & John Deas was the name of the firm trading in slaves.

This is all the more poignant for me because my daughter-in-law was born in Sierra Leone and came to Britain, as a baby, with her parents and older sister.

But my pain must be as nothing compared to all those millions of black people who have suffered cruelty, humiliation, discrimination and segregation around the world and down the centuries at the hands of white people.

From the late 16<sup>th</sup> century until 1860, slavery was integral to the way the Western world lived, functioned and prospered. In essence it was a brutal system, conceived in violence, maintained by cruel and severe punishments and all for the betterment of the Western world.

Economic interests blinded the eyes of those involved to any sense of justice, mercy, righteousness or Godliness. Slaves (men, women and children) could be legally bought as property/chattels, denied any rights whatsoever and were subject to harsh punishments.

At the centre of the British slave operation was the Royal African Company whose Governor ('Chief Executive Officer' today) was His Royal Highness James Duke of York (later to become King James II in 1685). Slaves were branded either with the letters 'RAC' or 'DY' to indicate to whom they belonged.

In the 1760's, 40,000 slaves were transported in British ships each year from West Africa to the British Colonies in the Caribbean and North America.

The trade involved the main British ports of Liverpool, London and Bristol with smaller ports of Chester, Glasgow, Whitehaven, Lancaster and Lyme Regis also involved.

Surely no one can doubt that slavery at that time, is a major factor in racism today. The American novelist, William Faulkner, wrote, "The past is never dead. It's not even past."

It is especially true that conflict which isn't resolved, returns. And because we haven't listened to the pain of black people or even tried to understand them, or even know about what they experienced, we continue to have inter-racial disharmony, ill-feeling and sporadic violence. The trauma they experienced then, still affects them now.

\*\*\*\*\* Question For Consideration \*\*\*\*\* Do you think we should still be singing patriotically, every year at the last night of the Proms, James Thomson's 'Rule Britannia, Britannia rule the waves, Britons never, never, never, shall be slaves', which he wrote in 1740?

### **Oppressive White Theology.**

Sadly, slavery was given a Biblical basis. As one example of oppressive, white theology we can look at the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) which was established in South Africa in 1652. Their view of the Bible was that they, the Afrikaners, were God's chosen people whilst black people were inferior and under God's curse. They based this on God's curse of Noah's son Ham (Gen. 9:18-24) which had traditionally been understood as having been fulfilled in the subjugation of Canaan by Joshua.

They believed, however, that the curse was a universal, eternal one on Canaan's father Ham, and that all black people were descended from him. At the same time, they believed that favoured white Europeans were descended from Japheth and Semitic people from Shem.

They designated black people as 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for white people to use as slaves (on the basis of Joshua 9:23 – originally applied to the Gibeonites).

This theology eventually gave rise to 'apartheid' (= 'separateness') in South Africa where the different races were to be kept apart and live and develop separately. It wasn't until 1982 that the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMU) denounced apartheid and described it as a sin.

It is also worth remembering the part that the British played in those times. In 1795 the British Colonialists arrived in South Africa, left for a few years but then returned in 1806 and captured the Cape of Good Hope.

Later in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British fought two wars against the Boers – 1880/1 and 1899-1902 ('Boer' is the Dutch and Afrikaans word for 'farmer') - who had fled into the interior. The British captured many of them, together with their black servants, and interred them in concentration camps where around 27,000 Boers/Afrikaners and also around 15,000 black slaves died.

### **The End of the Atlantic Slave Trade.**

On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February 1807 the House of Commons passed a motion by 283 to 16 to abolish the Atlantic Slave Trade. The most well-known pro-abolition white voices were John Newton, formerly a brutal slave captain but now converted and author of 'Amazing Grace', parliamentarians William Wilberforce and Thomas Fowell Buxton, Thomas Clarkson from Wisbech and Granville Sharp who sought to extend the defences of English Law to black as well as white.

John Wesley and William Cowper also joined the anti-slavery cause.

But black voices also were instrumental in the ending of this trade in human misery. For example, King Mbemba of the Congo, King Agaja of Dahomey (Benin) and freed slaves like Ignatius Sancho and Olaudah Equiano.

Also instrumental was Samuel Ajayi Crowther, from Abeokuta in Nigeria, who was rescued from a slave ship as a teenager and later became Africa's first black Anglican Bishop.

However, what was decided in London in 1807 took time to filter through to the other trading nations and it wasn't until 1853 that participation in the Atlantic Slave Trade was banned by the other nations involved, with the last recorded slave ship to land in America six years later in 1859.

### **Who Is To Blame & Who Should Take Responsibility For What Happened At That Time?**

I ask myself, 'Is there such a thing as national, corporate guilt?' If there is, then it has to be said that it has been very reluctant to come forward.

It is generally understood today, that some of the African nations themselves were complicit in the Atlantic Slave Trade and may even have benefitted from it. Some African nations were turned into war zones as tribe fought against tribe to capture slaves for sale to Europeans.

Hence there have been national apologies from Leaders in Uganda (1998), Benin (1999), Nigeria (2009) and Ghana; and sorts of apologies from France and the UK (2006) and the USA (2008/9).

Apologies have been muted in case legal liabilities were acknowledged with a resulting call for financial reparations.

The Baptist Union of Great Britain (BUGB) issued an apology to all black people in 2007 for its complicity (even by silence) in the slave trade.

Personally, although I feel saddened and sickened by what happened then, because I did not live during that time of legal slavery, I do not feel directly responsible.

However, I do believe that I have to acknowledge the impact of that time and the way it has continued to dominate and haunt relations between black and white people since then. And, I have to be aware of the effect it has now on how I personally relate to black people, and they with me.

I also have to acknowledge that the impact of that time is still visibly present in today's economic, social, political, legal and theological structures.

It is therefore of the utmost importance, it seems to me, that we listen to each other and together re-fashion those structures accordingly.

**What should we do with the statues of white people who were involved with the Atlantic Slave Trade and who had white supremacist and/or imperialistic views?**

This may seem a rather simplistic place to begin in terms of re-fashioning structures, but it is a deeply significant issue for black people, and therefore for white people, as we are currently seeing.

So, what should we do with the statue of **Edward Colston**, Tory M.P. for Bristol from 1710-13, who was also involved with the Royal African Company which held a monopoly on the English trade in African Slaves? He worked on their committees and was Deputy Governor of the Company in 1689-90.

For decades some people have been asking for the statue to be removed from such a prominent position, but their voices weren't listened to.



But should his statue have been pulled down and thrown into the dock? (Someone has since been charged with criminal damage). Should the statue be put into a Museum? Or, should he be left where he is to remind us of the unsavoury nature of some of our past British colonial history and culture?

It seems to me that every human being is a mixture of good and evil with the potential for both. Colston also traded in cloth, fruits and wines with Spain and Portugal and, because he didn't have any heirs, he left all of his money to pay

for Schools, Hospitals, Alms-houses and Churches in Bristol, London and elsewhere. In that sense, he was regarded as a philanthropist.

Personally, I would be very cautious about putting **anybody** up on a pedestal, but where statues deeply offend some, we have to ask if they are in the right place and are sending the right message **today**.

**It seems to me that history, and the recounting of history, is a construction (often by the rich and powerful) which always needs to be revisited in order to be checked for accuracy and bias. History needs to be revised continually in the light of new information that becomes available.**

The covering over of parts of history that we find uncomfortable or even embarrassing, is not the way to freedom and reconciliation.

Moving on to another controversial statue, that of **Cecil Rhodes** at Oriel College, Oxford, where he was a student; the Chancellor of the University, Lord Patten, has defended the statue saying that today around 100 black students a year are admitted to Oriel, with around 20 being from Africa and a Trust Fund linked to Cecil Rhodes provides grants for around 12 African students to study at Oxford each year.



But can these facts override the disquiet many feel about Cecil Rhodes' (1853-1902) record in South Africa, where he was Prime Minister of the Cape Colony from 1890-1896, or the legacy of the words in his Last Will & Testament?

In this he wrote that the Anglo-Saxon race was "the first race in the world" and that "the more we inhabit, the better it is for the human race. I contend that every acre added to our territory means the birth of more of the English race who otherwise would not be brought into existence."

The Vice-Chancellor of Oxford, Professor Louise Richardson, said, “The views of the past had to be seen in the context of the time.” This is true, but it surely doesn’t follow that people who were once venerated and put up on pedestals then, should still be venerated and look down on us now.

I have just heard that the Governors of the University have indeed decided to remove his statue.

Cecil Rhodes founded Rhodesia (now Zimbabwe & Zambia) where the legacy of apartheid continued, with black Africans at the bottom of the food chain (behind Indians and people of mixed race), and discriminated against in terms of housing, employment and education.

Indeed, until 1945 in Northern Rhodesia (present day Zambia), the government (the British South Africa Company) provided no school places at all for black children. Even by 1964, out of a population of 4 million, only 1000 black people had completed secondary education.

In 1964, at independence, segregation was made illegal in Zambia and fourteen years later, in 1976, every district of Zambia had at least one government secondary school.

\*\*\*\* Question for consideration \*\*\*\* “With regard to statues, do you think that taking them down will help the ‘Black Lives Matter’ Campaign?”

### **The ‘Black Lives Matter’ Campaign.**

This campaign (BLM) was started in 2012 after 17- year- old Trayvon Martin was shot dead in Sanford, Florida. George Zimmerman, a member of the white Neighbourhood Watch, shot him in the chest because he looked suspicious. Zimmerman, who claimed self-defence, was found ‘not guilty’ of murder or manslaughter by a jury of 5 white women and one woman of mixed race.

BLM was founded in order to “eradicate white supremacy, stop violence inflicted on black communities, and create a safe space for black communities, imagination, and innovation.”

When we use the phrase ‘Black Lives Matter’ some white people respond by saying ‘Well, White Lives Matter’ or ‘All Lives Matter’. But this is to miss the point.



**We have to begin by pro-actively listening in a new way to the experiences of black people as they search for equality.**

I liked this illustration from a programme which teaches children about racial awareness. It said, 'A row of houses may look the same, but it's the house which is on fire that needs special attention!'

All of us have a certain amount of 'unconscious bias' when it comes to our racial awareness, so we need to be revisiting our mindsets, attitudes, words and actions in this regard.

There is a helpful chart called the 'Cycle of Oppression' which begins with 'A Fear of Difference', continues round the circle with 'Stereotypes', which then leads to 'Prejudices', which gives rise to 'Discrimination' which then results in 'Internalised Aggression'.

Eventually that 'Internalised Aggression' can boil over externally in riots etc.

\*\*\*\*\* Question for Consideration \*\*\*\*\* "What stereotypical or prejudicial views might you have about people of another race?"

Before moving on, I was saddened by this comment from a 12- year-old schoolgirl of mixed race who said, "I've always wanted to identify more with white people because to be white is to be beautiful."

Sad, but great that the school were talking about these issues in the classroom and helping their pupils become aware of false racial stereotypes.

### **All That Glitters.....**

Whilst we often focus on the success of Britain ending the Slave Trade, we must also consider other 'darker' sides to what happened subsequently. I will briefly mention 3 things: -

1. There were powerful and influential people who wanted to ensure that Africans remained items of chattel who could be bought and sold, beaten and whipped.

One such was George Hibbert who operated as a slave owner and slave trader in Jamaica. He and William Wilberforce both lived in houses overlooking

Clapham Common in South London and both worshipped at the local Holy Trinity Church.

Hibbert, who was also an MP, built, with others, the West India Docks in east London in 1800. It was here that the slave-produced sugar of the West Indies was landed. The area today is known as Canary Wharf.

2. Another trade which grew phenomenally from about 1820 was in cotton. In the American states of Mississippi, Louisiana, Alabama, the Carolinas, west Texas, Georgia, Arkansas and Tennessee, 'Cotton was King'.

But the whole cotton economy was based on slave labour – 1.8 million of them. 75% of the cotton which came into Britain between 1840 and 1860 came from America, and most of it was landed in Liverpool before being shipped to Manchester and mills and factories all over Lancashire (around 2,500 of them).

Climatically, there was a fit. The hot, dry climate of the southern states of America helped the cotton balls to ripen and split, whilst the wet, high humidity of north west England kept the cotton from drying out and breaking as it was spun. The fast -flowing rivers also helped to power the mills and factories.

But the point is this: half a century after abolishing the slave trade, Britain was, economically speaking, still up to her neck in Southern cotton slavery.

3. Another aspect of the injustices of this time was the **Slave Compensation Act** passed by parliament in 1837. As slavery, in theory at least, was coming to an end, slave owners and traders were looking for compensation as they sold off their slaves.

The **Slave Compensation Commission** (10 men) was set up in Whitehall with £20 million to distribute. This represents £17 **billion** in today's money.

46,000 slave owners filled out the appropriate form and queued for their cheques at 19, Jewry in the City (today the premises of the Bank of China).

John Gladstone personally received £22,443 for 415 slaves in Guyana and, taken together, the Gladstone family received £105,000 (the equivalent of £18 million today). John Gladstone's son, William, later became Prime Minister.

The smallest amount paid was to someone who owned one slave in Barbados - £1 18s 10d.

Those who received large sums often invested the money in building railways, public buildings and institutions etc.

The slaves themselves, of course, received not a penny in compensation.

\*\*\*\* Question for Consideration \*\*\*\* Do you think it could be argued that, as a nation, Britain's industrial revolution and some of our infrastructure was built on the foundation of slave labour?

### **Black Liberation Theology.**

Rev. Doctor James H. Cone (1938-2018) was the Founder of Black Liberation Theology at the Union Theological Seminary in New York. His first book on this was 'Black Theology & Black Power' in 1969 which, he said, "was a response to over 400 years of the systematically dehumanising treatment of blacks at the hand of whites."

You may also wish to read his 'My Soul Looks Back' (1993) and a more recent one, 'The Cross and the Lynching Tree' (2013), which he said he found the most difficult to write.

It's worth pointing out at this point, that today more people are coming to the view that there is no such thing as 'theology' only 'theologies'.

Here in the West we have imbibed white European (enlightenment) theology, but we can also identify feminist, liberation, black, Asian, Jewish, African theologies etc.

Some would argue that although there are universal elements to a 'Biblical Theology' (because of the common source of revelation – the Bible - and because of our common humanity) nevertheless, every theology is culturally biased because it has been developed by people contextualised in time and space.

Thus, some black theologians view Western European theology as colluding with, and even promoting, the whole western cultural, economic and political imperialist agenda. It can be argued that in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, theology was the handmaiden of the colonial enterprise with all the problems of land acquisition, empire building and the de-humanisation of non-white peoples.

This Eurocentric approach excluded the possibility of any serious engagement with the indigenous culture and their history, thought patterns, practices and concerns.

James Cone, who believes that we are all brothers and sisters, talks about how 'black blood continues to cry out from the ground to the Lord and to white people', just like Abel's blood did when he was killed by his brother Cain (Gen. 4:10). It is a cry, not for vengeance, but for recognition of what has been done.

Only then can there be a reconciliation based on justice, liberation and the empowerment of black people.

In an article written in 1981 called: "The Gospel and the Liberation of the Poor", Cone writes: "If any person failed to speak of God's identity with the black struggle for freedom, he or she was not doing Christian theology." And, "The gospel is identical with the liberation of poor people from socio-political oppression."

So, whereas, say, Western theology has emphasised the gospel as deliverance from personal sin, black theology would say that yes, the gospel IS about that, AND it must also be about the corporate deliverance of oppressed black people from slavery and oppressive structures (as it was for the people of God in the book of Exodus).

Black theology is about the deliverance of the poor from exploitation by the rich and powerful (as was emphasised by the Old Testament prophets). And the gospel is about fulfilling Jesus' socio-political manifesto (as we read in Luke 4:18 &19). The purpose of black theology, in Cone's view, is to analyse the black person's condition in the light of revelation, in order to create a new understanding of black dignity, and provide the necessary soul among black people to destroy racism. He writes: 'being black in America has very little to do with skin colour. To be black means that your soul, your mind and your body are where the dispossessed are'. (James Cone, Black Theology & Black Power, 1969).

\*\*\*\* A Question Cone Would Ask Us To Consider Is This \*\*\*\* "How can theology be black if the sources used for its explication are derived primarily from the white western theological tradition?"

### **Mob Violence.**

It is very naïve to think that the suffering of black people in America ended with their emancipation from slavery. Their segregation, oppression and subjugation

were maintained by white supremacists with a new instrument of terror – the lynching tree. The ‘lynching era’ lasted from 1880-1940 during which time nearly 5000 African-American people were strung up from trees and lamp-posts.

‘Southern trees bear strange fruit,  
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,  
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,  
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.’

(Abel Meeropol)

In his profoundly disturbing but hopeful book, “The Cross and the Lynching Tree”, James Cone writes, “I was born in Arkansas, a lynching state. During my childhood, white supremacy ruled supreme. White people were virtually free to do anything to blacks with impunity. The violent crosses of the Ku Klux Klan were a familiar reality, and white racists preached a dehumanising segregated gospel in the name of Jesus’ cross every Sunday.

And yet in rural black churches I heard a different message, as preachers proclaimed the message of the suffering Jesus and the salvation accomplished in his death on the cross.”



James H. Cone

### **Political Bondage.**

It is worth remembering that Black liberation theology grew out of the Civil Rights Movement in America in the 1960’s, which was concerned, among other things, with establishing the rights of black people to vote.

It was in 1865 that the 13<sup>th</sup> amendment to the American Constitution was ratified and stated that ‘neither slavery nor involuntary servitude.....shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.’

The 15<sup>th</sup> amendment was ratified 5 years later in 1870, saying that a male citizen should not be ‘denied the vote based on race, colour or previous condition of servitude.’

But very little, if any, progress had been made since then.

Things came to a head in 1963 with the bombing of the 16<sup>th</sup> Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, Alabama, by white supremacists, which killed 4 black girls and injured many more of the black congregation.

Until then, discriminatory practices had been used to prevent African Americans from voting, but now the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965) were passed which said that ‘the right of Citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, colour, or previous condition of servitude.’ Until this time, black people had been in political bondage.

Frederick Douglass (1818-95), the American Abolitionist who has also been described as the father of the Civil Rights Movement, wrote: “If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favour freedom, and yet depreciate agitation, are men who want crops without ploughing up the ground.”

On May 4<sup>th</sup> 1969, James Foreman interrupted the Sunday Service at Riverside Church in New York with a public proclamation of “The Black Manifesto” demanding \$500 million from white Christian Churches and Jewish Synagogues as reparations to black people for centuries of exploitation and brutalisation.

### **A Biblical View of Slavery and Equality.**

It seems to me that slavery was an integral part of society in both Old and New Testament times.

#### **1. Old Testament.**

In the book of Leviticus, we read: - “But if a priest buys a slave with money, or if a slave is born in his household, that slave may eat his food” (Lev. 22:11).

However, the slaves that the priests and the people of God bought, had to come from the nations surrounding them, not from among their fellow countrymen or countrywomen.

“Your male and female slaves [‘ebed’] are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves... but Israelites must not be sold as slaves” (Lev.25:42-44). Also living in Israel in Old Testament times (and distinct from slaves), were other social groups e.g. the ‘foreigner’ [‘nokri’], the ‘alien’ or ‘sojourner’ [‘ger’] and the ‘temporary resident’ [‘toshav’].

But the key thing with all these groups - slaves, foreigners, aliens and temporary residents - is that they were to be treated well, loved and cared for. They were not to be abused and treated ruthlessly.

We have already noticed that the slave in the priest’s household was to eat the same food as the priest. And we read, “When an alien [ger] lives with you in the land, do not ill-treat him. The alien living with you must be treated as one of your native-born. Love him as yourself, for you were aliens in Egypt. I am the LORD your God.” (Lev. 19:33&34)

Slaves were even allowed to participate in the Passover meal, after they had been circumcised, as were the integrated aliens who lived among them. But temporary residents, hired hands (fruit pickers?) and non-assimilated foreigners were not allowed to participate (Ex.12:43-49).

And there were other laws which safeguarded the well-being, safety and provision for the minority groups e.g. the Sabbath Year (every 7 years) and the Year of Jubilee (every 50 years). See Lev. Chapter 25.

So, we see the stark contrast between the treatment of slaves and other minority groups under God, compared with the cruel and dehumanising treatment that black people experienced during the Atlantic Slave Trade.

This mistreatment occurs wherever and whenever people do not fear God. This was the dilemma for people like James Cone and millions of other black people who saw white ‘Christians’ worshipping in their white Churches on a Sunday, and abusing their black slaves for the rest of the week.

“So, I will come near to you for judgement. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, **but do not fear me,**” says the Lord Almighty.” (Mal. 3:5)

## **2. New Testament.**

Slavery in the Roman Empire was endemic. It was a long-established institution and part of the social structure. And it was against this background that the New Testament was written.

The treatment of slaves was generally callous with severe penalties and savage punishments for even minor misdemeanours. And a slave could be crucified for running away from their master.

Some argue that the New Testament doesn't call into question or condemn slavery but rather seeks to mitigate the abuses of the system.

But perhaps both are true.

### **a. A general condemnation of the slave trade**

In 1 Timothy chapter 1 verses 9 & 10 Paul writes, "the law is made .... for those who kill their fathers and mothers, for murderers, for adulterers and perverts, for **slave traders** and liars and perjurers – and for whatever else is contrary to sound doctrine...." (NIV)

The word translated 'slave traders' in the New International Version is 'andrapodistes' (from 'andrapodon' = a slave). The King James version translates it as 'men-stealers' and the Good News Bible as 'kidnappers', for this, in essence, is what the slave trade was.

So, the Bible does regard the slave trade as being intrinsically wrong in God's sight.

### **b. A plea for a radical transformation of the outworking of the relationship between Master and Slave**

It is difficult for us to grasp the revolutionary differences Paul is advocating in the nature of the relationship between Slave ('doulos') and Master ('kurios'). In Christ, there is to be a total transformation of the way Slaves and Masters are to regard each other.

Slaves are to view their service for their earthly Master as service rendered to the Lord Jesus Christ himself. They are Slaves of Christ and should serve diligently from the heart with fear and trembling (Eph. 6:5-8; Col. 3:22-25).



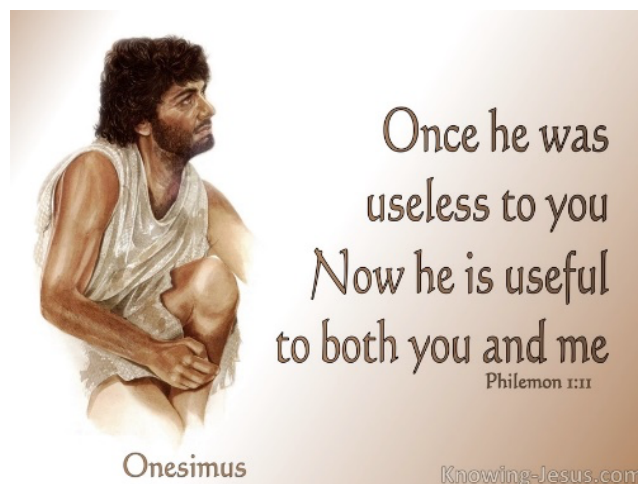
Meanwhile, Masters should also regard themselves as Slaves of Christ and treat their Slaves with justice and equality and without abusing or threatening them in any way (Eph. 6:9; Col. 4:1).

Paul gives some of the theology behind this radical change by saying that **all of us** were once slaves – enslaved by our old sinful nature and the worship of idols. But now, in Christ, we have been redeemed, bought back by his precious blood and set free. So now, in Him, there is neither slave nor free, for we are **all one in Christ Jesus**. We are no longer slaves, but sons and daughters, all equal in God's adopted family (See Gal. 3:26-4:8).

And one of Paul's wonderful pastoral letters, **Philemon**, is devoted entirely to the new nature of the relationship between Philemon (a slave owner) and Onesimus (his runaway slave) now they are both Christians. In this letter, Paul is smoothing over a potentially difficult situation.

Runaway slaves who were found and returned to their Master could face crucifixion, or, if the Master was lenient, he could brand the slave on his forehead with the letters 'FF' meaning 'fugitilis' (= 'fugitive').

So, Paul has a lot of pleading to do in this short letter. Pleading with Onesimus to go back to Philemon (risky) and pleading with Philemon to receive Onesimus back, not now as a slave, but as a brother in Christ (a big ask).



Paul also indicates that it would be costly for him personally as well. He liked Onesimus and would miss his company if he left, and Paul also offers to repay Philemon for any money Onesimus had stolen.

Did the whole thing work out successfully? We can assume it did, otherwise Philemon would have torn up this letter and it wouldn't be in our Bible today!

### **God's Grace Despite Human Sin.**

Whilst recognising and validating the pain of all that happened in the Atlantic Slave Trade, we can also trace the Grace of God and how He used His people to end slavery and promote Christianity.

Afro-British writers Cugoana and Equiano, who were both evangelical Christians, denounced the slave trade towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century.

And at the World Anti-Slavery Convention, held in London in June 1840 and organised by The British and Foreign Anti-Slavery Society, two black Christians from Jamaica, Edward Barrett and Henry Beckford, were delegates and later spoke at meetings around Britain including one attended by 5000 in Birmingham.

The Church Missionary Society began to train African Clergy for work in their homelands as did St. Augustine's College, Canterbury in 1838, and the Colwyn Bay Institute in 1888. Itinerant black preachers were common in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain including women such as Zilpha Elaw and Amanda Smith.

Today, we can perhaps see God's Grace in that the centre of gravity of the Christian Church has moved to the southern continents, including Africa. In 1900 more than 80% of Christians lived in the West; by 2100, if present trends continue and if the Lord hasn't returned by then, 80% of all Christians will be from Africa, Asia and Latin America.

One wonders how those who were once enslaved, humiliated and oppressed by cultures that had signed up to Christianity, could go on to embrace the Christian faith. The answer must surely be, only by identifying with the suffering, humiliated, victim of mob violence – the crucified Jesus.

“They put him to death by hanging him on a tree.” (Acts 10:39)

### **The Situation In Britain Today.**

Some things to consider: -

- The presence of non-white communities in Britain would not have occurred to the extent it has if we had not taken their ancestors into slavery, or conquered their ancestral countries as colonies, or invited them to come and join us after two world wars to re-build our country. It is difficult to conclude anything other than their presence among us is due mainly to white aggression or imperialism in earlier ages.

Maybe the Lord has turned this 'undesirable history' to good by blessing us with a diverse society.

The other main factor today is globalisation and the desire of some people from developing nations to come to the richer West.

- Today the largest churches in Britain are black majority churches and there are growing denominations established in the last 50 years that are overwhelmingly black in leadership and membership.
- Black people in Britain are more likely to live in deprived areas, perform the lowest paid jobs and suffer greater health problems.
- According to Government figures, 93% of Police officers are white and 1.2% are black, as of March 2019. Between 2007 and 2019, the total percentage of Police officers from Black African and other Minority Ethnic Group backgrounds (BAME) went up from 3.9% to 6.9%.
- In the House of Commons, the number of MP's from BAME backgrounds increased from 16 in 1999 (2.5%) to 41 in 2015 (6.3%) to 65 in 2019 (10%).

(In the total British population, 14% of residents are from BAME backgrounds).

#### Other things to be aware of and seek to implement: -

- When any individual, group or race has been systematically abused over a long period of time, there is considerable psychological scarring. Both individual and collective self-worth takes a severe knock. Trauma is passed down from generation to generation.

Therefore, in order for change to come about, those who have been abused need to be empowered. This takes place as they are listened to, as their pain is acknowledged and as we now ask, 'What can we do to work together?'

- Justice requires us to root out and re-order any system, structure, or narrative which privileges white people over black people and their culture, norms and perspectives. Black lives really do matter.
- We can examine the attitudes and practices in our Churches remembering these words from Selina Stone, Tutor & Lecturer in Political Theology at St. Mellitus College, "The racial inequities of our churches often fail to speak prophetically to the world."

- We can seek to understand 'Black History' in all its fullness (not just the history of slavery) and the contribution black people have made to life in Britain. 'Black History' has been an optional extra in our Education system, though things are now beginning to change.

When I was a boy and lived in Carlisle, we often went to a place called Silloth on the Solway Coast. It was our nearest seaside resort! In order to get there, we often went through a small village called Burgh-by-Sands.

Only recently did I discover that Burgh-by-Sands is where the first African Community in Britain was established in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD. The Africans were part of the Roman Imperial Army and, after helping build Hadrian's Wall, some decided to stay and make their home in the area.

They taught us a lot about Hadrian's Wall at Carlisle Grammar School but we never heard anything at all about the establishment of a black African Community in the area!

Some black Africans served in the court of Henry VIII and 100+ black soldiers fought for Britain with Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar.

And of course, today many of our vital public services would not function without the involvement of people from a BAME background.

- We can affirm the inherent dignity of all people created in God's image and recognise and proclaim that only in Christ can dividing walls of hostility be truly broken down (Eph. 2:14-18). And remember, with Paul, our common heritage, "From one man [Adam] he [God] made every nation of men ..... we are God's offspring...." (See Acts 17:26-31).

Whatever our racial background, 99.9% of our DNA is the same.

- We can remember that slavery and people trafficking have not gone away and we can seek to pray for and support those who are opposing this modern pandemic.
- God may be giving us, at this moment in time, an opportunity to speak in favour of black people, and other minority ethnic groups, and against white supremacy and racism in all its different forms.

- Perhaps we need to remember the words of **Joachim Prinz** (a Jewish Rabbi who fled to America from Germany) who said, “When I was a Rabbi of the Jewish community in Berlin under the Hitler regime..... the most important thing I learned under those tragic circumstances was that bigotry and hatred are not the most urgent problems. The most urgent and most disgraceful, the most shameful, the most tragic problem is silence.”
- Racial inclusivity is a test of the validity and identity of any Church which claims to be Christian.
- Black people must not be allowed to carry the burden of racism alone. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way, you will fulfil the law of Christ.” (Gal. 6:2)

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July 2020

### **Suggested Reading:**

Cone, James H., ***My Soul Looks Back*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

Cone, James H., ***Black Theology & Black Power*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969 [50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition, Feb. 2019]).

Cone, James H., ***The Cross & the Lynching Tree*** (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013).

Kapolyo, J., ***Theology and Culture: An African Perspective*** (Whitley Publications, Regent’s Park College, Oxford, 2019).

Killingray, David (and Joel Edwards), ***Black Voices: The Shaping of our Christian Experience*** (IVP, 2007).

Olusoga, David, ***Black and British – A Forgotten History*** (Pan Books, 2017).

Walvin, James, ***The Trader, The Owner, The Slave*** (Vintage Books, 2008).

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