

Introduction

Was slavery a moral problem for the first Christians? Regardless of how we respond, why should the realities of ancient slaveholding raise moral questions for Christians in the twenty-first century?

This brief volume attempts to highlight the urgency of these questions. It also suggests ways in which early Christian writings that touch on slavery may offer resources for confronting ethical dilemmas of our own day.

Rome was a slaveholding empire. No one who lived in the empire could avoid participating in its slave-dependent economy. According to the Gospels, Jesus of Nazareth had contact with slaves—and with slaveholders. Jesus' parables and other sayings refer often, and casually, to slaves and masters. The first Christian communities included slaves. They also included slaveholders. In the third millennium Christians comfortably acknowledge that some early Christians were slaves. We are far less comfortable acknowledging that some early Christians enslaved others.

Paul writes that all who have been baptized are united in Christ: "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female" (Gal. 3:28). On that basis many readers of Paul would like to conclude that the early Christian community

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effectively transcended differences between slaves and slaveholders. Not so.

Baptism did not transform everyday relations of slavery, even when both slave and master worshipped in the same congregation. This was true in the first century, when the gospel first began to be preached around the Mediterranean. It continued to be true throughout the fourth century, when Christianity was established as the official religion of the empire.

Perhaps it seems incongruous that the early Christian movement sanctioned slaveholding. After all, ancient Christian communities remembered that Jesus taught his followers they should be slaves to one another (Mark 10:43-44; Matt. 20:26-27). This teaching could even be said to be at the heart of the gospel message.

Early Christian perpetuation of slaveholding values may also seem incongruous because we know how important nineteenth-century Christians were in pushing for the abolition of slavery in the North Atlantic. The teachings of Jesus and of the early church figured importantly in the articulation of a coherent anti-slavery stance.

A focus on Christian resistance to slavery and the incompatibility of slavery with Christian values may seem more hopeful than acknowledgment of the pervasive and insidious impact of slavery on the church. Is it contradictory to refer to Christian slavery? Today, many would say yes. However, in antiquity, many church leaders were slaveholders. Church policy supported the rights of slaveholders. To correct the distorting traces of slaveholding values that linger in Christian thought and practice, it is first necessary to acknowledge how thoroughly early Christians internalized the values of the wider society.

I approach the study of slavery and early Christianity both as a historian and as a Christian. The history of early Christian slavery is of more than antiquarian interest. American Christian communities who advocate for reparations for slavery may be sobered—but nonetheless emboldened—by learning about slavery in early Christianity. In addition, although we tend to refer to slavery in the past tense, slavery remains a pressing global problem. An end to contemporary slavery is a goal for many Christian activists. Attention to ancient Christian voices that challenged the legitimacy of slaveholding values may inspire Christians who are working to end slavery now.

More generally, attention to the ancient Christians who bought, sold, and whipped slaves invites reflection on systems of exploitation and oppression in which we participate today. As I write about the dynamics of slavery in early Christianity, I wonder which practices of contemporary American life will be rejected by future generations as immoral. On a personal level I wonder how I can begin to recognize and act against such immorality, even when I benefit from it.

In antiquity the vast majority of Jesus' followers—at least those who left any written record—did not regard slaveholding as morally repugnant. Today, Christians regard slaveholding as incompatible with the good news Jesus preached. Our task is not to judge the past by the standards of the present. Rather, our task is to trace the insidious impact of slaveholding values on Christian thought and practice so that we may better witness to the gospel of freedom.