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### SLAVERY – THE ABOLITIONIST MOVEMENT

By David Meager

In the late sixteenth century, because of labour shortages the British and other Europeans started importing African slaves to the Caribbean to work on sugar plantations. African slaves were favoured because they were more resilient to the local diseases. Africans were captured by other Africans in raids and then transported to the coast. The slaves were then assembled on the coast by African rulers and kept in holding pens until sold to European ship captains. Once a ship was full, the trip known as the ‘middle passage’ usually to the Americas or the Caribbean, took a few weeks to several months; death rates ranged from 10-20 per cent. On arrival the slaves were sold at auction with about two-thirds working in sugar plantations. By 1807 three million slaves had been transported to the Americas on British ships and by 1867 between 7 to 10 million Africans had been shipped as slaves to the New World.

#### Abolitionist movement

Although there had been criticism of slavery since the Enlightenment, the British abolitionist movement can be traced back to the late 18th Century. In 1787, a group of twelve men, mostly Quakers and Anglicans founded the Committee for the Abolition of the Slave Trade. They included the veteran anti-slavery campaigner Granville Sharp and Thomas Clarkson who devoted his life to the cause. They recruited the MP for Hull, William Wilberforce, to lead the campaign in the House of Commons. Within twenty years of the establishment of this group, the slave trade had been abolished.

#### How did they do it?

Once the British Abolition Committee was established, abolitionism quickly became a mass movement. Petitions, pamphlets, tracts, rallies, posters, letters to MPs etc, were all used to rouse the conscience of the masses and enlist their support. Consumer goods were boycotted as up to 400,000 Britons stopped buying the rum and sugar that came from the Caribbean slave plantations. Eventually Parliament voted to abolish the slave trade on the 25th of March 1807. Most historians point to a range of causes which led to abolition, including economic interest, colonial ambition or the impact of the Enlightenment, however, it cannot be denied that the major driving force for change came from the Christian abolitionists.

Although the abolitionists emphasised the human suffering of slavery, their main arguments came from a number of key themes drawn from the Bible.

#### Made in God’s image

Bible passages such as Genesis 1: 26-27 (Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness”) and Acts 17: 26 (‘...he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth’) were used to show that all people were made in God’s image and all came from one man, Adam. ‘*Africans and Europeans, Pagans and Christians, are all on a level*’, wrote Abraham Booth. According to William Cowper ‘*the natural bond/of brotherhood is sever’d*’ [by slavery]

*‘That souls have no discriminating hue,  
Alike important in their Maker’s view;  
That none are free from blemish since the fall,  
And love divine has paid one price for all.’*

Abolitionists also pointed to the intellectual attainments of some black converts to Christianity. The writings of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano were used as examples to undermine the ideas of racial inferiority. They also pointed out that such racial inferiority had its origins with materialistic philosophers such as Hume and Voltaire.

### **Equal rights**

Abolitionists taught that as liberty was a gift from God it was therefore wrong to take someone else's liberty from them by force or for someone to sell their liberty to someone else. According to John Wesley, *'Liberty is the right of every human creature.'* The Exodus of the Israelites from Egypt was used to highlight God's opposition to enforced slavery. They also quoted verses such as Proverbs 14: 31 (*'Whoever oppresses a poor man insults his Maker'*) and Job 30: 25 (*'Did not I weep for him whose day was hard to show God's compassion for the poor'*), or Jesus' words in Luke: *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...to preach deliverance to the captives, to release the prisoners.'*

### **Love your neighbour**

Abolitionists repeatedly quoted the Golden Rule in Matt 7 v12 (*'Whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets.'*) They applied this to the British public by trying to get them to imagine what it would be like if they and their families were enslaved. Coupled with this, abolitionists worked hard to evangelise the slaves themselves as their masters often denied them the hearing of the gospel in case it would undermine their service. Wesley prayed that God would *'burst thou all their chains in sunder', 'more especially the chains of their sins.'* By 1800 around one third of American Methodists were of African descent.

### **God's judgement**

The abolitionists appealed to people's consciences by warning them of God's judgement and wrath against sin, especially God's anger at the exploitation of the poor. The Quaker Anthony Benezet warned *'Will not the groans of this deeply afflicted and oppressed people reach heaven, and must not the inevitable consequence be pouring forth of the judgement of God upon their oppressors, must we not tremble to think what a load of guilt lies upon our Nation.'* The abolitionists emphasised to the people that *'national sins produce national judgements'*. Abraham Booth likened Bristol and Liverpool to the ancient cities of Tyre and Sidon.

### **Approved by the Bible?**

In a previous Cross†Way article on slavery we saw that slavery is not outlawed in the bible, so how did the abolitionists handle this? They admitted that the Mosaic Law did allow a form of slavery, but this was a far cry from the abuses inflicted on African slaves. They also pointed to those texts which outlawed forcing people into slavery; they argued that slavery was tolerated in the New Testament because the church was too weak at the time to stop it, and sudden cessation would have caused social and economic chaos. They also pointed out that the impact of the gospel in Europe had led to slavery largely disappearing by the 12th Century, for it to be revived in the sixteenth was a backward step.

### **Slavery since 1807**

Even after the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery still persisted in many parts of Africa. The expansion of the British Empire in the second half of the 19th Century put an end to slavery in much of Africa and Asia. Slavery was abolished in the French colonies in 1848, India in 1843, in South America after the Civil War, Brazil in 1888, and China in 1906. Tunisia, Egypt, and the Ottoman Empire abolished slavery in the 19th Century and by the 1960s it had been officially abolished in most Islamic countries. Some parts of Africa retained slavery by the end of WWI and for this reason the League of Nations and later the United Nations took action to end it. After WWII the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights called slavery immoral and made it illegal.

Although there is a world ban on slavery there are probably more slaves today than there have ever been. It still exists in some Communist states such as North Korea. In some third world countries many work as 'bonded labourers' with similar conditions as slaves. Illegal slavery is a major problem in many countries today, many are sold into the sex industry or into forced labour often against their will.

According to the anti-slavery group 'Stop the Traffik' it is thought that between 600,000-800,000 people are trafficked every year, of which 80% are women and girls. The sex trade is largely run by east European gangs, while Chinese and African criminals are behind much illegal migrant labour trafficking. Britain has seen a growing trend in sex trafficking from within eastern EU countries. In the UK there were an estimated 4,000 victims of trafficking in prostitution in Britain at any one time in 2003, though some experts put the figure far higher. According to CARE '*the number of men purchasing sex has doubled over the past ten years in the UK, fuelling demand for prostitution*'. The British Government has recently pledged to sign the 'Council of Europe Convention on Action against Trafficking in Human Beings'. There are various campaigning groups lobbying governments for action to be taken, 'Stop the Traffik' a global coalition of organisations dedicated to seeing the end of people trafficking represents over 300 member organisations, including businesses, faith groups, community groups and charities. Their aim is to pressurise the U.N. and individual governments to bring about a change in legislation and policies, resulting in protection from people trafficking.

### **Conclusion**

The forced enslavement and barbaric treatment involved in the transatlantic slave trade certainly broke biblical laws on slavery, and the abolitionists used the bible to arouse national conscience to get it abolished. It could therefore be argued that the British Abolitionist Movement of the 18th Century was the catalyst for the official abolition of world slavery since it was the British who enforced it (although economic self interest was certainly important). The attitude of the abolitionists should challenge us if we are complacent or indifferent to the human suffering of our own day. We should also draw encouragement from the impact the abolitionists made as we seek to tackle the moral evils we see around us. If we are tempted to doubt the power of God's Word on people's consciences we should remember the abolitionists.

Further reading: *The abolition of the Slave Trade* (Cambridge Papers) to which this article is indebted - [www.jubilee-centre.org](http://www.jubilee-centre.org). Also [www.stopthetraffik.org](http://www.stopthetraffik.org)

*David Meager is on the staff of Church Society.*