

The Bible, Slavery, and America's Founders

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America's Founding Fathers are seen by some people today as unjust and hypocrites, for while they talked of liberty and equality, they at the same time were enslaving hundreds of thousands of Africans. Some allege that the Founders bear most of the blame for the evils of slavery. Consequently, many today have little respect for the Founders and turn their ear from listening to anything they may have to say. And, in their view, to speak of America as founded as a Christian nation is unthinkable (for how could a Christian nation tolerate slavery?).

It is certainly true that during most of America's history most blacks have not had the same opportunities and protections as whites. From the time of colonization until the Civil War most Africans in America (especially those living in the South) were enslaved, and the 100 years following emancipation were marked with segregation and racism. Only in the last 30 years has there been closer to equal opportunities, though we still need continued advancement in equality among the races and race relations. But is the charge against the Founders justified? Are they to bear most of the blame for the evils of slavery? Can we speak of America as founded as a Christian nation, while at it's founding it allowed slavery?

Understanding the answer to these questions is important for the future of liberty in America and advancement of racial equality. The secular view of history taught in government schools today does not provide an adequate answer. We must view these important concerns from a Biblical and providential perspective.

America's Founders were predominantly Christians and had a Biblical worldview. If that was so, some say, how could they allow slavery, for isn't slavery sin? As the Bible reveals to man what is sin, we need to examine what it has to say about slavery.

The Bible and Slavery

The Bible teaches that slavery, in one form or another (including spiritual, mental, and physical), is always the fruit of disobedience to God and His law/word. (This is not to say that the enslavement of any one person, or group of people, is due to their sin, for many have been enslaved unjustly, like Joseph and numerous Christians throughout history.) Personal and civil liberty is the result of applying the truth of the Scriptures. As a person or nation more fully applies the principles of Christianity, there will be increasing freedom in every realm of life. Sanctification for a person, or nation, is a gradual process. The fruit of changed thinking and action, which comes from rooting sin out of our lives, may take time to see. This certainly applies historically in removing slavery from the Christian world.

Slavery is a product of the fall of man and has existed in the world since that time.

Slavery was not a part of God's original created order, and as God's created order has gradually been re-established since the time of Christ, slavery has gradually been eliminated. Christian nations (those based upon Biblical principles) have led the way in the abolition of slavery. America was at the forefront of this fight. After independence, great steps were taken down the path of ending slavery - probably more than had been done by any other nation up until that time in history (though certainly more could have been done). Many who had settled in America had already been moving toward these ends. Unfortunately, the generations following the Founders did not continue to move forward in a united fashion. A great conflict was the outcome of this failure.

When God gave the law to Moses, slavery was a part of the world, and so the law of God recognized slavery. But this does not mean that slavery was God's original intention. The law of Moses was given to fallen man. Some of the ordinances deal with things not intended for the original creation order, such as slavery and divorce. These will be eliminated completely only when sin is eliminated from the earth. God's laws concerning slavery provided parameters for treatment of slaves, which were for the benefit of all involved. God desires all men and nations to be liberated. This begins internally and will be manifested externally to the extent internal change occurs. The Biblical slave laws reflect God's redemptive desire, for men and nations.

Types of Slavery Permitted by the Bible

The Mosaic law permitted some types of slavery. These include:

1. Voluntary servitude by the sons of Israel (indentured servants)

Those who needed assistance, could not pay their debts, or needed protection from another were allowed under Biblical law to become indentured servants (see Ex. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:12-18). They were dependent on their master instead of the state. This was a way to aid the poor and give them an opportunity to get back on their feet. It was not to be a permanent subsidy. Many early settlers to America came as indentured servants. These servants were well treated and when released, given generous pay.

2. Voluntary permanent slaves

If indentured servants so chose, they could remain a slave (Ex. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:16-17). Their ear was pierced to indicate this permanent subjection. The law recognized that some people want the security of enslavement. Today, there are some people who would rather be dependent upon government to provide their needs (and with that provision accepting their commands) than do what is necessary to live free from its provision and direction. Some even act in a manner that puts them in jail, desiring the care and provision they get more than personal freedom.

3. Thief or criminal making restitution

A thief who could not, or did not, make restitution was sold as a slave: "If a man

steals . . . he shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft" (Ex. 22:1,3). The servitude ceased when enough work was done to pay for the amount due in restitution.

4. Pagans could be permanent slaves

Leviticus 25:44-46 states: As for your male and female slaves whom you may have - you may acquire male and female slaves from the pagan nations that are around you. Then, too, it is out of the sons of the sojourners who live as aliens among you that you may gain acquisition, and out of their families who are with you, whom they will have produced in your land; they also may become your possession. You may even bequeath them to your sons after you, to receive as a possession; you can use them as permanent slaves. But in respect to your countrymen [brother], the sons of Israel, you shall not rule with severity over one another.

In the Sabbath year all Hebrew debtors/slaves were released from their debts.. This was not so for foreigners (Deut. 15:3). Theologian R.J. Rushdoony writes, "since unbelievers are by nature slaves, they could be held as life-long slaves" 1 without piercing the ear to indicate their voluntary servitude (Lev. 25:44-46). This passage in Leviticus says that pagans could be permanent slaves and could be bequeathed to the children of the Hebrews. However, there are Biblical laws concerning slaves that are given for their protection and eventual redemption. Slaves could become part of the covenant and part of the family, even receiving an inheritance. Under the new covenant, a way was made to set slaves free internally, which should then be following by external preparation enabling those who were slaves to live at liberty, being self-governed under God.

Involuntary Servitude is Not Biblical

Exodus 21:16 says: "He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death." Deuteronomy 24:7 states: "If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently, or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you."

Kidnapping and enforced slavery are forbidden and punishable by death. This was true for any man (Ex. 21:16), as well as for the Israelites (Deut. 24:7). This was stealing a man's freedom. While aspects of slavery are Biblical (for punishment and restitution for theft, or for those who prefer the security of becoming a permanent bondservant), the Bible strictly forbids involuntary servitude.

Any slave that ran away from his master (thus expressing his desire for freedom) was to be welcomed by the Israelites, not mistreated, and not returned. Deuteronomy 23:15-16 states:

You shall not hand over to his master a slave who has escaped from his

master to you. He shall live with you in your midst, in the place which he shall choose in one of your towns where it pleases him; you shall not mistreat him.

This implied slaves must be treated justly, plus they had a degree of liberty. Other slave laws confirm this. In addition, such action was a fulfillment of the law of love in both the Old and New Testaments. The law of God declares: “. . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself” (Lev. 19:17-18). Leviticus 19:33-34 clearly reveals that this applies to strangers and aliens as well: “The stranger, . . . you shall not do him wrong. . . . you shall love him as yourself.”

It was forbidden to take the life or liberty of any other man. Rushdoony writes:

Thus, the only kind of slavery permitted is voluntary slavery, as Deuteronomy 23:15,16 makes very clear. Biblical law permits voluntary slavery because it recognizes that some people are not able to maintain a position of independence. To attach themselves voluntarily to a capable man and to serve him, protected by law, is thus a legitimate way of life, although a lesser one. The master then assumes the role of the benefactor, the bestower of welfare, rather than the state, and the slave is protected by the law of the state. A runaway slave thus cannot be restored to his master: he is free to go. The exception is the thief or criminal who is working out his restitution. The Code of Hammurabi decreed death for men who harbored a runaway slave; the Biblical law provided for the freedom of the slave. [2](#)

Rushdoony also says that the selling of slaves was forbidden. Since Israelites were voluntary slaves, and since not even a foreign slave could be compelled to return to his master (Deut. 23:15, 16), slavery was on a different basis under the law than in non-Biblical cultures. The slave was a member of the household, with rights therein. A slave-market could not exist in Israel. The slave who was working out a restitution for theft had no incentive to escape, for to do so would make him an incorrigible criminal and liable to death. [3](#)

When slaves (indentured servants) were acquired under the law, it was their labor that was purchased, not their person, and the price took into account the year of freedom (Lev. 25:44-55; Ex. 21:2; Deut. 15:12-13).

Laws related to slaves

There are a number of laws in the Bible related to slavery. They include:

1. Hebrew slaves (indentured servants) were freed after 6 years.

If you buy a Hebrew slave, he shall serve for six years; but on the seventh he shall go out as a free man without payment (Ex. 21:2).

If your kinsman, a Hebrew man or woman, is sold to you, then he shall serve you six years, but in the seventh year you shall set him free. And when you set him free, you shall not send him away empty-handed (Deut. 15:12-13). Hebrew slaves were to be set free after six years. If the man was married when he came, his wife was to go with him (Ex. 21:3).

This law did not apply to non-Hebrew slaves (see point 4 under "Types of slavery permitted by the Bible" above), though, as mentioned, any slave showing a desire for freedom was to be safely harbored if they ran away. In violation of this law, many Christian slaves in America were not given the option of freedom after six years (and many escaped slaves were forcefully returned). To comply with the spirit and law of the Old and New Testament, non-Christian slaves should have been introduced by their master to Christianity, equipped to live in liberty, and then given the opportunity to choose to live free. Christianity would have prepared them to live in freedom.

2. Freed slaves were released with liberal pay.

When these slaves were set free they were not to be sent away empty handed. They were to be furnished liberally from the flocks, threshing floor, and wine vat (Deut. 15:12-15).

3. Slaves were to be responsible.

We have mentioned that some people prefer the security of enslavement to the uncertainty of living free. People who live free have certain responsibilities they must maintain. They cannot have the fruit of freedom without the responsibilities of freedom. It is within this context that the following law can be understood:

"If he [a Hebrew slave] comes alone, he shall go out alone; if he is the husband of a wife, then his wife shall go out with him. If his master gives him a wife, and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall belong to her master, and he shall go out alone." (Ex. 21:3-4)

Rushdoony comments:

"The bondservant, however, could not have the best of both worlds, the world of freedom and the world of servitude. A wife meant responsibility: to marry, a man had to have a dowry as evidence of his ability to head a household. A man could not gain the benefit of freedom, a wife, and at the same time gain the benefit of security under a master." ⁴

Marrying as a slave required no responsibility of provision or need of a dowry. He gained the benefits of marriage without the responsibilities associated with it.

Rushdoony continues:

"If he married while a bondservant, or a slave, he knew that in so doing he was abandoning either freedom or his family. He either remained permanently a slave with his family and had his ear pierced as a sign of subordination (like a woman), or he left his family. If he walked out and left his family, he could, if he earned enough, redeem his family from bondage. The law here is humane and also unsentimental. It recognizes that some people are by nature slaves and will always be so. It both requires that they be dealt with in a godly manner and also

that the slave recognize his position and accept it with grace. Socialism, on the contrary, tries to give the slave all the advantages of his security together with the benefits of freedom, and, in the process, destroys both the free and the enslaved." ⁵

4. Runaway slaves were to go free.

As mentioned earlier, Deuteronomy 23:15-16 says that a runaway slave was to go free. He was to be welcomed to live in any of the towns of Israel he chose. The Israelites were not to mistreat him. Rushdoony says that, "Since the slave was, except where debt and theft were concerned, a slave by nature and by choice, a fugitive slave went free, and the return of such fugitives was forbidden (Deut. 23:15,16)." This aspect of Biblical law was violated by American slavery and the United States Constitution (see Art. IV, Sec. 2, Par. 3). "Christians cannot become slaves voluntarily; they are not to become the slaves of men (1 Cor. 7:23), nor 'entangled again with the yoke of bondage' (Gal. 5:1)." ⁶ Those who became Christians while slaves were to become free if they could (1 Cor. 7:21). If they could not, they were to exemplify the character of Christ (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2). Eventually, Christianity would overthrow slavery, not so much by denouncing it, but by promoting the equality of man under God, and teaching the principles of liberty and the brotherhood of mankind under Christ. It would be the responsibility of Christians, especially those who found themselves in a place of owning slaves (for example, many Christian Americans in the past inherited slaves) to teach such ideas, and then act accordingly. Many Christians in early America did just this. Phyllis Wheatley was introduced to Christianity by her masters, educated, and given her freedom. Many American Christians, in both North and South, at the time of the Civil War did much to educate slaves Biblically. Stonewall Jackson, who never owned slaves himself and was against slavery, conducted many classes in his church to educate slaves.

5. Excessive punishment of slaves was forbidden.

A slave could be punished by striking with a rod (Ex. 21:20-21), but if the punishment was excessive, the slave was to be given his freedom (Ex. 21:26-27; Lev. 24:17). This included knocking out the tooth or damaging the eye. This applied to indentured servants as well as other slaves. Since the owner would lose his investment in such a situation, there was a financial incentive for just treatment.

Just treatment of slaves was required of the masters. Paul writes: "Masters, grant to your slaves justice and fairness, knowing that you too have a Master in heaven." (Col. 4:1)

6. Slaves could be brought into the covenant.

Slaves could be circumcised (brought into the covenant) and then eat of the Passover meal (Ex. 12:43-44; Gen. 17:12-13). Slaves could also eat of holy things (Lev. 22:10-11).

7. Slaves had some rights and position in the home and could share in the

inheritance.

(See Gen. 24:2 and Prov. 17:2.)

8. Slaves were to rest on the Sabbath like everyone else.

The Fourth Commandment applied to all (Ex. 20:8-11).

9. Female slave laws were for their protection.

Exodus 21:4-11 gives some laws about female slaves, which served for their protection. These Hebrew female slaves were without family to assist them in their need or to help to provide security for them. These slave laws were a way to protect them from abuse not faced by males and to keep them from being turned out into the street, where much harm could come to them.

Examination of the Biblical view of slavery enables us to more effectively address the assertion that slavery was America's original sin. In light of the Scriptures we cannot say that slavery, in a broad and general sense, is sin. But this brief look at the Biblical slave laws does reveal how fallen man's example of slavery has violated God's laws, and America's form of slavery in particular violated various aspects of the law, as well as the general spirit of liberty instituted by Christ.

The Christian foundation and environment of America caused most people to seek to view life from a Biblical perspective. Concerning slavery, they would ask "Is it Biblical?" While most of the Founders saw it was God's desire to eliminate the institution, others attempted to justify it. At the time of the Civil War some people justified Southern slavery by appealing to the Bible. However, through this brief review of the Old Testament slave laws we have seen that American slavery violated some of these laws, not to mention the spirit of liberty instituted by the coming of Christ.

Slavery and the New Testament

When Paul wrote how slaves and masters were to act (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2; Col. 3:22-25; Titus 2:9-10), he was not endorsing involuntary slavery or the Roman slave system. He was addressing the attitudes, actions, and matters of the heart of those Christians who found themselves in slavery or as slave owners. This encompassed many people, for half the population of Rome and a large proportion of the Roman Empire were slaves. Many people were converted to Christianity while slaves or slave owners, and many Christians were enslaved.

It is in this context that we can better understand the example of Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Onesimus, a slave of Philemon who apparently stole some money from his master and ran away, encountered Paul in Rome and became a Christian. Paul sent him back to his master carrying the letter to Philemon. Author of the famous *Bible Handbook*, Henry Halley writes:

The Bible gives no hint as to how the master received his returning slave. But there is a tradition that says his master did receive him, and took Paul's

veiled hint and gave the slave his liberty. That is the way the Gospel works. Christ in the heart of the slave made the slave recognize the social usages of his day, and go back to his master determined to be a good slave and live out his natural life as a slave. Christ in the heart of the master made the master recognize the slave as a Christian brother and give him his liberty. There is a tradition that Onesimus afterward became a bishop of Berea. [7](#)

The Mosaic slave laws and the writings of Paul benefited and protected the slaves as best as possible in their situation. God's desire for any who are enslaved is freedom (Luke 4:18; Gal. 5:1). Those who are set free in Christ then need to be prepared to walk in liberty. Pagan nations had a much different outlook toward slaves, believing slaves had no rights or privileges. Because of the restrictions and humane aspect of the Mosaic laws on slavery, it never existed on a large scale in Israel, and did not exhibit the cruelties seen in Egypt, Greece, Rome, Assyria and other nations.

Sinful man will always live in some form of bondage and slavery, as a slave to the state, to a lord or noble, or to other men. As a step in man's freedom, God's laws of slavery provided the best situation for those who find themselves in bondage. God's ultimate desire is that all walk in the liberty of the gospel both internally and externally.

As the gospel principles of liberty have spread throughout history in all the nations, man has put aside the institution of overt slavery. However, since sinful man tends to live in bondage, different forms of slavery have replaced the more obvious system of past centuries. The state has assumed the role of master for many, providing aid and assistance, and with it more and more control, to those unable to provide for themselves. The only solution to slavery is the liberty of the gospel.

Brief History of Slavery

Slavery has existed throughout the world since after the fall of man. Egypt and other ancient empires enslaved multitudes. Greece and Rome had many slaves, taken from nations they conquered. Slavery was a part of almost every culture. While some Christian nations had taken steps to end slavery, it was still an established part of most of the world when America began to be settled.

Many of the early settlers came to America as indentured servants, indebted to others for a brief period of time to pay for their passage. England at this time recognized the forced labor of the apprentice, the hired servant, convicts, and indentured servants. Some of these laborers were subject to whippings and other forms of punishment. These forms of servitude were limited in duration and "transmitted no claim to the servant's children." [8](#)

According to Hugh Thomas in *The Slave Trade*, about 11,328,000 Africans were

transported to the new world between 1440 and 1870. Of these about 4 million went to Brazil, 2.5 million to Spanish colonies, 2 million to the British West Indies, 1.6 million to the French West Indies, and 500,000 went to what became the United States of America. [9](#)

A Dutch ship, seeking to unload its human cargo, brought the first slaves to Virginia in 1619. Over the next century a small number of slaves were brought to America. In 1700 there were not more than 20 to 30 thousand black slaves in all the colonies. There were some people who spoke against slavery (e.g. the Quakers and Mennonites) [10](#) and some political efforts to check slavery (as in laws of Massachusetts and Rhode Island), but these had little large scale effect. The colonies' laws recognized and protected slave property. Efforts were made to restrict the slave trade in several colonies, but the British government overruled such efforts and the trade went on down to the Revolution.

When independence was declared from England, the legal status of slavery was firmly established in the colonies, though there were plenty of voices speaking out against it, and with independence those voices would increase.

America's Founders and Slavery

Some people suggest today that all early Americans must have been despicable to allow such an evil as slavery. They say early America should be judged as evil and sinful, and anything they have to say should be discounted. But if we were to judge modern America by this same standard, it would be far more wicked - we are not merely enslaving people, but we are murdering tens of millions of innocent unborn children through abortion. These people claim that they would not have allowed slavery if they were alive then. They would speak out and take any measures necessary. But where is their outcry and action to end slavery in the Sudan today? (And slavery there is much worse than that in early America.)

Some say we should not listen to the Founders of America because they owned slaves, or at least allowed slavery to exist in the society. However, if we were to cut ourselves off from the history of nations that had slavery in the past we would have to have nothing to do with any people because almost every society has had slavery, including African Americans, for many African societies sold slaves to the Europeans; and up to ten percent of blacks in America owned slaves.

The Founders Believed Slavery Was Fundamentally Wrong.

The overwhelming majority of early Americans and most of America's leaders did not own slaves. Some did own slaves, which were often inherited (like George Washington at age eleven), but many of these people set them free after independence. Most Founders believed that slavery was wrong and that it should be abolished. William Livingston, signer of the Constitution and Governor of New Jersey, wrote to an anti-slavery society in New York (John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the

U.S. Supreme Court and President of the Continental Congress, was President of this society):

I would most ardently wish to become a member of it [the anti-slavery society] and . . . I can safely promise them that neither my tongue, nor my pen, nor purse shall be wanting to promote the abolition of what to me appears so inconsistent with humanity and Christianity. . . . May the great and the equal Father of the human race, who has expressly declared His abhorrence of oppression, and that He is no respecter of persons, succeed a design so laudably calculated to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke. [11](#)

John Quincy Adams, who worked tirelessly for years to end slavery, spoke of the anti-slavery views of the southern Founders, including Jefferson who owned slaves:

The inconsistency of the institution of domestic slavery with the principles of the Declaration of Independence was seen and lamented by all the southern patriots of the Revolution; by no one with deeper and more unalterable conviction than by the author of the Declaration himself. No charge of insincerity or hypocrisy can be fairly laid to their charge. Never from their lips was heard one syllable of attempt to justify the institution of slavery. They universally considered it as a reproach fastened upon them by the unnatural step-mother country and they saw that before the principles of the Declaration of Independence, slavery, in common with every other mode of oppression, was destined sooner or later to be banished from the earth. Such was the undoubting conviction of Jefferson to his dying day. In the Memoir of His Life, written at the age of seventy-seven, he gave to his countrymen the solemn and emphatic warning that the day was not distant when they must hear and adopt the general emancipation of their slaves. "Nothing is more certainly written," said he, "in the book of fate, than that these people are to be free." [12](#)

The Founding Fathers believed that blacks had the same God-given inalienable rights as any other peoples. James Otis of Massachusetts said in 1764 that "The colonists are by the law of nature freeborn, as indeed all men are, white or black." [13](#)

There had always been free blacks in America who owned property, voted, and had the same rights as other citizens. [14](#) Most of the men who gave us the Declaration and the Constitution wanted to see slavery abolished. For example, George Washington wrote in a letter to Robert Morris:

I can only say that there is not a man living who wishes more sincerely than I do to see a plan adopted for the abolition of it [slavery]. [15](#)

Charles Carroll, Signer of Declaration from Maryland, wrote:

Why keep alive the question of slavery? It is admitted by all to be a great evil. [16](#)

Benjamin Rush, Signer from Pennsylvania, stated:

Domestic slavery is repugnant to the principles of Christianity. . . . It is rebellion against the authority of a common Father. It is a practical denial of the extent and efficacy of the death of a common Savior. It is an usurpation of the prerogative of the great Sovereign of the universe who has solemnly claimed an exclusive property in the souls of men. [17](#)

Father of American education, and contributor to the ideas in the Constitution, Noah Webster wrote:

Justice and humanity require it [the end of slavery] - Christianity commands it. Let every benevolent . . . pray for the glorious period when the last slave who fights for freedom shall be restored to the possession of that inestimable right. [18](#)

Quotes from John Adams reveal his strong anti-slavery views:

Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States. . . . I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in . . . abhorrence. [19](#)
My opinion against it [slavery] has always been known. . . . [N]ever in my life did I own a slave. [20](#)

When Benjamin Franklin served as President of the Pennsylvania Society of Promoting the Abolition of Slavery he declared: "Slavery is . . . an atrocious debasement of human nature." [21](#)

Thomas Jefferson's original draft of the Declaration included a strong denunciation of slavery, declaring the king's perpetuation of the slave trade and his vetoing of colonial anti-slavery measures as one reason the colonists were declaring their independence:

He [King George III] has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere. . . . Determined to keep open a market where MEN should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or restrain this execrable commerce. [22](#)

Prior to independence, anti-slavery measures by the colonists were thwarted by the British government. Franklin wrote in 1773:

A disposition to abolish slavery prevails in North America, that many of Pennsylvanians have set their slaves at liberty, and that even the Virginia Assembly have petitioned the King for permission to make a law for preventing the importation of more into that colony. This request, however, will probably not be granted as their former laws of that kind have always been repealed.. [23](#)

The Founders took action against slavery.

The founders did not just believe slavery was an evil that needed to be abolished, and they did not just speak against it, but they acted on their beliefs. During the Revolutionary War black slaves who fought won their freedom in every state except South Carolina and Georgia. [24](#)

Many of the founders started and served in anti-slavery societies. Franklin and Rush founded the first such society in America in 1774. John Jay was president of a similar society in New York. Other Founding Fathers serving in anti-slavery societies included: William Livingston (Constitution signer), James Madison, Richard Bassett, James Monroe, Bushrod Washington, Charles Carroll, William Few, John Marshall, Richard Stockton, Zephaniah Swift, and many more. [25](#)

As the Founders worked to free themselves from enslavement to Britain, based upon laws of God and nature, they also spoke against slavery and took steps to stop it. Abolition grew as principled resistance to the tyranny of England grew, since both were based upon the same ideas. This worked itself out on a personal as well as policy level, as seen in the following incident in the life of William Whipple, signer of the Declaration of Independence from New Hampshire. Dwight writes:

When General Whipple set out to join the army, he took with him for his waiting servant, a colored man named Prince, one whom he had imported from Africa many years before. He was a slave whom his master highly valued. As he advanced on his journey, he said to Prince, "If we should be called into an engagement with the enemy, I expect you will behave like a man of courage, and fight like a brave soldier for your country." Prince feelingly replied, "Sir, I have no inducement to fight, I have no country while I am a slave. If I had my freedom, I would endeavor to defend it to the last drop of my blood." This reply of Prince produced the effect on his master's heart which Prince desired. The general declared him free on the spot. [26](#)

The Founders opposed slavery based upon the principle of the equality of all men. Throughout history many slaves have revolted but it was believed (even by those

enslaved) that some people had the right to enslave others. The American slave protests were the first in history based on principles of God-endowed liberty for all. It was not the secularists who spoke out against slavery but the ministers and Christian statesmen.

Before independence, some states had tried to restrict slavery in different ways (e.g. Virginia had voted to end the slave trade in 1773), but the English government had not allowed it. Following independence and victory in the war, the rule of the mother country was removed, leaving freedom for each state to deal with the slavery problem. Within about 20 years of the 1783 Treaty of Peace with Britain, the northern states abolished slavery: Pennsylvania and Massachusetts in 1780; Connecticut and Rhode Island in 1784; New Hampshire in 1792; Vermont in 1793; New York in 1799; and New Jersey in 1804.

The Northwest Ordinance (1787, 1789), which governed the admission of new states into the union from the then northwest territories, forbid slavery. Thus, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa all prohibited slavery. This first federal act dealing with slavery was authored by Rufus King (signer of the Constitution) and signed into law by President George Washington.

Although no Southern state abolished slavery, there was much anti-slavery sentiment. Many anti-slavery societies were started, especially in the upper South. Many Southern states considered proposals abolishing slavery, for example, the Virginia legislature in 1778 and 1796. When none passed, many, like Washington, set their slaves free, making provision for their well being. Following independence, "Virginia changed her laws to make it easier for individuals to emancipate slaves," ²⁷ though over time the laws became more restrictive in Virginia.

While most states were moving toward freedom for slaves, the deep South (Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina) was largely pro-slavery. Yet, even so, the Southern courts before around 1840 generally took the position that slavery violated the natural rights of blacks. For example, the Mississippi Supreme Court ruled in 1818:

Slavery is condemned by reason and the laws of nature. It exists and can only exist, through municipal regulations, and in matters of doubt,...courts must lean in favorem vitae et libertatis [in favor of life and liberty]. ²⁸

The same court ruled in 1820 that the slave "is still a human being, and possesses all those rights, of which he is not deprived by the positive provisions of the law." ²⁹

Free blacks were citizens and voted in most Northern states and Virginia, North Carolina, and South Carolina. In Baltimore prior to 1800, more blacks voted than whites; but in 1801 and 1809, Maryland began to restrict black voting and in 1835 North Carolina prohibited it. Other states made similar restrictions, but a number of

Northern states allowed blacks to vote and hold office. In Massachusetts this right was given nearly a decade before the American Revolution and was never taken away, either before or after the Civil War.

Slavery and the Constitution

The issue of slavery was considered at the Constitutional Convention. Though most delegates were opposed to slavery, they compromised on the issue when the representatives from Georgia and South Carolina threatened to walk out. The delegates realized slavery would continue in these states with or without the union. They saw a strong union of all the colonies was the best means of securing their liberty (which was by no means guaranteed to survive). They did not agree to abolish slavery as some wanted to do, but they did take the forward step of giving the Congress the power to end the slave trade after 20 years. ³⁰ No nation in Europe or elsewhere had agreed to such political action.

Even so, many warned of the dangers of allowing this evil to continue. George Mason of Virginia told the delegates:

Every master of slaves is born a petty tyrant. They bring the judgement of heaven upon a country. As nations cannot be rewarded or punished in the next world, they must be in this. By an inevitable chain of causes and effects, Providence punishes national sins by national calamities. ³¹

Jefferson had written some time before this:

The whole commerce between master and slave is a perpetual exercise of the most boisterous passions, the most unremitting despotism on the one part, and degrading submissions on the other. . . . And with what execration should the statesman be loaded, who permitting one half the citizens thus to trample on the rights of the other. . . . And can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are of the gift of God? That they are not to be violated but with his wrath? Indeed I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just: that his justice cannot sleep forever. ³²

Constitutional Convention Delegate, Luther Martin, stated:

[I]t ought to be considered that national crimes can only be and frequently are punished in this world by national punishments; and that the continuance of the slave-trade, and thus giving it a national sanction and encouragement, ought to be considered as justly exposing us to the displeasure and vengeance of Him who is equally Lord of all and who views with equal eye the poor African slave and his American master. ³³

Some today misinterpret the Constitutional provision of counting the slaves as three-fifths for purposes of representation as pro-slavery or black dehumanization. But it was a political compromise between the north and the south.. The three-fifths provision applied only to slaves and not free blacks, who voted and had the same rights as whites (and in some southern states this meant being able to own slaves). While the Southern states wanted to count the slaves in their population to determine the number of congressmen from their states, slavery opponents pushed to keep the Southern states from having more representatives, and hence more power in congress.

The Constitution did provide that runaway slaves would be returned to their owners (We saw previously that returning runaway slaves is contrary to Biblical slave laws, unless these slaves were making restitution for a crime.) but the words slave and slavery were carefully avoided. "Many of the framers did not want to blemish the Constitution with that shameful term." The initial language of this clause was "legally held to service or labor," but this was deleted when it was objected that *legally* seemed to favor "the idea that slavery was legal in a moral view." [34](#)

While the Constitution did provide some protection for slavery, this document is not pro-slavery. It embraced the situation of all 13 states at that time, the Founders leaving most of the power to deal with this social evil in the hands of each state. Most saw that the principles of liberty contained in the Declaration could not support slavery and would eventually overthrow it.. As delegate to the Constitutional Convention, Luther Martin put it:

Slavery is inconsistent with the genius of republicanism, and has a tendency to destroy those principles on which it is supported, as it lessens the sense of the equal rights of mankind, and habituates us to tyranny and oppression. [35](#)

We have seen that after independence the American Founders actually took steps to end slavery. Some could have done more, but as a whole they probably did more than any group of national leaders up until that time in history to deal with the evil of slavery. They took steps toward liberty for the enslaved and believed that the gradual march of liberty would continue, ultimately resulting in the complete death of slavery. The ideas they infused in the foundational civil documents upon which America was founded - such as Creator endowed rights and the equality of all men before the law - eventually prevailed and slavery was abolished. But not without great difficulty because the generations that followed failed to carry out the gradual abolition of slavery in America.

The View of Slavery Changes

Most of America's Founders thought slavery would gradually be abolished. Roger Sherman said that "the abolition of slavery seemed to be going on in the U.S. and

that the good sense of the several states would probably by degrees complete it." [36](#)
But it was not. Why?

1. Succeeding generations did not have the character and worldview necessary to complete the task started by the Founders. Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty. Each generation must take up the cause of liberty, which is the cause of God, and fight the battle. While the majority view of the Founders was that American slavery was a social evil that needed to be abolished, many in later generations attempted to justify slavery, often appealing to the Scriptures (though, I believe, in error at many points, as mentioned earlier).
2. American slavery was not in alignment with Biblical slave laws and God's desire for liberty for all mankind. This inconsistency produced an institution that proved too difficult to gradually and peacefully abolish. Some Founders (like Henry and Jefferson) could not see how a peaceful resolution was possible and gave the "necessary evil" argument. Henry said: "As much as I deplore slavery, I see that prudence forbids its abolition." [37](#)

Jefferson was opposed to slavery yet he thought that once the slaves gained freedom, a peaceful coexistence of whites and blacks would be very difficult to maintain. Jefferson predicted that if the slaves were freed and lived in America, "Deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites' ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained; new provocations; the real distinctions which nature has made and many other circumstances, will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions which will probably never end but in the extermination of the one or the other race." [38](#)

This is why many worked (especially many from Virginia, like James Monroe and James Madison) to set up a country in Africa (Liberia) where the freed slaves could live. Some at this time did not see integration as possible, and apart from the power of God, history has shown it is not possible, as there have been and are many ethnic wars. The church must lead the way in race relations, showing all believers are brothers in Christ, and all men have a common Creator.

3. The invention of the cotton gin, which revived the economic benefit of slavery, also contributed to a shift in the thinking of many Americans. At the time of independence and the constitutional period most people viewed slavery as an evil that should and would be abolished. But by the 1830s, many people, including some Southern ministers, began to justify it. Some, like Calhoun, even said it was a positive thing. Others justified it by promoting the inequality of the races. Stephen Douglas argued that the Declaration only applied to whites, but Lincoln rejected that argument and sought to bring the nation back to the principles of the Declaration. In the end these principles prevailed.

The Civil War

It is not the intent of this article to examine the War between the States. [39](#) The causes behind the war were many. Certainly slavery was a part of the cause (and for

a small number of wealthy and influential Southern slave owners, it was probably primary), but slavery was not the central issue for all people in the South. Most Southerners did not own slaves and most of those who did had only a small number.

[40](#)

States rights and perceived unconstitutional taxes were also motivations for secession. There were many abolitionists in the North, both Christian and non-Christian, who pushed for the war, seeing it as a means to end slavery. Though slavery was not initially the reason Lincoln sent troops into the South, he did come to believe that God wanted him to emancipate the slaves.

In all the complexities and tragedy of the war, God was at work fulfilling His providential purposes. Due to the sin of man, to his inability to deal with slavery in a Christian manner, and to other factors, a war erupted. Both good and bad in the root causes, produced good and bad fruit in the outcome of the war. [41](#)

Though America's Founders failed to accomplish all of their desires and wishes in dealing with the issue of slavery, the principles of equality and God-given rights they established in the American constitutional republic set into motion events leading to the end of slavery in the United States and throughout the world. That America was founded upon such Biblical principles is what made her a Christian nation, not that there was no sin in the Founders. It is because of the Christian foundations that America has become the most free, just, and prosperous nation in history. The Godly principles infused in her laws, institutions, and families have had immense impact in overthrowing tyranny, oppression, and slavery throughout the world.

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For more information on this issue see [The Founding Fathers and Slavery](#), [George Washington, Thomas Jefferson & Slavery in Virginia](#), [Black History Issue 2003](#), [Confronting Civil War Revisionism](#), and [Setting the Record Straight](#) ([Book](#), [DVD](#), or [CD](#)).

Endnotes

1. R.J. Rushdoony, *Institutes of Biblical Law*, vol.1, p. 137.[\(Return\)](#)
2. Rushdoony, p. 286.[\(Return\)](#)
3. Rushdoony, pp. 485-486.[\(Return\)](#)
4. Rushdoony, p. 251.[\(Return\)](#)
5. Rushdoony, p. 251. [\(Return\)](#)
6. Rushdoony, p. 137.[\(Return\)](#)
7. Henry H. Halley, *Halley's Bible Handbook* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1965), p. 645.[\(Return\)](#)
8. Albert Bushnell Hart, *The American Nation: A History* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1906), vol. 16,

Slavery and Abolition, 1831-1841, p. 50.[\(Return\)](#)

9. "History of slavery is wide-ranging saga", book review by Gregory Kane of *The Slave Trade* by Hugh Thomas (Simon and Schuster), in *The Daily Progress*, Charlottesville, Va., December 7, 1997.[\(Return\)](#)

10. The earliest known official protest against slavery in America was the *Resolutions of Germantown, Pennsylvania Mennonites, February 18, 1688*. See *Documents of American History*, Henry Steele Commager, editor (New York: F.S. Crofts & Co., 1944), 37-38.[\(Return\)](#)

11. William Livingston, *The Papers of William Livingston*, Carl E. Prince, editor (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1988), Vol. V, p. 255, to the New York Manumission Society on June 26, 1786. In "The Founding Fathers and Slavery" by David Barton, unpublished paper, p. 5. [\(Return\)](#)

12. John Quincy Adams, *An Oration Delivered Before the Inhabitants of the Town of Newburyport, at Their Request, on the Sixty-First Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1837* (Newburyport: Charles Whipple, 1837), p. 50.[\(Return\)](#)

13. *Rights of the Colonies*, in Bernard Bailyn, ed., *Pamphlets of the American Revolution* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1965), p. 439. In "Was the American Founding Unjust? The Case of Slavery," by Thomas G. West, *Principles*, a quarterly review of The Claremont Institute, Spring/Summer 1992, p. 1.[\(Return\)](#)

14. Hart, p. 53.[\(Return\)](#)

15. Letter to Robert Morris, April 12, 1786, in *George Washington: A Collection*, ed. W.B. Allen (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1988), p. 319.[\(Return\)](#)

16. Kate Mason Rowland, *Life and Correspondence of Charles Carroll of Carrollton* (New York & London: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1898), Vol. II, p. 321, to Robert Goodloe Harper, April 23, 1820. In Barton, p. 3.[\(Return\)](#)

17. Benjamin Rush, *Minutes of the Proceedings of a Convention of Delegates from the Abolition Societies Established in Different Parts of the United States Assembled at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Zachariah Poulson, 1794), p. 24.. In Barton, p. 4.[\(Return\)](#)

18. Noah Webster, *Effect of Slavery on Morals and Industry* (Hartford: Hudson and Goodwin, 1793), p. 48. In Barton, p. 4.[\(Return\)](#)

19. Adams to Robert J. Evans, June 8, 1819, in Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds., *Selected Writings of John and John Quincy Adams* (New York: Knopf, 1946), p. 209. In West, p. 2.[\(Return\)](#)

20. John Adams, *The Works of John Adams, Second President of the United States*, Charles Francis Adams, ed. (Boston: Little, Brown, and Co., 1854), Vol. IX, pp. 92-93, to George Churchman and Jacob Lindley on January 24, 1801. In Barton, p. 3.[\(Return\)](#)

21. "An Address to the Public from the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery" (1789), in Franklin, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 1154. In West, p. 2.[\(Return\)](#)

22. *The Life and Selected Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Adrienne Koch and William Peden, eds. (New York: Random House, 1944), p. 25.[\(Return\)](#)

23. Benjamin Franklin, *The Works of Benjamin Franklin*, Jared Sparks, ed. (Boston: Tappan, Whittemore, and Mason, 1839), Vol. VIII, p. 42, to the Rev. Dean Woodward on April 10, 1773.[\(Return\)](#)

24. Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro and the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), chaps. 4-6. In West, p. 2.[\(Return\)](#)

25. Barton, p. 5.[\(Return\)](#)

26. N. Dwight, *The Lives of the Signers of the Declaration of Independence* (New York: A.S. Barnes & Burr, 1860), p. 11.[\(Return\)](#)

27. West, p. 4. [\(Return\)](#)

28. *Harry v. Decker & Hopkins* (1818), in West, p. 4.[\(Return\)](#)

29. *Mississippi v. Jones* (1820), in West, p. 4.[\(Return\)](#)

30. Congress banned the exportation of slaves from any state in 1794, and in 1808 banned the importation of slaves. The individual states had passed similar legislation prior to 1808 as well. However, several Southern states continued to actively import and export slaves after their state ban went into effect.[\(Return\)](#)

31. Mark Beliles and Stephen McDowell, *America's Providential History* (Charlottesville, Va.: Providence Foundation, 1991), p. 227.[\(Return\)](#)

32. Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Trenton: Wilson & Blackwell, 1803), Query XVIII,

pp. 221-222. [\(Return\)](#)

33. Luther Martin, *The Genuine Information Delivered to the Legislature of the State of Maryland Relative to the Proceedings of the General Convention Lately Held at Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: Eleazor Oswald, 1788), p. 57. In Barton, p. 4. [\(Return\)](#)

34. West, p. 5. See Max Farrand, ed. *The Records of the Federal Convention of 1787* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1937), vol. 2, p. 417 (remarks on August 25), and pp. 601 (report of Committee of Style), 628 (Sept. 15). See also Madison's *Notes of Debates in the Federal Convention of 1787*, August 25. [\(Return\)](#)

35. Luther Martin, *Genuine Information* (1788), in Herbert J. Storing, ed., *The Complete Anti-Federalist* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), vol. 2, p. 62. In West, p. 6. [\(Return\)](#)

36. Remarks at the Constitutional Convention, August 22, Farrand, vol. 2, pp. 369-72. In West, pp. 7-8. [\(Return\)](#)

37. Henry to Robert Pleasants, Jan. 18, 1773, in Philip B. Kurland and Ralph Lerner, eds. *The Founders' Constitution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), vol. 1, p. 517; Elliot, *Debates*, vol. 3, p. 590. In West, p. 6. Henry also pointed out that convenience contributed to the continuation of slavery. He said: "Is it not surprising that at a time when the rights of humanity are defined with precision in a country above all others fond of liberty < that, in such an age, and in such a country, we find men, professing a religion the most humane and gentle, adopting a principle as repugnant to humanity as it is inconsistent with the Bible and destructive to liberty? Believe me, I honor the Quakers for their noble efforts to abolish slavery. Every thinking, honest man regrets it in speculation, yet how few in practice from conscientious motives. Would any man believe that I am master of slaves of my own purchase? I am drawn along by the general inconvenience of living without them. I will not, I cannot justify it. For however culpable my conduct, I will so far pay my devoir to virtue as to won the excellence and rectitude of her precepts, and to lament my own non-conformity to them." In John Hancock, *Essays on the Elective Franchise; or, Who Has the Right to Vote?* (Philadelphia: Merrihew & Son, 1865), pp. 31-32. [\(Return\)](#)

38. Jefferson's *Notes*, Query XIV, p. 188. [\(Return\)](#)

39. See *America's Providential History*, chapter 16 for more on a providential view of the war. [\(Return\)](#)

40. See Hart, pp. 67 ff. Hart records that in 1860 only about 5% of the white population made a substantial profit of slave-keeping (a direct profit; many others benefited from the commerce associated with slavery). About 2% of this number (0.1% of the total white population) were large plantation owners who exerted much political influence.

Some people have pointed out that only 3% of Southerners owned slaves. While this is technically true in some measure, it is misleading. The 3% reflects ownership by the head of the household and does not include all its inhabitants. Taking this into account, at the time of the Civil War about 19% of the population lived in households with slaves; and this was 19% of total population which included a large number of slaves. When you consider that in 6 Southern states (Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina), there were almost as many or more slaves than whites, this 19% figure actually represents 35%-45% of the white population (in those states) having a direct relation to a home that had slaves. [\(Return\)](#)

41. See *America's Providential History*, chapter 16 for some positive and negative effects of the war. [\(Return\)](#)

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