

“The Bible and Slavery”

Dear Antwort Mann,

Do you ever wonder why God didn't give us more commandments? I feel life would have been different if He said, “Thou shalt not enslave thy brother.” Our Founding Fathers believed in God, but they all owned black slaves. Many slave owners tried to justify slavery by appealing to the Bible. Does the Bible condone slavery?

Signed, “Just Wondering”

Dear “Wondering,”

Since we don't keep any of God's original Ten Commandments, why do you think we would keep any other commandments He would give to us? And enslaving another against his will does fall under the 5th Commandment, for embittering another's life is a type of murder.

But the whole issue of slavery in the Bible is not as “black and white” (pun intended) as we would think. We must not import our American experience with slavery back into the Biblical passages that deal with the issue. Frankly, the Bible typically treats slavery in a negative light.

The Children of Israel were slaves in Egypt for 430 years. God sent Moses to free them. After that experience, when the issue of slavery comes up among the Israelites, it was an allowance for human weakness rather than a God-given, perpetual right. Bondage to another for life was on a strictly voluntary basis. Jewish and Gentile slaves held by the Israelites, for whatever reason, were to be treated with kindness and compassion, and were to be released at the beginning of every seventh year.

In New Testament times, the word slave held a much broader meaning. Slaves held a variety of positions, and could even be in positions of great power and responsibility. In the Roman world, slaves were often prisoners of war, or non-Roman individuals sold by their families to pay a debt. And it wasn't a racial thing, for often fair-skinned Britons and blonde Germanic peoples were slaves to the Romans. Typically, Roman slaves expected to be set free at age 30. Frequently, free Roman citizens sold themselves into slavery to pay a debt, and non-Roman persons sold themselves into slavery in hopes of eventually earning Roman citizenship. So, slavery in Biblical times was quite different from that practiced later by various countries, including our own.

Because of how broad the definition of slavery was, many of the Biblical passages dealing with Master/Slave relationships apply equally today to Employer/Employee relationships. But, for those who would kidnap others for the purpose of enslaving them against their will, St. Paul had very strong words of condemnation (I Tim. 1:10).

So, the idea that the Bible endorses the type of slavery that was present in America's past, or that is found in so many parts of the world today, simply does not stand. The Bible acknowledges its presence; makes provisions for proper care and dignity of those who were slaves, whatever the circumstances; and shows that, in the Christian congregation, masters and slaves were equal to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing together the same grace, love, forgiveness and peace through Christ's death and resurrection.

“There is . . . neither slave nor free . . . for you are one in Christ.” Galatians 3:28

**Best regards,
Der Antwort Mann**