

Truth and Life

- case studies, biblical interpretation and choices

FOUNDATIONS

Key questions

We have seen that living from a Jesus perspective is a call to the ethics of the Spirit, which transcends the law and is hallmarked by freedom, not 'legalism' or 'restriction', and is rooted in life-giving values.

Our next step must be to consider:

- How does the centrality of Jesus in Christian ethics influence the way we handle both scripture and the challenges of modern life? What are the distinctive values of the kingdom of God?
- What are the distinctive values of the kingdom of God?
- How are we use both the biblical text and prayerful reason to shape answers and actions to particular issues? What are the principles of Christian ethical hermeneutics?

We want to learn how to use both scripture and our renewed minds to make ethical decisions. The danger is ending up with theories; the only way to discover how scripture and prayerful thought work together is to apply them both to real situations.

APPLICATIONS

Text and circumstance

- **Some texts appear to support practices that Christians instinctively feel are abhorrent** e.g. genocide, polygamy and slavery. Few Christians would support slavery today, but this has not always been the case. As recently as the 19th century, many prominent Christians supported both the principle and practice of slavery, arguing for it from what they believed were clear biblical statements. Abolitionists also used the Bible, but interpreted it differently. We stand largely removed from the slavery issue and so the debate helps us to look objectively at how scripture was being used by both sides, and to check how we use scripture in resolving ethical issues.
- **Some texts touch on issues about which Christians continue to argue and debate** e.g. war, women and capital punishment. In the secular arena there is strong popular support for the return of capital punishment to the statute book. Many Christians agree and make a strong case from the Bible; as do those who disagree. It is a subject that demands a clear answer. We need to discover whether the lessons learned from the slavery debate can help us resolve a subject that stirs such strong emotions.
- **Some texts do not address pressing topics in quite the way we would like them to** e.g. politics, ecology and human rights. The debate about human rights and the demand for them has reached a crescendo in our times. The human rights movement has been largely spearheaded by humanist thought and for this reason many Christians are wary of it and even oppose it. Others, however, see the issues as central to God's



heart and identical in essence to those raised by the Torah, the prophets and New Testament Christians. We must learn how to respond as Christians to vital topics on the world's agenda, in a way that is pro-active not reactive.

Issue and interpretation

We will take the two topics of slavery and human rights as case studies in ethical hermeneutics. We will try to understand how those holding opposing positions, in each case, are using the Bible, and try to distil principles which we can apply to our ethical decision making amid the multitude of challenges and choices we face today.

CASE STUDY 1: SLAVERY

Setting the scene

Slavery has cursed the lives of millions of men and women throughout history. Because of abolition in the West it is easy to think of it as a thing of the past. The attitudes that gave it birth still remain:

- The lives of many people of African origin are still blighted by this legacy of slavery in the past
- The pro-slavery theology underlay Christian support for apartheid in South Africa in the 20th century

Pro-slavery case

Slavery is never said to be sinful. The Bible does not condemn it; it even commands it. Slavery is used as a model for Christian conduct. Slavery accords with God's will; either believe the Bible and support slavery, or oppose slavery and deny the Bible as God's authoritative word.

▪ Noah: clearly prophesied

- Canaan was cursed by Noah to be a slave of slaves (Gen 9:24-27). 'God decreed slavery before it existed.' The curse was argued to prophesy black Africa's destiny

▪ Patriarchs: divinely sanctioned

- Abraham received, possessed and willed slaves to his children as property (cf. Gen 20:14). The angel commanded Hagar the slave to return to Sarah (Gen 16:1-9), supporting fugitive slave law
- Joseph bought the people as slaves in exchange for food during the time of famine (Gen 47:20-21); surely at God's command

▪ Israel: nationally incorporated

- Foreign slaves could be bought by Israel from both surrounding nations and strangers living in the land, and the bondage would be perpetual (Lev 25:44-46)
- Hebrews could sell themselves and their families into slavery for limited periods to be released on the 'sabbatical' or 'jubilee' year (cf Ex 21; Lev 25); such slavery takes priority over the institution of marriage



▪ **Church: approvingly recognised**

- Jesus was surrounded by the cruel practices of slavery but never said a word against them. He heals the slave of a Roman centurion without question (Mt 8:5-13). The words of Jesus are used to encourage slaves to accept their state (2Tim 6:3)
- Apostles approved of slavery but disapproved of its abuses (cf Eph 6:5-9). The church had no right to interfere with slavery as a political system. In Christ there is neither slave nor free so the debate is not significant (Gal 3:28). Master and slave could both be church members side by side (1Tim 6:2). Christian masters were not commanded to free their slaves (1Cor 7:20-24). Paul was said to argue that slavery was based upon the words of Jesus (1Tim 6:1-6), and that he himself supported slavery by sending Onesimus back to Philemon (1:12-14).

▪ **History: mercifully instituted**

- Throughout history the practice of slavery has rescued multitudes of war prisoners from death, and has brought 'millions of Ham's descendants' (Africans) under the influence of the gospel

Anti-slavery case

Slavery is person-stealing; lawless, godless, a criminal sin, and an institution of oppression. It reduces human life to property, a thing. It denies human beings their God-given dignity and freedom. Its brutality cannot be reconciled with Christian love.

▪ **Noah: scripture misused**

- The curse speaks of national judgment, not individual bondage. Africans are not Canaan's descendants; the boundaries of Genesis 10:15-19 would demand that Assyrians, some Persians and all Greeks and Romans should be slaves
- These are the words of Noah, not God; they are not words of prophecy, they are the angry utterings of a semi-intoxicated mind. If the words have any historical fulfillment it must be found in Israel's conquest of Canaan (cf Dt 20:10-18)

▪ **Abraham: parallel misplaced**

- The Hebrew word *ebed* has a meaning much broader than 'slave', it refers to various forms of service. Abraham's property lists included Sarah as well as servants (cf Gen 13). Therefore, you cannot draw any parallel between the patriarchal passages and the enslaving of the African peoples
- If in fact Abraham did practise slavery he must have been enticed into it from his surrounding environment; neither God nor Israel ever originated servitude of this kind. Further, patriarchal morality is often clearly not to be an example for us (e.g. lying, concubinage and polygamy)

▪ **Exodus: slavery removed**

- God's deliverance of Israel from Egypt makes it clear that he hates and condemns slavery; he heard the cry of the oppressed and acted in judgment. Yet the Hebrews, with their own land, dwellings and cattle, had a much better lot than African slaves



- There are striking parallels between Hebrew and African slaves; both suffered involuntary enslavement by a foreign race, slave labour was unrequited and oppressive, in both cases attempts were made to retard and control the slave populations

- **Moses: service volunteered**

- Hebrew servitude was voluntary and a security against poverty (cf Ex 21:2-6), basically benevolent, a kindness to the poor and oppressed (cf Ex 21:20-21)
- Hebrew slaves could be redeemed at any time by their next of kin (Lev 25:47-52) and automatically freed on sabbatical or jubilee years. They took part in all religious ceremonies and times of rest (23 years and 64 days off every 50 years!); they were members of the covenant and had equal legal protection as their masters (cf Lev 19:15). Runaway servants were not returned to oppressive masters and thus given protection (Dt 23:15-16)
- Foreign servants, who came into Israel, were circumcised and became members of the covenant with all its benefits and safeguards (Dt 29:10-13)
- Israel was a theocracy with God as ruler and owner of all; this being the case slavery as it is popularly understood (one person owning another) was both theoretically and practically excluded

- **Israel: slavery condemned**

- There is no biblical record of Israel ever buying, selling or holding foreign slaves; it is not part of the descriptions of the nation's commerce (cf 1Kgs 10:22). The fact that the prophets attack all oppression and injustice, with a few denunciations of violations of Hebrew servitude and no condemnation of foreign slavery in Israel, shows that it had no such institution; yet other nations are condemned (Ezk 27:13)
- God forbade Israel from making captives slaves (Dt 20:10-20); even the Gibeonites who volunteered service to avoid extermination (Josh 9) were never proper slaves. The forced labour of Solomon's day was limited to the building programme
- Isaiah speaks about a fast to 'undo heavy burdens', 'let the oppressed go free', 'break every yoke'; this means freeing slaves. If there were slaves in Israel, in the modern understanding of the term, and plainly there were none, to have them would have broken God's law and would have been sin

- **Church: never approved**

- Jesus never spoke one word which can be used to defend slavery, and everything he said and did runs counter to it. There is no proof that Jesus ever encountered slavery in its pagan form; the centurion's slave was clearly loved by his master. To say Jesus condoned slavery is to argue from silence, and to say he also condoned the Roman barbarities of orgy and amphitheatre
- Apostles certainly found cruel slavery in their world, and slaves were baptised and entered the church retaining their negative status. Neither did they deny that slaveholders could be true Christians. They did not publicly proclaim slavery as evil, and they gave instructions about master-slave relationships
- Jesus and the apostles never legislated for slavery, nor did they approve of it. Restrictions are put on masters who are responsible to God for the slave redeemed at the price of Christ's blood; not for perpetuating the oppressive system. In the church there is 'neither slave nor free'(Gal 3:28). If Paul's instruction to Philemon about



Onesimus were obeyed; 'that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a slave but ... as a beloved brother ... both in flesh and in the Lord' (v15-17); then slavery could not exist

Summary

Slavery is a classic example of a godless practice, indulged in by Christians, so trying to give it a biblical rationale by comparing it to an institution different in every respect will not work:

- Scripture declares that all are created in 'the image and likeness of God' (Gen 1:26-27). It commands that we 'love our neighbour as ourself' (Lev 19:18)
- The idea that the slavery of Africans was benevolent is absurd; it was the basest, most oppressive, cruel and inhumane institutions known to humanity

CASE STUDY 2: HUMAN RIGHTS

Setting the scene

The idea of human rights has a long history:

- Human self-consciousness must have led to reflection on rights and duties from the beginning
- Plato and Aristotle discussed freedom and justice; Aquinas 'christianised' their ideas as 'natural rights'
- In Britain John signed the 'Magna Carta' in 1215, and in 1688-9 there was the 'Bill of Rights'
- The American 'Declaration of Independence' [1776], and France's 'Rights of Man' [1786] with Thomas Paine's book of the same name [1791], being other milestones
- In 1941 Roosevelt spoke of four universal freedoms: freedom of speech and worship, freedom from want and fear
- In 1948 the 'Universal Declaration of Human Rights' with its 30 articles was published; it has become the basis of global thinking on the subject

Anti-rights case

Christian understanding of biblical revelation about what it means to be 'human' and the nature of what is a 'right' should mean we agree about, and support 'human rights'. Many don't. They believe that talk about human rights is wrong because it:

▪ **Challenges God's sovereignty**

Human rights are said to display human arrogance and rebellion; sinners don't have rights. We deserve nothing but judgment; everything we have is more than we deserve, we have no right to demand anything. We have no rights outside of God's will.

▪ **Looks for human solutions**



Humanity's inhumanity is a spiritual problem. It is simply a consequence of sin; there can be no answer outside of repentance. It is people trying to find salvation on their own terms, apart from God.

- **Builds with humanist philosophy**

Thinking about 'rights' is based on the ideas of the ancient Greeks and no attempt to Christianise the values can free them from contamination. The French and American revolutions, with their demand for 'rights', were based on the thinking of Voltaire and Jefferson who were deists, not Christians.

- **Misdirects Christian action**

Commitment to human rights diverts energy into politics rather than evangelism. Our commission is to preach the gospel, not to work to change social and economic structures. Only when people become Christians will we see society change.

- **Brings non-biblical emphasis**

Scripture talks about 'responsibilities', not 'rights'. What constitutes a 'right' anyway? There is a big difference between something being 'desirable' and something being a 'right'.

- **Uses imprecise language**

Interpreted in 'minimum' terms a tyrant can oppress people and still claim that at least they have their 'basic' rights. There is no objective standard by which to measure 'rights'.

- **Has questionable values**

Interpreted in 'maximum' terms, looking for utopia; we end up with confusion and conflict. Every grievance motivated by self-righteousness or self-pity is spoken of as a 'right'; language becomes debased and people become cynical.

Pro-rights case

A Christian approach to human rights must begin with a definition of 'human' that begins with God, and so will be different from that of the secular humanist. It stands on the biblical foundation that humanity was created in God's image and likeness (Gen 1:27). To be human is to be similar to and different from the rest of creation. But does this mean we have 'rights'?

- **Relationship**

- The mark of humanity is our relationship with God
- Human uniqueness lies in the fact that we alone are aware of our origin in God; we alone can reflect and act upon its implications; even atheists are aware of this 'claim' though they speak of it in other terms

- **Responsibility**

- We understand our relationship with God in our sense of responsibility



- From where do atheists get their sense of responsibility, if not from a special relationship with God, which is at the heart of all humanness? We feel responsible for other humans who share the same uniqueness we feel within the world. Responsibility is the normal, human expression of human relationship with God

▪ **Rights**

- The word 'rights' usually occurs when there has been a breakdown in relationship, a conflict of interests or a dispute over what is fair
- Rights imply there is an external standard and source of authority to which appeal can be made and situations measured. For the Christian, God himself is this transcendent norm; righteousness and justice are essential to his character. He is also the one who decides whether the standard is being met (cf Isa 5:6; Dt 32:4; Ps 89:14; 97:2)

▪ **Response**

- If to be human is to be responsible, responsibility demands a response. We have an obligation
- Secular human rights thinking sees our response simply on a two-dimensional plane; an obligation to another like myself. But why? There is a subjective sense that I am under obligation to fellow humans; it is only fair. But with no objective standard people can equally argue for the opposite position; survival of the fittest
- Christian human rights thinking is three-dimensional. Our first responsibility is to God, and out of our obligation to God comes our responsibility to fellow humans. The question, 'Am I my brother's keeper?' acknowledges our accountability to God who keeps asking, 'Where is your brother?' (Gen 4:9). We are responsible to God for the men and women around us; this is the heart of being biblically human. The consequence of 'loving God with all your heart' is that you will 'love your neighbour as yourself' (Dt 5:6; Lev 19:18; Mt 22:37-40)

▪ **Requirement**

- What God commands me to do for another person is that person's right
- A person's rights exist because of God's love for them and his demand that I respond to that love. Rights exist because of God's desire and demand towards someone. My responsibility to God for others and their rights under God cannot be separated
- God's requirement of me towards other people leaves no place for charity; it is an obligation and duty, a demand which if neglected is sin. It is that person's right under God that I act, and his command that I do. 'I command you to be open-handed towards your brothers and towards the poor and needy' (Dt 15:11 cf. 1Tim 6:17-1)]. Whether or not I personally receive my rights depends on someone else deciding to do God's will
- We may not be personally guilty or responsible for a particular person's plight but we are still required by God to give them their rights under God. The good Samaritan was simply the one person who obeyed God's law; the others didn't
- When we treat others as we would like them to treat us, it guarantees they always receive maximum rights. The standard God requires is what we would want ourselves. The details become obvious.



▪ **Respect**

- Many Christians argue that because mankind has rebelled against God their rights are forfeited
- Created humanity has no claim as of right upon God the Creator under any circumstances; we have nothing we have not received. Much was destroyed at the Fall, but not God's requirement of responsibility. While that remains so do the rights of those made in God's image. The Fall has not affected our humanness so we still have our responsibility to God for others
- The Fall has made the pursuit of rights even more important. The world is subdued by tyranny, and that is why people cry out for their rights. Christians must not be cynical, but at the forefront of making God's will done for others

▪ **Redemption**

- The story of salvation is a declaration of human rights
- The Exodus was God restoring Israel's rights. She had a right to be redeemed because of God's covenant with Abraham (Gen 15:9-21). To live under God's protection is the highest human right (Ps 56:11). Their redemption brought rights, which could only be preserved by responsibility. The commandments are a declaration of human rights expressed in terms of responsibilities [e.g. the right to freedom from violence – do not kill]. Confidence in God's character and grace provide the framework for these rights
- The atonement sees the greatest violation of human rights; yet Jesus' denial of his rights worked for the salvation of mankind. By receiving what Christ has done we 'have the right to become children of God' (Jn 1:12). The church, having experienced this right, now has the responsibility to go into the world and share it (Mt 28:16-20). Everyone has the right to hear the gospel

▪ **Renunciation**

1. With the coming of the kingdom of God in Jesus, the standards of this fallen world are reversed (Lk 22:26). Disciples of Jesus no longer demand rights, but now give rights through loving service. They accept their responsibility under God (Phil 2:3-11). They renounce their rights, take up their cross and follow Jesus. They are prepared to have their rights violated as Jesus did in order to fulfill God's purposes, which they can do in the certainty of the final triumph of the kingdom of God

Summary

Human rights for the Christian touch both the heart of our being and the heart of the gospel. It makes us break out of narrow confines and look at its vast implications. It should put us at the forefront of the debate, not dragging our feet.

BIBLE INTERPRETATION

Here are some concluding principles that arise out of our case studies:

▪ **Use the Bible with care**

We have seen that simply to appeal to the Bible does not make our position correct. It raises the whole question of 'literal interpretation'. This may mean understanding the text



in a mechanical way. It may mean the historical meaning or the plain meaning. We cannot take practices of the past and apply them straight to the present.

- **Use the Bible in total**

All scriptural evidence must be considered. Clearer texts explain obscure parts. The spirit of the teaching is the final arbiter.

- **Discover the main emphasis**

It is easy to lock into secondary features in the text to support a view. Is the story of Abraham really about slavery?

- **Give principle priority**

Tap into the spiritual values to be found in biblical passages. What are the 'moral imperatives'? These should be given greater weight than specific statements. Move from 'letter-use' to 'spirit-use' of scripture.

- **Resist self-interest**

It is difficult as we all have self-interest! Does it lead to oppression and violence or justice and joy? Spiritual objectivity is the key, however painful.

- **Let the text speak**

We must have our thinking adjusted by the power of the Spirit speaking through the text. We must use a method of Bible study to allow this.

- **To whom does it speak?**

The text speaks to believers and the church; we are to be obedient. This will have huge consequences for the world due to our witness.

Questions and Reflections

1. What dangers do we face in our effort to apply truth to life? What qualities should Christian decision making display?
2. What steps would you take in trying to find an answer to a difficult moral problem?
3. What are the main dangers people face when using the biblical text in an attempt to resolve a moral problem? Give *two* examples from your own experience of how you think it has been misused. What principles would you try to adopt if you were to use the Bible as part of your struggle to resolve an ethical question? Do you think that using the Bible in Christian ethics is a help or a hindrance? Give reasons for your reply.

Reading & Resources

R Bauckham, *The Bible in Politics*, SPCK, 1989
A Kirk, *God's Word for a Complex World*, Marshal Pickering, 1987
WM Swartley, *Slavery, Sabbath, War and Women*, Herald, 1983

