

**Wading in Troubled Waters:
The Counterfeit Defense of American Slavery**

by James Ellis III

Wade in the water,

Wade in the water, children,

Wade in the water,

God's a-going to trouble the water.

The Controversy

A Christian's commitment to use their respective gifts to serve (Mark 10:45) rather than be served exists in direct correlation to the *quality* of, not the *existence* of, their relationship with God. 1 Corinthians 12:1 – 11 explains the importance of using one's spiritual gifts, in the diversified context in which they are distributed, to glorify the Father. It is feasible to serve the Lord's kingdom in such powerful ways that the Holy Spirit pours into communities ushering in the spiritually *lost, found, and injured* alike, and pushing them towards the church, while empowering them to run away from the sparkly, effervescent allure of popular culture. Oh, if it were not for man's sinful indulgences.

Arguably, America, with all of its commitment to freedom and equality, is founded upon the vices of exploitation and profit. The pilgrims, early Protestant Reformers, which fled the religious tyranny and censorship of England in the 17th century are the same people who conquered Indigenous Americans through the purportedly noble guise of manifest destiny and established a long history of disenfranchising African Americans through the international slave trade, Jim Crow legislation, and countless other methods. The Bible (James 5:1, Timothy 6:10, Matthew 19:23) and the testimony of history tell us that self-preservation and selfishness breed greed, and is often manifested through the resource of money. With money comes power, or at least the perception of it. Therefore, American slavery came into being as a result of the nation's desire to propel itself into being a global superpower, independent and highly-functioning, through the benefits of free labor. America needed an inexpensive, yet durable workforce in order to accomplish these goals. Sadly, Africans fit that bill to a tee, and due to society's false

perception of the continent being full of wicked savages, the slave trade in America only helped to perpetuate those stereotypes. Too bad for Africans that they were chosen by Americans, who were in the midst of adjusting to their own sense of freedom, for this monumental and laborious task. It was a case of economic of supply and demand, which helped foster racism and bigotry that was embedded in a Caucasian superiority complex.

The abduction of Africans from their homeland and placement into a lifetime of servitude through the institution of chattel slavery began in America in 1619 in Jamestown, VA. Slavery was ruled illegal on December 18th, 1865¹ and its residual vice of segregation was outlawed in 1964, as a result of the famous *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* court case wherein “racial segregation in public schools”² was ruled unconstitutional by the US Congress. During this time in America’s history the value of Africans, later to become African Americans, was no higher than that of a farm animal, and, thusly, they were treated accordingly. Cotton was the nation’s cash crop, and a huge workforce was needed to help establish and maintain the productivity of its agricultural investment. The following excerpt from the book of Genesis is one of the popular Biblical defenses that were used in favor of slavery during this time:

“And Noah began to be a farmer, and he planted a vineyard. Then he drank of the wine and was drunk, and became uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Cannan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. But Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it on both their shoulders, and went backward and covered the nakedness of their father. Their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. So Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son has done to him. Then he said:

“Cursed be Cannan: A servant of servants He shall be to his brethren.”

And he said: “Blessed be the Lord, the God of Shem, and may Cannan be his servant. May God enlarge Japheth, and may he dwell in the tents of Shem; and may Cannan be his servant.”

¹ Christian, Charles M., *Black Saga*, Pg. 212

² Christian, Charles M., *Black Saga*, Pg. 388

And Noah lived after the flood three-hundred and fifty years. So all the days of Noah were nine hundred and fifty years; and he died.” (Genesis 9:20 – 29)

Conventional Christian wisdom during this time taught that Africans were direct descendants of Ham. Therefore, in thinking that Ham was cursed by Noah, it was also thought that his bloodline were ordained by God to be “a servant of servants” (Genesis 9:25) to all of mankind, but more specifically to their Caucasian brethren. Dr. Tony Evans, senior pastor of Oak Cliff Bible Church, addressed the Curse of Ham briefly in his book, The Kingdom Agenda, with the following statement: “The implication of this position is that black people should accept their inferior position without resistance or rebellion, since it was ordained by God. And white people should not feel guilty for enslaving blacks, because slavery is their appointed lot in life.”³ In the eyes of many citizens slavery, in part, was merely evangelistic outreach that inherently contained financial blessings from the Lord. Proslavery advocates argued that by bringing Africans to a so-called Christian nation and seeking to expose them to the tenets of Christianity, to Christianize them, that they were following the commands of Jesus, wherein He says, “....All authority has been given to me in Heaven and on Earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations...” (Matthew 28:18 – 19). In the chapter that he contributed to Cotton Is King, which was entitled Slavery in the Light of Divine Revelation, Thornton Stringfellow wrote:

“Under the gospel, it [slavery] has brought within the range of gospel influence, millions of Ham’s descendant’s among ourselves, who but for this institution, would have sunk down to eternal ruin; knowing not God, and strangers to the gospel. In their bondage here on earth, they have been much better provided for, and great multitudes of them have been made freemen of the Lord Jesus Christ, and left this world rejoicing in the hope of the glory of God.”⁴

Other Biblical accounts that were used in defense of slavery include Paul’s plea to Onesimus that he receive Philemon, his runaway slave, back into his care (The Book of Philemon)⁵, Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers (Genesis 37:12 – 28), and Hagar’s

³ Evans, Tony, The Kingdom Agenda, Pg. 395

⁴ Elliott, E. N., Cotton Is King, Pg. 491

⁵ Miller, Stephen M., How To Get the Bible Into My Life, Pgs. 300 - 393

instructions from the Angel of the Lord to return to Sarai, her master, after fleeing because of her jealousy-fueled callousness (Genesis 16:9 – 14). Furthermore, it was often argued by proslavery supporters that slavery was a political issue, and not something that the church should necessarily accept or reject. As far as many Christians, some slaveholders and some not, were concerned slavery was legal, therefore the church had no right to interfere in its affairs, a separation of church and state rhetoric. According to John R. McKivigan and Mitchell Snay in their book Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery, this was definitely the case:

“Genuine Christianity, they [Christian slaveholders] argued, could exist (and had existed) either with slavery or without it; hence, religious bodies, whose chief goal should be saving souls, had no business “intermeddling” with an essentially secular institution. It was up to the government, not the church, to decide whether to maintain or to dismantle slavery. All three major southern denominations – Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist – officially subscribed to this position and decried ecclesiastical involvement in politics.”⁶

It is important to note that the Southern Baptist Convention was formed out of this notion that the church and the business world should not mix, that their properties exist in direction opposition to one another, much like oil and water. As both slaveholders and Christians, proslavery ministers and laypersons were left without the possibility of membership in major northern denominational organizations, and so the Southern Baptist Convention was formed on May 8th, 1845 at the First Baptist Church of Augusta, GA⁷.

⁶ McKivigan, John R.; Snay, Mitchell, Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery, Pg. 110

⁷ Leonard, Bill J., Baptist Ways: A History, Pg. 189

The Truth

Although it was openly endorsed as being a necessary evil, of sorts, that was supported by scripture, the Bible doesn't in any way condone slavery. For those still stuck in yesteryear's free-flowing benefits of racism this is a tough pill to swallow, yet a medication that is needed in order for the body of Christ, let alone the world itself, to regain its health. Proslavery and antislavery advocates have battled one another "verse for verse"⁸ for quite some time on this controversial topic. Over the years many Biblical scholars exercised poor hermeneutical skill in how they decided to exegete texts that touch-on the issue of slavery, which should serve as a reminder to all of Christianity that one can morph the Bible into justifying just about anything, but that doesn't mean that it is the *true* intent and will of God.

The love of money, power, and greed, are fueled by selfishness, and has haunted America and absolutely devastated humanity since the beginning of time. When Adam and Eve decided to disobey God in the Garden of Eden by eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, sin entered into the inherent makeup of man (Genesis 2:15 – 17, Genesis 3:1 – 24). In Genesis 4:1 – 15 we see that civilization's first murder took place, as Cain killed his brother, Abel, during a jealous rage. In Genesis 7:1 – 24 we see that God destroyed the world with a flood because of its rampant infestation of sin, sparing Noah and his family as He had promised. The list goes on and on. Sin is the downfall of man, not politics, economics, or historical *deja vu*. Of course, sin can be manifested in a multitude of ways, but at its root disobedience unto God can always be found. It has proven so difficult for America to rid itself from the ills of racial superiority, looking back to the beginning of its participation in the slave trade, because we have failed to comprehend the fundamental truth that it "is not first and foremost a skin problem, but a sin problem"⁹. It is quite sad that we've been so slow to mature to that level of understanding. In a collection of his granddaughter's writings, Baptist Faith in Action: The Private Writings of Maria Baker Taylor, 1813 – 1895, Richard Furman, South Carolina's foremost 19th century Baptist minister, explained his understanding of why slavery was sanctioned by God:

⁸ McKivigan, John R.; Snay, Mitchell, Religion and the Antebellum Debate over Slavery, Pg. 71

⁹ Evans, Tony, The Kingdom Agenda, Pg. 401

“If the holding of slaves is lawful, or according to the Scriptures; then this Scriptural rule can be considered as requiring no more of the master, in respect of justice (whatever it may do in point of generosity) than what he, if a slave, could, consistently wish to be done to himself, while the relationship between master and servant should be still continued...A bondservant may be treated with justice and humanity as a servant.”¹⁰

Yet, masters didn't, with any level of frequency, treat their slaves with generosity and compassion, according to the Golden Rule¹¹ that is described in Matthew 7:12, or Paul's declaration in Galatians 3:26 – 29, which reads, “For you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you are Christ's, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise.” As a matter of fact, not only were their working and living conditions atrocious, but many slaves were severely beaten for learning to read, and/or striving to know more about Jesus Christ. West Turner, a Virginian slave, had the following to say about his master: “an' do you know some 'o dem devils was mean an' sinful 'nough to say, 'If I ketch you here servin' God, I'll beat you. You ain't got no time to serve God. We bought you to serve us'.”¹²

The American hermeneutic of race and slavery, that is how Biblical interpretation is understood and applied in this given context, throughout history has been seriously skewed and grossly manipulated in order to promote white supremacy, and protect the financial infrastructure of the nation's elite. The curse of Ham was applied to those who were dark-skinned and/or of African decent in order “to protect the social order from the sort of disorderly conduct that Ham brought to the postdiluvian community”¹³. In expounding upon Genesis 9:25, the Life Application Study Bible (New International Version) adds the following argument against the Biblical justification of slavery: “This verse has been wrongfully used to support prejudice and even slavery. Noah's curse, however, wasn't directed toward any particular race, but rather at the Canaanite nation – a nation God knew would become wicked. The curse was fulfilled when the Israelites entered the Promised Land and drove the Canaanites out (see The Book of Joshua).”¹⁴

¹⁰ Schwartz, Kathryn C., Baptist Faith in Action, Pg. 66

¹¹ Miller, Stephen M., How To Get the Bible Into My Life, Pg. 15

¹² Levine, Lawrence W., Black Culture and Black Consciousness, Pg. 42

¹³ Haynes, Stephen R., Noah's Curse, Pg. 87

¹⁴ Life Application Study Bible (New International Version), Pg. 23

Noah's curse upon Ham had nothing to do with a so-called unworthy race of people, but a rebellious nation of people. In presenting his research on the religious implications of American slavery in his book, Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery, Stephen R. Haynes referenced a letter written to James Landrith from Bob Jones University explaining their stance against interracial marriage, communicated because of his desire, as a Caucasian whose wife was African American, to enroll at the institution:

“The people who built the Tower of Babel were seeking a man-glorifying unity which God has not ordained (Genesis 11:4 – 6). Much of the agitation for intermarriage among the races today is for the same reason. It is promoted by one-worlders, and we oppose it for the same reason that we oppose religious ecumenism, globalism, one-world economy, one-world police force, unisex, etc. When Jesus Christ returns to the Earth, He will establish world unity, but until then, a divided Earth seems to be His plan.”¹⁵

The Americanized understanding of the curse of Ham, contextualized by popular 17th century Christian thought, is an example of Isegesis, poor Biblical scholarship, and race-based Christianity.

Furthermore, the book of Philemon isn't written to promote slavery either. Paul writes to convince a master, Onesimus, to accept his runaway slave, Philemon, back into his care as a brother in Christ, not through the flesh-induced institution of slavery. Likewise, in Genesis 16:9 when the Angel of the Lord told Hagar, “Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under her hand.”, it was done so because the Lord heard her affliction, and He needed her to face that affliction head-on rather than fleeing from it (Genesis 9:11- 14). Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers not to demonstrate to humanity that God condones slavery, but to demonstrate to humanity that God, in the divine awesomeness of His omnipotence, ensures “that all things work together for good to those who love God, to those who are the called according to His purpose” (Romans 8:28). We see that spiritual reality manifested through Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers because of their jealousy (Genesis 37:12 – 36, Genesis 39), and then being elevated into power, as the governor of Egypt (Genesis 41:37 – 56), yet refusing to exact revenge on his brothers for their mistreatment of him (Genesis 45:15 – 24). And, so we see again that

¹⁵ Haynes, Stephen R., Noah's Curse, Pg.4

neither slavery or segregation are necessary evils, but, nonetheless, very effective tools of subjugation. The aforementioned, classic proslavery arguments don't pass the litmus test, or checks and balances, of scripture. Content that lacks proper context, or vice versa, will always produce erroneous conclusions, hence a belief by Christians from the 17th century well into today who earnestly think that Africans/African-Americans deserve(d) slavery, in part because God ordained a hierarchical separation of the races in the book of Genesis and beyond. This, however, is in spite of the good news presented in Colossians 3:9 – 14:

“Do not lie to one another, since you have put off the old man with his deeds, and have put on the new man who is renewed in knowledge according to the image of Him who created him, where there is neither Greek nor Jew, circumcised nor uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave nor free, but Christ is all and in all. Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering; bearing with one another, and forgiving one another, if anyone has a complaint against another; even as Christ forgave you, so you also must do. But above all these things put on love, which is the bond of perfection.”

The Future

America's financial code of ethics is jam-packed with the trappings of male bravado and machismo. Of course, this particular slant on morality has a communal relationship with racism, sexism, disenfranchisement, and stereotyping. The economic machine that we know as capitalism, with its foundations of free trade and enterprise, at some point forces everyone to make decisions that directly influence to what point one is willing to bend their morality in order to align oneself with the standards of profit and logic-minded business tactics that are so prevalent in American society. When the Southern Baptist Convention "was formed in 1845, when it broke away from white northern Baptists over the slave issues"¹⁶, it did so out of a religious and financial reasoning. The typical slave-owner didn't see a supreme contradiction between buying and selling human beings as mere pieces of property (because they were dark-skinned) and forcing them to work and live filthy lives of free servitude, all while professing a sincere, lifelong commitment to the values of selflessness and sacrifice that undoubtedly exist as the cornerstone of Christianity. It, however, is clear hypocrisy and racism, neither of which are of God. In an article entitled "The Bible, Race, and Interracial Relations" Lou DeCaro added the following to the discussion:

"The same Bible that has been forced into becoming a textbook on racial segregation by the traditional white church has often been better understood by the black church as God's Word of love, grace and holistic liberation. Nevertheless, it bears reexamining the claims of "Christian" racists with regard to the Bible's teachings. The religious as well as the non-religious may find it quite interesting to discover what the Bible actually does present with regard to race and human relations."¹⁷

The erroneous Biblical endorsement of slavery in America should serve as a powerful lesson for today's Christians, in that the more one chooses to compromise following in the path of Jesus' example, the Bible's instructions, and the Holy Spirit's voice, the easier it is to become hypocritical and, perhaps, even under the control of a reprobate mind. The well-known warning

¹⁶ Payne, Les, "Coming Out Four-Square Against Slavery", *New York Voice*

¹⁷ DeCaro, Lou, "The Bible, Race, and Interracial Relations", *Interrace*

by an unknown writer which says, “if you don’t want the fruits of sin, stay out of the devil’s orchard” is as true today as it has ever been.

The Gospel message is not one of exploitation and no one is above being influenced and manipulated by the enemy. The Bible commands Christians to die unto themselves (Matthew 10:39), as well as care for the least of these with dignity and benevolence (Proverbs 29:6 – 9). Whether the issue of the day is women in ministry, support for homosexuality (notwithstanding the Christ-like treatment of, however), or the prosperity Gospel, it is essential that the body of Christ embrace the *sola Scriptura* (scripture alone) hermeneutic view of God’s word. This, however, doesn’t mean that the evidence of tradition, reason, and experience don’t matter, rather that they need to be placed in a submissive context in light of scripture. Some scripture is meant to be applied literally, while others are meant to be applied figuratively. The task before God’s people is to seek to responsibly discern when and where each respective application is appropriate.

In a society where athletes and entertainers are paid outrageously high salaries while educators, military servicemen and women, and emergency care professionals (firefighters, police officers, etc.) battle with the rest of the nation over the minimum-wage crumbs of financial mediocrity and insult, it should not be a surprise to anyone that America consistently sits on the cusp of perpetuating the very same ills today that it has in the past. What we, as a society are saying, in essence, is that we value a sports playoff series or a musical artists’ ability to rhythmically wow us more than someone’s ability to guide, educate, inspire and support our children in a positive manner, or protect our neighborhoods. Yet, that’s the reality of America. Just as with anything else in life, one has to accept the bad with the good, and work through the power of Christ to change things for the better.

Frankly, America’s deep capitalistic roots have made the nation’s ability to profit off of its citizen’s stupidity and sinful desires rather easy. Hosea 4:6 reads, “My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge. Because you have rejected knowledge, I also will reject you from being priest for Me; Because you have forgotten the law of your God, I also will forget your children.” Likewise, when the Lord appeared to Solomon for a second time He said,

“...if My people who are called by My name will humble themselves, and pray and seek My face, and turn from their wicked ways, then I will hear from Heaven, and will forgive their sin and heal their land. Now My eyes will be open and My ears attentive to prayer made in this place. For now I have chosen and sanctified this house, that My name may be there forever; and My eyes and My heart will be there perpetually.” (2 Chronicles 7:14 – 16)

Will America allow its historical mistreatment of the least of these (Matthew 25:45) repeat itself, only perhaps manifested through a different issue, or will its followers of Christ look to clear Biblical truth for answers to life’s many questions, as they move forward in their dedication to boldly proclaiming the Good News? Maria Baker Taylor, a plantation mistress of the 19th century from South Carolina, had the following to say about slavery:

“I go out upon the broad ground that slavery was ordained by God, regulated by Him through Moses, St. Paul, and others, for the benefit of society, and the well ordering thereof and had that effect on Master and Servant; that the relation has been abused as every other has, as of parent and child, husband and wife, none would deny. It has been a great blessing to the African, who by coming from a land of barbarism, is being Christianized, and more or less, civilized. I have heard many of them bless God for having been brought to the South..... Slavery is no “moral evil”. It may be connected as every good things may with evil as eating, marrying, or anything you could name.”¹⁸

The institution of slavery in America shows, yet again, humanity’s inherent need for the saving grace of Jesus Christ. One of the biggest misnomers about Christianity is that Jesus died and was resurrected in order for those redeemed unto Him to live a life full of bliss. John 10:8 – 10 reveals that “He came that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly”. Yet, that abundance has to be interpreted through the character of God. Therefore, the abundant life that Jesus died for His children to have is found in obedience, not in uniformity with worldly ethics. Moreover, the Bible plainly teaches that anything, from a system to an individual, that steals, kills, or seeks to destroy that which has been created in the image of God is not of God,

¹⁸ Schwartz, Kathryn C., Baptist Faith in Action, Pgs. 93 - 94

but of the enemy, or the thief that is referenced in John 10:10. Slavery, by its very definition, accomplishes all of the three aforementioned evils of humanity. Resultantly, it, and institutions similar to it, should be rebuked just as the scribes and Pharisees were by Jesus in Matthew 23:13 – 35).

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