



GRESHAM COLLEGE  
*Founded 1597*

## **How we Learned that Slavery is Wrong Transcript**

Date: Thursday, 5 November 2015 - 1:00PM

Location: Barnard's Inn Hall

05 November 2015

## How We Learned that Slavery is Wrong

Professor Alec Ryrie

This is the first of a series of lectures on the history of Protestant Christianity, a broad, quarrelsome religious family now almost five hundred years old. At present, around one in eight of the human race are professing Protestants of one kind or another, but the significance of this religion lies in more than mere numbers. It's worked harder and more constructively to assimilate the conditions of the modern world than any other broad religious tradition, whether or not you think that is a good thing. And indeed, because of its historical dominance in northern Europe and north America, it has helped to define what the modern world is, and to set the intellectual and cultural patterns by which we still live. In these four lectures, I am going to be dropping in on some of the key episodes in the history of Protestantism's encounter with modernity, episodes which I think are interesting in themselves but which also have bigger stories to tell. And so inevitably we start with Atlantic slavery.

In the briefest outline: between the fifteenth and the nineteenth centuries, around twelve million Africans were shipped across the Atlantic by European slave traders. An unknown additional number died resisting capture or before embarkation. 10-15% of those who took ship died on the voyage, and the same or more died within a year of their arrival. The survivors, and any children they might have, were faced with perpetual enslavement.

Beyond the statistics, it is worth recalling what this actually meant. Irrevocable abduction from home and family. A voyage of weeks chained in the dark, aboard tiny, heaving ships, packed in with hundreds of naked strangers, living, dying and dead. If you survived, you faced the prospect of being literally worked to death, sometimes working the sugar-boilers for 24 hours or more at a stretch. Death rates were generally significantly higher than birth rates, so fresh captives were always needed. Such families as enslaved people did manage to form were always fragile: their so-called 'owners' could and did separate couples at will, and normally separated parents and children. Enslaved women were routinely raped. Defiance was met with astonishing brutality. After a slave rebellion in Surinam in 1790, for example, adults were 'hanged from the gibbet by an Iron Hook through his ribs, until dead', or 'bound to a stake and roasted alive over a slow fire, while being tortured with glowing Tongs'. Whereas children were 'tied to a Cross, to be broken alive, and their heads severed'. Atrocities like this were by design exemplary: deterring you not only from open resistance but from such heinous crimes as learning to read, or trying to discover the date of your own birth. Which is a reminder that the atrocities are in a sense a distraction from the underlying horror of arbitrary subjection to another human being's will.

Atlantic slavery was, plainly, one of the greatest crimes in human history. But one good thing at least has come out of it: the world now at least professes to believe that slavery in any form is wrong. That idea would have seemed almost incomprehensible to most of our premodern forebears. To them, slavery was like poverty: an undesirable but inescapable fact of life. Individuals might escape it, but abolishing the category completely was inconceivable. And of course, while the modern world has abolished slavery in law, we have very far from abolished it in reality. It is a pervasive fact of human history.

Christians are as deeply implicated in this as anyone else. The Hebrew scriptures are full both of matter-of-fact references to enslavement, and of regulations governing both slaves and their masters. And Christianity was formed in the Roman Empire, one of the most slave-based societies ever seen. The early Christians responded with a typically spiritualising, non-confrontational approach. They insisted on the spiritual equality of all believers, and taught that in Christ, the distinction between slave and free vanishes. However, they argued that physical slavery was therefore unimportant, and that Christian slaves ought humbly to submit to the masters whom God has providentially given them. Likewise, masters should treat their slaves as their brothers in Christ: which did not necessarily mean setting them free.

In medieval Europe, economic changes meant that Christian slaveholding morphed into serfdom, and after the plague of the fourteenth century, even serfdom was eased or even disappeared. But in the fifteenth century, an entirely new Christian slavery emerged. Portuguese navigators exploring western Africa began to enslave the peoples they encountered. And then the Spanish and Portuguese empires in the Americas were from the beginning intended to run on slave labour, which, since the indigenous population was nearly wiped out by disease and imperial brutality, meant importing Africans.

Those first empires were Catholic ones. Protestants came late to the Atlantic imperial race, and had definite moral qualms about slavery from the beginning. There are several pious early rejections of it, and most early Protestant imperial projects deliberately set out to staff their colonies with freely-employed indigenous labourers or with European immigrants. But the economic realities already established were not so easily defied. When the Dutch or the British conquered Spanish or Portuguese colonies, they took over the slave economies they found in them, and began importing their own slaves. When they tried using European colonial labour, they found that their colonists kept tediously insisting on tolerable working conditions, and even then died in the tropics at a prodigious rate. All the while, the Spanish and Portuguese slave trade meant that African slaves were readily available for purchase in the Caribbean. How could they resist the opportunity? On every Protestant-held

Caribbean island, slavery began as marginal and became dominant. Or take the North American colony of Georgia, founded in the 1730s and intended to be free of slaves. The attempt only lasted months. The colonists reported that 'a white man in these lands, if he cannot buy a slave, must work himself like a slave'. It is, to be blunt, very hard to compete with unpaid labourers who can be worked literally to death. And once you are importing slaves for yourself, you may as well sell to others too. By 1700 English ships were taking a dominant place in the transatlantic slave trade. Without ever quite deciding to do so, the Protestant powers had immersed themselves in African blood.

Some Protestants continued to disapprove. A famous Quaker manifesto of 1688 from Pennsylvania which is the world's first unreserved denunciation of slavery. But there were distinctly mixed motives. The Quaker petitioners feared that a slave economy would cut their own wages, and they and many others opposed importing black pagans into their new Jerusalems. But until the late eighteenth century, antislavery was very much a minority opinion, and harping on the subject made you look like a crank. Take, for example, Benjamin Lay, an Essex Quaker and serial trouble-maker who pitched up in Pennsylvania in the 1730s: four foot seven inches tall, dressed in home-made clothes, never wearing leather, a strict vegetarian, opposed to alcohol, tobacco and tea, opposed to capital punishment, and opposed to slavery. Once he burst into a Quaker meeting dressed as a soldier, delivered a diatribe against slavery, and stabbed his Bible with a sword, declaring that slave-owning was tantamount to murder. The Bible dramatically spurted red; he had hidden a bladder of juice between its pages for the purpose. Lay's moral clarity is admirable, but we can appreciate that his neighbours may have laughed rather than cheered. Blank opposition to slavery was a distinctly eccentric position.

Most mainstream Protestants could not afford such simplemindedness. Slavery might be regrettable, but better to work with it and improve it than to rail against it. We can dismiss many of slavery's defenders as self-justifying hypocrites, but not all of them. In 1742, a book in defence of slavery by Jacobus Capitein, a newly-ordained minister in the Dutch Reformed church, became a bestseller, running through five editions within a year. The book's argument is eloquent enough, but its unique selling-point was its author's story. For Capitein was African by birth, and had been enslaved as a child before being freed and sent to the Netherlands for education. And his ambition was to take the Protestant gospel back to his native land as a missionary.

Capitein was the first black African ever to be ordained a Protestant minister, and was everything that Europe's Protestant establishments hoped for from their empires: the light of Christendom spreading into heathen darkness. In 1742, he was sent to the Dutch trading-post of Elmina, in modern Ghana: of the 240 other employees of the Dutch West India Company stationed there, only the governor had a higher salary. The Netherlands cheered him on his way. A friend published a poem celebrating his mission: 'his skin is black / but his soul is white. ... With him, the Africans, once whitened, will always honour the Lamb.' Apparently it was kindly meant.

In reality, Capitein found himself isolated in Elmina, resented by most of his colleagues, without meaningful support from the church back in Amsterdam, and stymied in his attempts to build links with the local population. He tried to resign but was forbidden; so he forged on and created a school, only to die in 1747, aged only 30. His school died with him. The experiment had failed, and the Dutch ordained no more Africans.

Why did Capitein defend slavery? His basic argument was fairly routine, that the Protestant gospel of Christian freedom meant spiritual rather than bodily freedom. What is noteworthy, though, is why he chose to make this argument. The book arose, he insisted, from his determination to preach the gospel to the heathen. However, as he wrote, 'some Christians fear' that the preaching of the Protestant Gospel might lead to the disappearance of slavery, and therefore, not wishing to jeopardise their slave-holdings, they oppose it. So if he reassured slave-holders that they truly owned men's and women's bodies, perhaps preachers would have a chance to save their souls.

That caught the mood of the moment. The need to Christianise slaves was becoming a truism amongst Europe's pious classes. But not amongst those on the ground in the tropics. Protestant ministers in the colonies generally put the unappealing task of preaching to slaves at the bottom of their priorities, although not many went so far as the Revd William Davis of Antigua, who actually murdered one of his own slaves. And most slave-holders openly opposed missionaries. Christian slaves, they feared, might refuse to work on Sundays, or want their marriages recognised in law, making it difficult to split up families for sale. Christian slaves might even discover notions of Christian brotherhood or spiritual equality. One South Carolina slave-holder is said to have asked, with almost disarming honesty, 'is it possible that any of my slaves could go to Heaven, & I must see them there?' How they might feel about seeing *him* there would not have occurred to him. More immediately, however, he and his peers feared the argument that Christians cannot be enslaved and so should be freed as soon as they were baptised. Behind all this was the slave-holders' perennial nightmare, rebellion. Missionaries and their converts tended, therefore, to meet with pre-emptive, exemplary violence. During one of the first serious slave missions, to the Caribbean island of St Thomas in the 1730s, a missionary was beaten to death. One master set fire to the Bibles his slaves had been given, and then beat the flames out on their faces. Another man, Abraham, a slave turned church leader, was attacked on the road one night, tied up, viciously beaten, and then dumped at the mission church as a warning. In an exquisite example of steely Christian humility, Abraham sent the ropes back to his attackers by name, with an apology for the damage their property had suffered while on his person.

Like Capitein, most Protestant missionaries responded to this not with denunciations, but by arguing that

converting slaves was actually in their owners' best interests. Christian slaves were loyal, honest and hardworking. It was therefore the most heartfelt Protestant advocates of slave missions, the sternest opponents of slave-holders' atrocities and the most passionate apostles of spiritual equality who worked hardest to defend slavery. These ministers could only buy their own freedom to preach by trading away slaves' hopes for liberty.

It is easy for us to condemn this. Almost too easy. In 1676, the English Quaker Alice Curwen wrote a brief, impassioned appeal to a slave-holder she had met in Barbados. Curwen begged, not that the slaves should be freed, but that they should be free to worship. Then, she promised, 'the Lord God Almighty will set them Free in a way that thou knowest not, for there is none set Free but in Christ Jesus. ... All other Freedom will prove but a Bondage.' Could any serious Protestant, believing that the soul's fate matters more than the body's, disagree? Some slaves were drawn to the missionaries' preaching in the hope that it might end their captivity. The missionaries, wary of being used, insisted that they offered something different and better. If slaves converted, their bodies would still be enslaved. But, asked the missionaries, 'why should you be Men's Slaves and Satan's too?' The option of not being slaves at all was not on offer.

There is, as you'll have noticed, one aspect of Atlantic slavery I have not really touched on yet, and that's its racial basis. The reason for that is that Protestantism's view was pretty simple: racial slavery simply could not be justified. The implicit belief of many slaveholders was that Africans were not truly human and were incapable of being Christians – hence the slaveholders who compared giving the sacraments to slaves to baptising dogs or giving communion to horses – but no serious Protestant ever tried to defend this view. What they did do, sometimes making use of the scant Biblical cover provided by the weird story of Noah's curse of his son Ham, was try to explain something which most white eighteenth-century observers took as a self-evident fact: that while Africans might be human, they seemed subhuman or bestial. William Knox, an outspoken Anglican advocate of converting slaves (and himself a slave-holder), admitted that what he called 'the dull stupidity of the Negroe' was a problem for his cause. Whether Africans were actually created as a lesser race or whether they had merely degenerated, he did not know: 'but certain it is that a new Negroe (as those lately imported from Africa are called) is a complete definition of indolent stupidity'. When you meet people who have been systematically dehumanised, it's easy to conclude that they are less than fully human. Only slowly did the notion begin to dawn on some Europeans that slavery might be the cause, not the consequence, of slaves' degradation. But even that did not change the facts on the ground: because if slavery itself had made Africans unfit for freedom, then obviously it would be irresponsible simply to set them free.

Unsurprisingly, Africans had a different view, and that view now began to change European minds. For Capitein, working with the slave system had seemed unavoidable. A generation later the plates were shifting, in large part thanks to other exceptional individuals who acquired a European education and could speak in terms that Europeans found respectable about what slavery actually meant. Take Philip Quaque, who like Capitein before him, was sent from Cape Coast, in modern Ghana, to London for an education in 1754. In 1765 he became the first African to be ordained in the Church of England, and returned to Cape Coast as a missionary. His career was longer than Capitein's, but no happier. Unlike Capitein, however, he openly recognised the impossibility of being a missionary amongst slave traders. 'The vicious practice of purchasing flesh and blood like oxens in market places', he wrote, drove out all religion. The slave trade debased Europeans' morals, quite apart from what it did to 'my poor abject Countrymen ... whom you without the Bowels of Christian Love and Pity, hold in cruel Bondage'. He went on to be a vital informant for British abolitionists.

In the end, the cautious pragmatism of those who wanted to free slaves once they were ready was left behind by the moral urgency of the Protestant conscience. The first generations of missionaries had reckoned that Africans could not be converted until they were civilised. Quaque, and with him much of his age, concluded that Africans could not be converted until they were free. In the last quarter of the eighteenth century, there was a decisive shift in Protestant attitudes to slavery. The consensus view that slavery had to be worked with was disrupted by a new conviction that slavery in general and the slave trade in particular were intolerable evils.

This was not a general phenomenon across the Protestant world. The Netherlands was almost entirely untroubled by abolitionism, and preserved slavery until 1863, longer than any other European power. Protestant Denmark, whose slave economy was modest, does have the honour of being the first state to outlaw the transatlantic slave trade, in 1792. This was very much the personal initiative of one man, Count Ernst Schimmelmann, the Danish minister of finance and himself a slave-holder. He had been moved by the piety of some of his slaves, and hoped that ending the trade would force masters to treat their slaves better, since dead slaves could not be so easily replaced. The 1792 law, however, allowed the trade to continue for a further ten years as a transitional measure. Naturally, Danish slave-holders spent the next decade importing record numbers of slaves.

In the main, however, abolitionism was an English-speaking drama: first British Quakers and Methodists, and then American Methodists, Baptists and Presbyterians. A 1772 lawsuit established that any slave setting foot on English soil was immediately freed. In 1777, the (briefly) independent republic of Vermont adopted the world's first constitution outlawing slavery. And in Britain, a campaign against the slave trade materialised with bewildering speed in 1787. The petitioning effort against the trade which swept the country gathered some 1.5 million signatures between 1787-91, from a population of some twelve million. Nothing like this had ever happened before.

Britain's abolitionists almost succeeded in that first headlong rush. In 1792, William Wilberforce's bill to abolish the British slave trade passed the House of Commons by 230 to 85, only to fall in the House of Lords. That, however, turned out to be a high-water mark. The panic spiralling around the French Revolution made it a bad time for an idealistic campaign about human equality. Worse, a slave rebellion in the French colony of Saint-Domingue (modern Haiti) produced a wave of atrocity-stories which made abolitionism look dangerously naive. Rather than crumbling, however, British abolitionists knuckled down to a further fifteen years of campaigning, mixing the hard graft of building and sustaining a mass movement with the tortuous intricacies of Parliamentary manoeuvring. Finally, in 1807, for a brief moment, the mass movement, the legal arguments, the military interests and the shifting party-political forces all aligned. The Act was passed, and Britain banned a huge and lucrative trade which was one of the props of its own global dominance.

This has often been portrayed as a moment of heroic national virtue, but it is worth noticing that the wealth generated by the slave trade was concentrated in relatively few hands. Most British people and parliamentarians had no personal stake in it, beyond access to cheap sugar and tobacco. And there were reasons of secular self-interest, from economics to political philosophy, in play too. But once we have finished carping, abolitionism was unmistakably a religious movement first and last. Even if the Bible had not specifically condemned 'man-stealing', Christ's so-called Golden Rule - 'do as you would be done by' - could hardly justify kidnapping people, shipping them across the world in hellish conditions and selling them into perpetual slavery. Even if you accepted slavery itself, it was almost impossible to construct a Christian defence of the slave *trade*, and hardly anyone tried. The question is not, why British Protestants condemned the trade. Rather, given that earlier Protestant generations had not been moved to abolitionism, and that Protestants beyond the English-speaking world were mostly untouched by it, we need to ask why Britain saw this sudden, localised change of heart?

Abolitionism's origins as a public movement lay in the Seven Years' War of the 1750s, when some Protestant colonists in North America began to suspect that their wartime sufferings were divine punishment for some great national sin, and that that sin might be slavery. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, as British oppression began to grate on the colonists, slavery again resurfaced as an explanation for the judgement that was evidently being visited on them. It's during the revolutionary war of 1775-81 that American abolitionism first began to win real victories. Wiping the new nation's slate clean of the guilt of slavery was not only an opportunity, it was an urgent obligation.

In the event, slaveholding interests in the new United States were too strong, and the battle against slavery was frozen by the 1787 Constitution. But in Britain, the American war had the opposite effect. American independence made abolitionism politically possible: with the American colonies gone, Britain's slave-holding lobby was badly weakened. And the shock of unimagined defeat again provoked the question: for what sin are we being punished? In 1783, the year Britain conceded American independence, there was an answer ready to hand. It was the year of a grotesque lawsuit, in which the crew of a British slave-ship, the *Zong*, tried to exploit a legal loophole. They had deliberately drowned 131 men and women from their cargo-hold in the hope of making an insurance claim. The case was about insurance fraud, not mass murder, and indeed the crew won. But abolitionist publicists seized on the case. A British public for whom slavery had been both distant and abstract were suddenly confronted with what it really meant. The first petition to Parliament was organised the same year, and the line from there to the mass petitions of 1787 and the parliamentary campaign is a straight one.

The moral and spiritual horrors of slavery were nothing new. But what made them urgent was national self-interest. The slave trade was (or so it now seemed) a *national* sin, for which the nation as a whole had already been punished in the American war, and for which it could expect far worse to come. The slaving cities of Liverpool and Bristol should, Wilberforce warned, expect the judgement once visited by God on the ancient slaving cities of Tyre and Sidon. Josiah Wedgwood's famous abolitionist miniature asked 'Am I Not a Man and a Brother?'. That's not a question: it's an accusation. There was only one answer, and to give that was (for a British viewer) to speak judgement on yourself, and so to be stirred to act. And act they did. They petitioned; they subscribed to periodicals. They boycotted sugar and other slave-grown produce: 'if we purchase the commodity, we participate in the crime,' one pamphlet warned. For a growing swathe of the British public, men and women who had never met a slave and rarely seen a black face, the prospect of participating in this far-off crime was becoming intolerable. And so, eventually, it ended.

That should have been almost the end of the story. Britain's abolition of the slave trade led the way to a general abolition, far more slowly than campaigners wished, but fast enough to leave businessmen all over the Atlantic fazed by Britain's moral spasm. The United States banned the import of slaves in the same year, 1807. Britain, dominant in Europe after the defeat of Napoleon in 1815, progressively strongarmed the other European powers into banning the trade in theory, and its navy slowly strangled it in practice over the remainder of the century.

Slavery itself remained legal in Britain's colonies until the 1830s. Emancipating existing slaves seemed then, though it may not look so now, a much more complex issue than merely abolishing the trade. Most British abolitionists hoped that, with the trade abolished, the whole ugly system would simply wither away. When a new anti-slavery society was formed in Britain in 1823, it called itself the Society for the Mitigation and Gradual Abolition of Slavery. The pace was forced, this time not by idealists at home, but by missionaries in the field. In 1823, John Smith, an Anglican missionary on the island of Demerara, died in prison after being arrested for his role in a mostly peaceful slave insurrection. His death, far more than those of 250 slaves killed, caused a storm

in Britain. Parliament debated the case of the 'Demerara Martyr'. Britain's pious politicians did not like slave-holders who killed missionaries.

The story repeated itself in the so-called Baptist War in Jamaica in 1831-2, the biggest slave rising Britain ever faced. A Baptist deacon and slave named Samuel Sharpe led a general strike. The protest was, as he had urged, astonishingly peaceful, even though some 60,000 slaves were involved. But there were a few violent incidents, more than enough to provoke vicious reprisals. Sharpe himself spent his brief time in prison preaching to his fellow inmates. He told a missionary friend that 'he learnt from his Bible, that the whites had no more right to hold black people in slavery, than black people had to make white people slaves', and declared that 'I would rather die upon yonder gallows than live in slavery.' On 23 May 1832 that is what he did.

Again, however, what outraged the contemporary British public was the reprisals against white missionaries. One missionary was tarred and feathered by a white mob. His still-soiled neckerchief was solemnly taken home and exhibited around the country, to fascinated horror. It hit at a febrile moment in British domestic politics, and helped to precipitate the formal abolition of slavery the following year. Not that the 1833 Act was a very heroic triumph. It tried to enforce a transitional period of unpaid 'apprenticeship' on freed slaves, later cut short when it manifestly was not working. Slave-holders were also compensated handsomely for their financial loss. It is a sorry fact of nineteenth-century emancipations that, in every case but one (to which I'll return), slave-holders were financially compensated, compensation which has never been returned. Whereas no systematic compensation has ever been given to those who had been enslaved or their descendants. All they received was their freedom, which often meant freedom to be near-destitute plantation labourer. Still, freedom it was and is.

In the New World's most anomalous slave society, however, the story is stranger. Unlike in the Caribbean, slavery in the southern United States did not depend on imports: slaves' birth rate exceeded their death rate, thanks to a milder climate and an agricultural economy centred on tobacco and cotton rather than sugar. American slavery looked, not only sustainable, but lucrative. Southern slave-holders began to argue, not only that they were designing an alternative modern world, but that this was a more truly Christian model than the free North offered. Abolitionists could not quite believe it, but they were being challenged for the moral high ground.

The idea of a conscientious Christian argument for slavery now seems so obviously ridiculous that it is worth dwelling on. Pass over the secular arguments – that slavery was a feature of a well-ordered hierarchical society, more truly benevolent than the irresponsible anarchy of the free labour market, a time-hallowed human institution which worked with the grain of inherent racial difference. There was also a compelling Biblical case. The Bible never condemns slavery as such; often regulates it; and implicitly condones it. True Christian slavery, white Southerners argued, does not reduce human beings to mere property: it treats slaves as a sacred trust, people over whom their owners had certain (rather extensive) rights, and for whom they had equally extensive responsibilities. Slave and slave-holder were bound together by bonds of mutual godly obligation. If Abraham had bought slaves; if St Paul had sent a runaway slave home; if Christ himself had never spoken a word against slavery – who were these upstart prophets to proclaim a new abolitionist gospel of their own invention?

The obvious retort was that this idealism bore no resemblance to the reality of American slavery. Even leaving aside slavery's open cruelties and its racial basis, the lack of any legal status for slaves' marriages and the widespread laws prohibiting slaves from learning to read were an acute embarrassment for Protestants. But abolitionists who turned gratefully from the general principle to these specifics found their argument dissolving. Southerners freely acknowledged that their system needed reform, but argued that the chief obstacle to reform was the dangerous discontent which abolitionism was stirring up. If the abolitionists would only shut up, the result would be a reformed, godly slavery, America's gift to the world.

Many instinctively anti-slavery Protestants were forced to recognise the power of these arguments. If this was you, you might, for example, concede that slavery was tolerable in principle, simply very undesirable. But in that case, while you might press for emancipation, you've conceded the matter is debatable. In the American context, you would recognise each state's rights to make its own rules. And you would not break Christian fellowship over the issue, or try to force the pace. It was the Southern churches which broke away from the Northern ones, not vice versa.

At least, that was how things looked if you were white. Unsurprisingly, black Protestants found it easier to answer proslavery arguments, focusing not on textual niceties but on the evils which clustered around slavery like maggots. And a few white Americans did actually listen to these voices and found their worlds changed. William Lloyd Garrison, the publicist who became abolitionism's brilliant, vehement, polarising standard-bearer, was converted through a series of encounters with articulate African-Americans who manifestly deserved respect as well as sympathy. And *converted* is the word. Garrison described a speech by Frederick Douglass, an escaped slave who was also the century's most searing and subtle critic of slavery. Garrison said, 'I shall never forget ... the extraordinary emotion it excited in my own mind. ... I never hated slavery so intensely as at that moment.' This was classic revivalism, a very Protestant moral awakening, in which the Gospel's power pierced and transfigured the hearts of hardened sinners.

Innocent blood was crying out from the ground. To ask abolitionists to wait and be patient, Garrison argued, was to 'tell the mother to gradually extricate her babe from the fire into which it has fallen'. He was not a politician, looking for workable solutions, but a prophet, rousing a people from a deathlike moral sleep to see the horrific

evil that was before them. So his fury was directed not just at the slavers but at the gradualists, slavery's 'watchdogs', whose mealy-mouthed compromises gave slavery all the moral cover it needed. Slavery was a sin, and all slave-holders, however individually benevolent, bore a terrible and immediate guilt.

The trouble was that this moral outrage was not easily backed up with Biblical citations. So, for example, one Presbyterian abolitionist simply asserted that 'the whole Bible is opposed to slavery. The sacred volume is one grand scheme of benevolence – beams of love and mercy emanate from every page!' Which sounded like an admission that he had no Biblical case. Likewise the freed slave and self-taught lay preacher whom we know only as Elizabeth, who condemned 'scripturians' who would rather parse the text than meet God in their hearts. Some abolitionists accepted the logical conclusion, and began to leave their Bibles behind. We know slavery is wrong, one Baptist argued, not because Scripture says so, but as 'a matter of immediate moral consciousness': we *just know*. It was not far from there to the abolitionist minister who in 1860 preached that 'slavery is not to be tried by the Bible, but the Bible by freedom'. This led a fringe of abolitionists to open alienation from Christianity, including Frederick Douglass himself.

But importantly, there was another way out of this problem. Some abolitionists argued the Bible's tolerance of slavery applied only in specific historical circumstances; or that Christ stayed silent on the subject for fear that an antislavery message would stir up conflict and drown out the gospel; or even, that revelation was progressive, and only now had God judged that the world was ready to hear the truth, that slavery is and must always be an evil.

These were not the strongest arguments possible, and in debating terms we have to admit that the proslavery party had the upper hand. But American slavery's fate wasn't decided by a debate. Instead, trust progressively evaporated between the two halves of the nation. By the 1850s the southern establishment felt its so-called 'way of life' was under siege by fools, fanatics and barbarians; while the safeguards and rights it demanded, such as the return of escaped slaves, seemed increasingly intrusive and unacceptable to the North. In 1860 Abraham Lincoln, an avowed abolitionist, was elected president, on Northern votes alone. Eleven Southern states responded by seceding from the United States, which the North treated as rebellion. The resulting war lasted from 1861-5, and left over 600,000 dead.

So it turned out that the immediatists' warnings of wrath and blood had been true. When the war was almost over, Lincoln framed it as a divine judgement on the nation. He prayed for the fighting to end, but, echoing Garrison and the British abolitionists, added:

*Yet, if God wills that it continue until all the wealth piled by the bondsman's two hundred and fifty years of unrequited toil shall be sunk, and until every drop of blood drawn with the lash shall be paid by another drawn with the sword, as was said three thousand years ago, so still it must be said, 'the judgments of the Lord are true and righteous altogether'.*

Within weeks, it was over and Lincoln himself was dead. The victorious North dictated terms: all slaves were freed, no compensation was paid, and black and white alike were granted citizenship. The century of systematic discrimination and segregation which would follow was perhaps not much of an improvement, but no serious Protestant would ever defend slavery again.

So what does it all mean? Two lessons from all this that I would like to underline before I finish.

First, priorities. It is easy and entirely fair to point out that slavery bent Protestantism completely out of shape, such that proslavery religion's main and central doctrine was that slavery was right. But the same can be said, in reverse, of abolitionism, which in some hands became a religion whose beating heart was worldly freedom. Both of them had left behind the eighteenth-century missionaries' consensus that the Gospel matters more than slavery.

Even in the midst of America's crisis, however, that consensus survived. The free African-American revivalist preacher Zilpha Elaw certainly condemned slavery, and occasionally attended abolitionist meetings, but her heart was elsewhere. In 1828, when she went bravely to preach in the slave state of Maryland, she heard another preacher who was himself a slave. 'This poor brother,' she wrote rather sniffily, 'seemed to manifest an undue anxiety for his freedom.' St Paul, she recalled, had told slaves to be content with their condition, but this man 'anxiously sighed for liberty'. Happily, however, the man's prayers were soon heard: 'In the same week he was taken ill, and finally fell asleep in Jesus, departing to be "where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary are at rest."' This kind of attitude infuriated abolitionists who despaired of how promises of heaven were used to keep slaves quiescent. Yet if you truly believe that this life is a passing shadow and that humanity's greatest and only true happiness lies in God, how can temporal slavery or freedom compare to the momentous and eternal question of salvation or damnation?

I do not want to pronounce on the rights and wrongs of this, but to point out that the underlying logic of Protestant Christianity tugs inexorably in this direction. One flashpoint in the split between gradualist and immediatist abolitionists in the United States was mission to the native Americans. The Cherokee and the Choctaw both practised slavery. Abolitionists back East commonly demanded that missionaries denounce this as sinful. The missionaries themselves retorted that this would simply bring their mission to a swift end, and proposed treating slavery as they did polygamy, as a social wrong to be righted with forbearance. They did not

defend slavery, but were ready to tolerate it for the sake of spreading the Gospel. While many Protestants became extremely exercised about slavery, it was ultimately their religious principles which taught them that slavery was wrong (or right). Those principles also taught them that the Gospel of salvation mattered more than any political issue of any kind. Those who have hoped to recruit Protestants to secular causes have often found this kind of insistence awkward. But it will not go away.

Having said that, my second point is that abolitionism's history, especially its American crescendo, is of enduring significance for the history of Protestantism as well as for the history of slavery. Its first phase, trade-abolitionism, exemplifies one of Protestantism's classic tropes: repentance. Protestants knew that their own sins were all-pervasive, and were committed to self-examination to discover them, not least to avert the judgements which God threatened to visit on both individuals and nations. This restless search for sin eventually settled on a vast and morally indefensible atrocity: an insight which needed both imagination and moral courage, but it is no surprise that it eventually happened. In nineteenth-century America, however, faced with an articulate and principled Christian defence of slavery, this abolitionism turned into something new. In order fully to repent of the sin of slavery, immediatists also had to repent of an error: the view that slavery was not a sin.

For many Christians, to condemn a previously held orthodoxy would be deeply problematic. Any church which claims to be able to define doctrine authoritatively is going to have trouble admitting that it has made a mistake. But for Protestants is easier. Even instinctively conservative Protestants know that being sinful means being fallible. They will tear up and discard cherished interpretations of the Bible if they have to. And as the abolitionists' confrontation with Scripture show, when what they think is the heart of the gospel is at stake, they will not let the Bible stand in their way.

In the great matter of slavery, Protestantism performed this manoeuvre in full dress for the first time. Generations of Protestants had condoned, worked with or even actively defended slavery. Yet since the later nineteenth century, the doctrine that slavery is an intolerable evil has become an utterly fixed reference-point on Protestantism's moral map, despite that doctrine's shaky Biblical basis. The precedent was and is momentous. The world is full of long-tolerated or even long-cherished practices and convictions, seemingly based in the Bible, which some Protestants may suddenly, in the light of grace and providence, come to see as intolerable evils. Protestant advocates of feminism, of gay rights, of vegetarianism, or indeed, if that sounds like a left-wing shopping list, Protestant opponents of abortion, all have to face the fact that their campaigns lack explicit Biblical grounding. But the antislavery cause has established beyond respectable doubt that Protestants can and sometimes must champion a cause in defiance both of established tradition and of textual proof when it is at the heart of their Gospel.

© Professor Alec Ryrie, 2015