

A WORKSHOP ON HUMAN DIGNITY

An SCM Workshop

How to navigate a discussion about slavery in the Bible.

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A Bible (whatever translation you'd prefer), a piece of paper for each participant to write on or one large piece to be used by everyone (this is up to you) plus multiple pens/pencils. If you choose to use one piece of paper for everyone, using multiple pen colours would be preferable.

INTERNATIONAL DAY FOR THE RIGHT TO TRUTH (10)

Every year on 24th March we celebrate International Day for the Right to the Truth. This day focuses on gross human rights violations such as slavery and human trafficking while honouring the dignity of its victims, many of whom are stripped of this very thing.

The day also pays tribute to Monsignor Óscar Arnulfo Romero, a Catholic bishop, who was assassinated on 24th March 1980 at the age of 62. He peacefully protested government-endorsed human rights violations and violence in El Salvador, which had entered into civil war just six months prior.

BEING COMFORTABLE ASKING DIFFICULT QUESTIONS

This SCM workshop offers us, as modern-day progressive Christians, a space to recognise aspects of the Bible regarding human dignity and slavery that often go undiscussed.

Before beginning this workshop, please make sure that everyone is comfortable listening and/or participating in a discussion about slavery. For various reasons it could be an extremely upsetting topic for some people and a workshop they might prefer not to attend. Make sure everyone feels like they're in a safe space and that they don't have to talk among the wider group if they don't want to.

Take five minutes to discuss in pairs or small groups these three questions:

What are the different forms of slavery that exist today (and in the past)?

Why might some people 'willingly' enter into slavery? e.g. to get off the streets or provide for their families.

Does anyone know what the Bible says about slavery?

WHAT DOES THE BIBLE SAY ABOUT SLAVERY? (30)

Slavery has always existed, however, it wasn't until the Middle Ages that the term was first officially coined in relation to Slavs, central and eastern European people, who were often forced into slavery during this time.

Slavery in the Bible is generally dictated by the enslaved person's class, sex and/or nationality.

As with many other things, the Bible contains rather mixed messages about slavery and how enslaved people should be treated.

Representing some of the worst forms of human depravity and the violation of justice, freedom and basic dignity, such discrepancies in the Bible regarding both the divine legality and morality of slavery is difficult to comprehend. Yet, it is a concerning we must acknowledge.

While it is important to recognise the context in which the Bible was written – owning other human beings for various purposes was legally and generally (though never exclusively) accepted as a normal part of life and existed in form almost incomparable to recent or modern forms of slavery – how do we begin to understand why our God of love would be so apathetic to the abuse of enslaved people?

THE ACTIVITY


Either give out a piece of paper to each participant or place one large piece of paper in the middle to be used by everyone, whatever you'd prefer. As you read through the Bible quotes below, ask participants to write down how they feel when hearing them and what questions they provoke. They can write as much or as little as they like.

Read out these quotes to the group and see how they compare (pause in between for discussion):

- **Exodus 21:26** - "When a slaveowner strikes the eye of a male or female slave, destroying it, the owner shall let the slave go, a free person, to compensate for the eye"

Exodus 21:20-21 - "When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner's property"



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- **Leviticus 25:42-43** – “For they [the Israelites] are my servants, whom I brought out of the land of Egypt; they shall not be sold as slaves are sold. You shall not rule over them with harshness”

Leviticus 25:44-46 – “As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves. You may also acquire them from among the aliens residing with you, and from their families that are with you, who have been born in your land; and they may be your property. You may keep them as a possession for your children after you, for them to inherit as property. These you may treat as slaves, but as for your fellow Israelites, no one shall rule over the other with harshness”

- **Ephesians 6:9** – “masters... Stop threatening them [your slaves], for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality”

Ephesians 6:5 – “Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling”

- **Exodus 21:2** - “When you buy a male Hebrew slave, he shall serve six years, but in the seventh he shall go out a free person, without debt”

Exodus 21:4-6 - “If his master gives him [the slave] a wife and she bears him sons or daughters, the wife and her children shall be her master’s and he shall go out alone. But if the slave declares, “I love my master, my wife, and my children; I will not go out a free person,” then... his master shall pierce his ear with an awl; and he shall serve him for life”

Explore your thoughts and feelings together

Look back on what everyone has written down upon hearing these biblical passages. All four of these examples, despite being contradictory, appear within a few verses of each other.

Are the opinions and questions each of you wrote down similar? What are the most expressed thoughts?

Though the precise format of slavery was very different in biblical times to now, the passage from Leviticus 25 is extremely reflective of the Atlantic slave trade. How does it make you feel to know that American slave owners did not have to look far into the Bible to find justification for their ownership and, for some, abuse of people?

Do you think the Bible would respond at all differently to modern slavery?

Does your personal opinion of the Bible effect how you feel towards the weight of these passages? i.e. do you consider the Bible to be a divine, infallible, legal or moral book?

How does it make you feel to see what is, expectedly, quite negative words written in relation to Christianity’s holy text?

Why do you think Jesus didn’t say anything specific about slavery during his life?

WHAT WOULD JESUS DO? (15)

The Old Testament speaks regularly about the divine and objective rules of God: do not take the Lord's name in vain (Exodus 20:7), do not wear mixed fabrics (Leviticus 19:19), treat immigrants as though native-born (Leviticus 19:34), do not steal (Exodus 20:15) etc...

The New Testament, on the other hand, relies more on human's ability to act responsibly, guided by a moral compass that looks beyond the Torahic rules.

Mostly notably during the transatlantic slave trade, Christian opponents of slavery elevated biblical principles about love and justice in order to disregard more anomalous passages about violence, coercion and enslavement (such as those stated above), which were used by some slaveowners to justify their participation.

Do you think a more holistic or thematic interpretation of the Bible can be used to effectively counter individual passages such as those which condone slavery?

Ask participants to look back upon what they wrote down during the previous activity. What are some of the verses/theologies of the Bible that don't mention slavery but help us hold a mirror up to it? Do they prevent context from being used wholly to explain it?

Galatians 3:28

Ask participants to put their hands up if they have heard of this quote and if they know where in the Bible it can be found: "there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus".

As famous as this individual quote is, what is less well known is the content that encompasses it.

It belongs to a passage in the Bible entitled 'The Purpose of the Law'.

Described as a reaction to human "transgressions... the Law was our disciplinarian until Christ came... but now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian" (Galatians 3:24-25). Now, we are "all children of God" whether Jew or Greek, male or female, slave or free (3:27-28).

What does the coming of Christ mean for our reinterpretation of the previously mentioned Old Testament passages? Discuss.

How can we learn from and build on the legacy left behind by not only Christ but those throughout history (modern and ancient) who fought to change the law itself so that enslaved people could join the free?

CLOSING THE WORKSHOP (5)

Bring the discussion to an end and thank everyone who contributed.

Read to the group this extract from the poem Address to Slavery by Samuel Wright (1860).

Spend a few moments in quiet reflection.

**Slavery, O Slavery! I cannot conceive
Why judges and magistrates do not relieve
My down-trodden people from under thy hand,
Restore them their freedom, and give them their land.**

...

**Hope God by His power will save them at last,
And bring them as Israel in ages that's past,
Out of the reach of proud slavery's chain,
To enjoy the sweet comfort of freedom again.**

