

If the Bible Supposedly Promotes Slavery then Why Should We Consider Homosexuality a Sin?

Slavery was a social institution. Homosexuality is a choice, a personal moral decision, and a sin. Slavery was a wide-spread way of life in the ancient world (see Appendix 1: Does the Old Testament Condone Slavery?). Slavery cannot be put in the same category as sexual choices (see the articles which speak about homosexuality as a choice and not a genetic predisposition).

Homosexuals who argue that same-sex “marriage” is a civil right are trying to say that their sin is a right. Should we make murder legal? Then why redefine marriage to promote that which is categorically called sin in the Bible? Marriage is not a right. It is a privilege for those who meet the proper requirements. Since it is an institution that God created, we must abide by His rules and definition. God defines marriage as the union of one man and one woman clearly in Scripture from Genesis 2 to Matthew 19 to Ephesians 5. Unfortunately, gay marriage proponents overlook these passages and try to twist the Scriptures to support their sinful view.

Jesus said: ^(19:4) **And He answered and said, “Have you not read that He who created them from the beginning made them male and female , ⁽⁵⁾ and said, ‘for this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife , and the two shall become one flesh ‘? ⁽⁶⁾ “So they are no longer two, but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let no man separate.” Matthew 19:4-6**

To say that Jesus did not endorse heterosexual marriage, grounded in the creation of Adam and Eve is ludicrous. To say that Jesus would support same-sex marriage is suicidal. Does anybody remember what God did to the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah for their rampant homosexuality in Genesis 19, confirmed by archaeological evidence? Marriage is grounded in God’s creation mandate. Homosexuality is a distortion of God’s design. And again, while slavery was an institution known in the ancient world, it is not the same as a person’s choice to have sex with the same sex. To put these two issues in the same category is not wise, but for the sake of those who make fallacious and deceptive arguments based on this premise, I will give a response. In other words, those who say, “Who cares that the Bible calls homosexuality sin? The Bible also condones slavery” are severely misinterpreting the Bible and the culture in which the Bible was written.

Unlike heterosexuality and marriage, Scripture does not ground slavery in pre-Fall structures. The creation story tells us that the biblical writers viewed heterosexual unions, unlike slavery, as normative and transcultural. There was no slavery in paradise, but there was a man and a woman, and heterosexual sex was blessed by God. In addition, those who claim that the Bible promotes slavery have revealed their ignorance. The God who delivered the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and who inspired Paul to write Philemon show God’s heart towards the slave. Far from promoting slavery, the Bible’s dealing with this wide-spread institution is more complex.

Slavery was prevalent and widely accepted in the ancient world. The Old Testament did not institute slavery, but rather, addressed this issues which faced the culture. The economy of Egypt, Greece, and Rome was based on slave labor. In the first Christian century, one out of three persons in Italy and one out of five elsewhere was a slave (others estimate it was two out of four in the Empire). *The Easton Bible Dictionary* states, “Slavery as it existed under the Mosaic Law has no modern parallel. That law did not originate but only regulated the already existing custom of slavery (Exodus 21:20,21,26,27; Leviticus 25:44-46; Joshua 9:6-27). The gospel in its spirit and genius is hostile to slavery in every form, which under its influence is

gradually disappearing from among men.” While Genesis 17 indicates that when a household slave gives birth, the child is born a slave, this is not something that was legislated by God, but was rather the custom of the culture. The narrative neither approves of nor disapproves of this, it merely tells the story which was focused on God’s dealings with the patriarchs, and as such, there is no formal exposition or teaching on slavery in that context. We must always distinguish between what God prescribes in His Word with what He describes. Just because there is a story about Joseph being sold into slavery or David committing adultery, or Solomon having many wives does not mean that God is endorsing these choices or moral actions. He is merely describing what happened historically, and it actually reveals His grace in saving sinners that went against His prescription for sex, social justice, and marriage.

Slavery in the Old and New Testaments was extremely different from slavery in America or in other parts of the world in recent history. First, a person usually sold himself into slavery to pay a debt. Since bankruptcy laws did not exist, people would voluntarily sell themselves into slavery. Some scholars estimate that almost half of the Roman Empire was slaves. Slaves were often more educated than slave owners. A slave owner would often send a slave off to be educated as a doctor. Then the slave would return and function as a doctor in the home for the family. This is a far cry from slavery in America. Other scholars estimate that most lawyers, doctors, managers, artisans, educators, and working class were slaves. Slavery in the Roman world did not generally involve inhuman treatment. Slaves often managed money, guarded children, cooked food, and sometimes were often highly esteemed for their various professions. We generally associate the word “slave” with the ideas of forced subjection, involuntary service, and harsh treatment. Those terms are not accurate descriptions of slavery in the Roman Empire.

Indentured servitude was the practice in the Old Testament. A man would sell himself into slavery based on an economic need, and was not enslaved due to any racial discrimination. This kind of “debt-slavery” could be pushed by a creditor, but it was always done for the purpose of paying off a debt, and never for racial, or immoral reasons. Someone might be in this position of “washing dishes” for a few weeks, and be free from the debt. One wonders if this practice would still remain if we were not living in the age of credit cards and debt. The Law stated that if the slave had come with a wife, she and any children were also released after the debt was paid. In ancient times, slavery was never associated with any particular race. By allowing slavery (indentured servitude, not slavery as we know it) the Bible does not approve of racism. It was voluntary. Rarely was it obligatory (this would usually only happen in wars where conquered nations would be forced into slavery. But even then, we see that the Israelites had an enormous amount of freedom under Babylon and Assyria’s rule.). It was also never a lifelong status, and in the Old Testament, all slaves were released and freed from their debt at certain points as commanded under the Law. Slaves had to be freed when they paid the debt for which they were sold. Also, in the seventh year of their service, whether or not the debt was paid, they had to be released. In other words, debt-slavery was limited to six years. And when the Year of Jubilee arrived, all slaves were set free (Lev. 25:47ff).

Under normal conditions, no one could be a slave for life and this form of restitution did not necessarily lower one’s social status (No slave could remain longer than 6 years unless the slave requested it, which often occurred because of the bond between the slave and the family, cf. Deut. 15:15-17). Slaves were allowed to accumulate assets and buy their own freedom (Lev. 25:49). There was only one criminal offense in the Covenant in which the punishment was enslavement: housebreaking. So important was the security of the home, that only in this case, was it enforced, and that for restitution. “If the thief is caught while breaking in and is struck so that he dies, there will be no bloodguiltiness on his account. But if the sun has risen on him, there will be bloodguiltiness on his account. He shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft. If what he stole is actually found alive in his possession, whether an ox or a donkey or a sheep, he shall pay double” (Ex. 22:3-4). In the Hebrew culture, it was important for

people to make things right. One could not steal and not be held responsible. This ethic and morality is sorely missed today. Prisoners today are often repeat offenders because they never have to “pay” anything back to their victims. They receive three hot meals, watch a lot of television, work around the prison, usually enjoy a workout room, and may never be held responsible for their crimes in a way that actually teaches them the lesson of responsibility, accountability, and self-respect. They may never have to make any direct form of restitution to the offended party. This also stems from the fact that pre-Enlightenment cultures were much more communal and shame-honor based than cultures today in the West.

It should also be noted that if we were living in either testaments, we would most certainly hire servants. It was nearly impossible for a family to run a house, without extra help. Without an oven, refrigerator, electricity, a tractor, and the like, finding food, storing food, washing clothes, caring for children, running a farm or living in an agrarian society took a tremendous amount of time and effort. Servants were often treated like members of the family and acted as another child who was given responsibilities for the welfare of the family. In Israel, it was cheaper to hire day laborers than to maintain slaves. So, if a family had slaves, they were usually wealthy, and treated the slave properly, and as a part of the family. Most families in Highland Park have live-in maids who help run the home. This is very similar to the servants in the Bible. In fact, in Galatians we learn that slaves had more rights than children, until the children turned a certain age (Gal. 4). The slaves in Galatians 3 were teachers and guardians who accompanied the children everywhere. Again, this is quite different than American slavery, which the Bible certainly condemns.

Those who needed financial assistance or needed protection could become indentured servants (Ex. 21:2-6; Deut. 15:12-18). Again, this was a voluntary act which was very different from the way slavery was practiced in America. Also, a thief that could not or would not make restitution could be sold as a slave (Ex. 22:1-3), but the servitude would cease when restitution had been made. There were numerous opportunities for the manumission of slaves. Freedom could be purchased (Lev. 25:48-55). Slaves were to be set free in Sabbatical and Jubilee year cycles as was mentioned earlier (Ex. 21:2-4; Lev. 25:40-43).

Inhumane treatment by masters was grounds for release (Ex. 21:7-11, 26-27; Deut. 21:14). If a slave lost so much as a tooth at the hands of his master, he was to be set free according to the Law. Again, this is extremely different from the form of slavery practiced in the past few centuries. Some slaves were released by the direct command of the Lord (Jer. 34:8-10). Because of these issues, one cannot argue that “the bible has been used to justify things we don’t believe in anymore and that are clearly morally wrong such as slavery. Its condemnation of homosexuality is in the same category.” No, the type of slavery practiced in America is condemned in the Word because it is based on racism. The two issues are totally separate. Sexual morality and the complexities of slavery in the ancient world compared with the modern world are like apples and oranges.

The Bible teaches that slavery (not indentured servitude), as well as other forms of domination of one person over another, is wrong. For example, Joseph was sold into slavery (Genesis 37), and the Egyptians oppressed the Israelites (Exodus 1). Neither these nor other descriptions of slavery in the Bible are presented in a favorable light. What many liberals forget is that the Bible may DESCRIBE something but no PRESCRIBE it. We are not to believe the lies of Satan recorded in Scripture any more than we are to believe that what Joseph’s brothers did was good. The same argument is often made about marriage. Because Solomon had many wives, liberals say, “See, we should not listen to the Bible. Gay marriage is great. Why go by the Bible?” They fail to realize Solomon is judged for this sin and that polygamy, although described at times, is not prescribed.

The Old Testament law code made it a capital crime to kidnap a person and sell him into slavery (Ex. 21:16). It also commanded Israel to welcome a slave who escaped from his master and not be returned (Deut.

23:15-16). In 1 Timothy 1:10, Paul states that slave traders are just as sinful as murderers, adulterers, perverts, and liars.

Part of the problem is that we have false ideas about what slavery was really like. The life of a slave was not easy, but we get an exaggerated idea of the hardships of slavery from watching movies or reading historical material that is written on a popular level. Here the purpose is usually to dramatize the plight of slaves or to make some point about the evils of slavery in general, but the historical reality was less dramatic in ancient times. In most cases the life of a slave was not much different from the life of any worker. Those who have been in the military have experienced something like it — being legally bound to an employer and to a job that one cannot simply “quit” at will, not free to leave without permission, subject to discipline if one disobeys or is grossly negligent — all of this is familiar enough to those of us who have served in the military. And yet we know that the daily life of a good soldier (in peace time) is not especially hard nor are they mistreated or treated inhumanely (though exceptions occur in ancient “slavery” as well as in the military today as we’ve seen in Iraq. These exceptions to the rule do not make the rule flawed). This is what it was like to be a slave.

It is estimated that there were 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire. Research shows that the average slave was not abused or exploited. Some slaves did suffer at the hands of their owners, but slaves under Roman law could usually count on being set free. Slaves were used in the cities and in the country. While slaves remained their owner’s property, they themselves could own property - including other slaves. Slaves had complete control of their property and money. The ISBE article (p. 543) on slavery, states that in the Roman era, people sold themselves into slavery in order to “climb socially.” A poor, freeborn person had a harder time living than one who became a slave and obtained special training and jobs. This assured job security and afforded higher social status. Some think that in Romans 16:23, Erastus, the city treasurer sold himself into a form of government slavery in order to secure this high position. Once in this kind of service, they were held as a municipal slave until the age of 40 and then they became Roman citizens and ran for political offices. Slavery was the road to success in the eyes of many people during this time. In fact, many non-Romans sold themselves into slavery to Romans because they knew at the time of manumission they would become Roman citizens. Again, this is nothing like American slavery.

Being a slave did not indicate one’s social class. Slaves were accorded the social status of their owners. And outwardly, one could scarcely ever distinguish a slave from a free person. “To speak of ‘slaves’ in the NT period is to refer to a logical class and juridical class, but not to a social class as such. Any outcry for the ‘slaves of the world to unite’ would have fallen on deaf ears, because the social sense of those in slavery was far more dependent on their legal status as slaves. In outward appearance it was unusually impossible to distinguish among slaves, freedmen and free persons. Neither the slave’s clothing nor his or her race revealed a legal or social status. Patterns of religious life, friends, or work did not separate slaves from freed persons or freeborn workers...By no means was the slave’s position always subordinate, for in Greco-Roman households slaves served not only as cooks, cleaners, and personal attendants, but also as tutors of persons of all ages, physicians, nurses, close companions, and managers of the household. In the business world, slaves were not only janitors and delivery boys; they were managers of estates, shops, and ships, as well as salesmen and contracting agents...also as administrators of funds and personnel and as executives with decision-making powers” (ISBE, 544). So, a slave could be a custodian, a merchant, a salesman, a teacher, or a government official. Felix the governor, who judged Paul in Acts 23-24 was a slave who was educated at the expense of his master. His slavery helped him arise to such a role of prominence. This was the case with many artists, doctors, writers, teachers, and philosophers (Epictetus).

ISBE states that the slaves formed the broad class of “intellectuals” in the empire (p. 544). “For many, self-sale into slavery with anticipation of manumissions was regarded as the most direct means to be integrated into Greek and Roman society. As such, in stark contrast to New World slavery in the 17th-19th centuries, Greco-Roman slavery functioned **as a process rather than a permanent condition, as a temporary phase of life by means of which an outsider obtained a place within society...**” What most modern readers of the Bible do not understand is that the picture of slavery through a Mark Twain novel is nothing like slavery in the Greco-Roman era. For instance, many slaves lived apart from their owners, had their own properties and families, and enjoyed what moderns would see as a normal life (ISBE, 544). It seems that a slave in Rome and an employee in America are synonymous in many ways. Slaves were often highly educated. There were even slaves who were elders in the church, and thus had authority over the masters whom they served all week. Selling oneself as a slave was commonly used as a means of gaining Roman citizenship. If a slave was owned by a government official, this slave had access to the master’s seal and acted and was seen more as an ambassador than a lower-caste.

William Barclay, in his commentary, *The Letters to Timothy and Titus*, (Westminster, 1960), says: “In those early days, the Church did not emerge as the opponent and the would-be destroyer of slavery by violent and sudden means. And the Church was wise. There were something like 60,000,000 slaves in the Roman Empire... For the Church to have encouraged slaves to revolt and rebel and rise against their masters would have been fatal. It would simply have caused civil war, mass murder, and the complete discredit of the Church. (Instead), what happened was that as the centuries went on, Christianity so permeated civilization that in the end the slaves were freed voluntarily and not by force. Here is a tremendous lesson. It is the proof that neither men nor the world nor society can be reformed by force and by legislation. The reform must come through the slow penetration of the Spirit of Christ into the human situation. Things have to happen in God’s time, not in ours. In the end, the slow way is the sure way, and the way of violence always defeats itself.”

The Bible teaching in 1 Timothy 6:1-2 is that believers who were slaves were to honor, respect, and obey their masters. The name of Christ whom they profess to worship would be defamed if they fail to follow that instruction. If the believer was the slave of a heathen master, he might be tempted to regard his master as bound for hell, while the slave is saved for heaven. That kind of intolerant superiority was not like the mind of Christ. If the believer was the slave of a master who was Christian, the slave would be tempted to use the relationship as an excuse to do inefficient work, and expect not to be punished. The New Testament teaching is that the slave does not have the right to be disrespectful, no matter whom his master is. Colossians states the same principle in regard to work ethics and adds that whether one is a mere employee (free) or a slave, that we are to do our work unto the Lord and that He rewards us. We should also remember that if being a servant was sinful, then Jesus committed sin, which is impossible. Jesus took the role of a slave in John 13 (foot-washing) and is spoken of as a slave in Philippians 2. Therefore, being a slave isn’t sinful. Jesus adopted a slave’s role (John 13:4-5; Mark 10:45; compare Philippians 2:7) and taught that His disciples should do the same (Matthew 6:24; Matthew 10:24; Matthew 24:45-46; Luke 17:10; John 12:26, 13:12-16). Paul taught that all believers are slaves of Christ (Eph. 6:6; Rom. 14), and many of Jesus’ parables and teachings are about slaves serving masters which He uses to illustrate faithful, selfless service to Himself (Matt. 18, 24; Luke 12, 14, 17; John 15). In addition, there is a word group in Greek, which is used to speak of service to God, from which we get our word “liturgy” which is defined as “the work of the people” in worship. These words are consistently used to speak of man’s service to God. Jesus also spoke about no one being able to serve two masters (Matt. 6:24; Luke 16:13). He said, “But the greatest among you shall be your servant.” (Matt. 23:11)

The Apostolic Church looked upon slaves as brothers and as equals. The post-Apostolic Church admitted slaves to all the rights of the church, some of whom became pastors, elders, and even bishops. Church collections (money offerings) were often used to purchase freedom for slaves. The freeing of slaves was considered a praiseworthy action.

The New Testament does not advocate the overthrow of slavery by forcible revolution. Rather, it condemns and removes the abuses of slavery by striking at its roots, by lifting up the power of the Gospel to change hearts, and by setting forth principles for dealing with fellow human beings:

- 1) All human beings are made in the image and likeness of God and are worthy of respect (Genesis 1:28, Jam. 3:9).
- 2) All human beings are loved by God who cares for us (John 3:16).
- 3) All Christians are to love their neighbors as themselves (Matthew 22:39).
- 4) Christians have equality in Christ. (Gal. 3, Col. 3)

The abuses of slavery have disappeared wherever the Word of God has been widely and faithfully taught. Christianity never had as its immediate goal an attempt to change society, but to change people. And to the degree that people change, to that extent, society and its structures change. And so wherever the true Christian message has made deep inroads, slavery has been eliminated.

If the Bible does promote slavery, why was slavery prohibited or abolished in America by a Christians (Jefferson,¹ Lincoln) and in England by a white, Christian (Wilberforce)? They obviously saw principles in the Bible which led to their timely challenge to the government. Most likely, since Paul knew that slavery was imbedded in the fabric of society, he knew that he could not overturn it politically. He knew that he couldn't pass a bill in the Roman senate and end slavery. What he did do was change the nature of relationships among people which led to the abolishment of slavery. He states in 1 Cor. 7:21 that if one can become free, this is a good thing and one should pursue this. Paul is clearly not promoting slavery here. On the other hand, he was a law-abiding citizen and he recognized that God ordains all things including government (Rom. 13). As such, he knew he needed to follow the laws in his day and this is why he sent Onesimus back to Philemon (this was not in conflict to Deut. 23 because Paul believed Christians were under the "law of Christ" and that the Mosaic law was now obsolete). But, if one reads the letter to Philemon, one sees that the relationship between master and slave has been greatly changed. They are now to consider each other as brothers in Christ since they have the same Lord and Master. "It is equal footing at the Cross." Paul argues this same point in various passages (see below). Paul's letter to Philemon encouraged him to welcome back his slave Onesimus (who had now become a Christian). Early Church tradition says that the slave owner did welcome him back as a Christian brother and gave him his freedom. Onesimus later became the bishop of Berea.

In the New Testament, we see that Paul wrote how slaves and masters were to act toward one another (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22-25, 4:1; 1 Tim. 6:1-2). Since nearly half of the population of Rome were slaves, it is

¹ Thomas Jefferson's 1784 draft plan of government for the western territories prohibited slavery and involuntary servitude after the year 1800. Jefferson may not have been a Christian, but he was a Biblical deist.

understandable that he would address their attitudes and actions. Paul was hardly endorsing the Roman system of slavery; he merely addressed the current institution.

Paul also neutralized the condition of slaves and masters by continually pointing to the equality we have in Christ. This did not change the institution or change the roles of each, but it showed that all can be justified by faith in Christ, and all are in one body in Christ. There is not one body which is made up of slaves, and one made up of masters. It did change the attitude of each, which eventually led to the collapse of slavery altogether.

For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. (1 Cor. 12:13)

There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal. 3:28) Paul taught that in Christ human status was unimportant.

There is another kind of slavery that Christians need to think about. The Bible speaks of slavery to sin and slavery to righteousness. Jesus said, "Most assuredly, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin" (John 8:34). In a spiritual sense, people apart from Christ are slaves to sin. To keep on committing sin is to demonstrate that sin has control of one's life. Paul uses slavery as an illustration to our spiritual condition in various places. He says we changed masters and now serve Christ, not sin. "For when you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness" (Rom. 6:20). In vs. 22 he states that we have been enslaved to God so that we may be sanctified and then given eternal life. The Apostle Paul said, "To whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin to death, or of obedience to righteousness" (Romans 6:16). Then Paul thanked God that many who were once slaves of sin had now by the grace of God become slaves of righteousness. Christ can set us free from slavery to sin and will enable us to do righteousness. A "redeemer" purchased a person out of slavery (Ex. 21:8; Lev. 25:48ff.). Christ purchased us through His blood out of the slave market of sin. By taking on flesh, He became our kinsman redeemer (Ruth).

The writers of the New Testament epistles refer to themselves (and Christians – Rev. 1:1) as Christ's slaves. See Galatians 1:10, Philippians 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1, and Jude 1. The dedicated Christian is a servant (a bondsman) of the Lord Jesus Christ. We are not free to do as we choose. We are committed to obediently serve God and to deal justly with our fellow human beings. A bondsman of Christ does not minister to others with his own interests in mind (example of Timothy in Phil. 2). He has the interests of His Master in mind, for the good of those whom he serves. This is a product of nothing sort of the bondsman's own surrender and a bondsman's own personal faith in Jesus Christ. Many of the heroes of the Old Testament are called "servants of God" (the Hebrew word meaning "slave," Exodus 32:13; Deuteronomy 34:5; 2 Samuel 7:5; 2 Kings 21:10). Very significant are the Servant Songs of Isaiah 42:1-4; Isaiah 49:1-6; Isaiah 50:4-9; and Isaiah 52:13-53:12, which originally referred to Israel, prophetically to Jesus, and the New Testament writers applied them to Jesus.

Concerning slavery as a social institution, neither Jesus nor Paul advocated social revolution which would lead to the immediate emancipation of every slave. Such a sudden upheaval would have resulted in indescribable misery for many slaves who depended on their masters for a living. What the Bible teaches is that love coming from both sides (master and slaves) will melt cruelty into kindness, and in so doing, despots will be changed into kind employers and slaves will become willing servants. All will become brothers and sisters in Christ.

One can discern a trajectory within the Bible that critiques slavery. Front and center in Israelite memory was its remembrance of God's liberation from slavery in Egypt (e.g., Exod 22:21; 23:9; Lev 25:42, 55; Deut 15:15). This slavery was cruel in the eyes of God and was not the same as that which was spoken of in the Law. Christian memory adds the paradigmatic event of Christ's redemption of believers from slavery to sin and people (1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Consequently, Israelite law put various restrictions on enslaving fellow Israelites—mandatory release dates, the right of near-kin redemption, not returning runaway slaves, and insisting that Israelites not be treated as slaves—while Paul in 1 Cor 7:21-23 and Philemon 16 regarded liberation from slavery as at least a penultimate good.

The canon of Scripture shows considerable discomfort with the institution of slavery. Yet there is not the slightest indication anywhere in the canon that same-sex intercourse is anything other than a detested practice to be utterly avoided and shunned by the people of God, Jew and Gentile believer alike, in all circumstances.

While God deals with slavery through progressive revelation, homosexual behavior, however, is uniformly condemned in the Bible. Nowhere in Scripture is it spoken of in a positive way.

^(6:9) Or do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived; neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor homosexuals, ⁽¹⁰⁾ nor thieves, nor the covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor swindlers, will inherit the kingdom of God. ⁽¹¹⁾ Such were some of you; but you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the Spirit of our God. 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

In this one passage we see that homosexuality is clearly a sin and that there is hope as well. Some of the Corinthians were homosexuals, but through the power of the Gospel, they were forgiven their sins through Christ's blood and were living holy heterosexual lives.

^(1:9) realizing the fact that law is not made for a righteous person, but for those who are lawless and rebellious, for the ungodly and sinners, for the unholy and profane, for those who kill their fathers or mothers, for murderers ⁽¹⁰⁾ and immoral men and homosexuals and kidnappers and liars and perjurers, and whatever else is contrary to sound teaching, ⁽¹¹⁾ according to the glorious gospel of the blessed God, with which I have been entrusted. 1 Timothy 1:9-11

Paul says the Law was made to reveal the sin of homosexuality. It does so in Leviticus 18:22 among other places.

"You shall not lie with a male as one lies with a female; it is an abomination." (Lev. 18:22) While the civil and ceremonial aspects of the Law do not apply today, the moral aspects do. This is how we understand that homosexuality is clearly a sin, and yet wearing clothing made of two fabrics is not. Those laws were given to make Israel a distinct nation, set apart for God's special use. The moral aspects of the Law are clearly repeated in the New Covenant (Testament) except the keeping of the Sabbath.

In fact, the New Testament is equally clear about the timeless and universal condemnation of homosexuality.

^(1:16) For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ⁽¹⁷⁾ For in it *the* righteousness of God is revealed from faith to faith; as it is written, "But the righteous *man* shall live by faith." ⁽¹⁸⁾ For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness,

⁽¹⁹⁾ because that which is known about God is evident within them; for God made it evident to them. ⁽²⁰⁾
For since the creation of the world His invisible attributes, His eternal power and divine nature, have
been clearly seen, being understood through what has been made, so that they are without excuse. ⁽²¹⁾
For even though they knew God, they did not honor Him as God or give thanks, but they became futile in
their speculations, and their foolish heart was darkened. ⁽²²⁾ Professing to be wise, they became fools, ⁽²³⁾
and exchanged the glory of the incorruptible God for an image in the form of corruptible man and of
birds and four-footed animals and crawling creatures. ⁽²⁴⁾ Therefore God gave them over in the lusts of
their hearts to impurity, so that their bodies would be dishonored among them. ⁽²⁵⁾ For they exchanged
the truth of God for a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator, who is blessed
forever. Amen. ⁽²⁶⁾ For this reason God gave them over to degrading passions; for their women exchanged
the natural function for that which is unnatural, ⁽²⁷⁾ and in the same way also the men abandoned the
natural function of the woman and burned in their desire toward one another, men with men
committing indecent acts and receiving in their own persons the due penalty of their error.
Romans 1:16-27

The Bible is absolutely clear on the sin of homosexuality over and over again. It would be unthinkable in the minds of the inspired authors that two homosexuals could be married.

There are no contradictions in the Bible about this topic. Although our culture presents the approval of homosexual behavior as a social justice issue, Scripture and the more than 4,000-year-old community of faith have regarded it as a moral issue, i.e., as sin, and thus a matter of faith. In Scripture, social justice is understood to be counteracting injustices and their consequences that flow from the sin of disobedience to God's Word, especially immorality and idolatry. It cannot, therefore, be claimed that reversing what the Bible considers immoral, e.g., homosexual behavior, is an act of social justice.

The Bible consistently condemns homosexuality as a sin. It has never wavered on this point from the Old to the New Testament. One cannot interpret Romans 1 or 1 Corinthians 6 or 1 Timothy 1 as culturally bound texts. They speak of the moral will of God and clearly state that homosexuality is a sin. It is a personal, moral choice. Murder is a personal moral choice. Slavery, on the other hand was a political institution and as such, was treated carefully in the New Testament. One cannot extract principles from how the Bible deals with slavery over time and conclude that the same can be applied to homosexuality. They are two totally different subjects. A culturally bound institution that is expressed in a certain form of government or empire in a given era, is completely different from a personal, sexual, moral choice. One deals with humanity and sexuality and personal choice. The other deals with government structures, finances/survival, labor forces, and already-existing social institutions. We would also do well to remember that when we call Jesus "Lord" we are saying that He is our Master.

I personally believe that if slavery was not an accepted institution during the Biblical era, then we could not understand our relationship to God. Paul and others continually called themselves "bond-servants" or slaves of Christ. One who relinquishes all his rights and serves another, was illustrated in slavery, and served to help us understand our relationship with God. I thank God Christianity wasn't birthed in a democracy, because then we'd all think that we can choose to elect God to be Lord of our lives or selectively obey Him. Leviticus 25:55 says, "For the sons of Israel are My servants; they are My servants whom I brought out from the land of Egypt. I am the Lord your God." When Paul states that Christians are slaves of Christ in 1 Corinthians 7:22, he probably had the former text from Leviticus in mind. Why? Because no one living in the first century would ever think of himself as a slave to a god. This was unthinkable (ISBE, 545). The truth is that God is Lord whether we acknowledge Him as such or not and that all Christians are called to undivided loyalty and submission to the Lord of Lords.

Does the Old Testament Condone Slavery?

ABSOLUTELY NOT.

The Old Testament speaks of slavery often, and lays out rules on how slaves were to be treated. This has caused some to become confused...but a basic understanding of the context for ancient near-eastern slavery shows that the Old Testament does **not** condone slavery. Let's look at some common assumptions:

ASSUMPTION: #1: REGULATING A BEHAVIOR SHOWS APPROVAL

There are 33 Bible verses (NIV) containing the word "divorce". Divorce is specifically regulated in Scripture, but does that mean that the Bible condones divorce? Let's see:

"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel...

God hates divorce. Why would He give specific instructions governing it? Simple: because divorce was a fact of life. Failing to provide practical instructions on divorce would be like pretending it didn't actually happen. Well, slavery was also a fact of life. Regulations for slavery should not be confused with the approval of slavery. The existence of regulations for specific behaviors is **not** the same as approval for those behaviors.

However, **Assumption #1 is not relevant** to the issue of slavery in the Old Testament. As we'll see, other faulty assumptions are at work:

ASSUMPTION #2: SLAVERY WAS INVOLUNTARY SERVITUDE

Many incorrectly assume that the slavery in the Old Testament was like the modern western slavery of the 1700's and 1800's. Western slavery primarily benefited the rich, but Israelite slavery primarily benefited the poor. You see, slavery was almost always voluntary...the basic types of "enslavement" are known as self-sale, family sale, and indentured servitude. **These relationships were usually initiated by the slave as a remedy for poverty.**

Poor families would sometimes sell their children as slaves. Were this situation like modern western slavery, we could justifiably condemn the practice...but the reality is that this was of great benefit to the child. After some time the child may return to the family. This was the family's choice, not something commanded by God. The family may have had other options.

Slavery contracts often emphasized that the slave agreed to work in exchange for economic security and personal protection. While modern western slaves were forbidden to own property of any kind, Hebrew slaves could take part in business, borrow money, and buy their own freedom...in other words, they were free to "buy out" the contract they'd made. They were also able to own property, pay betrothal monies, and pay civic fines. Slaves could appear in court as witnesses, plaintiffs, and defendants.

Many ancient near-eastern slaves were able to buy time off as well, paying a fixed fee called a “quitrent” to their owner. This bought them a year where they didn’t have to work. The amount paid was roughly equivalent to the average annual pay of a hired worker, regardless of whether he was free or a slave.

ASSUMPTION #3: SLAVERY WAS CRUEL AND INHUMANE

While human nature tells us that abuse certainly must have occurred, the Old Testament forbids the cruel treatment of slaves. In fact, slaves were afforded the same legal protections as free citizens.

Leviticus 25 instructed Israelites to not mistreat slaves:

- Do not rule over them ruthlessly, but fear your God.
- ...you must not rule over your fellow Israelites ruthlessly.
- ...you must see to it that his owner does not rule over him ruthlessly.

Instead of being cruel and inhumane, the relationships between slaves and owners appear to have been, at the very least, respectful. Many slaves were treated much like members of the owner’s family. Deuteronomy 15 has a very instructive passage regarding setting a slave free:

If a fellow Hebrew, a man or a woman, sells himself to you and serves you six years, in the seventh year you must let him go free. And when you release him, do not send him away empty-handed. Supply him liberally from your flock, your threshing floor and your winepress. Give to him as the LORD your God has blessed you. Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the LORD your God redeemed you. That is why I give you this command today.

But if your servant says to you, “I do not want to leave you,” because he loves you and your family and is well off with you, then take an awl and push it through his ear lobe into the door, and he will become your servant for life. Do the same for your maidservant.

Do not consider it a hardship to set your servant free, because his service to you these six years has been worth twice as much as that of a hired hand. And the LORD your God will bless you in everything you do.

The personal rights and responsibilities of a slave were clearly more important than the owner’s “property rights”. Slavery was generally an economic transaction and not a human rights violation. As but one example, slaves were forbidden to work on the Sabbath and were expected to take part in social celebrations...just like their masters. It’s clear that the slavery in the Old Testament wasn’t like modern western slavery at all. Obviously, these slaves received great benefits from making such arrangements.

ASSUMPTION #4: IT WAS ACCEPTABLE TO HARM A SLAVE

If a master beat a slave and the slave died, he was to be killed. If he caused any sort of permanent damage to the slave, the slave was to be set free immediately. Note that “permanent damage” included such things as knocking out a tooth! This was a stark contrast to other near-eastern cultures, where a master was allowed to put out the eyes of his slaves with no consequences. An Israelite master had incentive to avoid striking a slave in the face, which was considered a civic wrong.

Some try to use **Exodus 20:20-21** as evidence that Assumption #4 is accurate:

If a man beats his male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies as a direct result, he must be punished, but he is not to be punished if the slave gets up after a day or two, since the slave is his property.

On the surface, this looks as though a master could get away with mistreating a slave. When we look more closely, it’s clear that this wasn’t considered mistreatment. In fact, this verse shows that slaves were treated in much the same way as free citizens.

Being beaten by a rod was a common punishment. The community elders employed the rod to punish wrongdoers, and fathers applied the rod to rebellious older sons. Using a rod to discipline a slave would be common, if not customary. The punishments for harming slaves and free men were equivalent:

- If the slave died, the owner was killed.
- If the slave was permanently harmed, they were set free.
- If the slave was temporarily harmed, the owner was not punished.

A free citizen who was temporarily harmed would be compensated for lost work time and medical bills, but the slave would not. The difference was simply economic: the owner was financially responsible for the slave, so he absorbed the loss of work time and made sure the slave was healed instead of paying them cash.

ASSUMPTION #5: WOMEN WERE SEX SLAVES

Women were sometimes sold into slavery (self-sale or family sale) as concubines. While westerners typically consider this the equivalent of being an involuntary sex slave, that’s clearly not the case, as we read in **Exodus 21**:

If a man sells his daughter as a servant, she is not to go free as menservants do. If she does not please the master who has selected her for himself, he must let her be redeemed. He has no right to sell her to foreigners, because he has broken faith with her. If he selects her for his son, he must grant her the rights of a daughter. If he marries another woman, he must not deprive the first one of her food, clothing and marital rights. If he does not provide her with these three things, she is to go free, without any payment of money.

A concubine wasn't held against her will and used for sex. She was a true wife, but a secondary or subordinate one. The phrase "marital rights" as well as those in Judges 3 give us insight into a concubine's life: the man who bought her is her husband, his father is her father-in-law, and so on. The practice of keeping concubines is related to polygamy and not to enforced servitude. This behavior is not commended in Scripture. It is an example of how people and Israel had fallen away from their God and His Word.

That being said, these relationships could hardly be considered negative. They let young women voluntarily escape poverty, offered them security and protection, and gave them upward social mobility in the home of a wealthy family. They were also safe from favoritism: if the man took another wife, she was afforded the same basic legal protections as any other wife: food, clothing, and conjugal rights.

Exodus 21:8 says that such women could not be sold to foreigners. The implication is that foreigners wouldn't recognize her personal rights as afforded by Israeli law, and so she could never be redeemed. This shows that a slave's personal rights were more important than a slave owner's "property rights".

ASSUMPTION #6: THE OLD TESTAMENT CONDONES INVOLUNTARY SLAVERY

The Old Testament is clear in its position on involuntary slavery: it was **punishable by death**:

- Anyone who kidnaps another and either sells him or still has him when he is caught must be put to death. Exodus 21:16
 - If a man is caught kidnapping one of his brother Israelites and treats him as a slave or sells him, the kidnapper must die. You must purge the evil from among you. Deuteronomy 24:7
- Involuntary enslavement was, according to the Old Testament, evil.

ASSUMPTION #7: THE SELLING OF SLAVES IS PROOF OF CRUELTY

The most common verse used for this claim is Leviticus 25:44.

Your male and female slaves are to come from the nations around you; from them you may buy slaves.

The assumption here is that this sale would be against the slave's will. However, there's nothing in the Old Testament to bear this out. The Hebrew word from that verse that's translated "buy" suggests a transaction. Considering the Old Testament's view of slavery and the lack of contrary evidence, one could reasonably assume that these transactions were entirely voluntary.

The ancient definitions of freedom and slavery were more relative than absolute. Kings were masters and their subjects were slaves. Rulers subject to others (e.g. emperors) were slaves. Child

adoptions were recorded as sales transactions, with the new parents being considered masters. Virtually any subordinate could be considered a slave. The modern definitions of freedom, slavery, property, and ownership don't adequately express the ancient reality.

For an example, read the 15th and 16th verses of **Deuteronomy 23**:

If a slave has taken refuge with you, do not hand him over to his master. Let him live among you wherever he likes and in whatever town he chooses. Do not oppress him.

The implication here is that the slave belongs to a foreigner, but should be allowed to make a home among the Israelites as he pleases. If slaves were considered property, extradition would have been immediate...since the slave would "belong" to someone else. Extradition back to a foreign slave owner was forbidden, and we might safely assume that this had to do with the difference in how slaves were treated by other cultures.

Note as well the wording of **Leviticus 25:46**...

You can will them to your children as inherited property and can make them slaves for life... While it was possible to will foreign slaves to your children, that was not the default. While it was possible to make them slaves for life, that was not the default. It's entirely reasonable to assume that the 'slave for life' clause would be based on the slave's wishes, as it would be for a Hebrew slave.

ASSUMPTION #8: SLAVES WERE CAPTURED IN WARTIME

During wartime, a city might surrender to Israel. It would then become a vassal state to Israel, and its people would be considered serfs instead of slaves. They would be expected to work on civic projects, as the Israelites did under Solomon's rule.

Considering the fact that such conscriptions included both Hebrews and foreigners, such serfdom would be entirely voluntary. The serf as well as the slave enjoyed the protection and prosperity of the community.

CONCLUSION

While the Old Testament clearly lists guidelines regarding slavery, it's clear that the type of slavery involved was overwhelmingly voluntary. Most relationships were either initiated by the slave or as an arrangement by the family of the slave as an economic and social benefit. Mistreatment of a slave was forbidden, and slaves were afforded most of the same freedoms and responsibilities as free citizens. The charge that the Bible condones slavery, as the modern western world understands it, is entirely without merit.

Appendix 2: Early America and Slavery

While there were Christians who supported slavery, there were many who did not. In fact, most of the founders of America were opposed to slavery. Slavery was often condemned from the pulpits of America as revolutionary preachers frequently spoke out against it. One patriot preacher said, "The Deity hath bestowed upon them and us the same natural rights as men."

Benjamin Franklin said that slavery "is an atrocious debasement of human nature." He and Benjamin Rush went on to found the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery.

Benjamin Rush's desire to abolish slavery was based on biblical principles. He stated: "Domestic slavery is repugnant to the principles of Christianity." He went on to say, "It is rebellion again the authority of a common Father. It is a practical denial of the extent and efficacy of the death of a common Savior. It is an usurpation of the prerogative of the great Sovereign of the universe who has solemnly claimed an exclusive property in the souls of men."

John Adams said, "Every measure of prudence, therefore, ought to be assumed for the eventual total extirpation of slavery from the United States . . . I have, through my whole life, held the practice of slavery in . . . abhorrence."

James Madison in his speech before the Constitutional Convention said, "We have seen the mere distinction of colour made in the most enlightened period of time, a ground of the most oppressive dominion ever exercised by man over man."

During the American Revolution, many slaves won their freedom. Alexander Hamilton served on George Washington's staff and supported the plan to enlist slaves in the army. He wrote to John Jay that "An essential part of the plan is to give them their freedom with their muskets . . . for the dictates of humanity and true policy equally interest me in favor of this unfortunate class of men." Blacks from every part of the country (except South Carolina and Georgia) won their freedom through military service.

After the Revolution, many Americans who were enjoying new freedom from England were struck by the contradiction that many blacks were still enslaved. John Jay said "That men should pray and fight for their own freedom and yet keep others in slavery is certainly acting a very inconsistent as well as unjust and perhaps impious part."