

Does Christianity Condone Oppression and Slavery?

Colossians 3:9-11

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Key Sentence:

True Christianity fights oppression and slavery and rejoices in diversity

Outline:

I. True Christianity undoes oppression and prejudice (Luke 4:16-19, Colossians 3:9-11)

II. True Christianity means the end of slavery (Philemon 1:8-20)

III. True Christianity celebrates diversity (Revelation 7:9-12)

Luke 4:16–19 And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read. ¹⁷And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written, ¹⁸“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Colossians 3:9–11 Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices ¹⁰and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator. ¹¹Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.

Philemon 8–20 Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me

even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Revelation 7:9–12 After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, ¹⁰and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” ¹¹And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God, ¹²saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen.”

Does Christianity Condone Oppression and Slavery?

Colossians 3:9-11

This is our twelfth week using the book *Confronting Christianity* to give Biblical answers to hard questions being asked of Christianity in our culture. This week I want to address two questions from the book and one other that is often asked. The chapters in the book are “Doesn’t Christianity Crush Diversity?” and “Doesn’t the Bible Condone Slavery?” Good questions. But since the 2019 publication of *Confronting Christianity* we’ve had the death of George Floyd, the resulting riots and protests in countless American cities, a deeply divisive election and the events at the Capital on January 6, 2021. All these bring to the forefront another hard question “Isn’t Christianity Racist and Oppressive?” Rebecca McLaughlin published another book a few months ago that addresses some of 2020’s questions, but I haven’t read it yet. Nonetheless, I’ll try to address these three related questions today. My conclusion will be that true Christianity fights oppression and slavery and rejoices in diversity

I want to start with the question of oppression because the other two questions are best addressed in light of our answer to this first one. The word oppression is being used a lot to frame today’s debates, especially about racial injustice. Critical Race Theory, which you’ve heard of, says racism is the result not of individual choices or sins but of a system in which white Western ideas oppressively control the narrative of society. But it’s not just race. The same Critical Theory says that white, male, heterosexual, Western culture is structured to oppress women, the LGBTQ community, the disabled, the overweight and non-Western nations. This theory, which is now the dominant way of looking at social issues, grew out of post-modernism. That theory set out to deconstruct all language and to deny the possibility of objective truth, because truth is different from each individual viewpoint. Critical theory then claimed that the viewpoints of the oppressed races, genders and choices are truer than the narratives of the oppressors. Only the oppressed can see their oppression. Critical race activism and gender activism and others aren’t so much concerned about bettering the lot of their groups as with removing, by force if necessary, the cultural, political and moral authority of the oppressors.

This is now the most common way of seeing the experiences of black people, homosexuals, women, and others in the history of our culture. We would agree that evil racism and cruelty and suppression have happened to people in these groups. Christians and others have done deep individual and even systemic harm to others. But there are several huge problems with Critical Theory.

First, it denies individual responsibility. You're guilty simply by belonging to the group perceived to oppress and innocent simply by belonging to the oppressed group. Second, Critical Theory offers no solutions. It promotes revolutionary activism that takes power from the old oppressor, but does nothing to prevent reverse oppression. Third, Critical Theory is unhinged from objective reality. Truth is only found in the experiences and narratives of groups. A key teaching is that rational thought, science, statistics and evidence, aren't ways of finding truth, but are narratives to maintain oppression. Finally, fourth, Critical Theory lumps Christianity and church wholesale into the category of oppressors without examining the actual stance of Christianity on issues.

I wish I could expand, from books I've been reading, on the first three faults. They make nonsense the claims of Critical Theory. But today we can only address the fourth weakness by examining the actual stance of Christianity. I freely admit, as I think most people would, that individuals who have said they are Christians have been racists, have acted with hatred toward homosexuals, have dominated and abused women, and have devised systemic expressions of their evil. But Christianity knows these are the sins of individuals, not the narrative of the faith. Today we want to look at that narrative, what we call the Bible, and see whether the teaching of Christianity justifies condemnation as oppressive, racist, condoning slavery or crushing diversity. We'll find that true Christianity fights oppression and slavery and rejoices in diversity.

We begin with oppression and racism. Our first text is Luke 4:16–19 *And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up. And as was his custom, he went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and he stood up to read.*¹⁷*And the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written,*¹⁸*“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed,*¹⁹*to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”*

This is Jesus' own mission statement, based on the prophecy of Isaiah. You can't get much closer to the true narrative of the Bible. Jesus says that he has come, first, to proclaim good news to the poor. Based on Matthew 5 and Luke 6 we can infer that this includes, but is not limited to, the poor in spirit, those who recognize their spiritual poverty. But it's also the economically poor. One of the weird things about critical theory is it's hardly ever applied to poverty. Marxism, which preceded it, attempted to get oppressed economic classes to revolt. When that failed Marxist theorists turned to other kinds of oppression and Critical Theorists have focused on those others, but not on actual poverty.

God's Word, on the other hand, is truly concerned for the poor and needy. I could give you literally a hundred examples, but one will suffice. Zechariah 7:9 "Thus says the LORD of hosts, Render true judgments, show kindness and mercy to one another, ¹⁰do not oppress the widow, the fatherless, the sojourner, or the poor, and let none of you devise evil against another in your heart." First, Jesus says, he came to bring good news to the poor. Second, to proclaim liberty for the captives. Again, there is a spiritual implication here. Jesus said we are all slaves to sin. He frees all who turn to him from captivity. But just as God literally freed the captives who were slaves in Egypt, and literally brought back the remnant who were captive in Babylon, so he literally frees those who are captive due to oppression and tyranny, as can be seen in the fall of the Communist states in 1992, and will be seen in Jesus' second coming to rescue his people. Third, to bring sight to the blind. Jesus often fulfilled this literally. He also meant it spiritually. When Jesus healed a man born blind in John 9, he said "For judgment I came into this world, that those who do not see may see, and those who see may become blind."

Finally, Jesus says he sets at liberty the oppressed. The word oppress means to bear down on somebody, to put an unbearable burden on them. It's used in several ways. One was economic oppression, Leviticus 19:13 "You shall not oppress your neighbor or rob him. The wages of a hired worker shall not remain with you all night until the morning." Don't bear down on workers by not paying them. Another was social oppression, as we saw in Zechariah against the widow and the fatherless. This oppression declares that these people are worth less or worthless, and withholds help or honor. Again, in Zechariah, we see racial oppression against the sojourner, or the foreigner among you. God has a special regard for the racially oppressed because his own people were foreigners, slaves in Egypt. He speaks against any separation between the person of another race and God's people. Numbers 9:14 "And if a stranger sojourns among you and would keep the Passover to the LORD, according to the statute of the Passover and according to its rule, so shall he do. You shall have one statute, both for the sojourner and for the native."

Part of the answer to the first question "Is Christianity Racist" is no. Jesus saw it as his mission to offer care and respect to those of foreign race who came among his people. Jesus lived this out. Someone pointed me to John 4 as I was preparing. Jesus disregarded the Jewish prejudice against Samaritans and women by asking for a drink. The Samaritan woman is astonished. John 4:9 [she] said to him, "How is it that you, a Jew, ask for a drink from me, a woman of Samaria?" (For Jews have no dealings with Samaritans.)" Jesus cared where others oppressed.

This pushback against racial, economic and gender prejudice becomes a principle of the Christian church. Our second text is Colossians 3:9–11 *Do not lie to one another, seeing that you have put off the old self with its practices* ¹⁰*and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge after the image of its creator.* ¹¹*Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.*

Colossians 3:9 is the end of a list of things Christians are to “put off” in relationships. For example, verse 8 “anger, wrath, malice, slander, and obscene talk from your mouth.” These are oppressive practices, the way people behave toward those they feel superior to or intimidated by. But this is the old way, the way of natural, fallen, sinful people. In that sense Critical theory is right: like chocolate chips baked into a cookie, hatred, oppression and ill-treatment is baked into us by our fall into sin. Our model is no longer people in their fallen state, our model is Jesus. Put on the new self which is being renewed in the image of the creator. I love that. You have a new self, but it is still being formed. As you put it on you are being remade in the creator’s image.

God’s image in us was distorted by the fall, so that racism and slavery, suspicion and fear, hatred and contempt are easily seen. Only in Jesus can that distorted image be renewed. Believer by believer, racism, prejudice and hatred are put off. Verse 11: “Here is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all.” This is Biblical antiracism. A true Christian sees humanity not through the lens of race but as “created in the image of God,” and “redeemed to the image of God.”

Thus Jew are no different than Greeks. Though this basic division defined Jewish practice, it is gone in Christ. Paul devotes half a chapter to this in Ephesians. Jews and Gentiles “have been brought near by the blood of Christ.” For Christ himself “is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, ¹⁶and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility.” That’s racial reconciliation. Hitler proved the horrible power of racial hatred, but Jesus has a better narrative, the power of redeeming love. In the same way there is no longer a division between circumcised, Jews and uncircumcised, Greeks. Even among the Gentiles there is no division between barbarian and Scythian. Apparently even the lowest of those who spoke in vulgar tongues, had their own racism against Scythians, who I guess were the lowest of the low. And there is no longer slave or free in Christ. Organized oppression through the ownership of human beings was now against the Christian narrative.

So the first accusation is that Christianity is racist. But the Scriptures of both the Old and the New Testament show that the Christian narrative is anti-racist, not in the distorted way that Critical Theory sometimes uses that term, but in the true way of ‘created in the image of God,’ and ‘redeemed to the image of God.’

The second accusation is that Christianity condones slavery. Rebecca McLaughlin does a good job of addressing this issues from several points of view. “In this chapter we will explore why slaves throughout the centuries have been drawn to Christianity. We will examine the horror of the transatlantic slave trade, the sinful blot of slavery on American history, and the ways in which the Bible has been used at times to condone slavery. But we will also see how biblical ethics radically undermines human slavery and creates a whole new paradigm, within which every Christian is both a slave and deeply free.”

All that is good. I encourage you to read it. But she doesn’t include in the summary what I thought was the best part of the chapter. She reviews aspects of slavery in the Old Testament, starting with the story of the slave Hagar, who bore Abraham a son, was mistreated and sent away by Sarah, but rescued and cared for by God. She says “Hagar's story is the first in a line of slave narratives in the Old Testament. Notably, Abraham's great-grandson Joseph was sold into slavery by his brothers. But God redeemed this sinful act by leading Joseph to become a ruler in Egypt.” It’s not racial. Hagar was an Egyptian slave to Hebrews; Joseph was a Hebrew slave to Egyptians. But God does care about the oppressive nature of enforced slavery. After Joseph's death, the Hebrews multiplied in Egypt and finally became enslaved. But God called Moses to redeem them, and so the story of God's people was a story of emancipated slaves. God’s law included repeated reminders that they had been slaves, and this was to inform how they treated slaves, immigrants, widows, and orphans. Enslaving others was a capital offense, Exodus 21:16 “Whoever steals a man and sells him, and anyone found in possession of him, shall be put to death.” “In summary,” she says “the Old Testament bans slave catching, provides protections for slaves, and invites us to see the world through enslaved eyes: from Hagar, to Joseph, to the whole people of Israel. But it does not ban slavery itself. So, what does the New Testament have to offer?”

This is where she turns to Paul's Letter to Philemon. “It may shock you to hear that the New Testament includes a letter written to return a runaway slave to his master. Or perhaps that aligns with your expectation that the Bible justifies slavery. Paul writes from prison in Rome, where he encountered an escaped slave, Onesimus, and he is sending Onesimus back to his master, Philemon. These facts seem to make an ironclad case for the Bible's support of slavery.”

Until you read the letter. Philemon, verses 8-20 *“Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, ⁹yet for love’s sake I prefer to appeal to you—I, Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus— ¹⁰I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. ¹¹(Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.) ¹²I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. ¹³I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion but of your own accord. ¹⁵For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother—especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord. ¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it—to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. ²⁰Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.*

Paul asserts his right to command Philemon, but he chooses persuasion: “I appeal to you, for my child, Onesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment.” Slaves were not sons; they were property. But Paul led this man to faith, and Onesimus became his spiritual son. Verse 12: "I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart" Paul's words of affection for Onesimus surpass any other expression of love for an individual Christian in his writings. He wishes Onesimus could stay, but sends him back to Philemon, "no longer as a bondservant but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother" Paul instructs Philemon to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul himself: this runaway slave is worth as much as an apostle, and Philemon had better treat him as such.

Paul offers to pay anything Onesimus owes and concludes, "Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say." According to Roman law, Philemon could have branded Onesimus, broken his joints, or administered some other brutal punishment. But Paul writes in such a way that if Philemon does not welcome Onesimus back with honor and love, as a beloved brother, he will be flat out rebelling against his most respected mentor. And Paul addresses this letter not just to Philemon but also "to Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the church in your house" Philemon could not harm Onesimus without incurring public shame. It was by means such as this that the New Testament and the early Christians undermined the systemic institution of slavery in the Roman empire.

Slavery was replaced, sadly, by other means of exploiting human wealth in Europe, but it continued in the Islamic countries. Then, tragically, it became an economic treasure-trove in the New World. A triangular trade arose in black lives, betrayed to the Europeans by their brothers in Africa, transported to the islands and mainlands of America, forced to grow tobacco and cotton and especially sugar cane, which was shipped to Europe as molasses and returned to Africa as demon rum. The slaves in the Americas were subject to the most cruel and demeaning property-chattel slavery, with no rights and no way out.

But all of this violated the explicit and implied teaching of Scripture. It was wrong, and Christians had no excuse to tolerate it, let alone support it. Sadly, many did. Not all, but in the South too many. Still, the idea that all Christians condoned slavery is a myth. The abhorrent nature of American slavery ultimately led to its denunciation by key Christian leaders in the United States and Europe. For example, while on a preaching tour in America, influential British preacher Charles Spurgeon denounced slavery as "the foulest blot that ever stained a nation." To pastors who defended slavery as a "peculiar institution," Spurgeon said, "It is, indeed, a peculiar institution, just as the devil is a peculiar angel, and hell is a peculiarly hot place." Likewise, Methodist leader John Wesley denounced slavery as "that execrable villainy which is the scandal of religion ... and of human nature."

Harriet Beecher Stowe wrote *Uncle Tom's Cabin* with the explicit goal of making her whole nation "feel what an accursed thing slavery is." Stowe declared, "I wrote what I did because as a woman, as a mother, I was broken-hearted with the sorrows and injustice I saw, because as a Christian I felt the dishonor to Christianity, because as a lover of my country I trembled at the coming day of wrath." Her book was not perfect. It reinforced stereotypes about black people. But Stowe saw that slavery in America was antithetical to Christianity. McLaughlin lists many black abolitionists who, like Harriet Tubman, rejected the idea that Scripture supported slavery but clung to the salvation and hope it provided in Jesus. Tim Keller summarizes this well. "the position some people took that the Bible condoned race-based chattel slavery was highly controversial and never a consensus. Most Protestants in Canada and Britain condemned it as being wholly against the Scripture. Rodney Stark points out that the Catholic church also came out early against the African slave trade. David L. Chappell in his history of the Civil Rights Movement went further. He proves that even before the Supreme Court decisions of the mid-1850s, almost no one was promoting the slender and forced biblical justifications for racial superiority and segregation. Even otherwise racist theologians and ministers could not find a basis for white supremacy in the Bible."

What is the story, the narrative of Christianity? Opposition to slavery and all its evils. Christians, sadly, have not always been on the same page as their Lord on this issue. But this is to their shame, not to his, not to his heart, not to his sacrifice. He died for all people, that all people might find life and freedom in him.

Which leads to our last question: “Does Christianity Crush Diversity.” Our text is Revelation 7:9-12 *After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands,* ¹⁰*and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!”* ¹¹*And all the angels were standing around the throne and around the elders and the four living creatures, and they fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,* ¹²*saying, “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever!”*

You can’t miss the diversity in this image of worship in heaven. “A great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages.” I rejoice that in that day everyone will have had the opportunity to hear and respond to the gospel, and that people from every nation and every bit and piece of every nation will have responded. This will be the most multi-ethnic crowd ever assembled. And all will be there with one purpose, to worship God and Jesus, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. God’s design, God’s intent and God’s victory is for all peoples.

This is not, of course, how Christianity is perceived in our culture. For many, the idea that Christianity is a white, Western religion, intrinsically tied to cultural imperialism stands as a major ethical barrier to considering Christ. Our culture, influenced by one of the earliest branches of Critical theory, post-colonialism, laments the ways religion has been used by Westerners to destroy indigenous cultures. Missionaries are the evil-doers, carrying the White Western narrative, with its legalistic, culture driven paradigm into innocent cultures with their own truths and their own realities. This, in critical eyes is the ultimate oppression, imposing our culture and our religion and even our science on those who were perfectly content in their innocent lives.

But this isn’t reality. Christianity is not a Western religion. It preceded white western culture and it has grown far beyond white western culture. Even now, prior to the victory of Revelation 7, the Christian church is already the most diverse organization in the history of the world. We don’t see it here in our own pews, though we’ve got some diversity. But in the church worldwide, it’s obvious.

McLaughlin says “The diversity of the Christian movement kindled by Jesus caught fire after his resurrection. Before leaving them to return to his Father, Jesus commanded his Jewish disciples to "go ... and make disciples of all nations" and in the book of Acts God's Spirit enabled them to proclaim Jesus's message in different languages, "from every nation under heaven." The hyper-Jewish apostle Paul, whose mission was to reach the non-Jewish world, ripped up the social barriers of his day. We've already looked at that in Colossians 3. “The idea that Christianity is a diversity-resistant, white Western religion of privilege is utterly irreconcilable with the New Testament.”

But, ironically, our habit of equating Christianity with Western culture is itself an act of Western bias. “The last book of the Bible,” she says, “paints a picture of the end of time, when “a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages” will worship Jesus.” This was the multicultural vision of Christianity from the start. For all the wrong turns made by Western Christians in the last two thousand years, when we look at church growth globally today, it is not crazy to think that this vision will be realized. So, if you care about diversity, don't dismiss Christianity: it is the most diverse, multiethnic, and multicultural movement in all of history.”

True Christianity fights oppression, racism and slavery and rejoices in diversity. This is the narrative denied by critical theory, but evident in Scripture.