

Slavery and Homosexuality

By Dan Jensen (2023)

(In order to fully benefit from this essay, I recommend reading through my “works for beginners” first. They can be found on my website.)

One of the most common objections to the faith in our culture today is that we cannot consistently be so dogmatic and sure of ourselves regarding the sin of homosexual acts, when the church was, by our own admission, so wrong about slavery. This is said to be all the more the case when the church was so dogmatic and positive about the subject of slavery. One often hears this objection from Atheists, Agnostics, Deists, Progressive Christians, and many others.

The problem for these objectors is that they are grossly simplifying both of these issues in the history of the church. They are failing to take into account the extremely important distinction between essential doctrines and secondary doctrines. And it is true that many Christians themselves fail to properly make this distinction today. Far too many see almost nothing as heretical, and far too many others see almost every fine point of doctrine as being absolutely essential to true and orthodox Christianity. All of this is wrong. Both of these issues had essential doctrines attached to them, but both of them also have many secondary points that often get connected to the essential points, and these points are in fact debatable from a biblical standpoint. The church cannot err when it comes to the essentials. However, it can *badly* err when it comes to the precise articulation of those essentials, and when it comes to secondary matters (both in articulation and substance).

Further, it must be noted that these issues are only secondary in the sense that the Bible is not unequivocally clear about them. They are often not secondary in the sense of how they impact the lives of many people. The church can and sadly often does

make mistakes over secondary issues (from a biblical vantage point) that are even fatal to many people. This fact deeply grieves us as believers, but it is the reality and we should be honest about this. Given this fact, we may wonder why God was not more clear about these issues. God, in His wisdom, has chosen not to make everything crystal clear for us because He is not going to ever fully negate the punishment of the fall until He returns. And even then, this will only take place for believers and the rest of the physical creation.

With all of that said, let us look at each of these issues and some of the complexities that have attended them throughout the history of God's people. When it comes to slavery, essential doctrine must be that God has not condemned any and all forms of servitude at all times throughout redemptive history. Anyone who says otherwise has denied the authority of the Scriptures. I understand that you may often hear a Christian leader talk about how the Bible condemns slavery, or how the church fought hard to end slavery. And all of these statements are fine and good, and I agree with most of them so far as they go. However, it must be understood that usually these Christian leaders are only talking about slavery as a secular institution in broad terms. Many Christians, myself included, believe that the Bible does condemn all forms of slavery along these lines. But, if any of these leaders ever said (and I think some would in fact say this and would show either their deep confusion here or the fact that they are not in fact true teachers of the faith) that God has always condemned any and all masters or lords that had unpaid servants, he or she would be spouting out heresy. I understand that we may not like this fact and I understand how much mileage this gives to our enemies, but the Bible is the Bible folks. True Christians do not have the option of negating what it teaches beyond doubt.

Beyond this very basic point of orthodoxy, the biblical doctrine is very complex and not easy to pin down. Again, I understand that it may frustrate us as to why God wrote His word this way, but you are not wiser than God. And neither am I. To be a true Christian means submitting to His word even when we do not fully understand it or like it. Now, does this mean that we have to then defend Southern slavery and all Southern slave

owners? Of course it does not. That system was horrendously evil and the vast majority of Christians the world over today would agree with me there. I am merely saying that we clearly see instances of God allowing certain forms of servitude for a time in both testaments. I have an entire section on my doctrine of slavery in the second part of my *Doctrine: Going Deeper*. It can be found on my website and I recommend it to you.

All Christians have agreed on this basic point. All Christian theologians have made this clear to one degree or another for 2K years. God has spoken on this one key point and therefore no true Christian can ever say that God has never allowed any forms of servitude where the servant is unpaid. Yet, when it comes to secondary doctrines, there have been all sorts of positions among godly theologians throughout church history for the reasons stated above. The idea that the church across the board was fully clear, dogmatic, and monolithic concerning its doctrine of slavery until the abolitionists came on the scene is simply not true. On almost every single secondary issue, there has been enormous amounts of disagreement.

And during the 1800's, when the doctrine came to a crisis point in the American church, there were many varied views. There were two overarching positions. The first was the position of most of the Northern United States, and it was that American slavery was or had become evil and needed to end sooner rather than later. This position was especially against the spread of American slavery. The second basic position was the position of most of the Southern United States, and it was that American slavery was a regrettable reality, but that it needed to be treated with extreme caution and care. However, within both of those positions were countless sub-positions. I cannot cover all of them here, but we will discuss some of them.

In the North, for the most part (some took more of a Southern view), some thought American slavery needed to end immediately. Some thought it needed to end gradually, but not nearly as gradually as did many in the South. Many were ready to use force against the South, but most wanted to avoid that. Many thought that the slaves should be freed, but should still have few rights after that. Some thought the slaves should be

freed and should be given many rights. Few thought that they should be made legally equal to white citizens. In the South, many believed that slavery should end eventually, but that it should only be done with the slowest gradualism for the sake of all involved. Others felt that slavery was not an inherent good, but that blacks and whites in America could never coexist without the institution. Thus, they said that the South needed to button up many of the longstanding problems with the institution, but that it must carry on for the foreseeable future.

The idea that the debate in our nation was solely between the die-hard abolitionists and hardened Southerners who thought slavery would be carried on into the new earth is silly in the extreme. It reflects an astonishing ignorance of the historical facts. In fact, the die-hard abolitionists were for the most part seen as heretics, even in the North! And that is precisely because most of them were heretics. I know how shocking that statement will be to many American Christians. But, you need to understand how much whitewashing of history has been done on this issue, both by those outside of the church, and unfortunately by many within it as well. There certainly were orthodox die-hard abolitionists like Wesley and Wilberforce. They were true Christian heroes and I'm not saying otherwise. But, the idea that they were representative of most orthodox Christians is foolhardy. Most of the die-hard abolitionists did not hesitate to say that the Bible was flat-out wrong about the issue of slavery. That doesn't mean that most of them were Atheists, Agnostics, or Deists. Most were Quakers or were Liberal Protestants. But, they did say that the Bible was wrong on this issue. Many said that it was atrociously so. That is heresy, and most of the church recognized this as heresy. Most abolitionists were seen as radicals even in the North for this very reason.

Today, as true Christians, we may greatly appreciate the die-hard abolitionists for their fight against American slavery. But, that does not change one iota that most of them were heretics. Just because our culture seeks to make them heroes in all ways does not give us the right to jump on that bandwagon. At the same time, it doesn't in any way mean that we have to be as soft on American slavery as was most of the American

church (including the North) at that time. We can say that Wesley and Wilberforce got it right and it is woefully sickening that they were so in the minority.

The important point though, is that the church at no time said that God has never allowed any forms of servitude at any time in redemptive history. That was the doctrine of many of the die-hard abolitionists and it was heretical. Not even Wesley or Wilberforce ever said anything along these lines. They knew their Bibles and they always only condemned the slavery of their day or any and all forms of slavery after the completion of the Bible. They never ever would have uttered the words, "The Bible got it wrong here." They interpreted many of the slave texts as I do today and as do many Christian theologians today. Hence, on the core essential of the Bible, namely that God has permitted certain forms and instances of servitude for His own good reasons, the church has always been dogmatic and clear. And she always will be.

The same basic point can be made about homosexuality. The Bible is unequivocally clear that homosexual acts are sinful. On this point, the church has always been dogmatic and clear. She still is today. And she always will be. However, on every single secondary issue that comes up in connection with this doctrine, there has been debate. Are homosexual desires sinful in themselves? Is being attracted to the same sex something that is inherent in some people because of the fall or is it something that is solely chosen? Is it some combination of both? What role does abuse play here? Maybe some were abused and some were not. Maybe all were abused. Should Christians support gay marriage as a civil right in the spirit of freedom of choice, while still condemning it in the church? Should homosexual acts be punished by the law? What role should therapy play here? Should homosexual couples be allowed to adopt and raise children, especially when there is such a strong need for adoption? Orthodox Christians do not all answer these questions in the same way. I understand that many of the most conservative Christians try to make all of these issues a matter of absolute orthodoxy, but that is not sustainable from the Bible. And that is coming from someone who is *very* conservative on these questions for the most part.

Even during the Middle Ages, when there was far less debate over this issue, the church was still not entirely uniform. Some parts of Europe cracked down very stringently on homosexual acts. Other parts technically outlawed it, but largely turned a blind eye to it, especially in certain monasteries and in brothels. I could give many other examples where medieval Europe was not monolithic in how it approached this issue.

Therefore, it is false to say that the church has been completely dogmatic, clear, and uniform in how it has answered and approached every secondary topic in connection with the biblical doctrine on homosexuality. I think the church got many things right when it came to slavery, and I think the church got many things wrong. I think many in the church were closer to the truth on many of the issues, and others were further away. I think the church has gotten many things right concerning the sin of homosexuality, and I think she has gotten many things wrong. I think many were closer to the truth on most of these secondary issues, and I think many others were much further away. The church will continue to grow, evolve, and correct itself more and more on this issue just like it did with slavery. However, on the core essential doctrine, the true church will never ever change her position. No matter how often Progressive Christians mock us for not being willing to “let this one go,” the church will never budge on this narrow and extremely important point.

The same thing is true for so many other issues where we are often mocked today. Many (especially Tony Jones) will say that we changed our minds on divorce; on divorced pastors; on dancing; on cards; on alcohol; on rock music in the church; on birth control; on abortion (see my essay on Billy Graham); and many other alleged examples. Jones and so many others only show their gross ignorance of historical theology. I pointed this out to Jones in our debate, not to be mean or engage in *ad hominem* (as he accused me of doing), but only in order to state the fact. And he at that point threatened to stop the debate as he knows full well how little he has read in this area and did not want the audience to know this. Most other skeptics of the Bible are just as ignorant. Those that are not, are dishonest.

The core essential issue on divorce is that it is evil and should be avoided by Christians at all costs. Past that, there has been debate on many, many issues. The medieval church eventually developed a doctrine of not allowing divorce, but granting annulments. The Protestant church thought the annulment solution was contrived, and sought to establish certain severe and rare cases of biblical grounds for divorce. But, the church never wavered in its belief that divorce is always an absolute travesty. The Pagan doctrine of our day can never be embraced by Christ's true bride. I have already discussed the nuances surrounding abortion in my essay on Billy Graham. The core essential issue with alcohol has always been that getting drunk is sin. The church has never changed its mind on that front, and it never will. With that made clear, many Christians have refused to condemn drinking in moderation. Others have said that they believe that many alcoholic drinks in biblical times were very watered down, and thus we should as Christians condemn all alcohol consumption today. Other debates have raged at different times in the church. The same types of nuance could be given for all of the other examples cited above. Most of them were only held to by Fundamentalists for a short time during the 20th century. The implication of Tony and so many others that these were the universally accepted doctrines of the entire church throughout her entire history until very recently is laughable in the extreme. Or that other doctrines were not always seen as essential (such as the sin of homosexuality) in the church until us nasty conservatives of today decided to make them so, is equally comedic.

Now, I understand that many skeptics may say a big, "So what? I don't care if there is more nuance, the mere fact that the Bible does not condemn all forms of slavery and condemns homosexual acts, as you readily admit, only proves that it is not from any sort of higher power, but is the product of hateful people." First of all, my purpose in this essay was to refute the notion that we cannot be so sure about homosexuality when we were so sure about slavery only to admit later that we were in fact wrong. Any skeptic who said the above, would be inserting a separate issue into this discussion. I was clear about what I set out to do in this essay, and I believe I have succeeded in my goal.

With that said, let's nevertheless address the above statement. You don't get to assume your ethic without proving it. That may work in skeptical circles, but it is not going to work when attempting to engage the other side. If God wanted to allow slavery in certain instances as a punishment for sin, He was certainly allowed to do so. There is nothing philosophically unsound about that doctrine. And if God created us only to have sex in a certain context, again He has the authority to do this.

I understand that countless people abused the system of slavery. That is their sin and has nothing to do with the instances where God allowed the institution in the Bible. People can say, "Well if the Bible had not allowed it in the first place, the institution never would have existed!" Hogwash. Slavery was found in every culture, including those that had never read a word of the Scriptures, from the beginning of the historical record. I also understand that it seems that many people do develop homosexual desires from a very young age that are outside of their control. I also understand that many people have treated such people in appalling ways throughout history. But again, that was the sin of those people. Their actions are never condoned in the biblical record. And because of the fall, we all have wicked desires that we have to seek to suppress. The person who struggles intensely with same-sex attraction is no different.

You can retort, "You don't get to just assume your Christian ethic either!" I am not. I have spent a great deal of time defending the Christian faith. You are welcome to read my works and then email me telling me where you find them wanting. I am happy to have that discussion. My email can be found on my website.

For further resources on these topics, please see the extensive bibliography I provided at the end of my *A False Kind of Christianity*.