

# How and Why Did Some Christians Defend Slavery?

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**M**y elementary teachers taught me George Washington boldly led the Continental Army, ably served as America's first president, and humbly refused to seek re-election after a second term. Nobody told me he owned slaves. Though he emancipated his slaves upon his death, while he lived he depended on slaves to run his Mount Vernon farm. [1]

Looking back, we understand Washington, like other Founding Fathers, was a man of his times. A devout but private Anglican, he never wore religion on his sleeve. He never offered a biblical defense for slavery. Like so many others, he took for granted that Scripture permitted it. And even if he thought slavery unkind, Washington's economic interests trumped his moral reservations.

Of course, some Americans did more than assume slavery. They argued for it. Baptist pastor Richard Fuller, for example, used the Bible to defend the institution of slavery. Fuller's parents raised him Episcopalian before sending him to Harvard. He graduated in 1824, earned a law degree, got married, and became a Baptist. After practicing law, he led churches in Beaufort, South Carolina, and in Baltimore, Maryland. In 1847, Fuller and Brown University president Francis Wayland published *Domestic Slavery Considered as a Scriptural Institution*. The heart of the matter boiled down to a simple question: Is slavery, in principle, a sin? Wayland argued it is. Fuller disagreed.

Fuller raised concerns about slavery's abuses, but he defended it nonetheless. How did he, and others like him, use Scripture to advocate for slavery? [2]

## Fuller's Case for Slavery

Fuller argued that slavery, in principle, is not sinful. Undergirding his argument was his abiding conviction that the Bible is the inspired and authoritative Word of God. The Bible alone has the right to define sin. Once sin has been identified, it is humanity's responsibility to repent. If "slavery be a sin," Fuller wrote, "surely it is the immediate duty of masters to abolish it, whatever be the result." Having established the supremacy of Scripture, Fuller proceeded to interpret its view of slavery. The gist of his argument went like this:

- 1. The Old Testament tolerates slavery.** Fuller pointed to Leviticus 25:44: "You may buy male and female slaves from among the nations that are around you." God would never permit what he considered sinful.
- 2. The New Testament tolerates and regulates slavery.** Jesus used the institution of slavery in his teaching, drawing a contrast between those in bondage and those free (John 8:35). Jesus didn't repudiate slavery. Paul told slaves to obey their masters, and he told masters how to manage slaves (Eph. 6:5–11; Col. 3:22–4:1). From Jesus and Paul we find, according Fuller, implicit approval of slavery.
- 3. If Jesus or Paul had wanted to outlaw the institution of slavery, they would've done so immediately.** Neither the Savior nor his apostle, Fuller insisted, would have caved to the pro-slavery culture if they counted it a sin.
- 4. The morality of slavery is no defense for its abuses.** Fuller owned slaves himself, and he prided himself on the way he cared for them, counting himself among "the sincerest friends of the African race."

For Fuller the matter was simple: If Old Testament saints owned slaves, and if the apostle Paul preached "the whole counsel of God" (Acts 20:27) without explicitly prohibiting slavery, then no man can rightly call slavery, in principle, a sin. In short:

Slavery was everywhere a part of the social organization of the earth; and slaves and their masters were members together of the churches; and minute instructions are given to each as to their duties, without even an insinuation that it was the duty of masters to emancipate. Now I ask, could this possibly be so, if slavery were "a heinous sin"? No!

Before America entered a Civil War to contest this interpretation, Wayland sought to change Fuller's mind. The university president was a widely regarded Christian ethicist. Despite being close friends, Wayland rejected Fuller's slavery hermeneutic.

## Wayland's Response

Wayland had great affection for Fuller, but he had no respect for his interpretation of the Bible on this issue. The holes in Fuller's interpretation are legion, Wayland insisted, and these arguments against slavery stand the test of time.

- 1. Slavery is a clear violation of Matthew 19:19: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."** It is impossible to love your neighbor and simultaneously use your strength to refuse him personal freedom.
- 2. Old Testament slavery can be explained in the context of Israel's unique place in history.** God gave Canaan to Israel, which involved the destruction of occupying forces and the enslavement of non-Israelites. But this was an exceptional event in human history. Just as no nation has the right to kill the residents of a neighboring country, so no person has the right to enslave another. To argue the goodness of slavery on the basis of the Old Testament is to rip Scripture out of its context.

**3. Like polygamy, slavery is a sinful behavior regulated—not endorsed—in the Old Testament.** The example of polygamy should drive a stake through the pro-slavery argument. As Wayland put it, in polygamy we find “an institution sanctioned [in the Old Testament] . . . which is wrong in itself, and therefore forbidden by our Savior [in the New Testament] to them and to all men.”

**4. The New Testament never tolerates slavery, and its principles demand slavery’s demise.** By addressing slaves, Paul is simply urging Christians who cannot change their circumstances to live holy lives. Further, by teaching about the holiness of God, the salvation of the nations, and the *imago dei*, the New Testament laid the groundwork for slavery’s funeral.

Were there a single New Testament verse commanding or even commending slavery, the system would have to stand. But no such verse exists, and the silence is deafening. According to Wayland, Fuller failed to read Scripture in its immediate, literary context.

True, no proof text dismantled Roman slavery with a single blow. Yet taken as a whole, the Bible decimated slavery with a thousand hits. As the Bible is preached and believed over time, Wayland believed, the implications of the gospel would ensure slavery’s end. It’s certainly true that slavery decreased dramatically under the Christianization of the Roman Empire. This, Wayland argued, is what careful Bible reading should lead us to expect:

Slavery is by the Word of God forbidden, but that the Word of God intends to remove it, not by immediate proclamation . . . but by applying the principles of the gospel to the consciences of men, and thus, by changing the sentiments of the society, gradually and kindly work its entire extermination.

Tragically, Wayland’s words did not prevail, and the North and South became locked in a bitter and bloody dispute. Fuller and Wayland are representative voices in the battle over slavery that tore America apart.

We know *what* Fuller believed, but *why* did he cling so tightly to these beliefs? What assumptions did he embrace that led him to so grossly misinterpret Scripture?

## **Fuller’s Bad Hermeneutic**

Like many of his contemporaries, Fuller didn’t interpret the Bible properly. He failed to distinguish *regulation* of slavery from *approval* of slavery. Scripture regulated slavery, but it never once approved it. In fact, the Bible always moved God’s people away from it. Even though Old Testament saints were allowed to practice slavery, they couldn’t do so with the capriciousness of their pagan neighbors. Under the new covenant, the Spirit would lead God’s people to the astounding reality that in Christ there is neither slave nor free. The Bible did not cut off the branches of slavery; it laid the axe to the root of the tree.

One reason Fuller and others failed to see this is because they didn’t follow the Reformation principle of “the analogy of Scripture,” which teaches that difficult passages are to be understood in light of clearer ones.

When Wayland came to texts regulating slavery, he knew those passages couldn’t contradict the call to love one’s neighbor. The clear passage (love your neighbor) clarified the difficult one (obey your master). Scripture was not condoning slavery, but teaching the enslaved how to live God-glorifying lives. As J. I. Packer notes, “Our methods of interpreting Scripture [must] express faith in its truth and consistency as God’s Word. Our approach must be harmonistic; for we know at the outset that God’s utterance is not self-contradictory.”

One need not go outside Scripture to discern that slavery is immoral. Scripture’s consistency demands this conclusion.

## Fuller's Fatal Flaw

But Fuller's fatal flaw was not finally his bad hermeneutic. It was his bad theology. He failed to see his black brothers and sisters as divine image-bearers. He commended himself for educating his slaves, giving them good medical care, and keeping them well fed. But he saw them all as fundamentally inferior to whites like himself. Because of his racism, Fuller believed he had a moral right to be a slaveholder.

Mark Noll assesses the situation correctly: "It was acceptance of black racial inferiority that defended American slavery by appeal to Scripture." In other words, appealing to the faulty biblical hermeneutic of men like Fuller misses the point: their biblical exegesis masked their racist hearts.

Fuller wasn't alone.

Presbyterian theologian James Henley Thornwell believed, without biblical warrant, that God separated the Africans into a different class, a lower class of people. It was their inferior status that made their enslavement, in his eyes, "normal."

## Pay Attention to God's Word

Richard Fuller, James Thornwell, George Washington, George Whitefield, and so many others would've done well to have adopted the views of the African-American pastor Lemuel Haynes. He knew everyone, black and white, is crafted in the image of God.

The Vermont pastor understood the bitter roots of America's division over slavery had been nourished in racist soil. Only when blacks and whites are seen as true equals can we taste heaven on earth. Only then, Haynes preached, will we see in America and in the church "this holy affection or love to Christ that must unite us." And united, we will witness that "happy prelude of our shortly meeting in the heavenly world."

Looking back, the church did not change its view on slavery because it ignored or outgrew the Bible. It's because, by God's grace, Christians paid attention.

By mining the Bible for a doctrine of humanity (we are *all* divine image-bears) and a doctrine of salvation (Christ shed his blood for all *peoples*) and a doctrine of the church (in Christ there is neither slave *nor* free), we find the tools we need to battle racism and oppression—then and now.

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[1] Ron Chernow's *Washington: A Life* (Penguin, 2010), 109–20. See Michael and Jana Novak's *Washington's God* (Basic, 2006), 44.

[2] It's important to recognize some slaveholders distinguished between the *principle* and the *practice* of slaveholding. Men like Fuller believed the Bible allowed for the institution of slavery, but they condemned its abuses. A contemporary parallel is the way some Christians support the death penalty in principle but oppose it in practice, since they distrust the judicial system to exercise capital punishment fairly.

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