

Why didn't early American slaves reject Christianity?

Devil's Advocate

Brian Burgess
Managing Editor

In studying some of America's more grim aspects of its history one cannot avoid the issue of slavery in our past. Faced with the failure of indentured servitude and assimilation of Native Americans, white colonialists began the Atlantic slave trade.

Any American can tell of the atrocities practiced during this time: rape, murder, abuse, theft, to say the least. Perhaps the most residual crime committed, however, was the Christianization of slaves.

Of course it may be bold to consider this a crime. For many Christians, such as my dear friend Bryan Koffman, there is the silver lining that while slaves did indeed endure some of the most horrible lives imaginable, they were brought to the glory of Christ in the process which ultimately answers the issue at hand. The problem is that Christianity was at first forced upon these poor men and women, and then embraced as a means of refuge; a crutch, if you will.

Historically the white slave-holders would give the slaves a very carefully scripted image of Christianity which made sure to keep the parts about liberation and fighting back out of view.

For the slaves, then, this presumably was seen as another one of their duties. When the slave owner told them to farm, they did so under threat of punishment. So when he tells them to pray, should they then refuse?

Over time, however, the slaves were taught to read and began to find in the Bible stories that spoke like words directly from God's mouth to their situation.

There were tales of these ancient people taking on the largest kingdoms in the world and overcoming, and for giving these strong willed individuals the strength and hope to overcome themselves, I am glad the Bible was there.

Yet, as a kid, when my mother would tell me about the little engine that could, she did not expect me to accept that there was, somewhere in the universe, an anthropomorphic train who overcame the severe adversities of gravity. Rather she used the tale to convey a proper message: through will much can be done.

Why then should the slaves be ordered by this God (who happened to be responsible on multiple occasions for the enslavement of the Jews in the first place) to believe the somewhat incredible (that is lacking credibility) tales just to derive the courage and strength to overcome a morally disgusting situation his followers had put them in to begin with?

I do not hope to undermine a tradition that has created something truly beautiful and inspiring by this questioning. I do, however, hope to encourage individuals to at least ask the questions this sort of thinking raises.

Most importantly I think my largest issue comes from one question: Should God receive credit for the efforts made by individuals that cost many their lives while he sits idly by?

Voice of Reason

Bryan Koffman
Contributor

Slavery sucks. Let's just make sure we're clear on that. The atrocities of our nation in capturing, torturing, and degrading those of another country out of personal greed and bigotry have had incredibly lasting, deep effects. Even as I write this article as a middle-class, white male, I have a hypersensitivity to coming across racist.

But there are some effects that I think we overlook.

A large majority of African American's claim Christ as their God and Savior. This is amazing, seeing as these are people who, had their ancestors not been shipped to America, would still be dead in their sins, worshipping Allah and the teachings of Muhammad in Africa.

I credit this effect of slavery to the goodness of God and his sovereignty. I would even go as far as to say that God ordained that slavery would take place so that millions of Africans and their legacy would be saved from God's just wrath for their sins through faith in Christ.

Now, let me be clear: I am not saying that God approved of slavery in America.

Those that would say the Bible supports slavery have a poor hermeneutic when it comes to the Old Testament, and they take New Testament verses out of context. Nor am I saying that God is the author of sin, nor is he responsible for sin – we are (Jam. 1:13-18).

Rather, I am saying that God often uses and directs sin in order to bring about a greater good.

We see this all over scripture: Israel is brought under the slavery of Egypt so that they might be multiplied into a great nation that would one day be freed from Pharaoh and become God's chosen people. Israel was taken into exile by the Babylonians so that they might turn from their idolatry and so the gentiles would come to know their God.

The most prominent example is Jesus. The apostles declare in the book of Acts, "truly in [Jerusalem] there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you anointed, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place." (Acts 4:27-28). God ordained the crimes against his Son, and used this horrific evil (the death of God) to bring about the salvation of the world.

African Americans can understand the Bible and Jesus in a much richer way; having been freed from literal slavery, like the Jews, they can understand Christ as their deliverer from slavery to sin. And just as our gracious, sovereign God has used calamity and tribulation in their lives for their good, so does he continue to do in the lives of those who call upon Him.



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