

The Theology of Public Policies of Enslavement (Part 1)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the first segment of a three-part series dealing with Christian perspectives on slavery to the state.

According to the dictionary, a *slave* is “a person who is owned by someone” or “one who is abjectly subservient to a specified person or influence”. Many libertarians, constitutionalists, and patriots claim that modern Americans are slaves. They reckon that Americans are not truly free.

In order to work, Americans often need to get a permit, credential, or license from the state. If they own their own business, such regulation is even more egregious. They are further compelled to forfeit roughly half of their earnings to the state through various taxes—which are then spent to support the welfare state, pagan seminaries (public schools), and many other objectionable policies. They can be conscripted into military service against their wills, forced to expend their labor for the state and risking their lives by fighting the aggressive wars it sanctions. They do not truly own their lands and homes but merely have the *privilege* to use and possess them—so long as the “fee” (property tax) is paid and all the state’s rules are complied with. Americans are also compelled to use a *fiat* currency—which singularly enjoys legal tender status—instead of privately-issued notes or commodity money (i.e., gold or silver), forcing them to participate in the welfare state debt and funding racket. The state even requires couples to obtain its permission prior to marrying. While the War Between the States was not primarily a conflict to end Negro slavery, it did mark the beginning of the part-time enslavement of all Americans.

In the starkest terms, an American actually differs little from a feudal serf in his legal standing, economic freedoms, and personal liberties. Sure, technology and knowledge have significantly changed since AD1300, rendering slave life more convenient. But an onerous tax system tantamount to the feudal tenement and fee system remains—along with myriad manorial (state) rules to govern serf behavior and living. Most areas of life are regulated by the state: education, medicine, finance, business, fishing, gun ownership, house building, driving, safety standards, emergency preparedness, and so on. While Americans are told that they are “free”, the reality is quite the opposite. It might be more accurate to say that Americans are slaves who are allowed to obtain periods of freedom by paying bribes, rendering service to the state, and being compliant. (Note that such free time encourages peaceful compliance as it helps most American slaves “feel” free.) Perhaps more than half of an American’s life and labor is spent in either indirect or direct service to the state. So, at the very least, Americans are part-time involuntary servants. The fact that Americans voted themselves into slavery does not make their condition less deplorable. Accordingly, the bondage decried by libertarians, constitutionalists, and patriots is plausible—at least in the abstract.

However, from America’s inception, the idea of involuntary servitude has been repugnant. Slavery is the antithesis of the principles of the Founding Fathers. John Quincy Adams wrote: “The inconsistency of the institution of domestic slavery with the principles of the Declaration of Independence was seen and lamented by all the southern patriots of the Revolution; by no one with deeper and more unalterable conviction than by the author of the Declaration himself [Thomas Jefferson]. No charge of insincerity or hypocrisy can be fairly laid to their charge. Never from their lips was heard one syllable of attempt to justify the institution of slavery. They universally considered it as a reproach fastened upon them by the unnatural step-mother country and they saw that before the principles of the Declaration of Independence, slavery, in common with every other mode of oppression, was destined sooner or later to be banished from the earth. Such was the undoubting conviction of Jefferson to his dying day.”¹ Benjamin Franklin said: “Slavery is...an atrocious debasement of human nature.”²

¹ John Quincy Adams (1837), *An Oration Delivered Before the Inhabitants of the Town of Newburyport, at Their Request, on the Sixty-First Anniversary of the Declaration of Independence, July 4th, 1837* (Newburyport: Charles Whipple), p. 50.

² Benjamin Franklin (1789), “An Address to the Public from the Pennsylvania Society for Promoting the Abolition of Slavery”, in Franklin, *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987), p. 1154.

Stephen McDowell remarks: “As the Founders worked to free themselves from enslavement to Britain, based upon laws of God and nature, they also spoke against slavery and took steps to stop it. Abolition grew as principled resistance to the tyranny of England grew, since both were based upon the same ideas.”³ The Declaration of Independence says that “all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights; that among these are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness.” Even though many people today scorn this political doctrine, American Christians can stand firm for the truth and the principles of liberty. Surely in America we have a legal rationale for revolting against enslavement!

The Theology of Public Policies of Enslavement (Part 2)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the second segment of a three-part series dealing with Christian perspectives on slavery to the state.

Is slavery wrong? In his excellent article, “The Bible, Slavery, and America’s Founders” (2003), Stephen McDowell outlines the biblical view of slavery. The Old Testament *prohibited* involuntary servitude by means of abduction. “He who kidnaps a man, whether he sells him or he is found in his possession, shall surely be put to death” (Exodus 21:16). “If a man is caught kidnapping any of his countrymen of the sons of Israel, and he deals with him violently, or sells him, then that thief shall die; so you shall purge the evil from among you” (Deuteronomy 24:7). However, voluntary servitude was permitted with qualifications (Exodus 21:2-6; Deuteronomy 15:12-18). The Old Testament prohibited returning runaway slaves too (Deuteronomy 23:15-16), which would seem to defy America’s Fugitive Slave Law (1850). Paul discussed how slaves and masters were to act (Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25; 4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-10) but he did not endorse involuntary slavery or the Roman slave system. As McDowell notes, “God’s desire for any who are enslaved is freedom (Luke 4:18; Galatians 5:1). Those who are set free in Christ then need to be prepared to walk in liberty.”

Slavery was an accepted way of life in the Roman world (consider the matter-of-fact mention of slavery in Matthew 10:25, Mark 10:44, 1 Corinthians 7:21-24, Galatians 3:28, Ephesians 6:5-9, Colossians 3:11, Revelation 6:15, and Philemon 1:10-17). About one-third of the population in Roman times was enslaved, but not all slaves were brought into their condition in the same manner. Theonomist R.J. Rushdoony provides a thesis that distinguishes “a slave by nature and by choice”, particularly “where debt and theft were concerned” (Deuteronomy 23:15-16). Some people in the first century were enslaved as a result of committing a crime, attempting to pay off a debt, or by voluntarily election. Enslavement for such reasons would hardly be wrong, and revolt against one’s master would hardly be justified under such circumstances. This idea was confirmed in the Old Testament: “If a man steals...he shall surely make restitution; if he owns nothing, then he shall be sold for his theft” (Exodus 22:1, 3).

However, most slaves during the Roman Empire were kidnapped foreigners: prisoners of war, sailors captured and sold by pirates, and people bought outside the Roman territory, although impoverished Roman citizens often resorted to selling their children into slavery. Such slaves faced harsh lives subject to the whims of their owners, often being whipped, branded, or cruelly mistreated. Yet the prospect of manumission encouraged slaves to be obedient and efficient. Under these circumstances, slavery would be wrong. Would not revolt against one’s master thus be justified?

How should Christians respond when they are enslaved or abused against their will? Should Christians care that they are in bondage—even part-time bondage in America? The Apostle Paul implied that they *should* care, observing that a freeman will have more opportunities to serve the Lord in this life. The Apostle Paul indicates that slaves should be content, but if they can become free to do so (1 Corinthians 7:20-24).

³ Stephen McDowell (2003), “The Bible, Slavery, and America’s Founders”, <http://www.wallbuilders.com/resources/search/detail.php?ResourceID=94>

That doctrine means that Christian slaves who find the possibility of becoming free should endeavor to obtain freedom. The Bible does not specify whether only legal and peaceful, or whether even illegal means, of obtaining freedom may be utilized. Indeed, apostolic doctrine proposes that Christians should avoid being enslaved in the first place. “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men” (1 Corinthians 7:23). It means that they may repulse enslavers by force as an act of self-defense when they have the means to do so—including, apparently, using force against both unbelieving and professing Christian masters. It does not forbid a slave from assaulting a sinning brother in Christ (who has abducted and enslaved him) in order to make his escape. The Apostle simply says: “if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity” (1 Corinthians 7:21 ESV). Likewise, American Christians would not be wrong to avail themselves of any means of escaping their slavery whenever possible.

Perhaps the Apostle Paul was encouraging Christian slaves in the Roman Empire to vie for manumission. But a slave had no “opportunity” to be manumitted unilaterally. It was not a choice or action of which he could “avail” himself independently. Thus, the action of availing oneself of the opportunity to be free, which Paul expressed, must be akin to using other means over which the slave had at least some degree of control—perhaps including disabling his master or “running away”.

Biblical principles regarding the institution of slavery in whatever form, and in whatever country, still have relevance today. The biblical passages pertaining to slavery might have to be interpreted differently in each country according to local custom and circumstance, but the principle remains that Christians must avail themselves of becoming free from involuntary servitude when possible.

The Theology of Public Policies of Enslavement (Part 3)

by John Cobin, Ph.D. for *The Times Examiner*
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This column is the third segment of a three-part series dealing with Christian perspectives on slavery to the state.

The New Testament gives us some clues about dealing with slavery—including the part-time slavery of modern Americans. For instance, the Apostle Paul informs us that Onesimus, once enslaved for unknown reasons, “departed for a while” from his master Philemon (Philemon 1:15), a Christian slaveholder living in Asia Minor (probably Colosse). He had been an “unprofitable” servant to Philemon (Philemon 1:10). We do not know if Onesimus became free of bondage legally or illegally. Paul simply stated that he was “sending him back” (Philemon 1:12) from Rome, and we do not know the reason why. The most common understanding of the event is that Paul confronted Onesimus about his rebellion and, after repenting, he was being returned to his lawful master and owner. Accordingly, Paul and Onesimus were glorifying God by obeying Roman law. Yet Paul was hoping all along that Philemon would do a good deed and free his dear friend Onesimus, thus granting permission for him to work further with Paul.

However, there are a few better, alternative interpretations. First, it could be that Onesimus had become legally free but had defrauded his former master (Philemon 1:18), requiring him to now make amends before Paul in good conscience could continue to associate with him. Onesimus did not run away, as John Gill notes, but simply *departed* after surreptitiously embezzling something from Philemon. Second, it could be that Onesimus was enslaved on account of some debt that he owed Philemon and had unjustly rebelled, running away. But upon conversion, both Paul and Onesimus realized the need to make amends with Philemon, and Paul was hoping that Philemon would forgive Onesimus’ debt so that he could work with Paul’s ministry.

Third, it could also be that Onesimus had been unjustly enslaved (perhaps by abduction) before Philemon was converted, but Onesimus had escaped, and was subsequently converted under Paul’s ministry. After being discipled, Onesimus became “profitable” in the faith (Philemon 1:11) and became very close to Paul. Thus, Paul was sending him back (with considerable regret) as a forerunner to his own planned visit (Philemon 1:22). Or perhaps Paul had some special encouragement to send to a church in the area and Onesimus, knowing the way, was a logical choice as a messenger. Either way, Paul, wanting

to avoid any grief arising from the former relationship, wrote Philemon a letter to guarantee Onesimus' security. Rather than the most common explanation of the event, one of these three interpretations seems more plausible given the principles taught elsewhere in the New Testament—especially where Paul tells slaves to avail themselves of the opportunity to be free when possible (1 Corinthians 7:21).

And this principle of Scripture applies to Americans. While some specific biblical premises must apply only to certain ages or cultures—just as buying swords or giving holy kisses have given way to buying guns and shaking hands—the general principles derived from Scripture must be applicable to all ages and cultures, regardless of any newfangled technology or policy. In the case of slavery, even if the nature and conditions of servitude changes, the principle laid down by the Apostle still applies: *Christians should avail themselves of opportunities to be free when possible.*

For example, if a black person was either kidnapped or born into servitude without hope of escape then he should be content (1 Corinthians 7:20, 22). But if he could have availed himself of the opportunity to be free by any means then he should have done so. Moreover, Paul's mandate applies to modern American "slaves" in the same way. Why would the principle of the Bible apply to only one case and not the other?⁴ Christians should try to be free even if it means breaking the rules to do so.⁵

The Scriptures make it clear that involuntary slavery is foul, and that Americans should try to escape their part-time slavery. There is never a qualification attached like "escape only if it is legal", unless we force an interpretive bias onto the circumstances of Onesimus and Philemon to generate such a doctrine. Further, the Old Testament makes clear the revealed will of God regarding slavery for that people and none of these commands would chafe against the idea of escaping involuntary servitude by *any* means.⁶

So how does a proper, biblical understanding of slavery affect one's view of revolution or disobedience to the state? It makes all the difference in the world! Modern American Christians find themselves in a condition of part-time involuntary servitude to the state. Thus, they have Scriptural warrant to free themselves from those shackles by whatever means possible: rebuffing conscription, avoiding paying taxes that support the welfare state (and never overpaying on account of ignorance of what one truly owes), voting consistently pro-liberty, and serving on a jury as a detractor against state abuses.

⁴ Even though the circumstances of American bondage have been different than those under the Roman Empire, the biblical principles of slavery must still be applicable.

⁵ Of course, becoming free or running away might involve breaking the law. For instance, Negro slaves in America violated the Fugitive Slave Law (1850) and other state laws by running away. They were considered chattels under state law and were thus covered under the common law of property. Given this fact, would the Apostle Paul have advocated that Christian Negroes compelled into involuntary servitude try to become free by "illegal" means—or only by legal means? Would Paul have spoken differently to slaves under the Roman system than he would to those under the American system in the 17th through 19th centuries? What counsel would he have given regarding escaping the part-time involuntary slavery of modern America—even by breaking the rules? It seems clear that contentment was to be the proper posture when freedom was impossible but otherwise the pursuit of one's freedom by any means was to be undertaken.

⁶ In ante-bellum America, a Negro slave would have been right to run away from his master. Conversely, it would not be right for a voluntary servant to run away in order to avoid an indentured servitude contract. It would also be wrong for a person in the condition of involuntary servitude for the punishment of a crime (as noted in the U.S. Constitution, Thirteenth Amendment) to runaway.