

*This document is offered for discussion of basic Christian views and does not represent policy or officially agreed views of Anglican Essentials Wales or any of its member organisations.*

## The basic Christian view of slavery is what ?



William Wilberforce was the figurehead we all remember for the abolition of slavery.

William Wilberforce was a clear Christian and he formed group of fellow Christians to fight slavery. As that group grew some later joined who were not Christian, the group was not restrictive but was for everyone in Georgian Britain. The eventual result was the **Slavery Abolition** Act of 1833. In the years that followed France abolished slavery in 1848 and the USA later abolished slavery in 1865. So this one group who eventually succeeded in Britain set in motion what became a change in attitude in the whole of the Western world.

Part of the problem then, just as now, was there were some in the Church who worshipped secular society more than God and so there were even Bishops then who had slaves. This shows us what William Wilberforce's group was up against. Even today we have senior Church people, including some Bishops amongst them, who are more willing to follow government and society than to follow God's instructions to us.

There is a very peculiar tendency to underestimate the amazing significance of what was achieved by William Wilberforce's group. There are many laws today where the law is effectively on paper but not really implemented seriously. Yet William Wilberforce's group didn't just get slavery abolished as an Act of Parliament on paper, he even got the British Navy stopping ships at sea from transporting slaves. Those ships that they stopped

weren't just British ships, they were ships from all countries and so it made Britain not just abolish slavery but also start to enforce the abolishment worldwide.

Was that the end of slavery? Well not really. A lot of slavery went underground and some forms of slavery even continue extensively today in a more modern form of slavery that's harder to always see. So let us remind ourselves of the basics.

Right at the very beginning of the Bible in Genesis chapter 1 at verse 27 we are told:

*So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God He created them;  
male and female He created them.*

That fundamental concept, **that we are all created in God's image**, is then used throughout the Bible. So, for example, Jesus Christ tells us (Matthew's gospel chapter 5, verse 48):

*"Therefore you are to be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect."*

Similarly St Paul writes in his letter to the Colossians in chapter 1 at verse 15 he writes of Jesus Christ:

*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.*

Note the word "firstborn" so we are all to follow Jesus Christ's example and way.

St Paul once again writes in 1 Corinthians chapter 15 at verse 49:

*And just as we have borne the image of the earthly man, so shall we bear the image of the heavenly man.*

And St Paul writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 3 at verse 18:

*And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.*

So we are all made in God's image and we are all being transformed to be more and more Christ-like if we accept Christ as our Saviour and accept His work in our lives.

So if we are all made in the image of God then are we all equal? Here we have to move away from our modern, politically-correct and distorted understandings of "equality". Yes, we are all equal. Equality is about complementarity in its meaning.

St Paul writes in 1 Corinthians at chapter 12 in the section beginning at verse 12:

*<sup>12</sup> For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. <sup>13</sup> For in one Spirit we were all baptised into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit.*

*<sup>14</sup> For the body does not consist of one member but of many. <sup>15</sup> If the foot should say, "Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>16</sup> And if the ear should say, "Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body," that would not make it any less a part of the body. <sup>17</sup> If*

*the whole body were an eye, where would be the sense of hearing? If the whole body were an ear, where would be the sense of smell? <sup>18</sup> But as it is, God arranged the members in the body, each one of them, as he chose. <sup>19</sup> If all were a single member, where would the body be? <sup>20</sup> As it is, there are many parts, yet one body.*

*<sup>21</sup> The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you." <sup>22</sup> On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, <sup>23</sup> and on those parts of the body that we think less honourable we bestow the greater honour, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty, <sup>24</sup> which our more presentable parts do not require. But God has so composed the body, giving greater honour to the part that lacked it, <sup>25</sup> that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. <sup>26</sup> If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together.*

*<sup>27</sup> Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.*

St Paul makes this point about different capabilities and gifts, of which all are equally important in almost all his letters in the New Testament of the Bible. For St Paul it is a fundamental Christian reality.

So, yes we are equal because our different gifts are all equally important. The gifts are different for each of us but the body functions as a whole and needs all of the different gifted people together. One is not more important than any other. This is real complementarity. All of us matter and all our different gifts are needed. There is no sense whatsoever in which we can look down on anyone else based upon what we perceive are their gifts. Therefore for human beings as slaves they are just as equally important as human beings as we are. Therefore in Christianity there is no place for slavery at all.

St Paul had to confront the issue of slavery directly at least once. We have the letter of Philemon about a slave and his master and the letter is so important to Christians that it is in the Bible for all of us to read and understand.

Philemon is the slave-owner and Onesimus, his slave, escaped. Philemon is a Christian known to St Paul and it is St Paul to whom Onesimus came.

St Paul converts Onesimus to Christianity and persuades Onesimus to return to his master Philemon. Such persuasion was very difficult and very necessary. The expectation here, the normal behaviour for any Roman or Greek citizen, was that Onesimus would be very, very severely punished by Philemon. Since Onesimus was Philemon's property so it was that Philemon could even have had Onesimus killed, BUT.....

St Paul knows that Philemon is a Christian and so St Paul writes to Philemon asking him to accept Onesimus back into his household with love as a fellow Christian and not to punish him at all but to forgive him completely. It is that actual letter from St Paul, to the slave master Philemon, about his slave Onesimus, that is in the Bible for us all to read and understand the Christian attitude to slaves at a time when slavery was completely normal in all society and everywhere.

St Paul asks Philemon to bring Onesimus back into his house, welcoming NOT as a slave but now as a “beloved brother, both in flesh and in the Lord [Jesus Christ]”. St Paul writes saying that he [St Paul] is confident of Philemon's obedience or agreement and says: “I write to you [Philemon] knowing you will do even more than I say. At the same time prepare a guest room for me.....”

So, although historically we don't know what finally happened between Philemon and Onesimus, nonetheless St Paul was clear that Onesimus would become loved as a brother to Philemon and we can suppose that he expected to find this new relationship when he went to visit them.



Christians do not agree with slavery in any form, it is simply a case of increasingly becoming wise to the modern forms of slavery around us.

June 2019

For further in formation the member organisations of AEW will each have additional views to the basics above. Whilst AEW makes no endorsement of any particular organisation, other useful contacts are:

[www.gov.uk/government/collections/modern-slavery](http://www.gov.uk/government/collections/modern-slavery)

[www.antislavery.org](http://www.antislavery.org)

[www.modernslaveryhelpline.org](http://www.modernslaveryhelpline.org)

[www.hopeforjustice.org](http://www.hopeforjustice.org)