



Church Abolition History¹

Ancient Battlefield

Human trafficking and sex slavery are relatively novel topics for the contemporary Christian Church. However, slavery, “the status or condition of a person over whom any or all of the powers attaching to the right of ownership are exercised,”² is far from new. Milton Meltzer, a chronicler of American struggles for freedom, put it this way: “Slavery as an institution that degraded man to a thing has never died out. In some periods of history it has flourished: many civilizations have climbed to power and glory on the backs of slaves. In other times slaves have dwindled in number and economic importance. But never has slavery disappeared.”³

The reality in this fight is that we are stepping onto an ancient battlefield. We have been hurled into the middle of a war for the souls and freedom of men. And we are not the first to fight.

Those who have fought before us on this same battlefield have left a legacy and power far greater than our individual conviction. Christians throughout the ages have combated the enemy of oppression with authority and victory. So, before engaging the enemy, let’s take a look at the relics on the battlefield—the memorials of valiant brothers and sisters who waged war for the oppressed.

Freedom in Egypt

After shepherding his father-in-law’s flocks for many years, Moses heard God. The former prince of Egypt had forfeited his royal position by murdering an Egyptian who mistreated a Hebrew slave. Now he trembled as God spoke from a bush that burned, revealing His plan for His people:

“I have surely seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters. I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them out of the hand of the Egyptians.... And now, behold, the cry of the people of Israel has come to me, and I have also seen the oppression with which the Egyptians oppress them. Come, I will send you to Pharaoh that you may bring my people, the children of Israel, out of Egypt” (Exodus 3:7-10 ESV).

After listening, Moses reminded God of his weaknesses – his lack of position, lack of clout, lack of eloquence – but God reminds Moses of His sufficiency. For it was actually God who was delivering the slaves through Moses:

¹ Report prepared by Stephanie VanTassell, Director of Marketing for Agape International Missions.

² Article 1.1, *Slavery Convention*, Mar. 9, 1927 (League of Nations). Retrieved from http://www.hrea.org/index.php?base_id=104&language_id=1&erc_doc_id=850&category_id=36&category_type=3&group

³ Meltzer, M. (1993). *Slavery: A world history*. United States: Da Capo Press, Inc.

"But I know that the king of Egypt will not let you go unless compelled by a mighty hand. So I will stretch out my hand and strike Egypt with all the wonders that I will do in it; after that he will let you go" (Exodus 3:19-20 ESV).

After many miracles, signs and wonders, Pharaoh allowed Moses to lead the Hebrews out of the oppressive suffering of Egyptian slavery. God did this because of His great love for His people.

"It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt" (Deuteronomy 7:7-8 ESV).

Freedom in England

In 1785, young parliamentarian William Wilberforce asked to meet in secret with the famous London vicar, John Newton. There, they discussed the immorality of the African slave trade and whether the vast economic machine could ever be stopped. People feared that abolition would shut down nearly every industry in England.

With the odds stacked against them, they formed a society of twelve who lobbied to abolish slavery. Newton's personal experience as a slave owner and a slave himself to an African princess was called upon for testimonials. Finally, after many years, the Abolition motion passed in British parliament in 1807 and became law in the same year. The vicar, Christian politician, and nine Quakers had defeated slavery in their nation.⁴

Freedom in the United States

The first abolitionist society in America was made up of Philadelphia Quakers. Founded on the belief that all men are equal in the sight of God, they were the first large denomination to officially ban slave holding.

Abolition gradually picked up speed but at a high cost. Elijah Parish Lovejoy, a Presbyterian minister and newspaper editor, was murdered for publishing his abolitionist views.

Abraham Lincoln, sixteenth president of the United States and staunch believer that God created all men equal, signed the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, which made abolition of slavery in the whole country an official goal of the Civil War. He concluded his second inaugural address saying:

"With malice toward none, with charity for all, with firmness in the right as God gives us to see the right, let us strive on to finish the work we are in, to bind up the nation's wounds, to care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan, to do all which may achieve and cherish a just and lasting peace among ourselves and with all nations."⁵

Just over a month after this speech, he was assassinated in a free America.

Freedom from Sin and Death

⁴ Dunn, J. (1994). *A biography of John Newton*. Retrieved from http://newcreationlibrary.net/books/pdf/285_JohnNewton.pdf

⁵ Lincoln, A. (1865, March). "Second Inaugural Address." Speech presented at the White House, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from <http://www.bartleby.com/124/pres32.html>

No one has staunchly fought for the freedom of all men with more passion and self-sacrifice than God Himself. The mission of Jesus was to set mankind “free from the law of sin and death” (Romans 8:2 NIV). The Apostle Paul entreats believers to not, “be subject again to a yoke of slavery,” because “it was for freedom that Christ set us free” (Galatians 5:1 NASB).

Complete freedom is not a human thought; it is a God-thought. The greatest abolitionist was, and is, Jesus Christ. In John 8:31-36, Jesus was talking with a group of Jews who believed in him. They argued that they were the children of Abraham and had never been slaves to anyone. They did not understand what they had to be freed from – Jesus answered them,

“Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed” (John 8:34-36 ESV).

It is with the power of Christ that we can wage war on the evil of modern slavery because only Christ can bring true freedom. Bondage is not only about physical constraints but about spiritual, which means that without Christ, people will remain enslaved. The role of the Christian Church is to be the body and presence of Christ who declared, “The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners” (Isaiah 61:1 NIV). The involvement of Christians in abolishing slavery is based on more than conviction; it is a calling and an anointing. We are to “do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God” (Micah 6:8 ESV).

We do not find ourselves on this ancient battlefield without power. We come in the Spirit of the Living God on ground that has already been won by the blood, sweat and tears of our Christian brothers. We can, and will, be victorious against the enemy of our souls.