

Slavery of African persons was a contestable issue in Europe and America during the 19th century. Quaker and Methodist ministers were among the first white religious figures to speak openly in opposition to the practice of slavery. In spite of moral opposition by political and religious leaders in the United States, slavery became an economic institution with the invention of the cotton gin and development of a massive cotton exporting industry in the South.

In particular, Joseph Butler and John Wesley were leading voices among religious opposition to the institution of slavery. Butler spoke specifically of benevolence and developed a basically utilitarian ethical theory. “That, as every man has the principle of self-love, which disposes him to avoid misery, and consult his own happiness: so we should cultivate the affection of good-will to our neighbor, and that it should influence us to have the same kind of regard to him.”ⁱ For Butler, the Christian duty is to promote the wellbeing of all humanity. According to Butler, a conception of “private good” is evidence of the sort of self-love that the gospel aims to root out.

John Wesley spoke specifically about the practice of slaveholding and went about debunking several of the common reasons for slaveholding. Most specifically, Wesley countered the common claim that Africans are stubborn and wicked if left to their own devices. Wesley said, “The inhabitants of Africa, where they have equal motives and equal means of improvement, are not inferior to the inhabitants of Europe: to some of them they are greatly superior...”ⁱⁱ

Liberation of American slaves was not won by white religious leaders alone. Tremendously thoughtful slaves and former slaves fought for the rights and humanization of the African slaves. Among these, Frederick Douglass was among the principal figures. Douglass spoke diligently about slavery’s drain on national resource and morality. Douglass concluded that slavery was so vile an institution and so deeply embedded in social and religious institutions of the South that it was necessary to destroy it by force, rather than longer, often much less apparently effective, means of moral appeal in dialogue.

The debate over slavery was instrumental in the development of new methods of biblical scholarship. Advocates of slavery appealed to scripture to support the morality of the institution. Pauline passages referring to obedient slaves and the story of the curse of Noah’s son, Ham, were foundational passages for the practice of slavery. In response, Abolitionists were forced to find a different way to read scripture that could maintain its centrality in matters of faith and morality, but explain why the Bible *says* one thing but *means* another. In the end, Abolitionists were effective in promoting their view that the *whole* message of Scripture is in support of the oppressed and against any practices that dehumanize. Literalist interpretations of a few passages that seemed to support slavery were no longer valid in light of the over-arching message of the Bible.

This reinvention of biblical interpretation by the abolitionists became a foundational development in later liberation movements. Women’s suffrage, the Civil Rights movement and liberation theology are all indebted to the abolitionists for this development. The abolition of slavery is the mother of liberation movements in America, and the religious and political figures that contributed to the moral arguments that ended slavery developed a wellspring of insight and prophecy for future liberation movements.

ⁱ J. Philip Wogaman and Douglas M. Strong ed., *Readings in Christian Ethics: A Historical Introduction* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993) 174.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, 186.