

WHY

HUMAN TRAFFICKING

IS EVERY

CHRISTIAN'S

CONCERN

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**HOLY
BIBLE**

The Bible tells me so

Why human trafficking is every Christian's concern

How often do you think about human trafficking? What, if anything, do you think Christians should be doing about it? Those of us living ordinary, reasonably comfortable lives may think it has little to do with us. We go to work, look after our families, and do what we can to support our church communities. We do our best to live a good life. Yes, we understand that there are people in slavery throughout the world, because we sometimes hear about it on the news, or in TV documentaries. We may have heard a missionary talk about it at church, and been impressed by the dedicated work other people are doing in this area. But in the main we tend to think that the girl who is being forced to work in a brothel, the woman who is held captive and raped repeatedly in order to provide babies whose organs will be harvested and sold, or the young man who is made to work in a farm or on a building site for no wages are things going on in faraway countries like India or Thailand and they really have nothing to do with us. And so we get on with our lives, making a living to support our families as best we can, and being sure to pay our taxes and tithes. Tackling human trafficking or modern-day slavery are matters which can be left to mission agencies and parachurch organisations.

In this brief article, I would like to make two points which I hope will persuade Christians that modern-day slavery is the concern of every one of us, and that we all should be doing whatever we can to work against it.

First, it is not the case that human trafficking is something out there, too far away for us to be concerned with it. The globalised market means that the likelihood that some form of slave or exploitative labour has been involved at some stage in the production process is really quite high. That is why companies in some countries are now required to publish modern day slavery statements in which they assure the public that no workers have been exploited at any stage in the course of the production of their merchandise. We each have a responsibility to ensure that the produce we buy is ethically sourced.

Moreover, it is more than possible that human trafficking is going on in your area. In Scotland, where I live, it is well known that many of the nail bars on our high streets are staffed by trafficked women, girls and some young men. There was a well-publicised incident of men being enslaved by a hotel owner who made them work for no pay at all. In the course of my ministry, I have met people who have escaped enslavement on farms, in factories and in hotels, not to mention many women and girls who have been forced to work in prostitution, and children who have been coerced (however subtly) into selling drugs.

So this is my first point – human trafficking is NOT something that is out there – nothing to do with us. It is often hidden, victims living and working in the most “respectable” of areas. And although we might find it inconvenient, we all have a responsibility to make sure, so far as is possible, that we are not supporting the exploitation of people by buying goods or services which may have been involved the use of modern-day slaves. We must not and cannot assume that human trafficking is something far away from us. It is much closer to us than we might like to think.

This brings me to my second point – the Bible makes it very clear that God takes bringing freedom and justice to the vulnerable very seriously indeed and that he expects his people to do the same. His desire that human beings should be able to live free and dignified lives is a thread which goes throughout the whole of the Bible.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the theme of freedom for God’s people dominates the story. In Genesis, Joseph is a victim of human trafficking – sold into slavery by his own family. Moses’ leadership of the people out of bonded labour in Egypt becomes the seminal story in the history of the Jews. The message is clear – no one is to keep God’s people as enslaved labour. When the people of Israel are finally freed from their exploiters, they have to begin the journey of forming a society that is just. The existence of slavery is assumed as the norm, however, the law collections contain legislation aimed at ensuring that slaves are treated well (e.g. Ex 20:10; 21:2-11,26-27; Deut 5:14; Lev 25:39-40), even those captured in war (Deut 21:10-14).

The prophets are very concerned that the poor and vulnerable be treated fairly and well. In Jeremiah 22:2-3, for example, the prophet declares:

‘Hear the word of the Lord to you, king of Judah, you who sit on David’s throne—you, your officials and your people who come through these gates. 3 This is what the Lord says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of the oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.’

Time and again it is said that the vulnerable should not be oppressed, for the simple reason that the Israelites were freed from oppression themselves.

“Do not deprive the foreigner or the fatherless of justice, or take the cloak of the widow as a pledge. 18 Remember that you were slaves in Egypt and the Lord your God redeemed you from there. That is why I command you to do this.” (Deut 24:17-8)

The thread runs throughout the Hebrew Scriptures - a redemptive impulse that cannot be ignored. The prophets in particular are concerned that the Jewish people should not become so caught up in their own religious "rightness" that they forget about those who are oppressed. So it is that they rail against those who make much of the fact that they are fulfilling their religious obligations. Listen to the prophet Amos (5:21-24; Cf Jer 6:20; Isaiah 1:11-15):

"I hate, I despise your religious festivals;
your assemblies are a stench to me.

22 Even though you bring me burnt offerings and grain offerings,
I will not accept them.

Though you bring choice fellowship offerings,
I will have no regard for them.

23 Away with the noise of your songs!
I will not listen to the music of your harps.

24 But let justice roll on like a river,
righteousness like a never-failing stream!

And to the famous words of the prophet Micah:

He has shown you, O mortal, what is good.
And what does the Lord require of you?
To act justly and to love mercy
and to walk humbly with your God (6:8).

In the New Testament, Jesus continues in this prophetic tradition. At the very outset of his work, he cites Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Luke 4:18-19).

Throughout his ministry, Jesus is very critical of religious people who are more concerned with keeping themselves right than with showing God's love to others and oppressing the weak and the poor.

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former. 24 You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel” (Matthew 23:23-24).

In fact, Jesus’ teaching of the kingdom of God is all about freedom from the values which permeate society – in his kingdom it is the very least in society who are first in God’s sight. And, as Paul says when he argues strongly against those who want to make their own religious “rightness” their main priority - Christ has set us free from this in order to “love our neighbour as ourselves” (Gal 5:14).

The redemptive impulse which we saw in the Old Testament is continued in the New and is fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus. Although slavery is never directly denounced (something which would have been incomprehensible in the first century world), the values which uphold it are subtly undermined as equality amongst believers is asserted (Philemon; Gal 3:28) and profit from slave-trading denounced (Rev 18:13).

The war in Ukraine has seen millions of people, mostly women and children, have fled their homes and are seeking refuge in neighboring countries. Already we are hearing of the disappearance of children and the trafficking of women and girls. People whose lives have been destroyed are being targeted by gangs and criminals who know exactly how to exploit the vulnerable. It is deeply disturbing that people try to exploit people who are in crisis – but that is what human traffickers do: they make money out of other people’s vulnerability and distress. So how should we respond to modern-day slavery in all its forms? The message of our Scriptures is clear – Jesus has come to set the captives free, and he calls his followers to do the same. We are asked not to live complacent comfortable self-regarding lives but to join in God’s work in the world. We are called to stand against injustice in whatever way we can, for, if we ignore the exploitation and enslavement of human beings we ignore the call of the prophets and of Christ himself.

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RESOURCES

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