Equality Under God: Biblical Interpretation and Human Rights

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Introduction

The level of influence of Christianity on American politics is currently one of the nation's most contested issues. Some citizens want leaders, laws, policies, and for the overall government to reflect Christian values. Those who hold this view point to the country's Founding Fathers as evidence that they intended for the United States, in all facets of government, to uphold Christian values. On the opposite end, others wish to weed religion out of the government and the public sphere altogether, citing the First Amendment to the Constitution—the separation of church and state—for support. Regardless of what one thinks the role of Christianity should be, no one can deny that it has been a highly influential and mobilizing force in United States history; sometimes it has directed people to act positively for the betterment of humanity, while at other times it has not. Christianity has influenced society through its rich history of tradition, experience, and reason. The most important aspect, however, is Christianity's influence through interpretation of scripture.

The Bible is generally interpreted by Christians in three general ways: (1) as the inerrant word of God, (2) as the writings of spiritually inspired holy men, or (3) as a mythical expression of a lived experience of God.[1] Under the first method of interpretation, given any passage in the Bible, readers are less likely to discover other variables, such as cultural context, that were involved with its creation. Instead, the readers are more likely to survey only the surface of the text and literally interpret what he/she thinks the words say; this method is inherently less interpretive in its nature compared to the other two.

The second and third methods of interpretation, by contrast, allow room for the influence of human fallibilities in the text. These two most significantly differ as to the degree of human

[1] Keith Ward, *Christianity: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2000), 108-111.

influence in scripture—the third contains more than the second.[2] These methods attempt to capture the truth beyond the text, a meaning that "transcends the particular and imperfectly understood context of the original writers and the prejudices and parochialisms that (readers) bring to the text."[3] Throughout time, readers of the Bible have employed all three methods of interpretation, and each one often has led to different ideological outcomes. This thesis argues that a closer examination of the history of biblical interpretation and its influence during three major social movements will provide Christians with a context for how the Bible should be interpreted and applied in the near and distant futures of American public life.

The first event to be considered in which Christianity played a prominent role was the abolition movement in the mid-to-late 1800s. Biblical interpretation was used to both support and oppose slavery in the United States. The movement eventually ended in the bloodiest war in American history. Second, the civil rights movement illustrates how Christian texts were used for the betterment of a nation that was desperately seeking direction. Martin Luther King, Jr. was the most recognizable figure during that era; his Christian roots were at the core of his political and social philosophies and showed through in all he wrote and said. The final movement to consider in which Christianity has been highly involved is the gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GBLT) rights movement. Similar to the abolition and civil rights movements, biblical texts have been used in both a positive and negative way. Many hold that the Christian tradition does not support equal rights for gay and lesbian people. In this way, biblical influence is negative because it has been used to suppress rather than liberate. Furthermore, it has brought a new-found strength to the "religious right," a movement seeking to

[2] Ward, 108-111.

[3] Peter J. Gomes, *The Good Book: Reading the Bible with Mind and Heart* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 1996), 46.

increase conservative Christian values in the political realm. At the same time, many churches use biblical passages to support equality for GLBT people, including efforts to welcome GLBTs into the church and allowing GLBTs to marry.

The obvious conclusion after a brief sketch of these three major historical movements is that the Bible has played a different role in each situation, and that it is used positively or negatively depending on the circumstances and method of support. Some adopt a literalist approach, citing specific passages of the Bible that they believe precisely address the issue in question; this falls in line with the first method of biblical interpretation. Others avoid biblical literalism and adopt a *christocentric* approach. Under this method readers of the Bible seek to reorient the reading of the Bible so that the reading "flows out of the energy of the center of the Gospel, the free justifying grace of God in Jesus Christ."[4] In other words, they attempt to interpret the Bible and its message as a whole through the lens of the teachings and behavior of Jesus.[5] This method aligns with the second and third methods of biblical interpretation. Additionally, some people do not see a need for religious morals to be involved in the discussion over citizens' rights, saying that humans are born with a natural sense of morality that does not require religious intervention for such major issues like the ones in question.

These methods of religious, or non-religious, justification are crucial because each one tends to lead people to different conclusions. These differences are the result of varying hermeneutical principles held by different people. It is not uncommon within most organized belief systems for its members to draw on the same sources and essential traditions yet come to

[4] H. Grederick Reisz, Jr., "The Authority of the Bible in the Lutheran Tradition," 1 August 2001, 3.

[5] Herbert W.Chilstrom and Lowell O. Erdahl, *Sexual Fulfillment for Single and Married, Straight and Gay, Young and Old* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001), 19.

different conclusions on certain issues; Christianity, in this case, would not be an exception.[6] Every legitimate form of Christianity in the United States (and across the world) acknowledges the Bible as the most superior source for knowledge of God's will for humanity. However, depending on the interpretation of key passages accompanied with unequal emphasis on them, many divisions of Christianity reach different conclusions on many varying issues. By examining how Christians used scripture during these three major events, a pattern can be identified that will provide some sense of what role the Bible should play in the future.

Both the abolition and civil rights movements illustrate how biblical interpretations among Christians eventually worked to liberate oppressed groups of people and promote equality within the nation. Now, despite the example provided by these two previous movements, proper interpretation of the Bible in regard to equal rights is again being debated by the Christian community. Christians interpret the Bible differently and come to varied conclusions; in some cases, biblical authority is used in a suppressive manner; in others, Christians use the Bible to spread a message of inclusiveness and unite Christians of different sexual, racial, etc. backgrounds. The pattern that each of these three movements displays is crucial because it illustrates how biblical interpretation has evolved and been applied to social situations through United States history. This thesis argues that to maintain its position in the United States public sector, and its credibility as a respectable religion among religious and non-religious people, Christians must use the Bible as a tool for the betterment of society by providing a basis for arguing in favor of equal rights.

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[6] Peter W. Williams, *America's Religions: Traditions and Cultures* (New York: Collier Macmillan Publishers, 1990), 11.

Chapter One: The Abolition Movement

The Beginnings

Religion was involved at the outset of the abolition movement in the United States. The movement emerged in the early 1830s as a by-product of religious revivalism known as the Second Great Awakening.[7] This term refers to transformations in American economics, politics, and intellectual culture; it was paralleled with the transformation of American religion in the decades following independence. As a result, the United States underwent a widespread blossoming of religious sentiment and unprecedented expansion of church membership.[8] The awakening led abolitionists to see slavery as a consequence of personal sin within the country and demand emancipation as the cost of repentance. During the 1830s abolitionism began to grow and spread throughout the northern and southern United States. The American Anti-Slavery Society was formed later that decade. It attracted tens of thousands of members with lecturing agents, petition drives, and a wide variety of printed materials. Condemning slavery on moral grounds, abolitionists pursued immediate emancipation using moral persuasion. Individual slaveholders and national churches—the chief targets of moral persuasion—largely rejected abolitionist appeals. Instead, opponents tried to suppress anti-slavery sentiment by enactments of the church, state, and sometimes by mob violence.[9]

The movement brought forth three distinct groups of abolitionists: religious, political, and radical/militant. Religious abolitionists continually lobbied various churches, gaining valuable allies in the early 1840s, namely the well-organized Methodist, Baptist, and

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[7] Williams, 174.

[8] Williams, 174.

[9] John R. McKivigan, "A Brief History of the American Abolition Movement," *Indiana University-Purdue University* (15 January 2004), <http://americanabolitionist.liberalarts.iupui.edu/brief.htm> (24 February 2008).

Presbyterian antislavery movements. Their agitation helped bring about schisms in the Methodist and Baptist churches in the mid-1840s and the New School Presbyterians in 1857.[10] Political abolitionists petitioned legislatures and interrogated political candidates on slavery-related issues. If no candidates expressed antislavery sentiments, abolitionists often protested by scattering their ballots among write-in candidates. When the federal government failed to respond to petitioning or lobbying, politically minded abolitionists formed an independent antislavery party—the Liberty party—in 1840.[11]

Radical abolitionists consisted of those who wanted to fight slavery through violent means; John Brown is the most notable figure of this group. In 1857 and 1858, Brown assembled a small, racially integrated company that aimed to set up a base in the Southern Appalachians to aid escaping slaves. This plan evolved into an unsuccessful attack on the federal arsenal at Harpers Ferry in October 1859. About half of his men were killed before Brown surrendered and was hung. Because of his initiative and passion against slavery, mixed with his terrorizing and destructive means, Brown remains one of the most controversial figures in the abolition movement.[12]

Slavery's Influence on the Christian Institution

Prior to the Second Great Awakening, some aspects of United States' culture were gradually becoming secularized. The church was no longer one of the primary units of social organization, and individuals were moving away from conformity and subordination to the

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[10] Ibid.

[11] McKivigan.

[12] Bertram Wyatt-Brown, "American Abolitionism and Religion," *Divining America: Religion in American History*, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/nineteen/nkeyinfo/amabrel.htm> (24 February 2008).

greater society. In this sense, reviving religion would not be sufficient by itself for reawakening the nation's spirit; it has been argued that the revival had to be hitched to a new idea: moral reform.[13] The Second Great Awakening was a potent combination of both revival and reform. Evangelicals, Unitarians, Quakers—who were the earliest activists in the crusade against slavery— and various utopians were all significantly involved with the Christian rejuvenation within the country, especially in regard to the abolition movement. The first major step in the abolition movement began in 1816 with the formation of the American Colonization Society, which attempted to raise funds to purchase freedom for slaves and return them to Africa.[14]

In the early nineteenth century, slavery appeared to be doomed to fall under its own economic weight, even to many in the South. Furthermore, antislavery sentiment was growing stronger throughout the South in the early decades of the nineteenth century. It was not until Eli Whitney invented the cotton gin in 1830 that the institution of slavery found a renewed vitality. Before the invention of the cotton gin, not only was the raising of cotton very labor intensive, but separating the fiber from the cotton seed itself was even more labor intensive. Raising cotton was losing its cost-effectiveness. With the cotton gin, growing and cultivating cotton became a lucrative cash crop, contributing immensely to the rise of cotton production in the South. This, in turn, led to an increase in the number of slaves and slave-holders, and to the growth of a cotton-based agricultural economy in the South.[15]

Because of this revitalization of slavery, its opponents also found a newly acquired spirit.[16] William Lloyd Garrison, who had previously gained experience working with the

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[13] Williams, 175.

[14] Williams, 179.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Ibid.

Quaker abolitionists, quickly emerged as an uncontainable spokesman for the new idea of "immediatism." Garrison and his followers took an uncompromising position not only on the evils of slavery but also on the absolute necessity of immediate abolition. He is known for condemning the Constitution as evil if it sanctions slavery saying it is "a covenant with death and an agreement with Hell."[17]

While the Quakers were the most radical and outspoken right away on the slavery issue, most of Christianity stayed quiet on the issue during the early- to mid-nineteenth century. However, once tensions grew over slavery, many churches were forced by their members to take a stance on the issue. Among the liturgical churches—Roman Catholic, Episcopalian, and Lutheran—antislavery sentiment was limited or regional, and no lasting schisms occurred. Congregationalists and Unitarians were scarce in the South, and so were barely affected organizationally. The three great national evangelical denominations—Baptist, Methodist, and Presbyterian—found themselves in shambles over the growing debates. For the Baptists, the North and South went their own ways and eventually grew so far apart that no reconciliation seems possible. Methodism was deeply rooted in John Wesley's antislavery teachings, and slave-holding was forbidden among American Methodists. However, as slavery grew more popular, slave-holding bishops began to appear as certain forms of Methodism made peace with southern traditions, justifying it in part by drawing on proslavery texts of the Bible but mostly by giving in to the luxurious temptation of owning slaves.[18]

Presbyterians found themselves in perhaps the most complicated situation. The denomination was already beginning to split over the issue of tradition versus progression over biblical interpretation prior to slavery becoming a major factor. When it did, the sect inevitably

[17] Ibid.

[18] Williams, 181.

divided into the "Old School" and "New School" Presbyterians. The "New School," which had a firmer base in the North, took a series of increasingly stronger antislavery positions. The Southern-based and typically more conservative "Old School" held to traditional norms that involved slavery.[19]

When the Civil War came about, many Americans viewed it as a religious event, or at least a political event with deep religious dimensions. As a result, just before the war, a "third great awakening" took place; this involved urban church revivals, union prayer meetings, and increased humanitarian efforts by many clergy and laity. Furthermore, preachers from both sides invoked the Bible as a source of divine sanction over the slavery debate.[20]

Slavery in the New Testament

Although many Christian denominations maintained steadfast support of slavery throughout the Civil War and beyond, Christianity undoubtedly played the largest role of any organized group in the effort to abolish slavery within the United States. The Bible was the primary source for Christians either denouncing or upholding the institution of slavery. Unfortunately, like with many issues, the Bible is not absolutely clear on its instruction over the morality of slavery.

Four main constituencies formed in response to the biblical debate over slavery, only one of which argued in support of slavery. The first group of people acknowledged that the Bible undoubtedly sanctioned slavery. Thus, they argued that to oppose slavery, one had to abandon the Bible. The second position holds that the Bible is the supreme divine authority; therefore,

[19] Ibid.

[20] Williams, 182.

Christians should accept the legitimacy of slavery as it existed in the United States.[21] For these people, the primary objective was to make the case that the Bible did in fact sanction slavery. In fact, first group's rejection of the Bible actually strengthened the second group's stance, since the first group's outright denial of the Bible affirmed the second group's assertion over the absolute authority of the Bible.[22]

In 1857, a Protestant theologian named George Armstrong wrote a treatise entitled, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery." In it he argued that slavery in its essential form is not a sin or offense. Although he adamantly defended the institution of slavery, his goal was to bring the North and the South together to agree by presenting an honest depiction of the doctrine of slavery as taught by Jesus Christ and the apostles.[23] He asserts that nothing which they taught showed that they regarded slavery as a sin or offense. The heart of his argument focuses on the distinction he makes between the "essential" and "incidental"[24] aspects of slavery.[25] By applying the distinction to biblical evidence he seeks to prove that the former is not in violation of God's law, while the latter is. The distinction is founded on hermeneutical principles that deem the Bible as the lone authority in the interpretation and evaluation of slavery.[26]

Using this method, Armstrong reaches a few important conclusions. First, slave-holding does not appear in any catalogue of sins given by inspired men. Certainly Jesus and his disciples

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[21] Mark A. Noll, "The Bible and Slavery," *Religion and the American Civil War*, Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout, and Charles Reagan Wilson, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 43.

[22] Mark A. Noll, "The Crisis Over the Bible," *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 32.

[23] Archie C. Epps, III, "The Christian Doctrine of Slavery: A Theological Analysis," *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 46, No. 4 (October, 1961): 243.

[24] "Essential" refers to the uncorrupted nature of slavery, while "incidental" refers to the unsuspected evils that surfaced through the mishandling of slavery.

[25] Epps, 244.

[26] Ibid.

were aware that the institution of slavery existed, yet they chose not to list it as an offense.[27] Second, the Apostles received and continued to keep slave-holders in the Christian Church without ever giving an indication that slave-holding was a sin.[28] Third, Paul sent a fugitive slave back to his master, saying that the master has right to the service of the slave. Finally, the Apostles frequently directed and enforced the relative duties of master and slave as Christian men of Christian motives.[29] Based on these reasons, Armstrong asserts that Jesus and his disciples had no intention of preventing others from slave-holding, nor did they condemn the institution as sinful.

Slavery in the Old Testament

The entirety of Armstrong's argument is contained within the New Testament. He, for whatever reason, did not feel the necessity to delve into the Old Testament. Whereas in the New Testament slavery is mostly avoided, the Old Testament takes up the issue directly. Much of the text in the book of Exodus is concerned mostly with the proper conditions for owning slaves. For instance, Moses instructed the Israelites that:

> When a man sells his daughter as a slave, she shall not go out as the male slaves do. If she does not please her master, who designated her for himself, then he shall let her be redeemed; he shall have no right to sell her to a foreign people since he has dealt unfairly with her. If he designates her for his son, he shall deal with her as with a daughter. If he takes another wife to himself, he shall not diminish the food, clothing, or marital rights of the first wife. And if he does not do these three things for her, she shall go out without debt, without payment of money. (Ex. 21: 7-11 [New Revised Standard Edition]).

In passages such as this, the issue in question is not whether slavery is inherently wrong, but rather how people should act in various slave-related situations.

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[27] Ibid.

[28] Epps, 245.

[29] Ibid, 246.

Prior to the time of Moses, the Bible explicates that God first interacted with one of Moses' ancestors—Abraham. The book of Genesis describes how God chose Abraham and made a lasting covenant with him. Eventually, Abraham would prove his faithfulness to God and the covenant would come to fruition during the time of Abraham's descendants. This story is relevant to the issue of slavery because all through the divine-human interaction, Abraham was holding multiple slaves: "Throughout your generations every male among you shall be circumcised when he is eight days old, including the slave born in your house and the one bought with your money from any foreigner who is not of your offspring" (Gen 17: 12) and "Then Abraham took his son Ishmael and all the slaves born in his house or bought with his money, every male among the men of Abraham's house, and he circumcised the flesh of their foreskins that very day, as God had said to him" (Gen. 17: 23). Therefore, since the biblical God is generally perceived as an omniscient being, God must have known that Abraham was a slave-holder; God chose a slave-holder to be the father of the nation of Israel. Then, the most direct Old Testament verse that overtly sanctions slavery reads, "As for the male and female slaves whom you may have, it is from the nations around you that you may acquire male and female slaves" (Lev. 25: 44).

The scriptural argumentation from the New and Old Testaments come together to form a strong case that the Bible upholds the institution of slavery. However, the third and fourth constituencies that formed during this time did not need to abandon the Bible in order to attack slavery. The third group conceded that while Bible did indeed sanction slavery, the presence of slavery in the Bible was not an adequate justification for slavery as it existed in the United States.[30] The fourth group distinguished between the letter of the Bible (literalism) and the spirit of the Bible. People in this category argued that the realities about which proslavery texts spoke

[30] Noll, 44.

did not correspond to the realities of nineteenth-century American society. There existed a clear distinction between the historical facts of the Bible and the morals it taught, only the latter being normative and binding.[31]

Biblical Antislavery

When the arguments from the New Testament by Armstrong and certain passages from the Old Testament are considered, the Bible seems to deem slavery as, at least, allowable. The Bible, however, can be used to attack slavery. Abolitionists used the antislavery material in the Bible to insist upon the liberation of slaves in the United States. The positive evidence against slavery from the Old Testament can be categorized into two types: direct quotes from the text and historical instances in which Jews and other nations had been punished for holding slaves.

Abolitionists viewed slavery as a violation of the eighth[32] and tenth commandments.[33] They deemed the act of slave-holding to be stealing services from another person. They also cite the prophet Jeremiah who pronounces, "Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness;...who makes his neighbor work for nothing, and does not give them their wages" (Jer. 22:13). He was hailed as the prime antislavery prophet of the Old Testament and one of the more controversial figures of his age.[34] In regard to the tenth commandment,

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[31] Noll, 44.

[32] The eighth commandment reads "You shalt not steal" (Ex. 20: 15).

[33] The tenth commandment reads "You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor" (Ex. 20: 17).

[34] Caroline L. Shanks, "The Biblical Anti-Slavery Argument of the Decade 1830-1840," *Journal of Negro History* Vol. 16, No. 2 (April, 1931): 144.

abolitionists argued that slave-holders coveted the freedom of their slaves, and therefore withheld it from them.[35]

The ultimate goal of antislavery activists was to prove that slavery was offensive to God. To do this, they often cited historical events in the Bible, such as God inflicting plagues on Egypt and the Pharaoh for enslaving God's chosen people. By God helping the Israelites escape from their bondage in Egypt, God was essentially acknowledging that the situation was undesirable and torturous for the people.[36]

In light of these various examples, slavery was present in both the New and Old Testaments of the Bible. However, some find this notion irrelevant, pointing out that the Bible is rooted in principles that supersede its historical practices. It is from this idea that the strongest arguments are presented in the name of the Bible and the Christian church, and perhaps no one argued it better than Frederick Douglass.

Viewpoint from a Slave: Frederick Douglass

Frederick Douglass is one of the most prominent figures in African-American history. After several failed attempts, he escaped from slavery in 1838 and subsequently joined the fight in the abolition movement.[37] While he also drew on political theory to combat slavery,[38] much of Douglass' claims against the institution were rooted in Christian thought and text. Douglass was highly critical of churches for not taking an active stance against slavery laws. He believed that religious leaders who avoided the issue were as responsible for sustaining slavery in the

[35] Ibid.

[36] Shanks, 145.

[37] Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin's Press, 2003), 20-28.

[38] Douglass argued that slavery was inherently incompatible with the Constitution.

country as were its supporters. In his famous speech at Corinthian Hall, Rochester, New York, he demonstrates his attitude saying, "I take (this law) to be one of the grossest infringements on Christian liberty, and if the churches and ministers of our country were not stupidly blind or most wickedly indifferent, they too would so regard it."[39] For Douglass, there was no reasonable excuse for Christians, whether leaders or regular members, to not oppose slavery.

Douglass then argued in his speech that the Christian tradition has no substance, or is "empty" as a religion, without enacting certain principles of goodwill. He illustrates this saying, "The fact that the church of our country (with fractional exceptions) does not esteem slave laws as declarations of war against religious liberty implies that the church regards religion simply as a form of worship, an empty ceremony, and not a vital principle, requiring active benevolence, justice, love and good will towards man."[40] Here one can see that Douglass' hermeneutics are developed through the spirit of the Bible and Christian thought.

He then condemns the individual members of the Christian tradition when he says, "A worship that can be conducted by persons who refuse to give shelter to the homeless, to give bread to the hungry, clothing to the naked, and who enjoin obedience to a law forbidding these acts of mercy, is a curse, not a blessing to mankind."[41] Here Douglass makes his first reference to the Bible in the speech. Using it as a rhetorical tool, he paraphrases the gospel of Matthew to boost the credibility of his words; the Christian audience to which he was speaking would have undoubtedly recognized these lines. Douglass then moves beyond paraphrasing and directly cites the Bible to reinforce his claims: "The Bible addresses all such persons as 'scribes,

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[39] Frederick Douglass, "Oration, Delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, July 5, 1852," Leonard Harris, Scott Pratt, and Anne Waters, eds., *American Philosophies: an Anthology* (Blackwell Publishing, 2002), 337.

[40] Ibid, 343.

[41] Ibid, 344.

Pharisees, hypocrites, who pay tithe of mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith (Matt. 23: 23).'"[42]

Douglass undoubtedly puts much of the blame on the church for sustaining slavery. He powerfully states in his speech that the church has taken sides with slavery and helped the institution to strengthen and grow more ubiquitous. In one of the more moving segments of his talk, he demonstrates his belief by saying:

> But the church of this country is not only indifferent to the wrongs of the slave, it actually takes sides with the oppressors. It has made itself the bulwark of American slavery, and the shield of American slave-hunters. Many of its most eloquent Divines, who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system. They have taught that man may, properly, be a slave; that the relation of master and slave is ordained of God; that to send back an escaped bondman to his master is clearly the duty of all the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ; and this horrible blasphemy upon the world for Christianity.[43]

Although the church's role in sanctioning slavery is crucial for Douglass, he also points to the church as the primary tool for abolishing slavery. For the existence of slavery in the United States "brands...Christianity as a lie."[44] Therefore, Douglass implies that true uses of Christianity would be for the abolition of slavery in the country. The characteristics of love, justice, faith, and mercy that he frequently mentions in his speech are the cornerstones for the Christian faith. If these principles, which are highlighted mainly in the gospels but inherent in the whole Bible, were enacted in the real world, rather than being preached emptily, Christian society would awaken to actively work toward the abolition of slavery.[45]

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[42] Douglass, 344.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Ibid, 346.

[45] Ibid.

With all different viewpoints and arguments involved with biblical interpretation and slavery in the nineteenth century, it can be complicated to sort through it all and come to a firm conclusion. As Abraham Lincoln famously stated in his Second Inaugural Address, both the North and the South, "read the same Bible."[46] On the one hand, biblical supporters of slavery argued that the Bible never specifically restricts slavery or condemns it as immoral. In other words, "the relation (between) the slave and his master is not inconsistent with the word of God..."[47] Their main goal was to emphasize the supreme divine authority of Bible, which could not be compromised by making exceptions for certain passages that sanction slavery.

On the other hand, those who used the Bible to condemn slavery, like Frederick Douglass, focused less on the literal meanings of specific passages and used the Bible more for its overarching messages. Douglass concluded that faith, hope, mercy, and love were the most prominent ones, while other abolitionists turned to the "broad principle of common equity and common sense... the general principles of the Bible...and the whole scope of the Bible," which led one to realize the principles of "justice and righteousness."[48] Through their arguments, Douglass and the other abolitionists fully embody a *christocentric* approach to biblical interpretation. Additionally, by placing these values at the forefront of Christian social engagement, the Christian tradition is validated by backing up its worship with active and equal benevolence in society.

The abolition movement illustrates how these two distinctive styles of biblical interpretation can play a prominent role in society. The implications of which ever side won out were immense: Christianity would either continue to sanction slavery as a moral practice or it

[46] Noll, "The Bible and Slavery," 43.

[47] Ibid, 45.

[48] Noll, "The Crisis Over the Bible," 41.

would denounce and press the United States government to abolish the institution. This role for biblical interpretation would prove to recur in the nation's future. The next era in which it would be duplicated was the civil rights movement.

Chapter Two: The Civil Rights Movement

The beginning and end of the Civil Rights movement, in contrast to the abolition movement, is not clearly identifiable. In many senses, the civil rights movement is still being fought today. This movement can also be defined by key events that took place between the years 1960 and 1980. During this time, the most significant figure to emerge as a leading voice and activist was Martin Luther King, Jr. King was a Baptist minister whose philosophy was deeply grounded in Christian thought, especially the life and teachings of Jesus in the New Testament. He brought forth new ideas about both what it meant to be a Christian and what it meant to be a law-abiding citizen of the United States. Because the values he preached were progressive for his time, he was naturally met with stern opposition, some of which was also rooted in biblical teachings. But before a deeper analysis of King's biblical interpretation can be done, one must identify the key events in the civil rights movement that led to King's rise to prominence.

Key Events During the Civil Rights Era

The modern civil rights movement emerged in the early 1940s and lasted until the late 1960s. Many prior events, however, such as the great migration and the New Deal, were prerequisites that allowed the movement to come to fruition. The former event refers to a massive relocation of southern blacks into the North due to unmaintained living conditions in

black neighborhoods and fear of white violence.[49] The latter term refers to President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's economic recovery plan during the Great Depression. The plan's early stages proved to be particularly damaging to African Americans; Roosevelt soon changed directions by establishing legislative commitments against racial discrimination. His administration began employing significant numbers of African Americans to prominent advisory positions in cabinet and federal departments and agencies.[50] African Americans began to rapidly switch from the Republican to the Democratic Party. The New Deal ultimately enabled blacks to survive the Depression by providing them with unprecedented assistance and recognition; it brought forth important, though unintended and unforeseen consequences for advancing the civil rights movement.[51]

With all the conditions in place, the civil rights movement took off with the 1954 Supreme Court decision of *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*; the Court ruled that the segregation of blacks and whites into different designated schools was unconstitutional.[52] Then, about one year later, Rosa Parks, a member of a well-known anti-discrimination group called the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NCAAP), refused to move to the back of a Montgomery, Alabama, bus, which was required by city ordinance. A 381-day bus boycott would soon follow and the bus segregation ordinance eventually was declared unconstitutional.[53] Then, in 1965, Malcolm X, a leading activist in the movement, was shot to

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[49] Mark Newman, *The Civil Rights Movement* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Publishers, 2004), 13.

[50] Ibid, 17.

[51] Ibid, 19.

[52] Ibid, x, 33.

[53] Glenn Eskew, "The Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and the New Ideology," Renne C. Romano and Leigh Raiford, eds., *The Civil Rights Movement in American Memory* (Athens, Georgia: University of Georgia Press, 2006), 11.

death. Three years later, Martin Luther King, Jr. was also shot outside a Memphis, Tennessee hotel room.[54]

Since the civil rights movement was largely led by Martin Luther King, Jr., the motivation behind his self-sacrificial, nonviolent, and humanist principles is important to identify. Fortunately, King made it quite clear in through his teachings that his philosophies on society and politics were firmly rooted in Christian thought and scripture, while his upbringing and education were the foundations for his faith.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: Theological Development

Martin Luther King, Jr. was born Michael Luther King, Jr., but later changed his first name to Martin. His grandfather began the family's long tenure as pastors of the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, serving from 1914 to 1931. King, Jr. acted as his co-pastor until his death in 1963.[55] King, Jr. attended segregated public schools in Georgia, graduating from high school at the age of fifteen; he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in 1948 from Morehouse College, a distinguished Negro institution in Atlanta from which both his father and grandfather graduated. In college, his ability to perform well was not always displayed in his academic work; he averaged less than a B in his college tenure. He then went on to study for three years at Crozer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania where he was elected president of a predominantly white senior class.[56]

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[54] Newman, xii.

[55] Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), 17.

[56] Ibid, 21.

King's time at Crozer was also where he first became exposed to liberal theology in an academic setting. He had grown up under fundamentalist teachings such as belief in the absolute infallibility of the Bible. But, he began questioning his fundamentalist upbringing in his teen years and continued to for the rest of his life. Furthermore, his conversion from black church fundamentalism had taken place under liberal black preacher intellectuals from Morehouse, such as President Benjamin Mays and religion professor George Kelsey. As a result, King did not experience much difficulty with Crozer's liberal approach to theology and biblical interpretation.[57]

King's time at Crozer Theological Seminary was one of the most influential periods of his life as far as the development of his social philosophy and approach to biblical interpretation as it applies to civil rights. Walter Rauschenbusch, professor of church history and Christian ethics, strongly influenced King's societal views. Rauschenbusch was the chief theologian of the white "social gospel" movement during the first two decades of the twentieth century. King's reading and studies of Rauschenbusch and the social gospel movement helped to develop his aspiration for finding a sound theological foundation to support his social conscience and philosophy.[58] By the time King graduated from Crozer 1951 with a B.D. degree, he had begun to formulate his renowned "social gospel" interpretation of the Bible. This idea was always at the heart of his preaching and action that was so important for the civil rights movement.

The Bible According to Martin Luther King

Much of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s philosophy was rooted in the Bible; other aspects of it come from different sources, such as his upbringing, education, and personal reflection. As a

[57] Burrow, 22.

[58] Ibid, 25.

Baptist, he concurs with the doctrines of justification by faith and the priesthood of all believers. He, however, does not fully believe in the original Lutheran stress on human's corruption. Instead, he holds that human nature is sinful, and humans are incapable of saving themselves because evil is lodged in their will; but they retain, as an imprint on their soul, the image of a good God who assists with the damages of sin on the human soul.[59] The Bible's influence on King is best elucidated in his famous *Letter from Birmingham Jail*. But first, the events that led to King's incarceration are crucial in order to understanding his ideas in the letter.

King traveled to Birmingham, Alabama because the city was notorious for its ubiquitous racial discrimination; it took the form of segregation, unequal employment for blacks, and a lack of promotional opportunities in department stores where blacks managed to be hired.[60] King felt an obligation to actively oppose the situation in the city. He had planned an economic boycott of downtown stores and mass demonstrations that would eventually cause Birmingham's white officials to concede the movement's demands. King had trouble recruiting sufficient volunteers to go to jail by sitting in at segregated lunch counters or marching; few blacks wanted to risk certain arrest in a cause that seemed unlikely to succeed. Nonetheless, King insisted that the campaign go on as planned. A state injunction was placed on King that barred him from public protest. King broke the injunction and entered jail, hoping that his incarceration would stimulate greater local and national support.[61] He eventually left jail on bond, but not before composing one the United States' most celebrated documents.

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[59] John W. Rathbun, "Martin Luther King: The Theology of Social Action," *American Quarterly* Vol. 20, No. 1 (Spring, 1968): 38, 39.

[60] Newman, 86.

[61] Ibid, 87.

King illustrates the framework for his activism in the *Letter from Birmingham Jail.* He begins by comparing himself the Apostle Paul. When responding to questions of why he was in the city of Birmingham, he says:

> "Just as the prophets of the eighth century B.C. left their villages and carried their 'Thus say the Lord' far beyond the boundaries of their hometowns, and just as the Apostle Paul left his village of Tarsus and carried the gospel of Jesus Christ to far corners of the Roman-Greco world, so am I compelled to carry the gospel of freedom beyond my hometown. Like Paul, I must constantly respond to the Macedonian call for aid."[62]

Although he stressed the importance of the Apostle Paul, King believed absolutely that Jesus was the model on which human beings were supposed to act. When defending himself against accusations of being an extremist, he replies by saying, "But though I was initially disappointed at being categorized as an extremist, as I continued to think about the matter I continually gained a measure of satisfaction from the label. Was not Jesus an extremist for love: 'Love you enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them that despitefully use you, and persecute you.'"[63] For King, Jesus was an extremist for the best reasons—love, truth, and goodness. These qualities helped Jesus rise above his environment; he felt that they helped King do the same in his own environment.[64]

King's use of the Bible as a source of morality was common in his works. He is famously quoted for differentiating between two types of laws—just and unjust. The difference, he says, is that "a just law is man-made code that squares with the moral law or the law of God. An unjust law is a code that is out of harmony with the moral law."[65] He clearly believes that all laws codified by human beings must match the law given to humans through the Bible, which is

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[62] Martin Luther King, Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," David P. Barash, ed., *Approaches to Peace: A Reader in Peace Studies* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 67.

[63] Ibid, 75.

[64] Ibid, 76.

[65] Ibid, 69.

based on biblical principles rather than descriptions of approved biblical practices. Along the same line, King also believed in a kinship between natural and moral laws; the common source between the two is the "God of Jesus Christ."[66]

King was aware, however, that Bible held many contradictions, especially regarding the issue of equal rights. After realizing this at a young age, King devised his own formula in a graduate school paper on how Christians should use the Bible; much of the material is deeply inspired by theologian William Adams Brown. King's thought is separated into three main parts: (1) Christians must accept the Bible as a spiritual guide in finding God, (2) Christians should know the meaning of the Bible, and (3) Christians should realize what the Bible can do for them.[67] Each of these three main ideas, however, requires a bit of explanation for one to truly understand King's meaning and interpretation of the Bible.

In relation to the first point, King states that the Bible "tells us not only what men have thought of God and what they have done for God, but what they have experienced of God."[68] By knowing that others before them have found God, the Bible encourages modern Christians to have faith that they will also.[69] Through these ideas King implies that he does not understand the Bible to be dictated by God; instead, it contains human experience that provides a different, yet important, validation to the Bible.[70] This view illustrates another departure from his fundamentalist upbringing.

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[66] Burrow, 192.

[67] Martin Luther King, Jr., "What Should the Christian Do About the Bible," Clayborne Carson, Ralph E. Luker, Penny A. Russell, and Louis R. Harlan, *The Papers of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1992), 286.

[68] Ibid, 287.

[69] Ibid.

[70] Burrow, 210.

King then elaborates on the second point, asserting that the Bible is "a book of progressive revelation; every book in the Bible is not equally valuable."[71] This is one of King's most important concepts that emerges later in his preaching and philosophy. King clearly emphasized the books of the New Testament over many of the Old. His attitude about the New Testament is essentially what formed the basis of his thought—the social gospel. Furthermore, in regard to the second point, King clarifies that he believes that the Bible is a piece of literature. It is not stated in abstract, universal propositions, but in concrete applications to specific situations; it was written in literary, not scientific or philosophical, language.[72]

King then elucidates the third main point by saying that the Bible helps Christians realize the enduring vitality of the central convictions of the Christian life, including such truths as the love of God, the Lordship of Christ, the fact of sin, the need of redemption, the influence of the Spirit of God, and the hope of immortality.[73] Additionally, King asserts that the Bible can deepen and purify Christians' emotional lives. It is a tool for ordering people's discordant lives and bringing them into harmony with their appreciations, hopes, fears, aspirations, loyalties, sympathies, and affections.[74]

Martin Luther King, Jr.'s style of biblical interpretation showed through in his actions. The Bible, emphasis on love for one's enemies, and inspiration by historical figures such as Henry David Thoreau and Mohandas Gandhi combined to form King's steadfast belief in nonviolence. This was exhibited during several sit-ins and peaceful demonstrations that were led

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[71] King, 287.

[72] Ibid.

[73] Ibid.

[74] Ibid.

by King.[75] His nonviolent principles were especially apparent on January 30, 1956 when his house was bombed. Once he ensured that his wife and kids were safe, he walked on his porch to face an angry black crowd who were equipped with weapons and ready to retaliate with violence. He calmly told them not to get panicky and pleaded with them to get ride of their weapons. He strongly asserted that the problem could not be solved by violence.[76] He argued that "we must meet violence with nonviolence," then drew on the Bible for further support by quoting Jesus: "'Love your enemies; bless them that curse you; pray for them that despitefully use you'...We must love our white brothers, no matter what they do to us."[77] King found much success and progress with this philosophy, all while drawing a huge following in the cause to bring equal rights to blacks in the United States. Still, not everyone followed King's philosophy; many sects of Christianity across the country were conflicted over civil rights issues.

The Other End of the Spectrum

One such sect was the Southern Presbyterian Church. After the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954, the General Assembly of the Southern Presbyterian Church adopted a resolution that all racial divisions within the church should be abolished.[78] This was immediately followed by desegregation resistance. L. Nelson Bell, a prominent voice in the resistance, argued that "there are (Christians) who believe that it is un-Christian, unrealistic, and utterly foolish to force those barriers of race which have been

[75] Williams, 397.

[76] James H. Cone, "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence," *Phylon (1960-)* Vol. 49, No. 3/4 (Autumn – Winter, 2001): 175.

[77] Martin Luther King, Jr., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, James M. Washington, ed. (San Francisco: Harper, 1986), 39.

[78] Julia Kirk Blackwelder, "Southern White Fundamentalists and the Civil Rights Movement," *Phylon (1960-)* Vol. 40, No. 4 (4th Qtr., 1979): 334.

established by God..."[79] This group insisted that *forced* desegregation would be detrimental to the church, causing an abrupt shift that would only irritate whites and blacks. Instead, Bell urged for *voluntary* desegregation so the shift could occur in a more smooth fashion, which eventually became the church's policy.[80] This directly contradicts King's argument that the civil rights movement should not "wait" for a natural transition to occur. King elaborates saying, "Freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed... justice too long delayed is justice denied."[81]

As the civil rights movement became more militant, the focus of white resistance shifted from rationalizing segregation to criticizing civil disobedience.[82] The Southern Presbyterians agreed that civil disobedience is justified if civil laws do not coincide with God's law; however, they determined that, with consideration of the laws and the situation in that time, "it does not seem likely that any case of civil disobedience is justified."[83] Furthermore, "scriptures state that we were to submit to our rulers."[84] This last statement alludes to a literal style of interpretation that was common among white southern fundamentalists. Still, their opposition to King and the civil rights movement was mostly theologically-based. The main source of biblical criticism toward the movement came from a different southern, white, Christian-affiliated group known as the Ku Klux Klan.

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[79] Blackwelder, 335.

[80] Ibid.

[81] King, Jr., "Letter From Birmingham Jail," 74.

[82] Blackwelder, 336.

[83] Ibid.

[84] Ibid, 339.

The Ku Klux Klan originally formed in 1865 soon after the conclusion to the civil war. It was organized by a group of six confederate army veterans from Giles County, Tennessee. After the war, whites were nervous about black retaliation against white populations. As a response to black emancipation, sporadic violence, economic chaos, and the leveling of several plantations in the county, the group of six convened to form the Ku Klux Klan.[85] The initial motivation for the Klan was to terrorize the newly enfranchised black voter.[86] The Klan grew rapidly throughout the state of Tennessee and eventually beyond its borders into much of the South and parts of the North. It had taken the form of a vigilante army that had chosen a path of violence as a means of "restoring the black man to his condition."[87]

At the time of the civil rights movement, the Klan's membership and influence had drastically dropped from the time of the its formation and expansion during the civil war. Nevertheless, the Klan maintained its effectiveness in spreading anxiety and fear throughout black communities. It reemerged from virtual nonexistence as a response to the Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, and the civil rights movement in general.[88] The Klan proved to be a formidable opponent, especially for King, because its members draw on the Bible for support in their ideology.

Perhaps the most important claim the Klan makes is that it accepts the whole Bible as scripture and "not just the few verses (it) likes."[89] It does not privilege the Paul's theology or the

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[85] Wyn Craig Wade, *The Fiery Cross: The Ku Klux Klan in America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, Inc., 1987), 32.

[86] "A Brief History of the Ku Klux Klan," *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* No. 14 (Winter 1996-97): 32.

[87] Wade, 47.

[88] "A Brief History of the Ku Klux Klan:" 32.

[89] Imperial Kludd, "KKK Christian Studies," *Brotherhood of Klans, Intl.* (16 March 2008), <http://www.ku-klux-klan.org/> (2 April 2008).

teachings of Jesus as King does. It supports their belief in white superiority by saying that the Holy Scriptures tell humans to love their own enemies, but not those of God. The Bible never teaches love for God's enemies; for the Klan, such a notion is "completely blasphemous and absurd."[90] Its members cite certain Old and New Testament passages for support of their beliefs. For instance, a common passage from the Old Testament reads, "...those who speak of you maliciously, and lift themselves up against you for evil! Do I not hate those who hate you, O Lord? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you? I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies" (Ps: 20-22). The Klan then takes this further by pitting black people against God because it claims Jesus was white. Connie Lynch, a prominent member and spokesperson for the Klan, explicated this idea at a rally in St. Augustine, Florida:

> Now, some of you say: 'But Jesus was a Jew.' That just goes to show you how these cotton-pickin' half-witted preachers have fooled you. Jesus wasn't no Jew, he was a white man...I've been through a lot of battles in my time, and I am still battling for what I know is right. I'm speaking for God, and you'd better hear what I say![91]

This type of rhetoric was, and still is, common for the Ku Klux Klan. Despite their strong opposition to the civil rights movement and Martin Luther King, they ultimately failed to reach their goal of maintaining power for white people. Perhaps the most important notion to consider is that everything for which they strove was done in the name of the Bible.

The abolition and civil rights movements both produce a common pattern that is essential if one is to attempt a modern study of rights issues. As discussed in chapter one, Frederick Douglass and the abolitionists eventually won out, given that society gradually assimilated to what they were preaching. Their ideas were progressive, even radical, for their time; and most if

[90] Imperial Kludd.

[91] Wade, 326.

not all of them were rooted in the Bible. The same can be said for Martin Luther King and those in support of the equal rights cause. King's biblical ideology was progressive for his time, just like Douglass. He faced strong opposition from fundamentalist groups and a reluctant society. Hence, in these two crucial eras in American history, the progressive ideology has broken through to enact change in the system. The most important commonality between King and Douglass was the source of their progressive ideas—the Bible.

King used the Bible to develop and reinforce his ideology. Importantly though, since he believed that the Bible contained a progressive revelation of God, he interpreted it as a form of literature, rather than a literal explanation of God's will. He, like Frederick Douglass, utilized a *christocentric* approach to biblical interpretation; he extracted key messages from the Bible that he found primarily from Jesus and the Apostle Paul. He was able to recognize the cultural conditioning by which the writers of the Bible were limited. Because of this, his philosophy was nondiscriminatory and contained the *christocentric* principles of faith, hope, love, and mercy.

On the other hand, the Ku Klux Klan left the Bible in the context of its time and tried to place it in the present, leaving out the overarching messages of love, hope, etc. This is the biggest issue with the Klan's literalist style of biblical interpretation, which is spelled out plainly in their philosophy: "...no matter how much (humans) change, or think (they) understand something, God's word will not change nor get softer because (they) got softer!"[92] The Klan did not believe, as King did, that the Bible is progressive and God's word changes or modifies throughout the Bible and into the New Testament. Now, with information and analysis of these two movements completed, a study of a contemporary, unfolding social movement is possible and necessary.

[92] Imperial Kludd.

Chapter Three: The Struggle for Gay Rights

During the abolition and civil rights eras, many American Christians drew on the Bible to both justify and condemn the neglect of equal rights to certain groups of people. The gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual (GLBT) rights movement essentially exemplifies the culmination of social progress over modern United States history.[93] Although other movements, such as the women's and those of other ethnic groups like the Native Americans, also took place in the contemporary era, the development of attitudes on biblical interpretation is best represented through the civil rights movement, abolition movement, and the struggle for gay rights. Like the abolition and civil rights movements, two opposing views of the GLBT rights movement emerge when Christians draw on the Bible for answers. Two high profile Christian-based organizations that adequately represent the two sides are Focus on the Family and Reconciling in Christ. However, before delving into these specific examples of biblically–based activism, one must be cognizant of the larger debate over homosexual rights.

The Issue of Homosexuality

The controversy over homosexuality can be discussed through multiple fields —biology, politics, morality, religion, etc. Furthermore, no matter the field from which one attacks the issue of homosexuality, there is still more than one rational conclusion for people to draw. Perhaps the most basic argument against homosexuality stems from a biological standpoint. One side of the argument asserts that a homosexual human being is incapable of achieving the most

[93] Modern U.S. history, for the purposes of this paper, refers to the beginnings of the abolition movement (early-to-mid 1800s) up to the present.

basic function of all living organisms—procreation.[94] In this sense, homosexual behavior would go against the "natural" order of things, thus making it an undesirable orientation. The opposing viewpoint claims this point to be irrelevant, since human beings are clearly no longer in a state of nature. Procreation is not a necessity for every person since humans are well populated and civilized. Furthermore, some heterosexual humans start or become infertile, which also denies the reproduction.[95] These two biologically based arguments are a small portion of the larger argument that within that field. Still, they are important for one to understand the scope of the greater debate.

Another important angle on the issue of homosexuality comes from the field of politics. The political goals of the gay rights movement have included obtaining important protections for homosexuals, mainly in the form of antidiscrimination laws. The push for antidiscrimination laws among gay rights activists has led to a higher degree of public antagonism against GLBT people, much like civil rights movement in regard to antagonism against desegregationists. Still, most Americans are not ready to support criminal sanctions for homosexual behavior.[96] A vast array of polling material shows that most Americans perceive gays as people who have chosen to pursue an unhealthy and immoral lifestyle, whose code of behavior makes them unfit to occupy many important positions in society.[97] In this sense, the gay rights movement faces a similar uphill battle as blacks did during the civil rights movement. The first step for the movement was to use the law as a tool for social change.

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[94] Daniel L. Olson, "Talking about Sexual Orientation: Experience, Science, and the Mission of the Church," James M. Childs, Jr., ed., *Faithful Conversation: Christian Perspectives on Homosexuality* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003), 112.

[95] Ibid, 113.

[96] James W. Button, Barbara A. Rienzo, and Kenneth D. Wald, "Identity Politics, Law, and Policy Innovation," *Private Lives, Public Conflicts* (Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1997), 2.

[97] Ibid.

Activists for gay rights have pressured the federal government to label verbal and physical assaults on gays and lesbians as hate crimes. They have also sought to remove the threat of legal persecution by pushing states to repeal antisodomy laws and to disregard sexual orientation in child-custody proceedings.[98] During the early part of the movement, the primary goal for gay rights activism was to secure antidiscrimination protection, using the law as an instrument of social change.

With the consideration of these brief biological and political backgrounds of the gay rights movement, an in-depth analysis of biblical interpretation during the movement is then necessary in order for one to fully comprehend the evolution of biblical interpretation and its application in society. Just as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Jr., and southern white fundamentalists embodied the core beliefs on the rights issues in their respective eras, the two general positions of the gay rights movement are exemplified by two opposing interest groups.

Familial Activism in the Modern Era: Focus on the Family

The first such group, representing the conservative end of the spectrum on the issue of gay rights, is Focus on the Family. It was founded by prominent psychologist Dr. James Dobson. Dobson was born in Louisiana and the son of a traveling evangelist in the Church of the Nazarene.[99] He received a Ph.D. in psychology from the University of Southern California in 1967. As a result of his concerns over marital and familial issues discussed at the National Women's Conference in Houston, he created the nonprofit, tax-exempt group called Focus on

[98] Button, Rienzo, and Wald, 3.

[99] Ruth Murray Brown, "The LaHayes and James Dobson," *For a "Christian America: A History of the Religious Right* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2002), 174.

the Family in 1977 to "teach scriptural principles of marriage and parenthood and to help preserve and strengthen families."[100]

Dobson first publicized his message through books, several magazines about family relationships, and a radio program that featured his advice to families. The organization originally attracted fundamentalist and evangelical churches; that changed, however, in 1980 when Dobson was appointed by President Carter to the steering committee of the White House Conference on Families.[101] This resulted in more public exposure to the principles of Focus on the Family, which caused a significant increase in staff, members, contributors, and budget. In 1988, Focus on the Family had a staff of more than 550, a new $14 million headquarters in Pomona, California, and a budget of $42 million.[102] Along with the popularity came a redefinition of the organization's mission toward a more explicitly evangelical Christian emphasis: "To cooperate with the Holy Spirit in disseminating the Gospel of Jesus Christ to as many people as possible, and specifically, to accomplish that objective by helping to preserve traditional values, nurturing and defending the God-ordained institution of the family, and promoting biblical truths worldwide."[103]

In 1988, as the organization grew, Dobson developed a series of new policy initiatives, two of which had crucial implications for the GLBT community. First, Dobson started a new radio program, *Family News in Focus*, specifically for the discussion of political issues.[104] This

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[100] Brown, 174.

[101] Ibid, 175.

[102] Ibid.

[103] James Dobson, "Our Mission, Vision, and Guiding Principles," *Focus on the Family: Nurturing and Defending Families Worldwide* (March 2008), <http://www.focusonthefamily.com/> (9 April 2008).

[104] Dobson made sure that less than five percent of the Focus on the Family budget went for political work; this was in order to maintain its tax-exempt status.

policy pushed for an already politically active group to become more so. Second, Focus on the Family began to encourage the formation of pro-family coalitions in each of the fifty states. These coalitions were to be completely independent, maintaining an "associated" status rather than "affiliated" in regard to their connections to Focus on the Family.[105] Since Focus began the promotion of state coalitions, about thirty three states out fifty states now have coalitions actively promoting pro-family issues. The coalitions vary in emphases but include pro-life, antipornography, public education critics, and gay rights opponents.[106] Dobson had now created a powerful, pro-family group with many arms of influence and solid base of members.

Unlike other strong conservative voices like Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson, James Dobson is not an ordained minister. Still, he is unwavering in his moral principles in keeping with the strict holiness codes that were part of his Nazarene upbringing. "Wesleyan perfectionism," which is part of the "holiness doctrines" originally adopted by Methodists, is persistent in the Church of the Nazarene.[107] Nazarenes prohibit illicit sexual activity and insist on marital fidelity, both of which are bases for Dobson's hard line stance against homosexual behavior.[108] However, the largest influence for Dobson and Focus on the Family over principles regarding GLBT rights comes from the Bible.

Limiting GLBT Rights Through the Bible

The most important trait of Focus on the Family is that it interprets the Bible literally, using it as a guide for how society and individuals should behave, and believing it to be

[105] Brown, 176.

[106] Ibid, 177.

[107] Ibid. The Church of Nazarene broke off from the Methodist church at the beginning of the twentieth century.

[108] Ibid, 178.

unaffected by time. The result of this form of interpretation is the repression of rights for certain groups of people. In the case of Focus on the Family, it cites particular passages of the Bible to justify their beliefs about the nature of homosexuality.

Focus on the Family refers to numerous passages in the Old and New Testament to deny the morality of GLBT people. First, Focus alludes to the Torah to get at the heart of the matter, the Bible says, "Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable" (Lev. 18: 22) and "If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have done what is detestable (Lev. 20: 13).[109] If one were to sincerely consider both of these passages, using biblical literalism as the method of approach, it would be difficult to deny the claim of Focus on the Family that homosexuality is immoral. By disregarding the cultural context in which the verses were written, neither leave much room for interpretation. Additionally, it is interesting that Focus does not list the entire passage in Leviticus 20: 13; it continues to say, "...they shall be put to death; their blood is upon them." The group is clearly using a rhetorical skill by omitting parts it does not accept.

Other parts of the Old Testament that Focus cites are not as straight forward. For instance, the group values the stories told in the book of 1 and 2 Kings: "(Asa) put away the male temple prostitutes out of the land, and removed all the idols that his ancestors had made" (1 Kings 15: 12) and "(The king) broke down the houses of the male temple prostitutes that were in the house of the Lord, where the women did weaving for Asherah (2 Kings 23: 7).[110] These verses require a bit more interpretation; it is not clear if male prostitution is the condemned act or

[109] James Dobson, "What Does the Bible Say About Homosexuality?" *Focus on the Family: Nurturing and Defending Families Worldwide* (March 2008), <http://family.custhelp.com/> (12 April 2008).

[110] Ibid.

homosexuality in general. Furthermore, it does not come close to addressing lesbian, bisexuals, or transgendered persons.

James Dobson then moves to the New Testament to support his claims about the morality of homosexuals. Importantly though, he only mentions verses from the letters of Paul: "Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robber—none of these will inherit the kingdom of God" (1 Cor. 6: 9-10); also, "...Sodom and Gomorrah and the surrounding cities, which, in the same manner as they, indulged in sexual immorality and pursued unnatural lust, serve as an example by undergoing a punishment of eternal fire" (Jude 1: 7).[111] Again, these passages leave room for interpretation to the unbiased observer. Dobson and Focus on the Family, however, hold strongly that "obviously, these Scriptures leave little room for debate; the only way their message can be negated is to reject the authority of God's Word."[112]

The fact that Focus on the Family avoids the teachings of Jesus when defending its position is crucial. The group clearly asserts infallibility in the Bible, yet they avoid parts of it, such as passages that evidently advocate indiscriminate inclusion of all people, that do not support their argument. As a result, other Christians have come to different conclusions on the issue of homosexuality, drawing on the gospel of Jesus as inspiration for the inclusion of GLBT people as an equal member of the Christian and American communities. One such group that engenders this ideal is Reconciling in Christ (RIC). They reject certain claims of Focus on the Family by highlighting the main themes in the gospel of Jesus. Unlike Focus on the Family, this group avoids biblical literalism when interpreting the Bible, acknowledging its sometimes

[111] Dobson.

[112] Ibid.

contradictory and unclear nature.[113] Instead, it utilizes the same Christ-centered method of interpretation that Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King used.

Equalizing GLBT Rights Through the Bible: Reconciling in Christ

Reconciling in Christ is an organization that stemmed from a group called Lutherans Concerned/North America (LC/NA). Formed in 1974, the LC/NA consists of laypeople, pastors, and congregations that are primarily from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) who work for the full acceptance and inclusion of people of all sexual orientations and gender identities in the life of the Church. They believe that "God values and embraces each person as a beloved child, the Spirit gives a diversity of gifts for the common good, and Jesus Christ calls us to work for justice."[114] In 1984, Reconciling in Christ was formed as an offshoot of LC/NA to recognize Lutheran congregations that welcome GLBT believers. The RIC has steadily gained momentum, and its roster now exceeds three hundred settings, including congregations, synods and organizations.[115]

The founders of the RIC argue that most GLBT people assume that they are not welcome in any church unless the church tells them otherwise. GLBT people view general welcoming messages from churches as an "everybody but me" type of statement. Because of this inherent disassociation between many churches and the GLBT community, RIC urges churches to make a special effort to communicate the same welcome.[116] In other words, RIC "seeks to make clearer

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[113] "About LC/NA," *Lutherans Concerned/North America* (April 2008), <http://www.lcna.org/about.shtm> (16 April 2008).

[114] Ibid.

[115] "Reconciling in Christ Program," *Lutherans Concerned/North America* (April 2008), <http://www.lcna.org/ric.shtm> (16 April 2008).

[116] Ibid.

the policy of churches where all people are welcome as full members, regardless of their sexual orientation, their gender identity, or that of their children, siblings or friends."[117] RIC also stresses the fact that it does not seek special treatment for GLBT people; instead, it recognizes that an extra effort must be put forth to bring the GLBT community to the same level of inclusiveness as other Christians.[118] While RIC's philosophy is clearly grounded in Christian thought, more importantly, its members support their ideals with scripture.

Before justifying its beliefs about homosexuality through the Bible, Reconciling in Christ cites a biblical passage that it believes is calling for the need of the group: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation...So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor. 5: 18, 20).[119] Clearly, the group interprets Paul's message in 2 Corinthians as a mandate for their work. While RIC uses these words for their literal meaning, the message inherent within them is consistent with the message of Jesus. Hence, RIC holds that their reading of the Bible (whether literal or not), along with a Lutheran emphasis on justification by faith through grace, is consistent with the *christocentric* hermeneutic that underlies the whole Bible.[120]

The most striking difference in methods of reading the Bible between RIC and Focus on the Family is that RIC does not quote particular passages to support its values, whereas Focus does. RIC instead strives to extract the key themes that they claim are ubiquitous throughout the entire Bible. For example, in the book of Romans, the Apostle Paul explains to the church in

[117] "Reconciling in Christ Program."

[118] Ibid.

[119] Ibid.

[120] Ibid.

Rome that Jesus' gospel is for both Jews and Gentiles, both of which were sinners: "Welcome on another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God" (Romans 15: 7).[121] In the same fashion, RIC uses this value of inclusiveness and applies it to the modern day issue of GLBT people. Even though Gentiles were not originally the chosen people of God, they are included in Jesus' gospel; even though GLBT people may be condemned in certain parts of the Bible, they too are included in Jesus' gospel.

Most of RIC's direct biblical references derive from the letters of Paul, but the group also uses the gospels to illustrate the way in which Jesus lived as a model for modern human interaction.[122] RIC emphasizes how many of the people Jesus helped and healed were those dwelling on the margins of society.[123] For instance, Jesus cleanses lepers in each of the synoptic gospels; in Mark and Luke, Jesus heals a man with an unclean spirit; and in John Jesus raises a man named Lazarus from the dead. All of these illustrate how Jesus associated with people that most others would not.

When comparing these two groups, Focus on the Family and Reconciling in Christ, one can plainly see the differences in their approach to biblical interpretation. Focus on the Family stresses specific passages in the Old and New Testaments that, in the group's view, label homosexuality as immoral. Reconciling in Christ, on the other hand, accentuates the inclusive behavior of Jesus during his life and the all-encompassing portions of Paul's theology. At times the group accepts certain passages as literal, as long as the message taken from them are in

[121] "Reconciling in Christ Program."

[122] This is probably because Paul is often cited as the only New Testament source that condemns homosexual behavior, as exemplified by Dobson and Focus on the Family.

[123] "About LC/NA."

accordance with the behavior and teachings of Jesus. Furthermore, instead of seeking to justify homosexual behavior, RIC attempts to justify and encourage the welcoming of all sinners, like Jesus did.

The contrast in biblical interpretation between these two groups gives an adequate representation of the greater GLBT rights movement; more importantly though, it falls in line with the pattern identified from the abolition and civil rights movements. Like Frederick Douglass and Martin Luther King, Jr., the philosophy of Reconciling in Christ has progressive qualities that go against the norms of modern Christianity. The group accepts the Bible for the message it proclaims, rather than the specific words it produces. RIC uses the same *christocentric* approach that Douglass and King embodied so well.

RIC's opposition, Focus on the Family, aligns with other groups from the past that interpret the Bible literally, like certain proslavery Christians in the nineteenth century and fundamentalist organizations of the civil rights era. However, the most significant difference that distinguishes the GLBT rights movement from the others is that it does not yet have a clear conclusion. Unlike the civil rights and abolition movements, where one side undoubtedly won out over the other, it is unclear which side will achieve its goals in the GLBT rights movement.

Conclusion

With all three movements considered, it is evident that the Bible has been a powerful social force throughout United States history. During the nineteenth century, biblical interpretation was pushed to the forefront of the slavery debate. Those who wanted to preserve the institution of slavery on Christian grounds demonstrated that the Bible both directly and indirectly sanctioned slavery. They drew upon both the Old and New Testaments to strengthen

their argument, while also pointing out how Jesus knew about, yet never condemned, slavery. In the end, they showed that by using a literalist approach to biblical interpretation, slavery is in accordance with God's word. On the other side, Frederick Douglass and the other abolitionists pointed to the spirit of the Bible to condemn slavery. Douglass emphasized the principles of love, mercy, hope, and faith that were taught and practiced by Jesus to support his argument. For him, slavery went against the purpose of the Bible and the purpose of Christianity as a whole.

The civil rights movement then reiterated similar themes during the push for desegregation in the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr. embodied the one side of the movement; through his preaching and writing he too accentuated the spirit, rather than the letter, of the Bible. He focused on the life of Jesus Christ and the theology of the Apostle Paul to form an all-inclusive social gospel. Yet, he met strong opposition from southern white fundamentalists and the Ku Klux Klan, all of whom quoted specific passages from the Bible to support their views.

In light of these first two movements, a pattern for biblical interpretation in relation to social change had been well established: the *christocentric* method of biblical interpretation had won out in both instances. Yet, the GLBT rights movement has still met considerable opposition in its push for equal rights and inclusion in the church. James Dobson's Focus on the Family has been a prominent voice for maintaining (or going back to) traditional family values. For this group, that means rejecting the homosexual lifestyle based on biblical texts. Reconciling in Christ, on the other end, advocates for churches to include everyone regardless of distinctions, because everyone is a sinner according to the Bible. RIC holds that imitating the inclusive behavior of Christ and the inclusive theology of Paul is truly in accordance with the message of the Bible.

The pattern that emerges after an analysis of these three movements is crucial because of the implication it has for the future of Christianity. The pattern is essentially illuminates the positive and negative effects of the two primary methods of biblical interpretation. The literal approach to biblical interpretation, on one hand, can guide its readers to act in positive ways that cultivate society: being faithful to God, loving one's neighbor, avoiding acts such as murder and theft, performing acts of humanitarianism, etc. Yet, on the other hand, it has the potential to guide its readers to act in irrational ways that degrade society and the integrity of certain people: cruel and unusual punishment, slaveholding, oppression of women and GLBT people, etc. Overall, literalism proves to be dangerous for two reasons. First, it "indulges the reader in the fanciful notion that by virtue of natural intelligence the text is apprehensible and therefore sensible."[124] Second, the power of personal analysis enjoyed by literalist readers may well "obscure the meaning of the text by paying attention only to what it says."[125] Rather than freeing the text from the text from Christian antiquity and medieval exegesis, literalism traps readers into the "illusion that truth and meaning are the same thing."[126] It is this differentiation that King, Douglass, and RIC were cognizant of, and also ensures the *christocentric* method of biblical interpretation its place in the future of Christianity.

The *christocentric* approach to biblical interpretation, in contrast to literalism, can only guide people to live as Jesus did; and presuming the readers are Christian, Jesus is a model they already want to follow. Living like Christ only leads one to act in ways that advance the moral wholeness of society, which entails the inclusion of all types of people, regardless of their color, the nature of their sins, their sexual orientation, etc. The Bible is an inclusive book; it has the

[124] Gomes, 45

[125] Ibid.

[126] Ibid.

ability to draw people of cultures foreign to the people and cultures of the Bible to understand it as their own.[127] Thus, the inclusiveness and empowerment of marginalized groups of people must be the defining trait of biblical interpretation. Just as Jesus reinterpreted laws from the Torah to be more fitting of his ideology, modern Christians should follow his example by redefining their own and/or their church's attitudes to align with a *christocentric* view of the Bible.

The ultimate purpose of a transition from literalism to *christocentrism* is to ensure the integrity and reputation of Christianity in American society. The GLBT rights movement highlights how the same mistakes from the abolition and civil rights movements are being repeated by many Christians. They are trying to deny GLBT people access to certain universal human rights in the public arena as well as equal inclusion and acceptance in the church, all based on a literal interpretation of the Bible. This behavior was shown to be morally wrong through the institution of slavery in the nineteenth century and the segregation of blacks and whites in the civil rights era, and it is still wrong against GLBT people today.

These examples from United States history show that no belief system can survive if its ideology is not in accordance with the interest of its people. While only some Christians can logically accept a literal view of the Bible, all Christians can acknowledge that living in likeness to the behavior, principles, and ideology of Jesus is appropriate to be a serious Christian. As a result, all groups of people can be included in the Christian community and discussions over moral issues like GLBT rights can be based on Jesus, rather than specific passages of the Bible. Therefore, Reconciling in Christ embodies what shape the future of Christianity should take in order to maintain its position in the United States public sector, and its credibility as a respectable religion among religious and non-religious people.

[127] Gomes, 22.

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