

LIVING IN SLAVERY'S SHADOW – When History Gets Personal

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When David A Wilson, a 28-year-old African-American man from Newark, New Jersey meets David B. Wilson, a 62-year-old white man from rural North Carolina, the conversation begins in a unique way. “My name is David A. Wilson and I believe your family once owned mine.”

“Meeting David Wilson”, an MSNBC documentary, is an absorbing personal journey through family histories. “It’s all “about creating a dialogue in America,” David A. Wilson said. “What you have in the two of us is the story of two races and two generations honestly talking about the dark cloud of slavery and its continuing impact on our families and our lives even today.”

Slavery’s dark cloud casts a long shadow over church history. In the most confrontational and uncomfortable part of the conversation David A. Wilson asks how Christianity and slavery can comfortably co-exist.

David A: “Correct me if I’m wrong – you’re ancestors were also Christians?”

David B: “Yes.”

David A: “Do you believe that being slave owners was in conflict with Christianity?”

David B: “I do.”

David A: “So How do you view them now?”

David B: “At the point in time that this occurred, I think it was the norm. It doesn’t make it right. I don’t know that they felt it was a conflict.”

David A: “‘Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.’ (Luke 6:34) That’s not something hidden in Christian culture - It’s an obvious sort of teaching. That was in contrast to this awful system and that’s one thing I can’t get around. I can’t get around the hypocrisy of it.”

David B: “You have human people who do bad things, whether it was during the time of slavery or present times. It’s not condoning slavery – it’s not condoning what’s happening now. You have situations where people – you can call it hypocrisy – claim to be one thing and do another.”

David A: “I can’t understand it today – and I can’t understand it from history’s perspective.”

Is there a legitimate partnership between slavery and Christianity? That’s an important question for every American and certainly every American.

SLAVERY’S GOSPEL – Frederick Douglas said, “Slavery at one time had the power to interpret the Bible and control the church.” When seeing “others” (Luke 6:34 - Greek word *anthropos* meaning all humanity) slavery saw a racial hierarchy with white Europeans on the “God ordained” top spot. Slavery’s theology of superiority was reinforced by exercises like a slave catechism:

Q. Who gave you a master and a mistress?

A. God gave them to me.

Q. Who says you must obey them?

A. God says I must.

Using scriptures like “Slaves obey your earthly masters in everything ...” (Ephesians 6:5), churches reinforced the “peculiar institution” by establishing an ecclesiastical caste system – i.e. because you’re black and inferior – this (slavery) is God’s place for you.

IS SLAVERY IN THE BIBLE? – Yes but not chattel slavery by race. In the Old Testament under the theocratic rule of the kings, people with debts could work them off as “indentured servants.” The “Year of Jubilee” canceled all debts.

In the Greek and Roman cultures of New Testament times, artists, writers and poets could be willing “slaves” supported by wealthy benefactors. The Greek word for “slave” - “*Doulos*” meaning literally “bond servant” - would resonate within the context of both Old Testament and New Testament cultures. The unusually cruel kidnapping, rape, torture and murder, fundamental to the trans Atlantic slave trade which endured for generations, would not.

CAN SLAVEHOLDERS BE CHRISTIANS? Because Christianity was and is often mixed with country, family, commerce and blood – it becomes very difficult to define faith in spiritual terms. Billy Graham said, “A Christian is someone who has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.”

If I know Jesus Christ, if I understand His heart, if He lives inside of me and I see the inclusive nature of His Kingdom and if I understand the pervasive brutality and pure evil of the slave trade, I can’t be a slaveholder no matter how normal or lucrative it was. And I can’t continue to practice the bigotry that still makes 11:00 am on Sunday morning the most segregated hour of the week.

WHERE ARE WE NOW? “Slavery is indeed gone,” Frederick Douglas said, “but its shadow still lingers over the country and poisons the moral atmosphere of all sections of the republic.” Where is this shadow? One out of three black men born in this country will spend significant time in prison. The high school drop out rate within some urban school systems is as high as 75% and 56% of black children live in single parent households. This is moral poison, the cancerous elephant in the room, the permanent underclass that slavery has created - still supported by a core belief in white supremacy.

WHAT CAN WE DO? We can define our faith. We can destroy our Euro-centric glasses and begin listening to people of color as real equals not projects that need fixing. For God’s sake – and I mean that literally – let’s get into this conversation!