
Emancipation Sunday
Chapel in the Park United Church
August 2, 2026
by Rev. Dr. Paul Shepherd

Based on 1 Corinthians 12:12-20 and Luke 4:14-21

Today, we celebrate Emancipation Day. And I feel like we need to start a bit of background. Because I do not know what people here already know.

To quote from the website, canada.ca, “On March 24, 2021, the House of Commons voted unanimously to officially designate August 1 Emancipation Day. It marks the actual day in 1834 that the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 came into effect across the British Empire.

Canadians are not always aware that Black and Indigenous Peoples were once enslaved on the land that is now Canada. Those who fought enslavement were pivotal in shaping our society to be as diverse as it is today.

Therefore, each August 1, Canadians are invited to reflect, educate and engage in the ongoing fight against both anti-Black and anti-Indigenous racism and discrimination. Emancipation Day celebrates the strength and perseverance of Black communities in Canada.

The transatlantic slave trade caused the deaths of millions of African people and their descendants. Many lost their lives as resistance fighters, during long treks to slave ships, or from mistreatment and malnourishment during the journey across the Atlantic. It is estimated that over 2 million African people died during that journey. In the end, most of the 12.5 million African captives were transported to Latin America and the Caribbean, while 6% were brought to North America.

Once landed in North America, enslaved Africans and their descendants were forced to work in fields, do manual labour and do domestic work in homes. They were forced to change their names, abandon their faiths, reject their cultures, and stop speaking their native tongues. The enslaved Africans were exposed to the most brutal forms of torture and abuse, all enforced by law.

In his book *Canada's Forgotten Slaves: Two Hundred Years of Bondage*, the

Quebec historian Marcel Trudel estimated that there were approximately 4,200 enslaved people in the area of Canada known as Nouvelle France, and later in Upper and Lower Canada, between 1671 and 1831. Initially, approximately two-thirds of these enslaved people were Indigenous and one-third were of African descent.

After British colonial settlers established Upper Canada, the number of enslaved Africans and their descendants increased significantly. It is estimated that 3,000 enslaved men, women and children of African descent were brought into British North America and eventually outnumbered enslaved Indigenous Peoples.”¹

That description on the [canada.ca](https://www.canada.ca) web site is a good starting place. We just need to remember that each one of those 14.5 million people were human beings. People who had their own dreams, hopes, aspirations. People who had children and were someone’s child. People who loved and were loved. And we should remember that Emancipation Day has been celebrated every single year 1834. It just was not recognized by the Government of Canada until 2021.

There are many good curated resources to learn more about the transatlantic slave trade. And as I said, I do not know what you already know. So this year it seemed fitting that I should talk about the Christian dimension to this history.

To open, let me ask you something.

[image: does the bible endorse slavery?]

Does the Bible endorse slavery? And the more disturbing question, Does the God of the Bible endorse slavery? The answer is not even debatable. The Bible is clear - the God of the Bible endorses slavery.

The God of the Bible permitted the Israelites to take slaves from conquered peoples. Slaves could be beaten. Slaves could be taken as concubines, and even raped without serious consequences². I refuse to read out the biblical passages that endorse those immoral behaviours, but you can find them in Genesis, Exodus, and Leviticus. Reach out to me if you’d like a deeper dive into this.

Some people make excuses for this, saying that slavery in the Old Testament was

¹ <https://www.canada.ca/en/canadian-heritage/campaigns/emancipation-day.html>

² <https://michaelpahl.com/2017/01/27/the-bible-is-clear-god-endorses-slavery/>

not like slavery during the slave trade. They claim that slavery in the Old Testament was really “chattel slavery” which was a lot like harsh employment. But that is nonsense. Exodus 21 clearly states that slaves can be abused because “the slave is your property”. Old Testament slavery was no different from how we understand the term today.

Other people have tried to make excuses for this, claiming that if stronger commandments had been made regarding the treatment of slaves, those commandments would have been ignored. These people argue that society was not ready for such an inclusive message. That idea puts the God of the Bible into a very small and powerless box. The truth is simple. God - at least God depicted in the Old Testament - took the time to tell people to not eat shellfish but did not find the time to tell people that slavery was immoral.

Not only are there specific passages that endorse slavery. But some of the wide narratives embedded in the Old Testament affirm slavery. Consider the story that revolves around Joseph. One of Jacob’s sons. The Joseph who had the coat of many colours.

Pharaoh had a dream about 14 cows walking past him - 7 fat cows followed by 7 skinny cows. Also, seven heads of grain full and good, followed by 7 heads of grain withered and thin, scorched by the wind. Joseph was the person who interpreted the dream correctly. The dream referred to 7 years of plenty followed by 7 years of crop failure and famine. And for that correct interpretation, Pharaoh put Joseph in charge of the whole land of Egypt.

During the 7 years of plenty, some foods were put away for future use. So when the 7 years of famine came, Egypt had food that they could distribute to other people. For a price. And do you remember what the people had to pay for food?

In the first year, people paid with money. After the money ran out, people paid with their livestock. After the livestock ran out, people paid with their land. And after the land ran out, people paid with their own lives. Genesis 47:21, “Joseph reduced the people to servitude, from one end of Egypt to the other.” Verse 19, people needing food declared “we with our land will be in bondage to Pharaoh”

Joseph was Pharaoh’s friend so of course his own people - the Hebrew people -

were not enslaved. And Hebrew people moved to Egypt in numbers.

And then, if we just flip a few pages, in Exodus 1:8 “Then a new king, to whom Joseph meant nothing, came to power in Egypt. That new king did not know Joseph, or the Hebrew people.” That king put the people he liked into power and enslaved the Hebrew people alongside all the other people that Joseph had enslaved.

So to summarize this long mythical story: Joseph did not invent slavery. Slavery has been around as long as humanity has been around. But Joseph instituted slavery in Egypt. And then, when the winds of favour changed, Joseph’s own people were enslaved in Egypt alongside other people. The Hebrew people were enslaved in Egypt because of a process that Joseph initiated. And they did not like it.

The essential narrative is that slavery is just fine - as long as it does not happen to me. The Bible does not oppose slavery - as long as it happens to someone else. The Bible supports slavery.

And this should not really surprise us. Every single part of the Bible was written by people who lived in cultures where slavery was as normal as having lunch. The biblical authors would not have seen slavery as strange. It was part of their environment. Like how a fish cannot see the water it is swimming in. Biblical authors likely could not see slavery (or racism, or sexism) because they were completely embedded in that reality.

What has been the Christian response to slavery over time? Let’s consider the passage in Exodus 21:20-21. I need to offer a trigger warning here. These words are disturbing. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible it reads,

[image: quote below]

“When a slaveowner strikes a male or female slave with a rod and the slave dies immediately, the owner shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, there is no punishment; for the slave is the owner’s property”.

Now - how do we understand this text today? Simple. The text is racist and wrong. Period. A better question might be - how have Christians understood this text historically, and has that understanding changed over time?

I want to know what churches - and preachers - said about this text in the past. I suppose we need a time machine to answer that question. And believe it or not, I do have

that type of time machine. Here. Today.

One way to get a sense of what churches taught in the past is to read Bible commentaries. Commentaries are often large multi-volume sets that give biblical texts alongside interpretations and references. Commentaries are designed to express well-supported ideas. They represent very middle-of-the-road interpretations. So commentaries represent what was being taught in churches at the time that they were written.

[show: commentary from 1952]

Here is a commentary from 1952. This is part of a 12 volume set. 1952 is not all that long ago. But this was written before the Civil Rights Movement. The Civil Rights Movement aimed to end racial segregation and discrimination. This commentary predates the Civil Rights Movement.

[image: 1952 commentary text]

The text from 1952 reads slightly differently from the NRSV today. “When a man strikes his slave, male or female, with a rod and the slave dies under his hand, he shall be punished. But if the slave survives a day or two, he is not to be punished; for the slave is his money.”

What is different? The text is more sexist. And we have this strange twist that the slave is now declared as “money”.

[image: 1952 interpretation]

The interpretation says this, “The laws governing the corporal injuring of slaves show the effect of resting on two irreconcilable postulates, i.e. that the slave is a human being, and that he is another man’s property.” It then goes on to say that the loss of property is equal to the fine to fit the crime, so the death of the slave is punishment enough for the slavemaster.

So in 1952, it was at least acknowledged that slaves were human beings. But declared that it was also clear that slaves were the property of others. And when faced with those “irreconcilable postulates”, ownership was seen as a more fundamental right than being a human being. The interpretation sided with the owner, not the slave.

[show: commentary from 1825]

Here is a commentary from 1825. This is part of an 8 volume set. This was written before emancipation happened. This commentary was written and published when slavery was still legal in the British Empire.

[image: 1825 interpretations]

The biblical text is almost the same, but the explanation for why the slaveowner should not be punished for the death of a slave is different. It says, “if the slave survives the beating, a day or two, the master was not punished; because it might be presumed that the man died through some other cause. And all penal laws should be construed as favourably as possible to the accused.”

To say that all penal laws should be construed as favourably as possible to the accused at a time when innocent people were legally enslaved was ... insane. This commentary was what would have been read by ministers and biblical scholars prior to the Emancipation of slaves in 1834. This commentary was what was being preached to congregations in 1825. This was mainstream.

Biblical scholars in 1825 had no problem endorsing a text that supported slavery. But things were even worse for less educated people. And far worse for slaves themselves. Because there was actually a version of the Bible designed to be read to or by slaves. This was casually known as the “Slave Bible”.

[image: slave bible]

The actual title was “Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands. Published in 1807. And when they said, “select parts” of the Bible - they were serious. In the standard Protestant Bible there are 1189 chapters. Only 232 made it into this version. But this was not done to save on paper. Passages that might have prompted rebellion were removed³ while verses that reinforced the institution of slavery were retained.

For example, Galatians 3:28 was removed, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” But Ephesians 6:5 was kept, “Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters

³ <https://www.npr.org/2018/12/09/674995075/slave-bible-from-the-1800s-omitted-key-passages-that-could-incite-rebellion>

according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ.”

[image: emancipation day]

Today we might wonder why Christians ever supported slavery. But given the history and the biblical support for slavery, a more interesting question is, “why do Christians no longer support slavery?” Slavery was baked into traditional Christianity from day one.

There are a number of reasons why most Christians no longer support slavery. Here is a short-list and you may know other reasons.

The age of enlightenment taught us to think for ourselves. And slavery is obviously wrong just based on the fact that I would not want to be a slave myself. Society has moved on. And we can thank many secular people for helping drag the church forwards.

Another reason is that some Christians had always opposed slavery. But they were a minority voice. These Christians pointed to different passages in the Bible that opposed slavery. For example, Jesus’s numerous teachings on “love your neighbour” and the golden rule both clearly do not allow for slavery in any form. The general teaching that we are all created in the image of God also strongly points to slavery being fundamentally evil and wrong.

There are also specific texts - like the ones we read earlier that appear to renounce slavery. From 1 Corinthians, “For in the one spirit we were all baptized into one body - Jews or Greeks, slaves or free - and we were all made to drink of the one spirit.” And in Luke, Jesus says that “God has anointed Jesus to bring good news to the poor. To proclaim release of the captives and to let all the oppressed go free.”

Sadly, the gospels do not record Jesus saying something blunt, like, “Stop buying other people as property”. But the image of Jesus liberating captives suggests that there should not be any captives. Anywhere. Anytime.

So in 1825 the Church affirmed slavery. And in 1952 the Church - while recognizing that slaves were actually human beings - still affirmed that ownership had precedence over humanity and human rights. The question is - where are we today? And -

is there still work to do today?

Emancipation was intended to not only eliminate slavery, but also, to eliminate anti-Black racism. Clearly, that project was only partly successful. If it had worked there would have been no need for the Civil Rights Movement at all. The Civil Rights Movement attacked anti-Black racism and segregation directly. And it had some successes. But anti-Black racism still exists today.

I heard one story about an Emancipation Day event - held in the late 1800's, in Leamington, Ontario⁴. The event was held in Leamington Park. The event was progressing nicely until the police showed up. The police informed the event organizers that they were welcome in the park, but only up to a certain time of day. After that, the park became "whites-only". Can any of imagine celebrating freedom from slavery and being told you have to leave the park because you are Black? Emancipation is one thing. Anti-Black racism is another thing. And anti-Black racism persists even today. I see it all the time, actually.

I want to close with the words of Jesus we read from Luke. "Jesus stood up, read 'release to the captives,' rolled up the scroll, and said: today, this is fulfilled. Not someday. Today. Which leaves us with an uncomfortable question for August 2, 2026. What has to be true, what do we have to do, for that liberation to be true today."

Amen.

⁴ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZW2iCNXXCg>