

In Response to “Real Christians Honor Traditional Marriage”, by S. Donald Fortson

Dr. Fortson’s words remind me that theologians and church historians – north and south and magisterial sects as well as those of Reformed faiths – in the pre-Civil War years were in agreement that the Bible clearly endorsed slavery. The dominant hermeneutic in those years called for a literal, common sense, “plain reading” of scripture. Even those – from north and south – who were adamant abolitionists agreed that the Bible was clear in its support of slavery. Henry Van Dyke, pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Brooklyn, accused abolitionists of ignoring the authority of the Bible.

It is easy for us in our time today – even those of us who claim to know the absolute truth and the unfaltering holding of Christian teaching since the first utterance of Jesus – to become confused and to forget that human abilities and understandings change, even if we allow, for argument’s sake, that God is incapable or at least not susceptible to change.

Today we think it obvious that even though Biblical passages assume the presence of slavery as a part of life and encourage followers of the way to stay in slavery, the overwhelming message of faith (even as found in scripture) is freedom from bondage. It is easy to forget that anything dealt with in the Bible as “slavery” may have little or nothing to do with that “peculiar institution” in the United States. Today, I hope that even a professor at a right wing institution who must subscribe to certain beliefs and ways of thinking to obtain and maintain his position is able to say that slavery is wrong and that to attempt to support slavery by biblical example is a perversion of scripture.

I would also argue that biblical arguments for the subjugation of women are equally flawed, although I doubt Dr. Fortson will agree with me on that point, at least not enthusiastically. Parenthetically, do any women teach at the Reformed Theological Seminary?

My point remains that even the most extreme right-leaning theologies have tempered and changed on various issues. If Christian teaching has evolved in the course of a mere 100 years from a pro-slavery (if you will) position to a position that decries slavery, isn’t it rather arrogant to posit that Christian teaching and human understanding of scripture on the position of homosexuality will never change and is, in fact, the same as the mind of God on the issue? (What *IS* traditional marriage, by the way? Isn’t biblical marriage a system of chattel property rights? Surely Dr. Fortson isn’t trying to say that today’s legal marriage – a contract system – is the equivalent of marriage covenants as portrayed in scripture?)

I realize that I am one of the many Dr. Fortson says falsely claim the name “Christian”. I suppose the biggest difference between me and Dr. Fortson is that I would consider it incredibly egotistical – self-righteous even – for me to say whether or not God has chosen Dr. Fortson for salvation (Reformed theologians still think that it’s God’s choice, don’t they Dr. Fortson??). But then again, I am secure enough not to care whether Dr. Fortson thinks I am a Christian or not.

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