

LIVING & EFFECTIVE TRANSCRIPT — EPISODE 1 — THE SLAVEMASTER’S BIBLE

RICH: There’s this one phrase of the Bible from Hebrews 4:12 that I think we’ve taken for granted. In the Christian Standard Bible, it reads: “For the Word of God is living and effective, and sharper than any double-edged sword.”

I think we hear that phrase, and we imagine a simple process: People read the Bible. They understand the Bible. And then it makes a difference... For the better. But what if it’s not that simple?

Of course, we know what the Bible does for us. It corrects us. It inspires us. It leads us to a saving knowledge of Jesus Christ.

But when it comes to society at large, verses hit people in all sorts of different ways, depending on who you are, where you live, and when you live. And the Bible’s played a pivotal role in the world. It’s been effective. But that role isn’t always as straightforward as we’d like to think it is. That verse, Hebrews 4:12, describes the Bible as a *sharp* double-edged sword. That means it’s not going to flow smoothly against the contours of history. Sometimes it cuts against the grain, even when the Church doesn’t.

Christianity Today and the Christian Standard Bible set out to make a podcast that explored the living and effective nature of God’s Word. The idea behind this podcast was to try to get to the bottom of exactly what the role of Scripture was in some of the most pivotal moments in history.

And I’m gonna level with you... this has not gone the way we planned.

QUOTE: Civil Rights Activists, especially Christians, are looking around at other believers and they’re asking, “are we reading the same Bible?”

RICH: These are not a series of feel-good stories. The Bible is used in all sorts of ways, and sometimes, for not-so-righteous purposes. But we decided to focus on that tension, and figure out exactly what it means that God’s Word is effective.

QUOTE: The printing press is, in fact, the entire story, and Luther is sort of the afterthought.

RICH: In a word that contains atrocities like American slavery. When the Church is divided among racial lines. When the world sees Christianity as “uncool” or a “passing fad.”

QUOTE: When it happened, it was just like... This is just absolutely devastating. Because he wasn’t Bob Dylan anymore.

RICH: When the Bible is constantly misused... When obeying the Bible seems nearly impossible in the moment.

QUOTE: King received up to 40 death threats every day. The answers he got to the problem of evil from Protestant Liberalism... He said the answers didn't come there. And then he said, "I remember the God my father taught me about."

RICH: We believe that the Bible is living and effective. But the question really is... Effective at doing what?

Hi, I'm Richard Clark. I'm a producer for CT Podcasts and an editor here. I've been at CT for about 3 years. Before that, I worked at a Southern Baptist seminary. I have 2 degrees in theology, and I grew up in a small town in Southeast Alabama, and every day on the way to school and work I would see a confederate statue in the middle of an intersection. I would cross a railroad track. The trains that used that railroad track transported slaves through our town back in the days of slavery. Right behind my house, on the other side of the block, was a mansion that was owned by a Democratic politician who was part of a group of people who supported slavery.

So I've always been a little uncomfortable when I think about how Bible-believing Christians took part in slavery. But I've never really gotten to the bottom of exactly what was happening in that moment of history. I guess, for me, for a while now, it's been relatively easy to just trust what the bible says about itself. That it's working in the hearts of those who read it. But I've also just had some discomfort around how things have played out. For me, what the Bible did during the time of the Civil War and slavery, has been somewhat of an abstraction. I don't think I've ever really had to grapple with the nature of Scripture's efficacy in that time. So while it's not the easiest, that question is probably a good place to start in this series.

What I thought I'd be talking about in this episode was the ways that the Bible influenced people like Wilberforce and Nat Turner to overwhelm those who supported slavery. And how those who supported slavery didn't really care about the Bible.

Well, that's not exactly true. And the role of the Bible, actually, is pretty complicated when you look at it in this context. In fact, it's so complicated, that when I asked Mark Noll to come on the show and talk about its role in the time of the Civil War, he warned me that this might not be... the most cut-and-dry way of demonstrating the effectiveness of the Bible.

MARK NOLL: The very strong reliance of the United States' culture and society on the Bible shrank when people trusting the Bible couldn't agree on slavery, and Bible arguments defending slavery continued strong after the Civil War. If the South had won the Civil War, slavery would've kept going. And the South was as Bible-devoted as the North.

RICH: The Christian Standard Bible and Christianity Today present: Living and Effective, a podcast about the moment when humanity and the Bible collide.

NOLL: I'm not sure how I actually got interested in this topic, except that I was intrigued by how creative ministers were in the 1770s at applying the Bible in favor of the Patriot cause. So there was a lot of symbolism about Israel and its enemies. But now it's Britain that's Egypt, and the colonists are the children of Israel. Now, to me, as a Christian, that's not particularly persuasive.

So you had a lot of sermons, analogizing Britain as Egypt, America as Israel, but not very much arguing, for example, in Romans 13, should you have a revolt? Well, there's a little bit. There's a couple good Patriot sermons explaining how that should happen, and a couple of Loyalist sermons explaining how it shouldn't. But, overwhelmingly, it was this kind of metaphorical, analogical, typological use of the Bible. But, the point that really got my interest, and probably got me started on this, was doing just a little bit of history of African Americans.

Now, what was the Bible angle for African Americans? Not as many African Americans read, and, of course, there wasn't the opportunity to form churches until you get into the 19th century, but there were African Americans reading the Bible, and they *also* analogized things, but the analogies were sometimes completely reversed from the Patriots.

So, when Governor Dunmore in Virginia, the British governor, said, "If, slaves, you escape, and come to the British side, you'll be free." Britain was immediately described as Israel and the United States as Egypt. So you had a common reference to the Bible, both very forcefully, but at opposite application of Biblical themes, not so much arguments. A couple Presbyterians, a man named Bourne, who actually got kicked out of the Presbyterian Church of America for making these arguments in the 18-teens, he said, look: The apostle Paul said there aren't going to be any man-stealers in heaven! Well, how can you have a slave system based on stealing Africans from their tribal homelands and think you're gonna go to heaven? He just got kicked out of his church. They didn't like it. Then, in 1829-or-30, David Walker, a freed slave in Boston, writes a blistering tract to appeal to the world on behalf of the colored people of the United States, and he just dives into Scripture and says, American treatment of slaves is worse than Egypt's treatment of the children of Israel. It's condemned throughout the Bible, and it just doesn't work. That was one of the very first really strong, publicly recognized appeals to the Bible against slavery. And then, you get some people associated with Charles Finney, a man by the name of Theodore Dwight Weld, eventually you get the Beecher family, you get other people who said, that's right! The Bible's against slavery. But, as soon as those arguments take off, and they're based on things like the golden rule, do unto others... do you want to be enslaved? Do you want your kids to be enslaved? Well, don't you enslave people! It was a powerful argument. But, it was not as powerful as ordinary people reading the King James Bible, and saying... Look: Abraham had slaves.

The mosaic legislation gave regulations on the children of Israel keeping enslaved people they captured from other tribes, and passing their children of those slaves on as slaves. And then look at the New Testament! Jesus spoke against many, many, problems... sins... he didn't once mention slavery as a sin.

And then there's the apostle Paul! The book of Philemon is the book in which Paul is sending a slave back to his master! And then you have in the Pauline writing, several other times, "Slaves, obey your masters, unto the Lord!"

What could be more obvious than that the Bible sanctioned slavery?

RICH: So we were in the middle of, like, a pivotal moment in US history, and it seems at first glance, that the Bible is failing. If you were an African American or an abolitionist at the time, you'd be extremely frustrated. You'd be struggling to figure out... like... wasn't the whole point of the Bible just to address this kind of issue? If not, what is it doing? And if you, like me, believe that the Bible is living and effective, how does looking at what the Bible did in this point of history effect that Truth?

And if you didn't believe in the power of God's Word...

STEVE PATTON: This was actually one of the issues that kept me away from the faith. For me, when people tried to engage me with Christianity, I could not move past... "That's the slavemaster's religion."

RICH: That's Steve Patton. He's an itinerant preacher and curator for the Regeneration Project, where he's spoken a lot about the Bible's approach to slavery. Obviously, this was something he struggled with. He had a hard time with the fact that those who were most dedicated to the Bible at that time were also *supporters* of slavery.

PATTON: Growing up as a strong, ethnocentric African-American man, Church and Christianity were all around me. So were the FOI, Muslims, and some others. I started following Jesus when I was 16, and it wasn't until I was in my 20's, "Okay, I can't just say, oh you know, we all sin and fall short of the glory..." when talking about something as massive as using the Bible to defend Slavery.

RICH: After everything Noll had said, I felt we needed something to remind us exactly what the Bible says about slavery. One of the biggest weaknesses of the Biblical arguments people were making in that day was really just starting from a category error. Essentially ignoring or even completely missing the context in which the Bible addressed slavery.

PATTON: What the transatlantic slave trade was would've been categorically rejected both in the New and the Old Testament. Like, just categorically rejected. First Timothy 1:10, where Paul was listing off these people who are damned... slave traders are in there. If you're a slave

trader you're going to hell. And then in the Old Testament where in Exodus 21 it says where if you do take someone into this form of servitude, this was more of an economic sort of thing, but, by the way, God was trying to get his people to engage with this already-existing sort of cultural thing. He was trying to get them to engage with it in a way that would be radically different. He was saying, you can only engage with this practice with people who are only around your region. You can't go to far-off countries and bring slaves in. That was categorically rejected. There was stuff like, if in a neighboring country, a slave runs away, and comes among the people of God, don't send him back! You count him as free. There was no bounty for catching slaves and sending them back. No, they get there, he's free. And you treat him like a brother.

RICH: It turns out that God has always been at work to subvert slavery.

PATTON: But especially, in the Old Testament, the rules that God lays out for how He wants His people to engage in this practice are super subversive, especially if you look at it throughout the course of human history as they began to practice it. As God lays out these specific ways to interact with these people who would sell themselves into servitude or people who were conquered and brought into servitude. The plan, in the end, was ultimately always to abolish it. If you look at the slave trade in that particular region, among the people, especially those places where the Israelites were, by the time that all the tribes are scattered, slavery is basically done. It's done. It's virtually a non-issue at that point, because in the way they would engage with it, it started to crack from the inside. All the power that the institution would start to hold, be it economic power, be it positional power, the way that you began to engage with it is like... "yeah, I could keep these slaves, but I've gotta keep paying them! And that's dead. And it's not our thing anymore. So I just might as well let them go free!"

RICH: So you're saying that God put in place systems that made... He disincentivized it basically?

PATTON: Right! So that whole thing was just a minefield for me. I'm like okay... wait. God gives a system how to deal with slavery? Why not just abolish it altogether? But, it's very subversive. With God playing the long game, because He has the ability to do that. God playing the long game, to ultimately disrupt it. Rather than just forcefully abolishing it, He sends His people amidst all the other peoples of the known world and shows them how to engage with this system in a way that's radically disruptive.

RICH: Okay, so we can acknowledge that God has a plan to obliterate slavery, and that eventually, that plan works. But when it comes to how God deals with evil in the world... Great, substantial, epic evil, is subversion and the long game really what we want to hear? When it comes to how God deals with an evil as great as slavery?

PATTON: Well, it depends on what we're talking about. If we're talking about what was happening *then* for God to send His people into a system to disrupt and ultimately to dismantle that system, yes! Especially the way that they were playing it, because it wasn't like... God said this thing, and ALL THE PEOPLES OF THE EARTH had to listen. No, he had this one nation... this one group of folks, and they had to be the ones to proliferate that out to everyone else.

RICH: My struggle with this kind of thing is... you know, books like Philemon, it feels like people looked at it and said, "you know..." face value "this is giving me permission, this is condoning the things we're doing."

PATTON: Yeah, you can do that when you're reading your own cultural bias into it. Then that allows you skip over parts where he says, like, "when you receive them, treat them like you treat me." What if the slavemasters who professed to be Christians, you know, looked at all of the slaves, and said, "Wait... I've gotta treat you like I would treat Paul? Oh wait..." The whole system would've been very different had they actually even applied that. Trying to make a clear-eyed Biblical case when you're blinded by money is very hard.

That's what Wilberforce was up against, when he was trying to abolish slavery. He realized that he was up against people's pockets. And he was committed, fueled by the Gospel to bring an end to it, but he knew he was fighting against people's money and that was a problem.

For me, the wildest case, with Christians engaging in this issue of slavery, the wildest case was up in New England. You've got the Puritans, in Boston, writing all of this great theology, and they're hanging people in the public square and they're okay with being slaveowners. But then you come down, today it's about an hour drive, you come to Newport, Rhode Island, which was, at the time, the home of the transatlantic slave trade, as much as 90% of the slave trade was going through Rhode Island. And you have the Quakers... They were not theologically robust. They did not believe in inerrancy of Scripture, they did not believe the Bible was the ultimate authority, but they did fully believe in "love your neighbor." And they could not shake "love your neighbor" and see what's coming in and happening at the ports right down there in Rhode Island. They would meet in the Quaker meeting house for prayer and for their abolitionist meetings. Now, they were not theologically robust folks! They were not what these guys were doing up in Boston. They just couldn't shake "love your neighbor" and what was coming in off the boats, so they stood there to fight for the abolition of slavery in Newport, and they won. Newport was the first place to legally abolish slavery. It was still happening, but the first big punch that needed to land, it landed. And they weren't making big, clear-eyed theological statements about it. They just couldn't shake "love your neighbor."

No man can serve two masters. If God be God, then serve Him. But if Mammon be god, then serve him.

There was a lot of people that, in trying to establish themselves in the new world, they were more committed to Mammon than they were to the Scriptures. A lot of them weren't looking for spiritual defense as much as they were just looking for an excuse to keep doing what they were doing, because it was comfortable and they were making money. Humans suck. Right? Especially if you come from a theological background that lets you hold tightly to this idea of depravity, you can see that depravity really playing out in their approach to try to use the Scriptures to defend this heinous act.

But in the end, do I think people truly used the Bible to defend slavery? And the answer's yes. But did they *truthfully* use the Bible to defend slavery? The answer's no.

RICH: So that's the catch. I mean, God wasn't coy about his opinions on slavery. He wasn't hiding something. You could argue that the Bible was as clear as it could possibly be in the way that it confronted cultural assumptions about slavery and obliterated any racist or greedy argument we'd make against it. But when it comes to getting our own way by misunderstanding the Bible, human beings are always gonna find a way. And that means, when it comes down to it, the biggest obstacle to our understanding of the Bible might just be our assumptions.

THABITI ANYABWILE: The greatest example of that, in my mind, would be Jonathan Edwards.

RICH: I talked to Thabiti Anyabwile—He's a pastor at Anacostia River Church, and he's written a bunch of books about this subject.

ANYABWILE: Edwards was as prodigious of an intellectual as America's ever produced. He seemed to write on almost everything—except slavery. It's Edwards with the academic theology, it's Edwards with the voluminous theology, it's Edwards with the sometimes intellectually sublime theology, but that proves quite worthless, doesn't it, on the biggest issue of his day?

RICH: For evangelicals, Jonathan Edwards is a really big deal. He's known as one of the greatest preachers of all time. One of the most uncomfortable things to realize about this time in the church's history is that it was also the context for what we call The Great Awakening. And Jonathan Edwards is credited with providing the philosophical and theological underpinnings of The Great Awakening.

I'll admit this... I don't get it. It kind of freaks me out. Is it really possible that a time marked by spiritual enlightenment and the salvation of many is also marked by apathy and ambivalence towards slavery? Well, yeah. In fact, Edwards's most famous sermon, "Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God" is one of the most renowned sermons from that period of time. It may have also been the most effective in leading his hearers to repentance, and kicking off that period of revival.

But just three weeks after calling his congregation to repentance, he sat down at his desk and wrote a defense of an unrepentant slave-owning Pastor.

ANYABWILE: What we have from Jonathan Edwards is an outline of his thoughts on slavery, which would be used in defense of a minister who didn't share Edwards's theology, was a theological opponent, and who was about to be fired by his congregation and the minister's association ended up tapping Edwards to make a defense of him. Now, in Edwards's sketching of a kind of Biblical theology of slavery, he seems orthodox enough. But he was answering the question from the perspective of a fairly aristocratic... you know... Connecticut River Gods, as they were called... Pastorate, and his loyalty to the pastorate and protecting even a theological enemy, was greater, in his mind, I think, than the sort of explication and application of that Biblical theology.

RICH: I guess you could say he was theologically distracted from the issue.

ANYABWILE: Or, to put it in sharper terms, he was a hypocrite on this point.

RICH: That accusation of hypocrisy would've hit Edwards pretty hard. There's a particular kind of irony here—Edwards's defense of this pastor owning slaves rested primarily on accusations hypocrisy. On the part of those who Edwards was disagreeing with. He essentially pointed out the degree to which those people, who accused the pastor, also benefited from slave ownership.

ANYABWILE: Now Edwards might think the revivals were the biggest issue of his day, but socially speaking, the developing biggest issue of Edwards's day is the slave trade.

And he missed it.

He gave no attention to it in his own life, and many evangelicals missed it, gave very little attention to it in their lives, and still some others just got it wrong. They gave attention to it, but in precisely the wrong direction.

RICH: I'm not sure what to do with all of this. Not only was one of the most important American theologians actively complicit in one of America's greatest evils of all time, this all happened smack in the middle of The Great Awakening.

And slavery ended because of a war. Not a Bible verse.

So if the Bible isn't actively putting an end to slavery, what's it doing?

ANYABWILE: So one thing is the Lord's judgment of the church. So, Abraham Lincoln doing that public theology that he does in the aftermath of the Civil War, understood that the Civil War had been a judgment. Even people before the Civil War were predicting judgment,

because of the country's sin in slavery and the slave trade. And so the Lord is judging, and that judgment begins at the household God but also expands to the entire country, and so that's part of what the Lord is doing. To put it another way, He's sifting the true church from the false. I would contend that a lot of what's called Evangelical Christianity is Apostate Christianity. It's not authentic just because we call it Evangelical. It's the distinction that Frederick Douglass would make between slaveholding Christianity and true Christianity. So I think the Lord is making that really clear; that there's a thing that calls itself Christian that actually denies the power of the Gospel. And there's a thing that looks despised and utterly weak, which indeed is Christian. Which is what the Lord prefers according to First Corinthians, right? So I think He's judging, and discriminating, and distinguishing.

RICH: The thing that surprises me here is that no one, NO ONE of note, was really getting this right when it comes to reading the Bible and seeing what it should be saying. And some of this stuff to us, with modern eyes, is pretty clear. The question I have, I guess, is, like, if a tree falls in the forest, and no one hears it, did it make a sound? Is there anything good happening?

ANYABWILE: You framed the question in terms of nobody of note is hearing it. And I would say, despite all of the distraction and all of the errant teaching, and the self-serving teaching of slaveholding society, indeed, lots of slaves heard it. It's the underside of society that often hears the Bible in more accurate and liberating and spiritually renewing ways. That's true in Jesus's own ministry, it's the poor and marginalized, the broken, it's women, and I think that's true in the American experience. So it's not that the Bible's not being heard, but it's not being heard by the elite. On the one hand, God is growing his church, so the Lord makes that promise in Matthew 16, He's keeping that promise even down to today.

The greatest miracle of Christianity in American is the conversion of African people to Christian faith.

That the slave would actually see the truth in the slaveholder's religion and embrace that truth and make it his own and shave off some of the slaveholder's errors in infancy in order to walk with Jesus. That is the most amazing miracle in the world. So that person who is looking at Christianity, saying "its failure is proof of its falsehood"—I'm saying, no, no, its converts are proof of its power and its genuineness, are you kidding me?

RICH: It turns out that some who would stress salvation were missing pretty badly on questions of ethics and piety. But at the same time, those who were suffering from that pretty terrible breach of ethics, were miraculously experiencing salvation. A wave of Christian awakening was happening in the hearts of the enslaved.

As Christians, we want the Bible to be effective. And not just be effective—we want it to be effective in ways that make us *feel* good. In ways that make us the key player here. We want it to be effective in our lives and the lives of people like us. We want heroic stories of great

people doing wonderful things because of the Bible. But that's not always the case. Sometimes what the Bible is doing is different than what we're trying to do. Sometimes the Bible is thwarting us, not improving our lives. Sometimes the Bible is judging us, not helping us to be better people. Sometimes the Bible is working, but in places we're not even looking.

ANYABWILE: Always know that God is up to good, and that He's at work in the world, and we should pray that we could discern it and join Him in it. Or, that He would take our weak and ineffective witness and do more with it than we can conceive at the moment.

RICH: That may not be enough to completely satisfy me, but it's enough to show me that God's Word, out in the world, isn't made void. And it works in salvific ways in the hearts of those who are truly willing to be humbled, and who are willing to truly, really, actually take up their cross. Whether we're humbled by the world, or whether we have to actively humble ourselves, Scripture is not hiding the truth from us. If we are not able to see it, well that's on us.

The Word of God is living and effective, and sharper than any two-edged sword, penetrating as far as to divide soul, spirit, joints, and marrow. It is a judge of the ideas and thoughts of the heart.

On the next episode of Living & Effective, Scripture cuts to the heart. It judges us. It's not something to be used lightly or carelessly. So, what happens when, suddenly, the Bible becomes a large-scale cultural phenomenon?

QUOTE: You had 120,000 kids at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas, and you had Billy Graham, and Kris Kristofferson, and Johnny Cash, it seemed for a moment in time as though Jesus could be a thing that would bring the nation together rather than tear it apart.

RICH: This has been Living & Effective. You can find more info at www.livingandeffective.com. Make sure to rate and review us on iTunes to help us spread the word. Living & Effective is a collaboration between Christianity Today and Christian Standard Bible. It is written and produced by me, Richard Clark, an editor at Christianity Today, and Cray Allred. Executive Producers are Nick Rynerson and me, Richard Clark. Engineering by Johnathan Clausen. Music by Sweeps and The Always People. Special thanks to Trevin Wax, Brandon Smith, James Kinnard, Michael Wojcik, Jennifer Clark, Morgan Lee, Natalie Liederhaus, Derek Rishmawy, Alicia Sharpe, Ted Olson, and Mark Gally.