



Update



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Vernon & Martha Hedge

Thomas Jefferson

Why an article about Thomas Jefferson? When I teach the Word, I'm concerned that those listening can apply biblical truths to their everyday lives. That's especially true when teaching my students at Calvary Commission. As I look at the great divisions in our nation, I am concerned about the moral decline. Once truth is no longer absolute, whatever one believes at the moment is "truth." The all-out attack on the Ten Commandments is a good example. They are absolute.

The next step is to remove history because we don't like it, or to judge the actions of people by our own filters. This is not a political article; it is a presentation of facts in the context of the time period they occurred. Slavery was wrong then; it's wrong now. Fully accepting that, we still cannot change the past. It is what it is. What we do moving forward is important.

To move forward, we accept the good and try not to repeat the bad from the past, but learn from both. As history reveals, Jefferson was caught in a moral and legal crisis. He opposed slavery but legally could not free his slaves.

Jefferson was a huge contributor to the creation of our new form of government, a form never used in history. We owe him a deep debt of gratitude for the biblical principles he helped incorporate into the fabric of our nation.

Jefferson was not an atheist, as some charge. He would not be considered an evangelical Christian,

but based on his writings he could be called a *cultural Christian*. He rejected all the miraculous elements of the Scripture including the virgin birth of Jesus Christ. He said he was a Christian in the sense that he was a follower of the teachings of Jesus.

He fully embraced the moral ground and values of the Bible, especially all the sayings of Jesus. He believed that Jesus represented

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the best system of morals known to man because they addressed issues all the way to the heart of man.

The important thing to know is that he was very well read in the Bible, and when any issue of how man should treat his fellowman came up, he would fully embrace what the Scripture taught.

He believed the God of the Bible was the Creator of mankind, that man was responsible to live by His laws, that God was the judge of all mankind, and that mankind needed God's help to live on the earth. All of these are revealed in the Declaration of Independence.

Jefferson Opposed Slavery

Because Jefferson, a co-author of the Declaration of Independence, owned slaves, he is being accused today of being a "blistering hypocrite" and a "racist." But is that true? Before we make a final conclusion, we need to take a deeper dive into history to see what Jefferson himself did and wrote, and the laws that bound him into a system he greatly opposed. Let's look at "the rest of the story."

This is an overview of my extensive research. If you would like greater detail, I have an 11-page document that I will be glad to email you, free of charge. It has 14 quotations by Jefferson on slavery, personal information about his life, his marriage to Martha Wayles, and

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gives a better understanding of what it cost him to stand in opposition to slavery. In addition, he paid his own expenses to serve our fledgling nation. When he died, he was in debt about \$2.5 million by today's money.

Attitude toward slavery

Over his lifetime, I have 14 quotes where he is on record opposing slavery, but I will only give four in this newsletter. At the time Jefferson passed the bar and became a member of the Virginia House of Burgesses in 1769, he approached the senior legislator Richard Bland in the House of Burgesses and proposed that they introduce a motion to abolish slavery in Virginia. Jefferson seconded the motion. Richard Bland spoke on behalf of the motion and his appeal created an avalanche of opposition. The most wounding of all was when Bland was denounced as an enemy of his country on the Floor of the House of Burgesses.¹

Jefferson introduced a total of **twelve bills** in Virginia and Congress to abolish slavery, but each bill was voted down. There were more issues than money and slavery, but money controlled in the South. The slaves were the work force of the plantations, and to abolish slavery would bankrupt the plantation owners. They were totally unwilling to do that. It took the Civil War (1861-1865) for the plantation system to be dissolved.

Jefferson became *number one outlaw* in **England** when his *A Summary View of the Rights of British America* was read before Parliament which he had written in 1774. Jefferson outlined all the wrongs

Great Britain was doing against the Colonies, especially calling out King George. Here is a portion on what he had to say about slavery:

The abolition of domestic slavery is the great object of desire in those colonies where it was unhappily introduced in their infant state (by Britain). But previous to the enfranchisement of the slaves we have, it is necessary to exclude all further importations from Africa, yet our repeated attempts to affect this ... have been hitherto defeated by His Majesty's negative (veto).²

For Jefferson the die was cast; everyone knew he opposed slavery. In 1776, Jefferson was a part of the five-man Committee charged with writing the Declaration of Independence. He and the committee adopted the following statement about slavery:

He (King George III) has waged cruel war against human nature itself, violating its most sacred rights of life and liberty in the persons of a distant people (black Africans) who never offended him, captivating and carrying them into slavery in another hemisphere (America), or to incur miserable death in their transportation thither (on the ships to America).

This piratical warfare (acting like a pirate), the opprobrium (shameful act) of infidel powers, is the warfare of the (tongue in cheek, supposedly Christian) Christian king of Great Britain. Determined to keep open a market where men should be bought and sold, he has prostituted his negative (his veto) for suppressing every legislative attempt to prohibit or to restrain this execrable commerce.³

When the Declaration came to the floor of Congress, the slave states doggedly refused to even consider this slavery statement as a part of the Declaration of

Independence.

Eventually, laws were passed that stopped the importation of new slaves. In 1807, during his Presidency, he wrote: *Whatever may have been the circumstances which influenced our forefathers to permit the introduction of personal bondage into any part of these states, and to participate in the wrongs committed on an unoffending quarter of the globe (the African people weren't bothering anyone), we may rejoice that such circumstances, and such a sense of them, exist no longer. It is honorable to the nation at large that their (Congress) availed themselves of the first practicable moment for arresting the progress of this great moral and political error (transporting slaves to America).⁴*

Jefferson wrote a letter dated August 25, 1814 to Edward Coles (1786-1868) who was a longtime friend and was at the time the Governor of Illinois. Governor Coles wanted Jefferson to join him in a crusade against slavery. Here is a portion of his answer to Edward Coles:

Dear Sir, Your (document opposing slavery) was duly received and was read with peculiar pleasure Mine (my thinking) on the subject of slavery of Negroes have long since been in possession of the public (known to the public), and time has only served to give them stronger root (in me)

The laws do not permit us to turn them (the slaves) loose I hope then, my dear sir ... you will come forward in the public councils, become the missionary of this doctrine truly Christian ... And you will be supported by the religious precept, "be not weary in well-doing" (Galatians 6:9). That your success may be as speedy and complete, as it will be of honorable and immortal consolation to yourself, I shall as fervently and sincerely pray.⁵

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So, it is evident that Jefferson saw the wrong of slavery.

Virginia Civil Law Concerning Slaves

Another factor concerning slaves was that Virginia had civil laws which made it financially next to impossible to free a slave in Virginia. For example, in 1723, Virginia passed a law that forbade emancipation of slaves under any circumstances, which as time passed were softened some. Two other laws were: (1) If a negro or mulatto slave would be set free, the emancipator pays for his transportation out of the country (Virginia) within six months.⁶ In most situations, this meant the slave had to leave his family behind, thus very few would claim this provision.

(2) Added to that, when an owner would set a slave free, he had to guarantee a bond for his education, training for a livelihood, and financial support of the slave while he was being prepared for free world living.⁷ Considering Jefferson's financial circumstances, Virginia law made it impossible for Jefferson to personally free his slaves—he didn't have the money.

Financial Catastrophe

At age 14, Thomas Jefferson inherited his father's plantation of 2,750 acres which included about 20 slaves. It's called Monticello today. His father was a surveyor, landowner, mapmaker, and a local magistrate. With that kind of inheritance, one would think money was not an issue.

But things started to financially stack up against him. On January 1, 1772 Jefferson married Martha

(Wayles) Skelton. Just two years into their marriage, Thomas Jefferson's father-in-law John Wayles passed away in 1773 and left him 11,000 acres of land, 135 slaves, and a mountain of debt—in today's money about \$500,000, mostly owed to British businessmen.

By 1773 Congress had issued their own paper money known as Continental Currency. When Jefferson sold 5,500 acres of his new inheritance to pay off his father-in-law's debt, he was paid in Continental Dollars just in time for the beginning of the Revolutionary War that started in April of 1775 with shots fired at Lexington and Concord, Massachusetts.

Virginia had created a state loan office for the purpose of repaying British creditors at the end of the War. Jefferson placed the sales money of his land in this Virginia state loan office. By the time the war was over the state had used much of his money to fund the war effort, and what was remaining had lost 97.5% of its value.

Congress had overprinted the amount of money causing runaway inflation, and the British Government saturated the Colonies with counterfeit money that was so well done that the damage was already done before the Colonist caught on to their plot. The British creditors would not receive Continental money as payment on debts.

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Thomas Jefferson was standing at the wrong place, at the wrong time, and in the wrong year. He would struggle for rest of his life dealing with his own debts, and those debts of John Wayles.

Social Demands

Social expectations were a constant financial drain. It was expected of a plantation owner that he would entertain guests who might likely stay two or three days or two or three weeks. Jefferson had a steady traffic of friends, business and political associates who would accept his hospitality with no realization of what it was doing to his finances. At times, family members lived with him.

Much of his political service to the nation was financed out of his own pocket. When Jefferson was appointed a diplomat to represent America during the years 1785 thru 1789 he traveled to London, Holland, Germany, France, and northern Italy. All of this travel involved political business, but it was all at his own expense.

Most of the time his daughter Martha (Patsy) traveled with him and at other times a second daughter Polly joined them.⁸

By the time he returned home, this diplomatic mission plunged Jefferson \$5,000 more into debt, which would be about \$95,000 in today's money.

Dumas Malone wrote a biography of Jefferson entitled, *Jefferson and His Time: The Sage of Monticello* in which nearing the end of Jefferson's life, Malone calculated that Jefferson owed \$107,273, which in today's money would be about \$2.5 million.⁹

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“All men are created equal.”

Some attacking Thomas Jefferson say he was a hypocrite to write in the Declaration that all men are created equal when he owned slaves. If all men are created equal, why didn't he set all his slaves free? Because of his owning slaves, they completely discount any and all his contributions to America.

However, they overlook that the only sense that Jefferson considered all men equal was in their “unalienable rights” as a person. He came to see and understand the unalienable rights that God had given to all human beings included blacks. Today people try to mix *privileges* in with *unalienable rights*; there is one distinguishing factor—unalienable rights don't cost anyone else any money.

And they overlook that legally and financially he could not, despite his best efforts, change the laws that would make it possible to free the slaves.

A champion for freedom

As we read Jefferson's full story, we can see the following things:

- He was raised in a society where slavery was considered “normal.”

- As he studied and practiced law in Virginia, he saw how unfair it was that black people were treated like cattle to be bought and sold.

- He came to a full understanding of unalienable rights as he viewed the treatment of slaves, the requirement for all Virginians to tithe to the Anglican Church whether they attended church or not, and the unfair taxation policies of Britain. Jefferson came to see and understand the unalienable rights that God had given to all human beings included blacks.

- He introduced a total of twelve bills to abolish slavery both in Virginia and Congress.

- He saw that emancipation would have to be a legislative action in which every slave owner would cooperate together to gradually free the slaves and set them up to be able to earn a living and to settle into society. This legislative law would replace the Virginia state laws that protected slavery.

- He supported and encouraged

anyone who was opposed to slavery and worked to abolish it.

- As a young man he believed slavery was wrong and still held to that position when he was old.



No—Thomas Jefferson was not a *blistering hypocrite*. He was a man locked into an economic situation of civil laws over which he had no control.

For people to try to remove Jefferson's name from all our public places, evidences a lack of knowledge or a departure from truth on their part, and reveals ulterior motives underneath all the protest—change America no matter what truth they violate.

He probably more than any other man was a champion for the *personal liberty* of every man which we so richly enjoy in America today. ✨

¹Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson* (1905) Vol. XI, p 417.

²Thomas Jefferson, *The papers of Thomas Jefferson* (1950), Vol. I, p 130.

³*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Edited by Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907) Vol. I, p 34.

⁴*The Writings of Thomas Jefferson*, Edited by Albert Ellery Bergh (Washington: The Thomas Jefferson Memorial Association, 1907), Vol. 16, p 290.

⁵Thomas Jefferson, *The Works of Thomas Jefferson*, Paul Leicester Ford, editor (New York and London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1905), Vol. XI, pp 416-420.

⁶W. O. Blake, *The History of Slavery and the Slave Trade; Ancient and Modern* (Ohio: J. & H. Miller, 1857), p 374.

⁷Ibid. Blake, p 386

⁸*Thomas Jefferson*, Edited by Merrill D. Peterson (New York: New York, Literary Classics of the United States, Inc., Copyright 1984) pp 1522-1523.

⁹Dumas Malone, *Jefferson and His Time: The Sage of Monticello* (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1981) Vol. 6, p 511, Appendix II, “Jefferson's Financial Affairs.”
