

Christians in slavery

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [January 21, 2015](#) issue



A tower in Corsica that was part of defenses built between 1530 and 1620 to protect from pirates, who frequently attacked to capture Christian slaves. Photo by [Tanos](#) under a [Creative Commons](#) license.

Churches in Africa and Asia often find themselves having to think seriously about issues that in the West are long forgotten. One issue these churches may have to confront is one of the oldest dilemmas for Christians—slavery.

Plenty of modern scholars have addressed the theological dimensions of human bondage, tracing the bitter conflicts between Christian slaveholders and Christian abolitionists. Far less noticed are the many situations throughout history in which Christians were themselves enslaved by nonbelievers and had to formulate ways of retaining their faith.

That issue surfaces repeatedly in the New Testament, but it did not simply go away when the Roman Empire accepted Christianity. In fact, it remained a matter for impassioned debate until quite modern times.

Today slavery is once more on the political agenda as the result of the depredations of terror groups like the Islamic State, which proudly boasts of enslaving captives in Iraq. Their statements also note the taking of Christian slaves by like-minded groups in Nigeria and the Philippines. In coming years we are likely to see many episodes such as the recent mass kidnapping of Nigerian schoolgirls. These may become so commonplace that they will cease to shock the global conscience.

One response is to consider intervention and rescue, or crushing the perpetrators. But let us assume that such actions are not immediately effective and that Christian populations find themselves in long-term captivity. How can churches understand these actions, and how can ordinary believers respond?

Such questions form the subject of a remarkably long literature created in urgent response to desperate practical needs. The famous writings of Ireland's St. Patrick, for example, focused heavily on the situation of Christian slaves, above all that of abducted women subjected to sexual exploitation. He praised their astonishing resilience and their ability to maintain their faith.

Commonly, the slavemasters of Christians have been Islamic rather than pagan. From the 14th century onward, Turkish Muslims expanded their power over the rapidly shrinking Byzantine Empire, conquering heavily Christian territories in Anatolia and southeastern Europe. Islamic holy warriors carried out raids deep into infidel territories, making Christians dread these *ghazi* raids or *razzias*.

Between 1500 and 1800, Christian Europe was multiply assailed by raiders and slave traders as North African pirate fleets ranged as far as Iceland and Ireland. Many thousands of Christians, including clergy, found themselves facing lifelong servitude in Muslim societies or decades of hunger, toil, and torment. (Of course, Christians in these years also held many Muslim slaves.)

How should Christians respond to enslavement? In the 14th century Greek bishops urged captives to retain their faith at all costs. Churches also tried to succor or ransom captives.

That effort inspired Catholic religious orders such as the Mercedarians, who placed themselves under Our Lady of Ransom. (The order will celebrate its 800th anniversary in 2018.) Apart from collecting and channeling money to free slaves, members of the order added a special vow that they would personally give up their own freedom and even their lives if that was required to free Christ's faithful. In one famous case in 1240, a brother named Serapion pledged himself as a hostage in exchange for some captives. When a ransom was not forthcoming, Algerian Muslims crucified him.

Martin Luther was also agonizingly aware of slavery. In 1520, discussing the right of a Christian community to choose and ordain clergy without episcopal approval, he imagined "a little group of pious Christian laymen taken captive and set down in a

wilderness.” Surely, said Luther, those captive Christians must choose clergy from among their number to carry out the sacraments and preserve their faith, even if that meant going outside traditional church institutions.

Luther’s concerns grew more urgent following the Ottoman occupation of Christian Hungary and the siege of Vienna, when Islamic forces threatened to push deep into Germany. During that crisis, he addressed himself to the many Christians who had already fallen into captivity and the still larger number who might soon follow them. He urged them to obey their unbelieving masters, as St. Paul had instructed his own contemporaries. Christian slaves should not seek to escape but rather accept their miserable condition as their personal Calvary. Above all, they should resist conversion, even if that would vastly ease their suffering.

The best hope that Luther could offer slaves was the belief that Ottoman successes portended the approaching end times. As it did for African Americans in later centuries, slavery generated an apocalyptic hope.

Patrick, Luther, the Mercedarians—these figures developed thoughtful Christian responses to the nightmare of slavery. It is horrible to think that modern churches might need to rediscover their lessons.