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*Christianity, Slavery and the
Slave Trade*

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Christianity, Slavery and the Slave Trade

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Themes of future issues:

Vol. 10, No. 2 (December 2007)
The Bible and Theological Education in Africa

Vol. 11, No. 1 (June 2008)
Methodology in Gospel and Culture Research



Editorial

The celebration of the bi-centennial of the abolition of the Atlantic slave trade in 1807 has afforded the opportunity for an appraisal of this achievement and its significance for different societies around the world. In view of this, Professor Andrew F. Walls led a doctoral seminar at Akrofi-Christaller Institute, 14–18 May 2007, on the theme of 'Christianity, Slavery and the Slave Trade'. He gave a series of morning presentations on the theme: 'A tale of three continents – West Africa and the Atlantic Slave Trade'. This issue features the biblical reflections that began each day and some of the afternoon case studies, which have a specifically West African focus. Perhaps what was remarkable about the seminar as a whole was the consistent picture, built up independently through its constituent parts, of the intractable nature of slavery, the tortuous process of its abolition, and the uneven quality of Christian witness in dealing with it.

Although we are unable to reproduce here the scene-setting presentations of Professor Walls, it may nevertheless be helpful to capture the highlights, as a backdrop and framework for the more focused articles. The major concerns of his presentations were to consider how this 'tale of three continents' came to influence the Christian missionary movement from the West, becoming its most outstanding social concern, and to understand the religious and cultural issues involved in the struggle for abolition. The Atlantic story marked an early form of globalisation, as the slave trade produced a globalised economy, tying continents together in ways that have continuing economic and political consequences. The story also raises religious and cultural issues that are relevant for the contemporary situation, including the place of Christian thought and action in the social sphere.

As an important component of the backdrop to the story as it affects Africa, Professor Walls drew attention to the fact that it was just under sixty years ago, in 1948, that slavery was explicitly rejected by all nations in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, a direct fruit of lessons learnt from the Second World War. Until that time, slavery had been endemic in human history. The Christian Scriptures testify to this, reaching as far back as the sale of Joseph to professional slave dealers in the patriarchal narratives. Slavery was subsequently interwoven into Israelite history, as Joseph's descendants became slaves in Egypt. Following the Exodus, the liberated slaves were told to continue to remember their history and allow it to affect their dealings with others. New Testament writings show that slavery remained a live issue in the emergent Christian churches in the Roman Empire.

A further component of the backdrop to the African story that Professor Walls highlighted was the history of the institution of slavery in Europe. As just noted, slavery was institutionalised in the Roman Empire and many early Christians were slaves. While slavery may have been less prominent in the early Christian nations of northern Europe, new forms developed, in the form of serfdom in a feudal system that lasted for a thousand years. Such an arrangement helped to condition the European mind to slavery, and the feudal system paved the way for the wider

institutional development of the Atlantic slave trade in later times. With respect to Islamic history, the enslavement of non-Muslims was considered acceptable, Muslims being prohibited only from enslaving Muslims (an application of aspects of Old Testament teaching).

He then traced the dynamics involved in the emergence and development of the trade in slaves from Africa, seeing it as one consequence of the discovery of the New World and the resulting need for labour in the mines and plantations. The Christian conscience in European nations had been dulled by the practice of serfdom and social stratification generally and by low views of 'primitive' peoples. Yet he discerned two new aspects to the Atlantic slave trade that set it apart from earlier forms of slavery, in that it exhibited new degrees of cruelty, brutality and inhumanity, much of it bound up with the forced displacement of large numbers of people. There was also a new association of slavery with race and colour.

Professor Walls raised the question as to why it took so long for Christians in Europe to recognise the iniquity of slavery. As part of the search for understanding, one should not neglect the stories of the Christian minority that did voice their opposition to slavery and the slave trade and sought to do something about it. This tradition of opposition developed into the Abolition Movement, which eventually had an impact on the political establishment in Britain through the parliamentary campaign to abolish the slave trade. One should also take note of the impact of the revivals of the mid eighteenth century, which succeeded in breaking down barriers between black and white Christians for a time, until the strength of institutional slavery led to renewed segregation. A further positive facet of the story to note is the significant role of Africa and Africans in the struggle, including some outstanding African writers, the Sierra Leone project for the resettlement of freed slaves, and the positive connections with the African Diaspora in the Americas and the Caribbean.

Professor Walls disputed the view that one reason for the abolition of the slave trade was that it was no longer profitable, for it can be shown that the trade was still highly lucrative at the time that it was abolished. He also drew attention to modern developments in questionable trade practices, which are widely tolerated in the interests of a 'flexible labour market', and made the sobering suggestion that if slavery were an issue now, with the same economic and security stakes as existed then, it is unlikely that the bill to abolish the slave trade would be passed.

In a final presentation, Professor Walls considered the aftermath of the abolition of the slave trade through the valiant efforts of those who sought the total abolition of slavery and the alleviation of the devastating effects of European settlement in Africa through mission and legitimate trade, such as Thomas Fowell Buxton, and his 'heirs', Henry Venn and David Livingstone. It is sobering to realise that fifty years after its official abolition, the slave trade was far from over, but was in fact increasing, and that the conditions under which slaves were transported were even more dehumanising because the traders were now seeking