



Human Trafficking: An Affront to God

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Slavery in its various forms is an age-old institution, as old as human civilization itself, and it appears that the world will continue to pursue ways to keep this scourge alive and profitable. Talking about human trafficking is certainly not a happy occasion, and it is not an issue faced just by the countries in Asia and Africa alone, but by the entire world, including Europe and North America. The United Nations' "Global Report on Trafficking in Persons 2022" reported a drop in confirmed cases of human trafficking for the first time since the issue began being tracked twenty years ago. The reason, however, traces back to the restrictions implemented all over the world due to the Covid pandemic. Despite the drop in confirmed cases of human trafficking, the report not only sheds light on the persistent nature of this issue. It also reflects the fact that the report only tracks confirmed cases, while providing no data on people who go through various stages of trafficking, whose cases are never confirmed for various reasons.

The churches across the world identify human trafficking as a serious affront to both God and humans. In Matthew's Gospel, we hear Jesus's command to "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mt. 22:21, NRSV). This command explicitly states that since humans bear the image of God, they belong to God alone, and no humans, be they the emperor or a social system, cannot, and should not, be allowed to own and possess any individual human being or a group of them. By extension, this command demands that churches emphatically pronounce that the emperor or socioeconomic system can only lay claim to materials and instruments of their own making, such as money and other transactional apparatuses of a societal arrangement, and never to anything that God has made, and certainly not on humans who bear the image and title of God. The challenge before us as churches and groups that strive to address human trafficking is to understand it as part of the

overall state of the economy and of late capitalism, and to discern the worth that the current socioeconomic system confers to individual human lives.

In the book of Revelation to John, it is instructive to read the verses where all commodities of the world that are commonly traded are assembled together with the trade of slaves and that of human lives (Rev. 18:11-13). The alternative translation that the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible provides for the very end of the thirteenth verse is instructive for contemporary discussions on human trafficking. Instead of the regular translation of “chariots, slaves—human lives,” the alternative translation given in the footnote of NRSV is “chariots, and human bodies and souls.” This verse informs us that until the reign of God is fully among us, the trade of human bodies and souls will continue in some form and fashion. If, until the eschaton, history will always be beset with the sale of human bodies and souls, then the proclamation of the church’s faith and hope in Christ that does not account for and address this tragic nature of human reality and the lived experience of the multitudes will fail to be a genuine proclamation of the lordship of Christ.

If human trafficking is trading of human bodies and souls against one’s own will, the world presents us with plenty of opportunities to voluntarily sell our bodies and souls. The challenge for Christians is to be able to live in this world, be able to make a living, and yet not to be conformed to the ways of this world as Saint Paul urges us: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect” (Rom. 12:2, NRSV).

These insights from Scripture should not dampen our spirits or make us lose our resolve in persisting with this holy trouble of confronting the torment of human trafficking. Rather, they should remind us that the one who was crucified and resurrected is the eternal symbol and sacrament that calls us to boldly encounter all situations where people suffer for no reason or choice of their own, and to proclaim in and through all those situations that Christ is indeed Lord, and that for a Christian there is no other Lord besides Christ—neither self-avowed emperors of this world, nor the social systems of our respective lands that we inadvertently and/or unknowingly subscribe to and support and often actively affirm and consider as lord.

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ⁱ UNODC, Global Report on Tracking in Persons 2022 (United Nations publication, Sales no.: E.23.IV.1), available at https://www.unodc.org/documents/data-and-analysis/glotip/2022/GLOTiP_2022_web.pdf

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