

Some Blacks See Spiritual Redemption In 'Slave' Motif

Written by {ga=Raymond Billy}

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By Raymond Billy | ResonateNews.com

The expansion of black civil liberties since Rhode Island enacted North America's first abolitionist law 150 years ago Friday hasn't stopped slavery — as an issue — from being a lingering cultural wound. Most black Americans have in recent history endorsed [apologies](#) and [reparations](#)

for ancestors' enslavement while a majority of their countrymen of other races strongly opposed those ideas, according to surveys. Despite the negative emotions the very word “slave” may still invoke, some black Christians are using the concept to connote spiritual redemption.

New Orleans-born rapper J. Miles, 26, says that spiritual slavery is universal. In a provocative [teaser](#)

released in February for “

[Slave Trade](#)

,” an extended-play production and a same-name single Miles released this year, he said “everybody's a slave. Some know it; a lot don't.”

“The question is: 'Who's your master'?” Miles asks in the teaser.

Miles said the American ethos of liberty masks the fact that most people are trapped in spiritual bondage. Escape from that onerous condition is found in being God's slave, he said, but people are generally too busy enjoying their perceived freedom to heed that option.

“A non-believer will never say 'I'm not in control,' but we are by nature bent on living a life of sin — we can't help ourselves,” Miles, who recently moved to the Phoenix, Ariz., area with his family, told ResonateNews.com. He said spiritual emancipation through slavery to God is a concept that even Christians find difficult to accept.

“A lot of times when we're confronted with the idea of slavery for Jesus, we filter it through our cultural understanding — especially African-Americans,” Miles said. “It's a turnoff, but when we look at it in terms of a biblical perspective, we see where Jesus said 'My yoke is easy and my burden is light' — but it's still a yoke.”

The Rev. Dallas Wilson Jr., vicar of John's Episcopal Chapel in Charleston, S.C., said the

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Gospels were intended to portray what a master-slave relationship looks like between God and his adherents.

“The word 'slave' is what we are to God, that was Christ's earthly relationship with God,” said Wilson, who is black and has been in ministry for 40 years. “Now, our relationship with Christ is supposed to be a slave-master relationship.”

Wilson said he became interested in the Bible's uses of “slave” in the 1970s. It was then that he noticed that late University of Chicago theologian Edgar Johnson Goodspeed's translation of the Bible used “slave” where other versions — such as the King James and the New American Standard versions — used “servant.” Later, he noticed the Holman Christian Standard Bible also used “slave” — the precise translation of the Greek word “doulos” — instead of “servant.”

“I wondered why they started translating it to 'servant.' What became obvious is that it's not the word itself, but the abuse of the system of slavery throughout history and its negative baggage that translators were trying to avoid,” Wilson said.

Decades after Wilson noticed the discrepancies between Bible translations, mega-church pastor John MacArthur, who is white, took notice as well. MacArthur — pastor of Grace Community Church in Sun Valley, Calif. — is the author of “Slave: The Hidden Truth About Your Identity in Christ,” released in 2010.

Wilson and MacArthur met in 2008 at The Cove — a retreat center for Christians in Asheville, N.C. There, they discussed the slave analogy's significance to Christianity. Three years later at Wilson's church, MacArthur was the featured speaker at a two-day conference on the topic. About 130 civic leaders in Charleston attended the gathering, Wilson said. The exposition received a mixed reception.

“There were some people who walked out shaking their heads and others who said 'My God, I've learned something new,’” Wilson recalled. “There are some people who haven't spoken to me since that day.”

Garner, N.C., resident Daniel Watkins said he believes slavery to God is preferable to what he described as the enslavements of his past impulses. Watkins, a graduate of the two-year evangelical School of Revival in Raleigh, said he was powerless to cease harmful habits on his own. **“People who don't like the idea of slavery think there's some middle ground — not being a slave to sin or Jesus — but there's no middle ground.” — J. Miles**

“In slavery, you don't control what you do. In my own past, I was addicted to alcohol and marijuana. I would do anything to get them,” Watkins, 20, said. “They were my master and they controlled me.”

Now, Watkins said, he finds liberty in allowing God to control his life.

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“The day I dedicated my life to Christ, that's when the desire to smoke and drink left. I can't explain how or why — it just happened almost immediately,” said Watkins, who now works at a Christian run child-care center.

In the song “Slave Trade,” Miles also says slavery to Christ equals freedom from self-destruction.

“It's only [Christ] that I'm needin.' Free from sin to be his slave, but his slavery's feelin' like freedom,” the lyrics say.

Miles said early in his college career at Xavier University in New Orleans, he “was a womanizer.” He said selfishness was one of his defining character traits. After Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans in 2005, his world was turned upside-down, Miles said. He was forced to transfer for a semester to the University of Houston. He said the traumatic upheaval of the hurricane caused him to seek stability and assurance in God. A year after ultimately graduating from Xavier, Miles said he was doing a Bible study from Romans 6, which says “you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness.” That passage gave him a different take on slavery, he said.

“People who don't like the idea of slavery think there's some middle ground — not being a slave to sin or Jesus — but there's no middle ground,” Miles said. “It's far better to be a slave for Jesus because when you are, you're liberated from the bondage of sin.”

Wilson — whose church held a second Christian slavery conference in February led by black Bible teachers — expressed a similar sentiment.

“I say it's better for me to be a slave of God. If you sat down and talked to other people, they might say something different. For me, it's freedom. I'm free to obey the spirit of God and not have to worry about what people think of me,” Wilson said.

PHOTO BY: Tiffa Day