Is God a Liberator or Oppressor?
Interactive Display Instructions
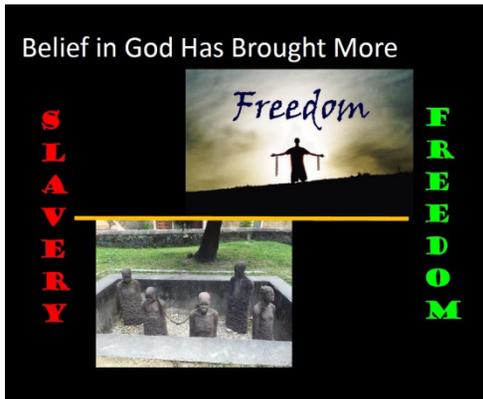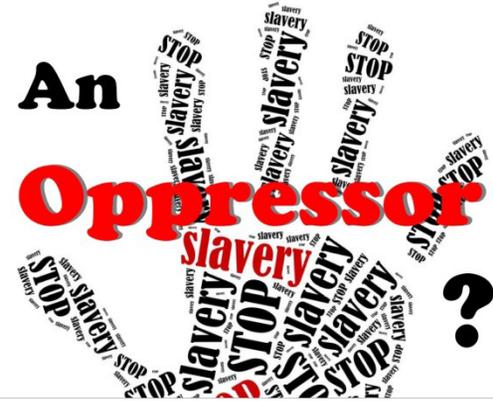
Purpose
The goal behind this interactive display is to engage people on a personal and intellectual level about the topic of freedom and slavery. It aims to challenge both Christians and non-Christians alike.

'Is God a Liberator or Oppressor?' Interactive Display Introduction
1. Invite people to participate: 'Hi, I'm _____ and I'm with _____. We're asking people about how ideas about God impacts different levels of freedom and slavery.'
2. Give them a set of 'dots' and a quick overview: 'Answer the questions with the dots. Go top to bottom, and left to right.'

3. Tell them that you'll 'When you're done, if you have time, I'd like to ask a few follow-up questions.'
4. Give them time to engage with the material. Ask: 'Which question stood out to you most? What questions does this make you think of?'

The Big Picture Conversations: The conversations I'm hoping to have can move from:
1. *The Bible Question*: Ask if they know what the Bible really says about 'slavery'
   a. American Protestants were the only English-speaking Christians in the world who believed that the Bible justified slavery. They did so because:
      i. They did not recognize that the Hebrew word *ebed* which was translated 'slave' did not have the same meaning as American slavery. Context was everything. Just as the phrase 'I'm mad about my flat' could mean 'I'm angry about my flat tire' in America and 'I'm happy about my apartment' in England. Context matters. And they ignored very important biblical passages about how Jewish law structured servanthood.
      ii. They did not recognize the social context. There was no commuting to work. In order to work for someone, or pay off a debt, you typically had to go live on someone else's land. Then you became a 'servant' (*ebed*).
   b. Just in the Old Testament alone…
      i. You couldn't force or kidnap someone into slavery (Ex.21:16; Dt.24:7). This was a dead giveaway that American slavery =/= biblical slavery.
      ii. You couldn't force someone to stay; you had to help them run away from an abusive master and then settle down (Dt.23:15 – 16). 'This provision is strikingly different from the laws of slavery in the surrounding nations and is explained as due to Israel's own history of slavery. It would have the effect of turning slavery into a voluntary institution' (Raymond Westbrook, editor, *A History of Ancient Near Eastern Law*, volume 2, 2003, page 1006). This was another dead giveaway that American slavery =/= biblical slavery.
      iii. These two principles above ruled out the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and American slavery. It also banned most of the ways people could become 'slaves' in ancient times:
         1. war captivity
         2. purchase from a slave trade: debt was personal and specific to the relationship because it was based on trust; debt could not be bought and sold as a commodity; therefore people could not be bought and sold either (Lev.25:42)
         3. perpetual involuntary servitude, like being born to slave parents
         4. sold by parents
         5. political vassalage
      iv. God limited the ways people could become 'slaves' to:
         1. Self-indenture because of misfortunate
         2. Self-indenture because of debt
         3. Self-indenture as a form of payback (e.g. for theft because in Jewish law, you had to pay back 2 – 5 times the value in Ex.22:1 – 14)
         4. Voluntary servanthood (Ex.21:2 – 6)
      v. God protected the humanity of the person who was indentured:
         1. This was a contract of labor, not a giving up of rights over one's own body. Therefore, there was absolutely no sex slavery. The Jewish law had a strict view of sex and marriage.
         2. People who were physically hurt in any permanent way by their masters/employers immediately gained their freedom (Ex.21:27 – 28).

3. People in servitude could still own property and keep their own savings (Lev.25:49 says 'he may redeem himself'), which was absolutely foreign to chattel slavery because in that system, masters own everything produced by their slaves. This was a dead giveaway that American slavery =/= biblical slavery.

vi. God built protections into Jewish law to help avoid servanthood
1. People were to give generously to their neighbor in need (Dt.24)
2. Debts were forgiven every seven years (Dt.15:1 – 2).
3. Interest rate lending was forbidden (Ex.22:25; Lev.25:36 – 37; Dt.23:19 – being repeated three times makes it very important!). In the Ancient Near East, exorbitant interest rates on loans were the chief cause of people being sold into slavery.[1] That is probably true again today.
4. Family land was restored to people every fifty years (Lev.25)

vii. The Essene community in the Dead Sea region forbade slavery, which makes sense because they were more like a monastery and not on family-based land. They recognized that Jewish law, when it made allowances for servitude, assumed the family land system.

c. In the New Testament…
i. Jesus never bought, sold, captured, released, or owned slaves (contrast with Mohammed – see below). Significantly, there are not even '*ebed*'-type slaves mentioned at the time of Jesus among the Jews.

ii. The approach to slavery is built on a foundation of the Old Testament.
1. Slavery is classed as a form of theft, and the worst extreme of theft (1 Cor.6:10; 1 Th.4:6)
2. Kidnapping is a heinous sin (1 Tim.1:10)
3. Slave trading (buying and selling of debt in the currency of people) is a heinous sin (Rev.18:13)

iii. Paul accepted certain forms of slavery and certain reasons for it (Eph.6:1 – 5; Col.3:22 – 4:1; 1 Tim.6:1 – 10), but not all!
1. Exemplifying the Christian tradition, Paul taught – especially in 1 Corinthians (composed between 53 – 57 AD) – that the individual human body belongs solely to God. Paul's basic thought about the human body, which reverberates throughout his first letter to the Corinthians is found in 6:19 – 20: 'Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own? For you have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body.' The human body will be resurrected in glory like Jesus' resurrected body (1 Cor.15:12 – 57). This would certainly have raised numerous questions about human relationships where the use of one's body is involved. Due to this concern that Christians be under Jesus' lordship, Paul loosened social relations and commitments between people, including marriage and slavery 'to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord' (1 Cor.7:35, see 7:29). This is why he says, ''Were you called while a slave? Do not worry about it; but if you are able also to become free, rather do that' (1 Cor.7:21). Paul therefore has a general preference for a slave becoming free. Paul's admonition to 'not become slaves of men' (1 Cor.7:23) shows an aversion to slavery or indentured servitude in general, despite the fact that in the Roman world, people voluntarily sold themselves into slavery to wealthy and powerful patrons to strategically advance their careers.[2]

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[1] T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker, editors, 'Slavery', in *Dictionary of the Old Testament Pentateuch*, InterVarsity Press: Downers' Grove, IL, 2003

[2] 'In Roman Italy of the first century BC, it was evidently possible for the slave to achieve individual distinction despite his lowly origins and to be happily received into the free, civic community.' (Keith Bradley, *Slavery and Society at Rome*, Cambridge: 1994, p.1) 'It was possible for such men, whether born into the imperial familia or recruited from outside, to advance through what loosely resembled a career structure, beginning with subordinate positions while still young and proceeding to positions of greater authority after manumission, which typically came when they were about thirty. For some, especially in the first century AD, the way was open to participate directly in the highest levels of Roman government.' (p.69) 'One captured slave from Smyrna 'served as a young administrator in the household of the emperor Tiberius, by whom he was set free. He accompanied Caligula when the emperor traveled north in AD 39 and was probably promoted to a provincial financial posting under Claudius and Nero before eventually becoming a rationibus, secretary in charge of the emperor's accounts, under Vespasian. Vespasian indeed conferred upon him the rank of eques, second only to that of senator and

2. If a master used coercive elements, it was seen as evil. The three relationships described in Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9 (marriage, parenting, master-slave) involve relations of power where the person in power is limited precisely in his ability to abuse his speech; this is significant because speech is the foundation of the use of social power. (1) The husband (5:25 – 33) is not to accuse his wife, separating himself emotionally from her in violation of the head-body unity of marriage; but he is reminded that Jesus washes his wife with the word. That is, Jesus speaks to the church not to condemn her, but to express his unity with her in love and build her up. (2) The father (6:4) is not to exasperate, anger, or embitter his children but to teach them patiently. (3) The master (6:9) is to 'do the same' as the slave in what the slave was taught (!), that is, to respect, fear, and serve with sincerity, and additionally, 'to give up threatening,' which is a verbal limit. One can imagine that any power relationship, not just these three, would follow this pattern. The Ephesians and Colossians passages are helpful because they assume that power is a fundamental reality in human relations; Christians simply inherit these relationships from the fallen world and/or the original creation order. Yet in every case, Christ subverts power to serve a distinctly Christian purpose, especially regarding how we speak. This is what leads the Christian community into being a community where songs of praise and a symphony of thanksgiving break forth from everyone, the vision of the church that Paul gives in Ephesians 5:18 – 20 right before talking about these three relationships. The church is to be a singing symphony where we all have a part. To be 'filled by the Spirit' as Paul says is to be a community where all speak, not just the powerful.

3. Slaves had recourse within the church to confront masters who sin, obstruct Christian mission, or ask for something immoral. Bringing Jesus' process for reconciliation in Matthew 18:15 – 20 together with Ephesians 5:22 – 6:9, we get a very important insight. If the wife, child, or slave needed to address the sin of the husband, parent, or master, what recourse did they have? According to Jesus, they can confront their counterpart in private (Mt.18:15), then with one or two witnesses (18:16), and then before the church (18:17) for not repenting in a way commensurate with what love, service, mission, and reconciliation in Christ require. Hence, the New Testament does not require of slaves unconditional obedience to their masters.

4. If the Christian slave was not manumitted immediately, s/he was still responsible for paying off her/his debt, finishing a sentence, etc. However, the desires for upward mobility and material gain were not considered appropriate motivations for anyone, including Christian slaves seeking automatic release from Christian masters (1 Cor.7:17 – 35; 1 Tim.6:2 – 11). Nor, on a practical level, did independence necessarily lead to an easier life, so manumission by a Christian master, while it certainly happened, was not automatic.

2. *The 'Which God' Question*: Which 'god' are we talking about? Does it matter? Great question!
   a. Islamic Slavery: In slide 4, the picture of the statues of people in chains comes from Zanzibar, and it remembers the vast Islamic slave trade which went all through East Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. The Islamic slave trade was predominantly female. Some scholars say between 2:1 and 4:1 women:men. That's because in the Qur'an, Muslim men can have up to 4 wives, and unlimited concubines. So Islam gave rise to a huge network of sex slavery.
      i. Up to four wives: 'And if you fear that you cannot act equitably towards orphans, then marry such women as seem good to you, two and three and four; but if you fear that you will not do justice (between them), then (marry) only one or what your right hands possess; this is more proper, that you may not deviate from the right course.' (Qur'an 4:3)

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his marriage, under Claudius, to a woman of free birth produced two sons who also gained equestrian standing.' (p.69ff.) 'Some ambitious men did the same [sold themselves] in the hope of becoming the stewards of noblemen or imperial treasures. This, in my view, was the story of the all-powerful and extremely wealthy Pallas, scion of a noble Arcadian family, who sold himself into slavery so that he might be taken on as steward by a woman of the imperial family and who wound up as minister of finance and eminence grise to the emperor Claudius.' (Paul Veyne, editor, translated by A. Goldhammer, *A History of Private Life: From Pagan Rome to Byzantium*, Belknap-Harvard: 1987, p.55)

    ii.   Unlimited concubines: concubines are referred to as 'those whom your right hand possess' in Qur'an 23:5 – 6; 33:50,52; 70:29 – 30. For example, 'Successful indeed are the believers…who guard their private parts [refrain from sex] except before their mates [wives] or those whom their right hand possess [slave girls]' (Qur'an 23:1, 5 – 6).

    iii.   Muhammed bought, sold, captured, released, and owned slaves.[3]

b.   Christian Abolition, Phase 1: Christian faith immediately started freeing slaves. When Constantine became the first Christian Emperor in 313 AD, within two years (315 AD), he passed laws banning the kidnapping of people into enslavement – punishable by death, banning the separation of enslaved families – thus recognizing their humanity which Roman law had not done before, and allowing people to simply declare in front of a Christian bishop that they wanted to free their slaves – thus making it extremely easy to bypass the Roman Imperial bureaucracy.

    i.   649 AD: Clovis II, king of the Franks, frees and marries his British slave Bathilda. Bathilda was a British Christian who had been kidnapped and brought across the Channel. The two had met when Clovis was but a teenager. Together, they start to dismantle slavery. In 650 AD, the Council of Châlon-sur-Saône, in Burgundy in modern day France, forbids the sale of Frankish slaves outside the Frankish kingdom. 'When Clovis died in 657, Bathilda ruled as regent until her eldest son came of age. Bathilda used her position to mount a campaign to halt the slave trade and to redeem those in slavery. Upon her death, the church acknowledged Bathilda as a saint.' Hence, Bathilda abolished slavery among the Franks.

    ii.   1000 AD: Stephen I of Hungary, the first Hungarian Christian king, who reigned from 1000 – 1038 AD and is generally considered to be the founder of the Kingdom of Hungary, declares in his laws that any slave who lives, stays in, or enters the Kingdom of Hungary would be free immediately.

    iii.   1102 AD: The London Church Council forbids slavery and the slave trade, which abolishes both throughout England. This decree emancipates 10% of England's population.

    iv.   1117 AD: Iceland abolishes slavery.

    v.   1315 AD: French king Louis X condemns slavery and unreasonable vassalage, insisting his kingdom will be a dominion of free men: 'As all men are by nature free born, and as this kingdom is called the Kingdom of Franks [freemen], it shall be so in reality. It is therefore decreed that enfranchisements shall be granted throughout the whole kingdom upon just and reasonable conditions.' This effectively made any slave setting foot on French soil free.

    vi.   1335 AD: Sweden (which included Finland at this time) makes slavery illegal.

    vii.   The Spanish and Portuguese took over those African slave ports because they wanted to sail around Africa to get to India and get spices for their food. They got Christians back into the slave trade, in order to grow sugar on plantations.

c.   Christian Abolition, Phase 2: So Christians abolished slavery once. Then they abolished it a second time. The British Christians abolished slavery in the British Empire. Then they sailed their navy into Muslim ports and shut down the slave trade. So Christians *imposed abolition* on

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[3] Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1990); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammed at Medina* (Oxford University Press: London, 1961); W. Montgomery Watt, *Muhammed: Prophet and Statesman* (Oxford University Press: London, 1965). See Qur'an 33:26 – 27: 'And He drove down those of the followers of the Book who backed them from their fortresses and He cast awe into their hearts; some you killed and you took captive another part. And He made you heirs to their land and their dwellings and their property, and (to) a land which you have not yet trodden, and Allah has power over all things.' In 627 AD, Mohammed conquered the rich Jewish community of Khaybar – a vast date palm plantation ninety miles south of Medina. On this occasion, Mohammed ordered the torture of a Jewish chief to acquire information about the location of his treasures. When the treasure was discovered, Mohammed beheaded the leader for trying to conceal the goods. Mohammed, on the same day he has her husband executed, then takes as a slave the wife of the chief, a very beautiful 17 year old woman named Safiyah, to be his eighth wife. Mohammed was then sixty. He took another Jewish woman for another wife. Large numbers of Jews were taken prisoner and sold. This story is compiled in the 9th century by Sahih al-Bukhari in writings that form one of the two pillars of Islamic jurisprudence (Volume 5, Book 59, Number 512). The distribution of booty is described in al-Bukhari Hadiths No.143, page 700. See Mako A. Nagasawa, Slavery in Islam, found here:

Islamic countries. I know that raises more questions about ethics, but that's the historical fact. Islam has never had an abolition movement from within. Historian Gerald Horne, *The Counter-Revolution of 1776*, argues that the American colonists rebelled from the British Empire because they recognized that the British Empire would soon abolish slavery, because of the English *Somerset* legal court case of 1772. So the U.S. was founded in part *to preserve slavery*, against Christian history and principles.

    d.   *Slide 5*: The Christian God is both good and powerful, but directs His goodness and power towards the transformation of people.

3.   *The Human Nature Question*: This comes up on Slide 6. Do we need liberation in other ways?

    a.   The Christian God does help us from within. That's why the Son of God shared in our corrupted human nature, so we could share in his healed human nature. There are many things that we are 'in bondage' to. And putting other people in bondage is one of the things we can be 'in bondage' to!

        i.   So if you want the ultimate example of a human being who is free – free in the deepest sense – then we have to look at Jesus. He is who a human being was meant to be. And he makes it possible for us to be like him.

        ii.   Be prepared to answer a few questions that people may raise out of curiosity.

            1.   *Why doesn't God instantly change our desires, wants, and habits?* Because our desires, wants, and habits come partly out of choices we make. And God doesn't make up experiences and put false memories in our heads. Not only that, neuroscience tells us that our brains are formed partly through our choices. So it seems like

            2.   *Why is human nature partly evil?* God didn't create us that way. He created us only good. But we took into ourselves the desire and power to define good and evil from within ourselves, from an individualistic perspective, as opposed to trusting God to define that for us.

For more information: See the website of New Humanity Institute, where I've collected material about slavery and abolition.
http://www.newhumanityinstitute.org/resources.earlychurch.htm.