

Slavery & Christianity (Paul's Letter to Philemon) by John W. Robbins, The Trinity Foundation, Tennessee, 2007. (18 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

Introduction

1. Length Does Not Determine Its Importance

Philemon is one of the shortest books of the Bible, and commentators, apparently because it is short, have tended to slight it. They seem to assume that anything short cannot be important or profound, but they should know better. The *Twenty-third Psalm* is short, only 117 words in English, and it is both theologically and philosophically profound. The *Lord's Prayer* is only 66 words, and it is a model of theological precision and profundity. The notion that something short cannot be important or profound does not hold true even for uninspired writings: Lincoln's *Gettysburg Address* is 272 words, and it may be America's greatest speech. Einstein's 1905 paper on the theory of relativity was both brief and revolutionary. [Page 7]

2. Impediments to Preaching the Gospel

Paul faced many adversities in preaching the Gospel: the sinful use of force by both Jews and Gentiles, sickness, poverty, shipwreck, and false professors and teachers in the churches. This last impediment was to become one of the worst obstacles to the spread of Christianity over the course of world history. [Page 9]

3. The Impediment of the Roman Catholic Church State

For centuries one of the biggest impediments to preaching and understanding both the Gospel and the whole counsel of God has been the Roman Catholic Church-State. The Jesuits used to boast that if they could have a child until he was seven, he was theirs for life. [Page 9]

For most of its history, the Roman Church-State has been a slaveholder. [See my *Ecclesiastical Megalomania: The Economic and Political Thought of the Roman Catholic Church (The Trinity Foundation, 2006)* for a discussion of the Romanist theory and practice of slavery.] It has also persecuted and murdered Christians whenever and wherever it has not been restrained by public opinion or civil government. Even worse, its leading teachers have developed arguments defending both slavery and persecution. [Acton, one of the greatest Roman Catholic historians of the nineteenth century, wrote a letter to Anglican Bishop Mandell Creighton in which he explained his standard of historical judgment: "For many years my view of Catholic controversy has been governed by the following chain of reasoning: 1. A crime does not become a good deed by being committed for the good of a church. 2. The theorist who approves the act is no better than the culprit who commits it. 3. The divine [theologian] or historian who defends the theorist incurs the same blame... To commit murder is the mark of a moment, exceptional. To defend it is

constant, and shows a more perverted conscience.” It was in the same letter that Acton stated his famous aphorism about power: “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely.”] Its claim to be a Christian church, which was almost universally accepted in the decadent and endarkened twentieth century, has also created a completely false impression of Christianity in the minds of billions. It has rendered them incapable of understanding, let alone believing, the Gospel. [Page 10]

4. Romanism Is Not Christianity

...Romanism is not Christianity; it is an entirely different religion. Romanism is a stew of idolatry, superstition, paganism, and tyranny, yet so widely regarded as Christian by the world that the world will not give Biblical Christianity a hearing because of the sins of Rome. [Page 11]

5. The Impediment of Southern Nationalism

In addition to Romanism, another impediment to preaching the Gospel in America, especially in the South, is the corruption of Christianity by Southern nationalism. Before, during, and after the War in the Annals of the United States), many preachers defended slavery. [Page 11]

6. Christian Defense of Slavery

Ten years ago the “Reverends” Steve Wilkins and Douglas Wilson published a small book defending Southern slavery. (They lifted entire paragraphs without attribution from a 1974 book titled *Time on the Cross: The Economics of Southern Negro Slavery* by economic historians Robert William Fogel and Stanley L. Engerman. All defenders of slavery have trouble with the Eighth Commandment.) Wilkins and Wilson titled their book *Southern Slavery As It Was*, and according to them, it was not that bad. Wilkins and Wilson are loud leaders of the Neolegalist, Vantilian, Reconstructionist, classical education and homeschool movements in the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA) and the Confederation of Reformed and Evangelical Churches (CREC). Wilkins and Wilson are typical of many professed conservative American Christians who think it fashionable and even Biblical to defend slavery and the feudal South. *[This group includes rabid racists who post their hatred on the worldwide web, claiming all the while to be Christian. See the website www.littlegeneva.com and notice its heroes – John C. Calhoun, Robert E. Lee, Stonehall Jackson, Robert L. Dabney, Cornelius Van Til, and Rousas Rushdoony – not one of whom, despite their many errors, expressed the racial hatred that consumes the racists on the web. Racism is a form of collectivism, and racists – white, black, Jewish, Japanese, Arab, Greek – are the most primitive of collectivists. Like other forms of collectivism, racism is increasingly influential in many countries.]* [Page 12]

The Bible supports freedom – spiritual, religious, political, and economic – not slavery; and those who favor slavery either do not understand or do not believe the Bible. In particular, they do not believe Paul’s letter to the slaveowner Philemon. [Page 13]

7. Verses 1-3: Paul’s Signature and Salutation

Paul is immediately identifying himself with the slave Onesimus, not with master Philemon, and not with Onesimus alone, but with all innocent slaves everywhere. *[The Thirteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which was ratified in 1865 and ended slavery in the United States, distinguishes between slavery as a punishment for crime and the enslavement of innocent men: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as a punishment for crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” So does the Bible.]* Paul describes himself as a prisoner, not as an apostle, because it contributes to the purpose of the letter, which is to end slavery. [Page 14]

8. Faith Unites Christians, not Race

Far from the Bible teaching racism or the Christian Greeks and Christian Jews hating each other, the Biblical message is one Gospel for all, both Jews and Greeks: one Lord, one faith, one baptism. According to the Bible, the only thing that matters is not one’s ancestry, race, or heritage, but one’s ideas: one’s faith. Ideas – not blood, genes, heritage, or ancestry – make the man. As Scripture says, a man is what he thinks (*Proverbs 23:7*), not what he eats or who his granddaddy was. [Page 16]

9. Fellow Workers for the Gospel

Paul describes Philemon as a “fellow laborer.” The word laborer indicates a humble status – not rich, powerful, prominent, or of the master class. Those professed Christians who defend Southern slavery and praise the antebellum South always imagine themselves as masters, never as slaves. But Paul does not imagine himself or Philemon to be other than they are – laborers, not masters, and he tactfully reminds Philemon that he too is a laborer. In the Gentile Roman world, labor was disdained, just as it is in all slaveholding societies, including the American South. In those societies labor is something that animals and slaves do, not gentlemen. But Christianity does not condone this heathen, Gentile attitude toward labor and slavery: God himself worked for six days creating the universe... [Page 19]

10. Verses 8-16: The Appeal to Philemon

Paul, unbeknownst to many commentators, wrote this letter as a form and model of church discipline. Again, unbeknownst to many commentators, it is Philemon the slaveowner, not Onesimus the slave, who is doing something wrong. Paul writes to him and simultaneously to the church in order to correct him. Notice that Paul does

not first approach Philemon privately, as churchmen today say is required, based on their inability or unwillingness to understand *Matthew* 18. The reason for Paul's publicly correcting Philemon is obvious: The procedure outlined in *Matthew* 18 is for private sins, not for public offenses, and Philemon's is a public offense. Philemon has not sinned against Paul privately; his actions involve several other people – most obviously Onesimus, but also the other members of his household, the church that meets in his house, and Paul's fellow laborers. By approaching Philemon as tactfully and as firmly as he does, Paul furnishes an example of how elders should handle cases of public sins through the church discipline. Calvin wrote in his commentary on *Philemon*: "By his example, he [Paul] shows that pastors should endeavor to draw disciples gently rather than to drag them by force...this has far greater power to obtain his wish than if he had issued a command." Paul could have issued a "very bold" command "in Christ" to Philemon to correct the situation, but he did not. [Pages 25-26]

11. State and Church

With regard to civil governments, Paul makes it clear in *Romans* 13 that civil officers receive their authority directly from God – not through popes, nor prelates, nor the church. *[To understand how this affects the theories of democracy and representative government, please read the chapter on the Philosophy of Politics in Gordon Clark's book, A Christian View of men and Things (The Trinity Foundation [1952] 2004).]*

It is the law of the Lord Jesus Christ that governs in Philemon's situation, not Caesar's. Philemon's ownership of Onesimus was perfectly legal under the pagan laws of the Roman Empire but Paul says that it was not morally proper, that is, it was sinful. Implicit in Paul's doctrine is the idea that legality and morality are two different things. If they were the same – if whatever is legal were also moral, and whatever illegal, immoral – then there would be no law other than that of Caesar. If that were the case, then nothing governments do – including persecuting Christians – could be condemned on moral grounds. But in any civilized society legality and morality are not the same, though some actions they prohibit overlap. In a civilized society murder, for example, is both sinful and illegal. In his letter to Philemon Paul makes it clear that Christians must be governed by Biblical law, not pagan law, when the two differ. So even though slavery was legal in the Roman Empire and acceptable to many people, including Christians such as Philemon, it was not fitting. *[Another reason for Paul's tact that commentators never consider may be that he is a prisoner of Rome and must be careful not to say anything that suggests sedition. So rather than denouncing Roman laws, Paul urges Christians to do what is fitting, regardless of what the law says. He is writing in a society that regards slavery as perfectly acceptable.]*

In *Romans 13* Paul makes it clear that the proper role of civil government is the enforcement of the so-called second table of the Ten Commandments: *Romans 13:9* explicitly mentions adultery, murder, theft, false witness, and covetousness. Civil governments have no power over the mind, and so they have no authority to enforce the first table of the law. *[They do, however, have the obligation to obey the so-called first table of the law. God's law governs all individuals and institutions. There are no exceptions for presidents and kings. That means, for example, that no one should be permitted to take an oath – either in court or on being inaugurated into office – on any book other than the Bible. Swearing by Allah or Zeus is worse than useless: They are not the truth.]* [Pages 28, 29]

12. Onesimus the Fugitive Slave

Since Paul himself was a prisoner, not only did he not turn Onesimus in, but he also must have kept Onesimus' status as a fugitive, they almost certainly would have taken him into custody. The fact that they did not suggests that Paul and his fellow workers may have conspired to keep Onesimus' status a secret from the authorities. So let me pose the question again: How can we reconcile Paul's actions with the inspired injunction to be subject to the governing authorities?

To answer the question, we must say a number of things: First, being subject to the governing authorities does not always mean obeying them. Their authority is delegated and limited; therefore, they are to be disobeyed when they command us to sin. So Peter and the other apostles say, "We ought to obey God rather than men" (*Acts 5:29*), especially when governors command us not to speak because it is the law. "I was just following orders" is no excuse; each man is responsible for what he does, and he must use his private judgment to decide what is right. *[In case there are any Roman Catholics reading this essay, let me say that there is no escape from exercising private judgment. The decisions not to think about certain subjects, to abandon one's own analysis, and to trust the Roman Catholic hierarchy in matters of faith and morals are themselves decisions of private judgment. Those individual decisions, moreover, are not made once and for all; they are made daily. The decision not to think about the most important matters is a private judgment that is made repeatedly by every subject of the Roman Church-State. The attack on private judgment is not only self-contradictory, it is also un-Biblical. Speaking to the multitudes, Christ Jesus himself commands them to think for themselves rather than rely on their religious leaders and experts: "Yes, and why, even of yourselves, do you not judge what is right?" (Luke 12:57).]* Men in the United States military services, unlike the subjects of Nazi Germany and members of the Roman Church-State, are obligated to obey only lawful orders, not all orders. And they alone must decide whether an order is lawful or not. [Pages 34-35]

13. Obeying God's Law

Paul does not call for a slave insurrection; he opposed it. Nor does he call for a revolution against the tyranny of Rome. But he did expect Christians to obey God's law, rather than men's. He expected them to do what was fitting, even when that did not conform to Roman law. [Page 35]

14. God's Law Over National Law

The reason the Roman Empire's fugitive slave law was not just is *Deuteronomy* 23:15-16: "You shall not give back to his master the slave who has escaped from his master to you. He may dwell with you in your midst, in the place which he chooses within one of your gates, where it seems best to him; you shall not oppress him." As a rabbi, Paul must have known this verse and many other verses in the Old Testament concerning slavery. That is why he did not turn Onesimus over to the Roman authorities: God's law supersedes Roman law. And when Paul does send Onesimus back to Philemon, he sends him back as a free man. Onesimus returns to Philemon freely and voluntarily, not in chains, not as a slave. [Page 35]

15. Love Your Neighbor as Self

Paul commands Philemon to accept Onesimus as he would accept Paul himself – not as he would accept a runaway slave who, under the laws of the Roman Empire, deserves to be punished for his disobedience. That is why Paul commands Philemon: While Philemon might be eager to get his slave Onesimus back, he would be eager to receive him back as a slave, not as a free man. Paul commands Philemon to accept Onesimus as a free man – as himself. Paul is applying to this specific case the injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself. [Page 37]

16. The Plan of God

Truth is the basis, the foundation, for Christian love. Biblical love is not a warm feeling in the stomach, but the exercise of a good will toward another. That good will does not exist apart from knowledge of the truth. [Page 40]

17. Legally Set Onesimus Free

The phrase "no longer as a slave" is the focus of the entire letter. Onesimus is no longer a slave, and Paul urges Philemon to recognize that fact and to formalize it in law. The only sense in which Paul can be understood as urging Philemon to free Onesimus is the purely formal, legal sense. Morally, Onesimus is no longer a slave. Paul is teaching Philemon, the church in his house, and us some of the social implications of Christianity, in which no man is naturally a slave, nothing should be done without consent, compulsion should be used only against criminals, all men are brothers in the flesh, and some men are also brothers in the Lord. Onesimus is both, and his longstanding relationship with Philemon makes him that much more a "beloved brother." Despite the clarity of Paul's statements, despite the fact that he

repeats them, many commentators have inexcusably misunderstood his argument and missed his conclusion. [Pages 42, 43]

18. The Superstition of Royalty

One of the great superstitions of heathenism – along with the ideas of polytheism and racism – is royalty. When the ancient Israelites rejected the republican government God has given them, they demanded a king like all the heathen nations around them. God warned them of the consequences of their idolatry in *1 Samuel 8*, but they did not listen, and they suffered those consequences under the monarchy.

Monarchy rests on the assumption that all men are not created equal – that some men, some families, some bloodlines are somehow superior to ordinary men, who are called commoners. In the seventeenth century the doctrine of the divine right of kings was developed in order to oppose the ludicrous claim of popes to rule by divine right, but it was used to deny that all civil governments, except monarchies, are ordained by God. Somehow, kings are different, superior, another order of mankind. [Page 44]