

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

PayPal

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *The Expositor* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_expositor-series-1.php

markable words. All the unsaved are, through their own sins, already dead: for they are, in the just judgment of God, already beyond human help, a prey to eternal corruption. From this death believers have been set free by forgiveness of their sins, and by inspiration of the Divine Spirit of life, a forgiveness and inspiration impossible had not life returned into the lifeless body of Christ. In another and opposite sense believers are dead. For their old life has come to an end. They are sharers with Christ in the deliverance wrought by His own death upon the cross. They will share His resurrection and enthronement, and to their confident hope this future glory is a present reality.

In another paper I shall discuss, in the light of the phrases now before us and of the thoughts therein embodied, the place in St. Paul's thought of the historic facts of the Death and Resurrection of Christ.

JOSEPH AGAR BEET.

THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON.

IV.

“Whom I have sent back to thee in his own person, that is, my very heart: whom I would fain have kept with me, that in thy behalf he might minister unto me in the bonds of the gospel: but without thy mind I would do nothing; that thy goodness should not be as of necessity, but of free will.”—PHILEM. 12-14 (Rev. Ver.).

THE characteristic features of the Epistle are all embodied in these verses. They set forth, in the most striking manner, the relation of Christianity to slavery and to other social evils. They afford an exquisite example of the courteous delicacy and tact of the Apostle's intervention on behalf of Onesimus; and there shine through them, as through a semi-transparent medium, adumbrations and shimmering hints of the greatest truths of Christianity.

I. The first point to notice is that decisive step of sending

back the fugitive slave. Not many years ago the conscience of England was stirred because the Government of the day sent out a circular instructing captains of men-of-war, on the decks of which fugitive slaves sought asylum, to restore them to their "owners." Here an Apostle does the same thing—seems to side with the oppressor, and to drive the oppressed from the sole refuge left him, the horns of the very altar. More extraordinary still, here is the fugitive voluntarily going back, travelling all the weary way from Rome to Colossæ in order to put his neck once more beneath the yoke. Both men were acting from Christian motives, and thought that they were doing a piece of plain Christian duty. Then does Christianity sanction slavery? Certainly not; its principles cut it up by the roots. A gospel, of which the starting point is that all men stand on the same level, as loved by the one Lord, and redeemed by the one cross, can have no place for such an institution. A religion which attaches the highest importance to man's awful prerogative of freedom, because it insists on every man's individual responsibility to God, can keep no terms with a system which turns men into chattels. Therefore Christianity cannot but regard slavery as a sin against God, and as treason towards man. The principles of the gospel worked into the conscience of a nation destroy slavery. Historically it is true that as Christianity has grown slavery has withered. But the New Testament never directly condemns it, and by regulating the conduct of Christian masters, and recognising the obligations of Christian slaves, seems to contemplate its continuance, and to be deaf to the sighing of the captives.

This attitude was probably not a piece of policy, or a matter of calculated wisdom on the part of the Apostle. He no doubt saw that the Gospel brought a great unity in which all distinctions were merged, and rejoiced in thinking that "in Christ Jesus there is neither bond nor free"; but

whether he expected the distinction ever to disappear from actual life is less certain. He may have thought of slavery as he did of sex, that the fact would remain, while yet "we are all one in Christ Jesus." It is by no means necessary to suppose that the Apostles saw the full bearing of the truths they had to preach, in their relation to social conditions. They were inspired to give the Church the principles. It remained for future ages, under Divine guidance, to apprehend the destructive and formative range of these principles.

However this may be, the attitude of the New Testament to slavery is the same as to other unchristian institutions. It brings the leaven, and lets it work. That attitude is determined by three great principles. First, the message of Christianity is primarily to individuals, and only secondarily to society. It leaves the units whom it has influenced to influence the mass. Second, it acts on spiritual and moral sentiment, and only afterwards and consequently on deeds or institutions. Third, it hates violence, and trusts wholly to enlightened conscience. So it meddles directly with no political or social arrangements, but lays down principles which will profoundly affect these, and leaves them to soak into the general mind. If an evil needs force for its removal, it is not ready for removal. If it has to be pulled up by violence, a bit of the root will certainly be left and will grow again. When a dandelion head is ripe, a child's breath can detach the winged seeds; but until it is, no tempest can move them. The method of violence is noisy and wasteful, like the winter torrents that cover acres of good ground with mud and rocks, and are past in a day. The only true way is, by slow degrees, to create a state of feeling which shall instinctively abhor and cast off the evil. There will be no hubbub and no waste, and the thing once done will be done for ever.

So has it been with slavery; so will it be with war, and intemperance, and impurity, and the miserable anomalies

of our present civilization. It has taken eighteen hundred years for the whole Church to learn the inconsistency of Christianity with slavery. We are no quicker learners than the past generations were. God is patient, and does not seek to hurry the march of His purposes. We have to be imitators of God, and shun the "raw haste" which is "half-sister to delay."

But patience is not passivity. It is a Christian's duty to "hasten the day of the Lord," and to take part in the educational process which Christ is carrying on through the ages, by submitting himself to it in the first place, and then by endeavouring to bring others under its influence. His place should be in the van of all social progress. It does not become Christ's servants to be content with the attainments of any past or present, in the matter of the organization of society on Christian principles. "God has more light to break forth from His word." Coming centuries will look back on the obtuseness of the moral perceptions of nineteenth century Christians in regard to matters of Christian duty which, hidden from us, are sun-clear to them, with the same half-amused, half-tragic wonder with which we look back to Jamaica planters or South Carolina rice growers, who defended slavery as a missionary institution, and saw no contradiction between their religion and their practice. We have to stretch our charity to believe in these men's sincere religion. Succeeding ages will have to make the same allowance for us, and will need it for themselves from their successors. The main thing is, for us to try to keep our spirits open to all the incidence of the gospel on social and civic life, and to see that we are on the right side, and trying to help on the approach of that kingdom which does "not cry, nor lift up, nor cause its voice to be heard in the streets," but has its coming "prepared as the morning," that swims up, silent and slow, and flushes the heaven with an unsetting light.

II. The next point in these verses is Paul's loving identification of himself with Onesimus.

The A.V. here follows another reading from the R.V., the former has "thou therefore receive him, that is, mine own bowels." The additional words are unquestionably inserted without authority in order to patch a broken construction. The R.V. cuts the knot in a different fashion by putting the abrupt words, "himself" that is, my very own "heart," under the government of the preceding verb. But it seems more probable that the Apostle began a new sentence with them, which he meant to have finished as the A.V. does for him, but which, in fact, got hopelessly upset in the swift rush of his thoughts, and does not right itself grammatically till the "receive him" of v. 17.

In any case the main thing to observe is the affectionate plea which he puts in for cordial reception of Onesimus. Of course "mine own bowels" is simply the Hebrew way of saying "mine own heart." We think the one phrase graceful and sentimental, and the other coarse. A Jew did not think so, and it might be difficult to say why he should. It is a mere question of difference in localizing certain emotions. Onesimus was a piece of Paul's very heart, part of himself; the unprofitable slave had wound himself round his affections, and become so dear that to part with him was like cutting his heart out of his bosom. Perhaps some of the virtues, which the servile condition helps to develop in undue proportion, such as docility, lightheartedness, serviceableness, had made him a soothing and helpful companion; what a plea that would be with one who loved Paul as well as Philemon did! He could not receive harshly one whom the Apostle had so honoured with his love. "Take care of him, be kind to him, as if it were to me."

Such language from an Apostle about a slave would do more to destroy slavery than any violence would do. Love

leaps the barrier, and it ceases to separate. So these simple, heart-felt words are an instance of one method by which Christianity wars against all social wrongs, by casting its caressing arm around the outcast, and showing that the abject and oppressed are objects of its special love.

They teach too how interceding love makes its object part of its very self; the same thought recurs still more distinctly in *v.* 17, "Receive him as myself." It is the natural language of love; some of the deepest and most blessed Christian truths are but the carrying out of that identification to its fullest extent. We are all Christ's Onesimuses, and He, out of His pure love, makes Himself one with us, and us one with Him; the union of Christ with all who trust in Him, no doubt, presupposes His Divine nature, but still there is a human side to it, and it is the result of His perfect love. All love delights to fuse itself with its object, and as far as may be to abolish the distinction of "I" and "thou." But human love can travel but a little way on that road; Christ's goes much farther. He that pleads for some poor creature feels that the kindness is done to himself when the former is helped or pardoned. Imperfectly but really these words shadow forth the great fact of Christ's intercession for us sinners, and our acceptance in Him. We need no better symbol of the stooping love of Christ, who identifies Himself with His brethren, and of our wondrous identification with Him, our High Priest and Intercessor, than this picture of the Apostle pleading for the runaway and bespeaking a welcome for him as part of himself. When Paul says, "Receive him, that is, my very heart," his words remind us of yet more blessed ones, which reveal a deeper love and more marvellous condescension, "He that receiveth you receiveth Me," and may reverently be taken as a faint shadow of that prevailing intercession, through which he that is joined to the Lord and is one spirit with Him, is received of God as

part of Christ's mystical body, bone of His bone, and flesh of His flesh.

III. Next comes the expression of a half-formed purpose which was put aside for a reason to be immediately stated. "I would fain have kept with me"; the tense of the verb indicating the incompleteness of the desire. The very statement of it is turned into a graceful expression of Paul's confidence in Philemon's goodwill to him, by the addition of that "on thy behalf." He is sure that, if his friend had been beside him, he would have been glad to lend him his servant, and so he would have liked to have had Onesimus as a kind of representative of the service which he knows would have been so willingly rendered. The purpose for which he would have liked to keep him is defined as being, "that he might minister to me in the bonds of the gospel." If the last words be connected with "me," they suggest a tender reason why Paul should be ministered to, as suffering for Christ, their common Master, and for the truth, their common possession. If, as is perhaps less probable, they be connected with "minister," they describe the sphere in which the service is to be rendered. Either the master or the slave would be bound by the obligations which the gospel laid on them to serve Paul. Both were his converts, and therefore knit to him by a welcome chain, which made service a delight.

There is no need to enlarge on the winning courtesy of these words, so full of happy confidence in the friend's disposition, that they could not but evoke the love to which they trusted so completely. Nor need I do more than point their force for the purpose of the whole letter, the procuring a cordial reception for the returning fugitive. So dear had he become, that Paul would like to have kept him. He goes back with a kind of halo round him, now that he is not only a good-for-nothing runaway, but Paul's friend, and so much prized by him. It would be impossible to do any-

thing but welcome him, bringing such credentials ; and yet all this is done with scarcely a word of direct praise, which might have provoked contradiction. One does not know whether the confidence in Onesimus or in Philemon is the dominant note in the harmony. In the preceding clause, he was spoken of as, in some sense, part of the Apostle's very self. In this, he is regarded as, in some sense, part of Philemon. So he is a link between them. Paul would have taken his service as if it had been his master's. Can the master fail to take him as if he were Paul ?

IV. The last topic in these verses is the decision which arrested the half-formed wish. "I was *wishing* indeed, but I *willed* otherwise." The language is exact. There is a universe between "I wished," and "I willed." Many a good wish remains fruitless, because it never passes into the stage of firm resolve. Many who wish to be better will be bad. One strong "I will" can paralyse a million wishes.

The Apostle's final determination was, to do nothing without Philemon's cognisance and consent. The reason for the decision is at once a very triumph of persuasiveness, which would be ingenious if it were not so spontaneous, and an adumbration of the very spirit of Christ's appeal for service to us. "That thy benefit"—the good done to me by him, which would in my eyes be done by you—"should not be as of necessity, but willingly." That "as" is a delicate addition. He will not think that the benefit would really have been by constraint, but it might have looked as if it were.

Do not these words go much deeper than this small matter? And did not Paul learn the spirit that suggested them from his own experience of how Christ treated him? The principle underlying them is, that where the bond is love, compulsion takes the sweetness and goodness out of even sweet and good things. Freedom is essential to virtue. If a man "could not help it" there is neither praise nor

blame due. That freedom Christianity honours and respects. So in reference to the offer of the gospel blessings, men are not forced to accept them, but appealed to, and can turn deaf ears to the pleading voice, "Why will ye die?" Sorrows and sins and miseries without end continue, and the gospel is rejected, and lives of wretched godlessness lived, and a dark future pulled down on the rejecters' heads—and all because God knows that these things are better than that men should be forced into goodness, which indeed would cease to be goodness if they were. For nothing is good but the free turning of the will to goodness, and nothing bad but its aversion therefrom.

The same solemn regard for the freedom of the individual and low estimate of the worth of constrained service influence the whole aspect of Christian ethics. Christ wants no pressed men in His army. The victorious host of priestly warriors, which the Psalmist saw following the priest-king in the day of his power, numerous as the dew drops, and radiant with reflected beauty as these, were all "willing"—volunteers. There are no conscripts in the ranks. These words might be said to be graven over the gates of the kingdom of heaven, "Not as of necessity, but willingly." In Christian morals, law becomes love, and love, law. "Must" is not in the Christian vocabulary, except as expressing the sweet constraint which bows the will of him who loves to harmony, which is joy, with the will of Him who is loved. Christ takes no offerings which the giver is not glad to render. Money, influence, service, which are not offered by a will moved by love, which love, in its turn, is set in motion by the recognition of the infinite love of Christ in His sacrifice, are, in His eyes, nought. An earthenware cup with a drop of cold water in it, freely given out of a glad heart, is richer and more precious in His sight than golden chalices swimming with wine and melted pearls, which are laid by constraint on His table. "I

delight to do Thy will" is the foundation of all Christian obedience; and the servant had caught the very tone of the Lord's voice, when he said, "Without thy mind I will do nothing, that thy benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity, but willingly."

ALEXANDER MACLAREN.

RECENT ENGLISH LITERATURE ON THE
NEW TESTAMENT.

OF books bearing more or less directly upon exposition we have received the following: *Lessons of the Cross and Passion*, etc. Four courses of Lent Lectures by C. J. Vaughan, D.D., Dean of Llandaff (Macmillan & Co., 1886), of which nothing need be said but that it maintains that steady uniformity of excellence which the writer by his previous thirty volumes of sermons has led us to expect. All are at the same level, "not too bright or good for human nature's daily food," but remarkable for instinctive correctness of exposition, unaffected devoutness, and purity of style. The four courses are on "Lessons of the Cross and Passion," "Words from the Cross," "The Reign of Sin," and "The Lord's Prayer." *The Parables of our Saviour Expounded and Illustrated*, by William M. Taylor, D.D., LL.D. (Hodder and Stoughton, 1887) is also by a writer too well-known to require much commendation. This is however the best book we have had from Dr. Taylor. The subject gives scope to his expository insight and geniality. The writer's broad common-sense frees the Parables from the over-refinements of commentators, and grasps the definite lesson of each. It is a fresh and stimulating volume, sure to be prized by preachers. *Seven, the Sacred Number: its Use in Scripture and its Application to Biblical Criticism*, by Richard Samuel (Kegan Paul, Trench & Co., 1887), is a laborious but ill-advised attempt to show that questions of Canonicity, Textual Criticism, and Interpretation can be settled if we believe that every writer of Scripture had an eye to a symmetrical arrangement of his words and paragraphs in sevens. *Astrology in the Apocalypse*, by W. Gershom Collingwood, M.A. (George Allen, Sunnyside, Orpington, 1886), is a short essay on the traces of Chaldæan astrology in