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MARGARET KILLINGRAY

# The Bible, Slavery and Onesimus

**Almost all the societies featured in the Bible practised some form of slavery. Understanding the background to the economic and social life of those societies, whether slavery, marriage or land ownership, can illuminate the practical and theological implications of the text. This article brings together some of the recent debates and conclusions, particularly about slavery in the New Testament, with the focus on Paul's letter to Philemon.**

This issue of *Anvil* commemorates the abolition of the British trans-Atlantic slave trade two hundred years ago. Many Christians actively participated in the large-scale petitioning of Parliament to bring to an end an iniquitous and barbaric practice. However, almost all the societies that feature in the Bible practised some form of slavery. This article aims to bring together some of the recent debates and conclusions, particularly about slavery in the New Testament, so that those who lead Bible studies and teach the Bible in local churches have some background and understanding of the issues that slavery raises. The focus is Paul's letter to Philemon.

The Christians of the first century AD lived and worked in slaveholding societies. Slaves, slave owners and free citizens together formed the first churches. Paul's great statement – 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.' (Gal. 3:27,28) – focuses on the three main areas of division in human society: race, ethnicity and religion; status and economic disparity; and gender. What were the out-workings of this vision in those early Christian fellowships? What kind of changes would there be in the lives of slaves and their owners?

On first reading, the main issue of the letter from Paul to Philemon seems to be the restoration of relationships between Onesimus, the slave, and Philemon, the slaveholder. Like other Christian fellowships, theirs had to deal with potential conflict arising from the *new* relationships of mutual submission in the body of Christ, whether between Jew and Gentile, or slave and free. But they still had to live and work in societies with pre-existing social realities they could not change.

It is not difficult to sense from the texts the shock and disbelief of those first Jewish disciples as they were forced to recognise their Gentile fellow believers as fully Abraham's seed and heirs. Christianity for them was particularly subversive, radical and transforming. But how far was the new faith radical, not just for those Jewish and Gentile relationships, but also for those caught up in other social divisions: rich and poor, male and female, and slave and free? How far were they called to become a Christian counter-culture overturning existing inequalities?<sup>1</sup>

1 There is an interesting reconstruction of the reading of the two letters of Colossians and

Philemon in the church at Colosse in Walsh & Keesmaat 2004.

Were they simply called to bring some amelioration to the worst excesses of power and oppression while seeking to maintain the existing structures?

## About the letter

In this short letter Paul writes to Philemon about Onesimus the slave. Philemon had become a Christian through Paul's ministry. Paul was in prison in another town and Onesimus had turned up there, found Paul, and become a Christian through him. But he was on the run from Philemon whom he had wronged in some way, perhaps by stealing. Paul was sending him back, pleading with Philemon to welcome him as a brother in Christ, possibly to free him. Paul also offered to repay any debts that Onesimus had incurred. There is also a suggestion that Paul would like to have Onesimus back, with Philemon's blessing, as a support and fellow worker. Paul begins the letter with a greeting to Philemon and some of his fellow believers, and ends with greetings from those who are with Paul.

The letter strikes a particularly warm and personal note. Paul makes a joke – a pun on Onesimus' name, which means useful. Did Paul mean that he had been no good at his job, or, perhaps, obstructive? Apart from the initial greeting in vv 1-3, and the ending in vv 23-25, the 'you' is singular throughout. The letter is full of praise and appreciation. Paul describes Philemon as our dear friend, co-worker, my brother, and Onesimus as my child, my own heart, a beloved brother. He commends Philemon for his faith and love and tells him that he has received much joy and encouragement from him.

Col. 4:7-18 gives us some background to the letter. Onesimus was being sent back to the city of Colosse, where he was a slave. Now a 'faithful and beloved brother', he was accompanied by Tychicus, carrying two letters from Paul – a general one to the Colossian church and the personal one to Philemon. Perhaps he was also carrying the letter to Laodicea, mentioned in Col. 4:16. It seems from the text that Paul had some contact with friends outside the prison. As in his house arrest in Rome at the end of Acts, he can send messengers, write letters, and see visitors.

This seems a simple and reasonably straightforward letter on first reading, but almost every aspect of the above summary has been questioned, worked over, and fresh outlines put forward in which all the players have different roles and relationships with each other. Commentators have raised questions about Paul's whereabouts when the letter was written and there are arguments about the time of writing in relation to Paul's travels and his other letters.

## Paul and a slave

How had Onesimus found Paul? It is possible that Onesimus had deliberately sought him out. If he had run away from Philemon and was in deep trouble, then he needed to find some kind of sanctuary. He would probably have known of Paul's relationship to Philemon. Athenian law seems to have allowed a runaway slave to seek asylum in the home of a friend of the family.

Where was Paul when he wrote this letter for Onesimus to take back to Colosse? Some commentators say Rome, others Ephesus.<sup>2</sup> Ephesus seems far more likely.

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<sup>2</sup> Tom Wright says Ephesus (Wright 1986; Wright 2002) and Dick Lucas (Lucas 1980) says Rome.

Colosse is roughly 100 miles further inland from Ephesus on a main route in Western Asiatic Turkey, so the journey to find Paul would not have been too difficult.<sup>3</sup> Not so if Paul was in Rome. Moreover, Paul asks Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, again suggesting a manageable journey.

Paul's background as a well-educated Pharisee meant that he had a wide knowledge of the Old Testament. He would have been aware of all the laws in the Pentateuch involving slavery, including Deut. 23:15 – 'Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them.'<sup>4</sup> But in Asia Minor, Roman law governed slavery and Roman law certainly did not countenance the hiding of a runaway. Moreover, Onesimus' chosen 'place' could not be Paul's prison. His only place of sanctuary was back where he was known, back as a brother in Christ in Colosse. But would he be oppressed? How could Paul ensure that he would find sanctuary and full forgiveness? He sends him back with an appeal to Philemon to accept him. He also offers to repay anything owed by Onesimus. This may be a response to the law that work days missed had to be made up financially by anyone who harboured runaways. Onesimus might not have actually stolen cash or valuables from Philemon.

Commentators find it hard to work out exactly what Paul is asking Philemon to do. Is he simply asking for a forgiving welcome before Onesimus resumes his role as a household slave? Is he asking Philemon to free him? Is he deliberately a little ambiguous? The letter is conciliatory in tone, with a teasing note, perhaps because Paul wants Philemon to work out for himself the right course of action when Onesimus returns. Paul seems to be asking that when the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus has been sorted out, he would very much welcome having Onesimus back to help him in his work and ministry. But it *is* clear that Paul is calling Philemon and the church to welcome Onesimus back as a Christian brother – with the kind of welcome they would have given Paul. The parallels with Jesus' story of the prodigal son are interesting: give a party for the returning prodigal as a brother and a son, not as a servant, and don't mutter and grumble about it outside the back door.

However radical about slavery Paul may want to be, neither here nor in the Colossian letter, which will be read publicly, would he want to make a plain statement of opposition to slavery and risk bringing the wrath of the already suspicious authorities down on the small and new church. Since he may have been in prison for proclaiming a King other than Caesar, or for stirring up civil strife, it would not be politic to make radical statements in public. And he may also simply not know quite what to say. He doesn't actually say that Onesimus has run away but uses the vaguer expression, 'separated from you'. But this may be his caution at setting down in writing too much about the position of Onesimus as a runaway slave.

What would the issues be for Philemon as he read this letter and pondered his response? Calvin pointed out that 'It would be a sign of haughty pride if he should

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3 Colosse today is a large mound, with a slightly tatty metal signpost. It was devastated in an earthquake in 60 AD, which is one pointer to the dating of the letters.

4 This probably referred to slaves escaping to Israel (you, plural) from surrounding nations.

be ashamed to count as his brother those whom God numbers among his sons'. Could he free one slave and not the others in his household? If he freed the one who had become a Christian and a brother, despite the criminal offences he might have committed, how would this affect discipline amongst the other slaves, both in his household and in those of his fellow citizens? Were there restrictions on his ability to free a slave?

## **Roman/Greek society and slavery**

What exactly did it mean to be a slave in the middle of the first century in Romano-Greek society? *Is* this a radical subversive letter? Slavery was thoroughly and deeply embedded in the social, economic and political life of Roman and Greek society. The institution was regulated both by law and by custom. During the time of the Empire there was some amelioration in the conditions of slavery; laws were passed against certain abuses of slaves and a decree from the Emperor Claudius was issued in the first century that old or sick slaves could not be abandoned unless they were freed. A law limiting the number of slaves who could be freed in an owner's will suggests that it had become customary to put manumission clauses in wills. Nero permitted slaves in certain circumstances to complain to a court. However, slaves were at the mercy of their owners and history tells us that this kind of power too easily leads to abuse. Torture was used as punishment and to extract information. In fact it was obligatory in cases where the mysterious death of an owner was being investigated, even though a number of contemporary writers pointed out that this was not a very efficient way of getting at the truth. There were also those who were strong critics of slavery in Rome and in Greece. The Stoics spoke of the common humanity of slave and slaveholder, but urged equanimity on slaves – better a slave than enslaved to passions. Seneca did not question slavery itself but wrote that cruel slaveholders were exceeding the bounds of moral rectitude.

Slaves came from every part of the Roman Empire but there was no one strongly distinctive racial difference between slave and free as there was in the American slave systems of the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Romans probably tended to despise Greeks, particularly those from Thrace, Greeks to despise barbarians, Jews to despise Gentiles, but all these groups, and others, would have been represented in the slave populations. Rich Romans sometimes had over a hundred slaves with well-educated Greek slaves running their households, educating their children and nursing their babies. In a society built on imperialistic expansion many slaves were war captives; in addition, some were born to slaves, some were sold by their families to pay debts, and some, abandoned as babies and left on the local dump, had been picked up and brought up to be slaves.

Household slaves, like Onesimus, probably had the best living conditions. The conditions for slaves used in the mines and galleys (some of whom would have been convicted criminals) and in agricultural production could be very grim and life was short for them. In households long term relationships could blur the essential distinction between slave and free. However, Roman attitudes tended to see slavery as a despised, lowly state, featuring 'vicious tendencies' and a lack of morals.

In a small town like Colosse there would be a fair number of slaves, but they would not be an obvious group. The proportion of really rich people was very small. Town-dwelling slaves, working in households or in small businesses, would not be very different from the general population. They would not stand out from others as they walked the streets. The bottom ranks of miserable poverty were far more like the worst of our world's slums, and slaves were no worse off than many of the free poor and might actually have had slightly more security and a warmer place to sleep. Even the very poor might have one or two slaves and some slaves actually had slaves. There would always have been a number of freed men and women, who would very likely still be in a relationship of patronage to their former owner; in fact the system of patronage in which political and kin-like loyalty was expected of subordinates, from the Emperor downwards, would have tended to make being 'owned' a less obvious social distinction than we might have expected.

There has been an on-going debate about just how poor the members of the early church were.<sup>5</sup> Some have recently argued that the early churches incorporated people from different social levels and economic backgrounds, reacting to earlier views that Christianity was a movement of slaves, poor peasants and the destitute. But it seems more likely that only around one to two percent of the population of a Roman town would be genuinely comfortably off. The vast majority would be the destitute poor with a small number having some economic security. There are examples of the latter in the New Testament, people who might have a home of their own, be able to host a church, own a business, have some education, able to support missionary activities and to travel. But there were many in these societies for whom life was so hard that the difference between their free status and the bondage of the slave meant little in practical terms. There was always the possibility of saving enough to buy freedom, or of being given freedom as a reward. Some may well have seen themselves not as prisoners shackled to slavery for ever, but as people who could with a bit of luck move up the social ladder.

## Slaves in the church

There must have been many pastoral and social issues involving slave members of the new churches in Asia Minor. Slaves sometimes may not have been in situations where they were free to 'flee the works of darkness and keep themselves pure', that is to live in ethical obedience to their new Lord. Those involved in the administration and finance of the household could not suddenly refuse to use illegal or immoral methods that were household practice. Slaves were, in some households, sexually available to their owners. Their bodies were not their own.<sup>6</sup> We have examples of Roman wives who, for some reason, could not sleep with their husbands, making one of their young slave girls available (cf. Sarai and Hagar, Gen. 16).

Moreover some of the temple prostitutes were slaves. If any of them became Christians how could they obey Paul's injunction to take no part in sexual licence? Slave families could be broken up and sent off separately to new owners. How

5 See Theissen 1982, 1992 and 2001 and Meggitt 1998 and 2001.

6 Interestingly the technical term for a slave was the Greek word for body, *soma*. It is

used once in the New Testament in Rev. 18:13 and is the only time that the KJV uses the word slave; everywhere else it uses servant, or the phrase 'in bondage'.

could they obey the household codes? What kinds of tensions were there in small churches where owners, their slaves and slaves of other non-Christian owners worshipped together? How were slaves to react to injustice and to the ill-treatment of younger, more vulnerable slaves when new 'neighbour-loving' obligations were placed on them? What if a slave was moved to prophesy, with his owner sitting listening? Could they mutually admonish one another and bear one another's burdens?

There is another possible issue about slave members of the church. When households were baptised, who was included in this?<sup>7</sup> The arguments about infants being included in household baptism has been part of the debate on paedo-baptism, but what if slaves were also baptised automatically as part of the household? Were they simply included as possessions of a converted slaveholder, just as subjects of Germanic warlords were included hundreds of years later? How did Christians deal with other social practices that were challenging their new approach to social ethics – the punishment of criminals, the spectacles in the arena, participation in the regular pagan festivals, some of which carried elements of the worship of the state and the Emperor? Slaves might well have been compelled to take part in some of these activities.

## The biblical background

That the Bible *supports* slavery is an accusation that has been made in many contexts. But a better way of putting it would be that both Old and New Testaments describe slavery as practised in the societies of the time. Both the Law in the OT and the outworking of Christian discipleship in the NT sought to influence the working of slavery so that the power of owners was limited and the right of slaves to be counted as equals in the fellowship of the people of God was maintained. What the Bible does not do in so many words is denounce slavery as a sinful institution, *per se*, in all forms and in all places. However, many would argue that the underlying biblical theology – creation in the image of God, the Fall involving all humanity, Jesus' one atoning sacrifice for all, and the final universal judgment – means that humans cannot *own* other humans. Wholesale emancipation simply was not a possibility. Nor was democracy. That doesn't mean scripture forbids them! Both abolition of the slave trade and slavery, *and* democracy were the outworkings of human equality before God.

## Jewish law and the Old Testament

The law in the Pentateuch provided a range of measures to moderate the worst excesses of slaveholding. We have already mentioned Deut. 23:15-16 that prohibited the sending back of runaways. Deut. 21:14 gave some protection to women taken captive in war and kept as concubines. Deut. 24:7 and Exod. 21:16 insisted that there should be no kidnapping or enslavement of Hebrews. However, Lev. 25:44 permitted the taking of foreign slaves, even those living in Israel, although they were to be included in the covenant of circumcision, to share in festivals, including the Passover, and given Sabbath rest. Rights of redemption remained for Israelites

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7 Cornelius (Acts 10:44); Lydia (Acts 16:14-15); the Philippian jailor (Acts 16:27-34); Crispus (Acts 18:8).

who had sold themselves for debt. In the seventh year they were to go free (Exod. 21:2). In addition, when Hebrew slaves were freed they had, by law, to be supplied liberally with livestock, wheat and wine to ensure that they could make their way in the world (Deut. 5:12-14). Exod. 21:20-27 prescribed punishments for injuring or killing a slave. All these texts, of course, suggest that slavery of one form or another was an accepted part of OT society. As we read the narrative of the OT, we realise that both in relation to the enslavement of people, as well as in marriage and concubinage practices, it is hard to find one patriarch, judge or king who did not betray God-given laws.

However, the repeated reminders that the Israelites themselves had been slaves ('We were slaves of Pharaoh but the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand';<sup>8</sup> 'Remember that you were slaves in Egypt';<sup>9</sup> 'I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of the land of slavery'<sup>10</sup>) anticipate the frequent New Testament use of bondage as a metaphor both for the unredeemed state – a slave to sin – and for the Christian's new relationship to God.

## The New Testament

Rabbinic texts had prayers where Jewish men thanked God they were not a woman or a slave.<sup>11</sup> A free adult male Israelite was the complete human being. Jesus challenged this view when he changed the category of completeness.

To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth and the truth will set you free'. They answered him, 'We are Abraham's descendants and have never been slaves to anyone. How can you say that we shall be set free?' Jesus replied, 'I tell you the truth, everyone who sins is a slave to sin. Now a slave has no permanent place in the family, but a son belongs to it forever. So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed' (John 8:31-36).

Paul repeats this idea in Galatians 4:7, saying, 'you are no longer a slave, but a son and heir'.

Jesus also emphasised the two laws of love, and extended the term neighbour from its kin and clan base in Lev. 19 to include anyone. He also called his disciples to love their enemies. In his discourse on the throne of judgment in Matt. 25, he welcomes into the Kingdom those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, invited the stranger in, looked after the sick and visited the prisoner, because in doing these things 'for one of the least of these my brothers', they were doing it for him. These are a Christian's duties to all, and especially to the disadvantaged and the downtrodden – and to slaves. The radical and demanding nature of these commands has led over the centuries to every kind of excuse for excluding some groups from their implications. Jesus spoke a number of times about being a servant. In Matt. 20:26, in response to a request for the best seats in the kingdom, he said 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve...'

8 Deut. 6:21.

9 Deut. 5:15; 15:15; 16:12; 24.18, 22.

10 Exod. 20:2; Deut. 5:6; 6:12; 8:14; 13:5, 10; Joshua 24:17; Judges 6:8.

11 'Blessed is he who did not make me a gentile, boor (ignoramus, slave) or woman.'

## The Letters

A theme in the letters of both Paul and Peter is that, in turning to Christ, the Christian has ceased to be a slave in bondage to sin. 'For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery' (Gal. 5:1). The working out of this theme in relation to slavery is most clear in 1 Cor. 7:20-24. Against the background of a church in some turmoil over a number of disputes, the issue of the extent of their new freedom when 'all things are lawful', involved marriage, singleness, the betrothed and the slaves. Paul's calming injunction was for them to stay in whatever situation they were when they were converted. So those married to unbelievers should remain faithfully in that marriage, *unless* the unbeliever actually walked out. Then they were free. In the same way he says, 'Were you a slave when called? Don't let it trouble you. Although if you can gain your freedom, do so. For he who was a slave when he was called by the Lord is the Lord's freedman; similarly he who was a free man when he was called is Christ's slave' (1 Cor. 7:21, 22). Peter encouraged Christian slaves to accept slavery and its brutalities in the same way that Jesus submitted to the harsh injustices of the last twenty-four hours of his life. 'Rejoice that you participate in the sufferings of Christ' (1 Pet. 4:13).

## Household codes and slavery

Perhaps the most important texts that governed Christian slave relationships are the five sets of instructions to slaves as members of a household. In Titus 2:9 Paul tells Titus what to teach slaves. In 1 Pet. 2:18-23 Peter addresses slaves, after talking about submission to rulers and authorities, and then turns to husbands and wives. Writing in 1 Tim. 6:1,2 Paul tells Timothy how to teach slaves to serve their masters. It is in Col. 3:22-4:1 and Eph. 6:5-8 that there are the fullest instructions, with words for the powerful – husband, father, master – and for the submissive wives, children and slaves. Some see these texts as reactionary, affirming situations of dominance and power, contradicting the texts of mutual submission and equality (Gal. 3:28; Col. 3:11 and 1 Cor. 12:13), all of which include 'in Christ there is no slave or free'. Others see them as revolutionary in their call to the men, as husbands, fathers and masters to act in love to those in their care. Also some are struck by the fact that Paul addresses the weaker person first, significant in that it suggests that wives, children and, above all, slaves, are morally responsible for their own behaviour and actions. Paul does not tell husbands to *make* their wives submit, nor masters to *make* their slaves obey, although this was seen as a significant part of their social responsibilities. These texts certainly suggest that Christian householders could not simply assume the absolute power they legally had over wives, children and slaves. However, these three relationships are not identical. No-one suggests that the parent/child relationship, although open to abuse, is not one of gradually diminishing authority and submission. We leave the on-going arguments about the relationship of husband and wife on one side. Some have applied the master/slave codes to employment practices and suggested that they form guidelines for employees and employers. However it is hard to argue that Peter's instruction to slaves (1 Pet. 2:20) that they have God's approval when they endure suffering and

are beaten, even when they have acted correctly, can apply to modern employment situations.

There is an interesting connection between Jesus' teaching on not resisting an evildoer, turning the other cheek and going the second mile (Matt. 5:38-41) with the instructions to slaves to 'render service with enthusiasm as to the Lord' (Eph. 6:7). When a Roman soldier conscripted someone to carry his kit for a mile, he was using that person as a 'carrying machine' or 'temporary' slave. This was a dehumanising act. By turning to the soldier and volunteering to carry the load for another mile, the conscript established a relationship between him and the soldier, making a free choice as a free person and overcoming 'evil' with good. This is radical peacemaking that takes the initiative and transforms the relationship. Slaves who worked with enthusiasm as to the Lord were demonstrating their new-found freedom in Christ and may well have excited comment and enquiry.<sup>12</sup> They may have made life a little uncomfortable for some slave owners!

### **The message of Philemon**

Slaves and slavery in the biblical text raises the important issue of how we read narrative. Does this letter teach that runaways should be sent back to their owners in all circumstances, as some biblical preachers have said in the past? Or do the particular circumstances simply make that the right thing to do with Onesimus' agreement? When we read narrative we are wrestling with the difficult and compromised lives of men and women struggling to obey the Lord in fallen societies. We have to make judgements about them and their actions based on Christ-centred ethical principles derived from the text as a whole.

This letter helps us to understand how the transforming power of Christ works in personal lives, as well as in the fellowship of believers and in the church's wider relationships with society and its social structures. Paul writes with gentleness and humility. We only need to compare Paul's early life, before he was converted, with the man in prison here. The once proud Pharisee writes from a gentile prison about a gentile Christian slave. He waives his rights as an apostle in order to ask Philemon to waive his rights as a slave owner. He has the authority of an apostle and in other letters he exercises this authority, but not here. Onesimus, now a Christian, has to accept his position as a slave as something he cannot change. Paul has persuaded him to return and accept whatever might happen to him when he gets back. Philemon is being asked to transform the relationship between master and slave, within the context of the fellowship meeting in his house.

This letter reminds us that we all have to live with limitations, having to make the most of things we cannot change. Onesimus cannot change his slave status; Paul in prison has to rely on others, on letters, at a distance. Philemon has to decide what is possible for him as he takes a stand against the accepted social and legal systems of his day. 'We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son' (Rom. 8:28). The lifelong transformation of Christians into the image of Jesus is more likely to take place in these difficult situations than in situations of ease and comfort.

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12 In Genesis 39 Joseph illustrates how a God-fearing slave might live and work.

This letter emphasises the role of the fellowship of believers, the *koinonia*. Within the fellowship, believers together model and demonstrate their theology. They show the character of God in their relationships. So slaves and free, Jews and gentiles, male and female, they are all one in Christ. There can be no reliance on status; and where gifts are God-given freely for the building up of the body, never in relation to social rank, gender and ethnicity, then slaves may be called to encourage and admonish the free and have words of knowledge for their masters (cf. Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-31; Eph. 4:11-16). When Onesimus is welcomed back as a new Christian brother, then the whole fellowship, whatever their previous relationship with him, joins in the welcoming joy. Paul is telling Philemon that he and Onesimus are now a joint project with all the saints, standing side by side in the gospel of reconciliation. They are accountable to one another.

This letter also demonstrates a way of resolving conflict. There is a deep rift between two Christian men. It involves possibly theft, betrayal and resentment at injustice. It requires forgiveness, reconciliation and new beginnings. Paul begins by reminding Philemon that he has already taken up a particular theological and moral position by becoming a Christian and being part of a church. He is morally accountable and is called to live a consistent Christian life in fellowship. Whatever the social and legal complications might be, he has to begin with forgiveness and restoration. Paul also praises Philemon, tells him how much he appreciates him and all that he does in love in the church. He says the kind of things that will warm Philemon's heart, before he and Onesimus have to deal with the situation. Paul would like Philemon to embrace Onesimus in love, possibly give him his freedom, and then send him back to assist Paul. 'I appeal in love', he says. 'I don't want to do anything without your consent.' He honours Philemon's autonomy and allows him to make decisions that conform to his new transformed life. But he sends Tychicus, a man who has standing and authority with the churches of western Asia, with Onesimus. Thus he protects Onesimus and provides a possible go-between for their arrival in Colosse.

This letter illustrates, in one situation, the way in which all Christians and all churches have had to battle with a sometimes very hostile world. They have had to discern when to challenge and when to endure. Their discernment has not always been very astute. A bronze collar, dating from the fifth century, has an inscription that reads, 'I am the slave of the archdeacon Felix. Hold me so that I do not flee.' It is also engraved with a cross. The inscription suggests that the slave had tried to run away and was now permanently restrained. 'Felix apparently saw no incongruity in proclaiming simultaneously his status as a leader in the church and his identity as a slaveholder.'<sup>13</sup> I wonder if Felix had read the letter to Philemon?

Not many would question the unacceptability of slavery in any form today. But 200 years ago some Christians were challenging the abolitionists, not just for economic reasons, but on biblical grounds as well. (The bishops in the House of Lords came out rather badly!). This highlights the importance of social awareness, of spotting the ways in which relationships within the fellowship are denying our status of equality before God. It calls us to be aware of the human rights abuses, similar to slavery, that exist today, those compelled to work in the sex trade, for

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13 Glancy 2002: 9.

example. It calls us to be actively supporting agencies that fight against the various forms of slavery in our world.<sup>14</sup> It also challenges us as employees in our attitudes to work and as employers in our responsibilities for those who work under us.

Did Philemon listen to Paul and act as Paul wanted? The survival of the letter suggests that he did.

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14 For example, Tearfund, [www.tearfund.org](http://www.tearfund.org) and International Justice Mission UK, [www.ijmuk.org](http://www.ijmuk.org)

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