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Paul's letter to Philemon has been used in some seriously ugly ways throughout American history ~ even within (perhaps especially within!) our own Episcopal Church here in South Carolina. I could cite many examples, but one includes fellow South Carolinian and 19th century Episcopal priest Edward Dalcho who referenced this letter in his defense of slavery by writing:

All the sophistry in the world cannot get rid of [the] decisive example [of Paul's letter to Philemon]. Christianity robs no man of his rights; Onesimus was the property of his master, under the laws of his country, which must be obeyed, [as it is] not contrary to the laws of God. ¹

So, to avoid any sophistry or false teaching, let me begin by explaining how slavery in Greco-Roman society was different than what evolved here in the States. First, it was not racially-based. Anyone could become a slave, regardless of skin tone, ethnic identity, or religious ideology. One of the articles I read described Rome as "an equal-opportunity oppressor."² Second, under Hebrew law, slavery was not interminable. Most slaves were released from bondage after six years or so, and supplied with both food and flock.³ According to Jewish Jubilee law, all slaves were to be released every 50th year, regardless of length of servitude. Third, Levitical law mandated that slaves not be treated harshly, but rather as hired laborers, and that a slave's kin had the right to buy back such laborers at any time.⁴

It shocked me to learn that it was not unheard of for a person to be a property-owner and voluntarily enter into bondage. For some, it was a means of climbing the social ladder or obtaining special training or jobs.⁵ However, for most volunteers, it was a means of avoiding starvation – a common occurrence in the ancient world – as they were under both the protection and provision of their owners.

¹ Frederick Dalcho, *Practical Considerations*, pp. 20-21. See also *Richmond Enquirer*, 3 December 1819.

² Robert Gagnon in *The Lectionary Commentary: Acts and the Epistles*, page 464.

³ Exod. 21:1-11 and Deut. 15:12-18

⁴ Lev. 25:39-55.

⁵ Cf. Gagnon above

This was the context in which Paul was writing to his beloved friend Philemon about his runaway slave, Onesimus. Slavery, regardless of circumstance, is clearly wrong. But Dalcho's justification, and that of any other advocate of slavery, cannot rightly use Paul's letter to Biblically support the form of slavery that existed here.

And Dalcho certainly wasn't the only one. In South Carolina, many of the most prominent plantation owners and social blue bloods of the 18th and 19th centuries were Episcopalians, and our Church staunchly advocated against abolition and defiantly continued to ignore secular law after the passage of the 13th amendment.

Perhaps the silver lining to this dark period of our history are two women from Charleston, Sarah and Angelina Grimke, who grew up in the Episcopal church and became the first female abolitionists. Even as young girls whose prominent family owned hundreds of slaves, both held deep convictions that slavery was wrong. As adults, both Sarah and Angelina were publicly outspoken in their conviction that slavery was a moral evil. They wrote prolifically and spoke at many Christian gatherings, appealing to the consciences of those who sought to live according to the Gospel.

Getting back to Paul's letter, he was not addressing the issue of slavery, per se, in his letter to Philemon. Rather he wrote to his friend to address how to treat those who have wronged you, how reconciliation is an act of faithfulness to God, and how all who are made in God's image are equal members of God's beloved family.

You might have noticed that the letter was specifically addressed to the church in Colossae, which was a clever move as it holds Philemon up as a moral example to this church of newly converted believers who are yet still learning about forgiveness, reconciliation, and the value of every person's dignity.

Paul sets forth a new relational dynamic by referring to Onesimus as Philemon's "beloved brother." No longer is Onesimus bound to Philemon as a slave, but now they are bound to one another as brothers in Christ. And so Paul proceeds to appeal to Philemon's good nature and desire to do the right thing, making Philemon's choice in how to proceed with Onesimus voluntary and not an act of obedience. Paul's final stroke is to articulate his trust that Philemon 'will do even more' than Paul requests because he is a good and honorable follower of Christ.

The Grimke sisters seemed to emulate Paul's call to conscience in their own writing and speaking. "Angelina Grimké wrote her first tract, "Appeal to the

Christian Women of the South (1836)," to encourage Southern women to join the abolitionist movement. She addressed Southern women in sisterly, reasonable tones [arguing] that slavery was contrary to the United States' Declaration of Independence and to the teachings of Christ. She discussed the damage both to slaves and to society. She advocated teaching slaves to read, and freeing any slaves her readers might own. Although legal codes of slave states restricted or prohibited both of these actions, Angelina urged her readers to ignore wrongful laws and do what was right" as a matter of Christian duty.⁶

We, too, live in a time in which our laws and social mores keep us from living up to who we are created to be. Circumstances are different now, to be sure, but we still have culturally acceptable forms of making sure certain groups of people are 'kept in their place.'⁷

For example, I think it's safe to assume that most everyone here is informed and culturally aware enough to know that the waitstaff at our favorite restaurants aren't making enough in tips to earn a living wage, right? I read a study⁸ examining whether Christians were better or worse tippers at restaurants than those of no faith at all. Any guesses as to what they found? Those of no faith tipped their servers significantly better than Christians, both when service was deemed good as well as bad. (... a little something to think about at lunch today.)

What if we shift our perspective for a moment? What if we look through the eyes of our descendants at our behavior and choices as Christians today? Just as we shake our heads in disgust and shame at our forebearers at how they subjugated others for the sake of their own privilege, what might cause our children and our children's children to shake their heads about us? Will they be proud of how we related to the LGBTQ+ community, or how we managed our stewardship of creation, or how we were quick to resolve interpersonal and international conflict without litigation or violence?

I for one feel a deep sense of shame about the ways in which we've rationalized and institutionalized minimum wage rates in such a way as to not be anywhere near a living wage, and we continue to knowingly buy goods produced in overseas sweatshops, we still fail to provide quality affordable and accessible healthcare to everyone, and educational disparities persist.

⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grimk%C3%A9_sisters

⁷ For an insightful read, I suggest *You Have Stept out of Your Place: A History of Women and Religion in America* by Susan Hill Lindley.

⁸ <https://scholarship.sha.cornell.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1015&context=articles>

And while none of that may technically fit the definition of slavery, the underlying evil is the same.

As Christians, we take seriously the Gospel mandate to treat every human being with dignity – we understand that is how a follower of Jesus is to behave. (It’s part of the covenant we make at our baptism!) And as we grow up and mature in our discipleship, we take on the responsibility to do “all in our power to support [others] in their life in Christ.”⁹ We agree to hold each other accountable, in love, to the Gospel. And that Gospel calls us to die daily to worldly self-interest.

Yes, it’s hard. It’s hard to examine ourselves – our motives and our privilege – in light of the Gospel. It can feel deeply threatening. It can be even more discomfoting when someone we trust from our faith community calls attention to our moral shortcomings, regardless of how lovingly they approach us.

Jesus, Paul, the Grimke sisters each believed “the gospel ought to have a liberating impact on oppressive social structures in the world, not just on individual self-understanding in relation to God. Christianity is not just an otherworldly, ethereal religion. Faith is concrete.”¹⁰ Faith requires that we thoughtfully consider how we can relinquish material privilege for the benefit of all, and act in ways that make it easier for all of us to build up the Kingdom of God.

⁹ BCP 303.

¹⁰ Gagnon, page 467.