

# Slavery & Christianity

Paul's Letter to Philemon<sup>1</sup>

John Robbins

Onesimus, Paul writes, “once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me.” How has Onesimus changed? Well, he has left Philemon (but that cannot be the reason he is now profitable to Philemon), and he has become a believer. Paul says that Onesimus was not helpful to Philemon – perhaps he stole something from him – we are not told. (It is easy for both slaves and employees to rationalize stealing from their masters and employers.) But now Onesimus is helpful to both Philemon and Paul, and that is because he ran away to Rome – a journey of hundreds of miles – and has now become a Christian. We are not told why Onesimus left Philemon; perhaps as a young man he was rebellious, and he may have felt Philemon’s anger. But now all that has changed. (32) As a believer he has been helpful to Paul, who is in chains and does not have the freedom required to preach the Gospel widely. I doubt that the irony was lost on Philemon: Onesimus has more freedom in Rome than Paul the Apostle, and so has become a helper to Paul.

This means that Paul has not turned Onesimus the runaway slave over to the Roman authorities. Even though Onesimus remains the legal property of Philemon, Paul has not reported him to the government so he could be punished for his rebellion and returned to his legal owner. (Punishment of runaway slaves at the time included branding, maiming, and death.) Why not? Simply by running away from his master Onesimus had committed a serious crime under Roman law. Why does Paul, why do all the men with Paul – Timothy, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke – protect a fugitive slave? By doing so, they have become complicit in his crime. Under Roman law of the first century after Christ, anyone who harbored a fugitive slave was not only liable for reimbursing the slaveowner for all the income lost because of the slave’s flight (what we would call civil damages) but was also subject to severe criminal penalties. Yet Paul did not report Onesimus to the Roman authorities. Is this the same man who wrote in *Romans* 13: “Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities?”

Before we answer that question, let us consider this matter a little more. Paul does not tell us how much time has elapsed since Onesimus left Philemon. That time must have been considerable: Onesimus had traveled from Colosse/Laodicea to Rome, a journey of hundreds of miles (the most direct route is over land and sea); he had listened to Paul teach and had been converted by the truth he had heard; he had become an important helper to Paul; and, since Onesimus returned willingly to Philemon, he and Paul must have discussed what to do about his situation. Onesimus was not a fugitive for a day, a week, or even a month, but in all likelihood for several months. (33) During all this time he was in violation of Roman law.

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 secret from the Roman authorities. Had they known that Onesimus was 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’

---

<sup>1</sup> Robbins, John, *Slavery & Christianity* (The Trinity Foundation, Unicoi TN, 2007) pp. 32-40  
Excerpts and footnotes by William Gross [www.onthewing.org](http://www.onthewing.org) March 2007.

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 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 the Word of God. A civil law is not moral simply because it is 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. (34) 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.

Second, the *Romans 13* injunction forbids armed resistance to governors<sup>2</sup>; it does not prohibit peaceful disobedience to sinful laws. In the sixteenth century, Reformed theologians developed the doctrine of lesser magistrates, which provided that private citizens could not take up arms against tyrannical rulers, but that local (lesser) magistrates have the duty to protect their citizens from tyrannical kings.<sup>3</sup> Paul does not call for a slave insurrection; he opposed it. Nor does he call for a revolution against the tyranny of Rome.<sup>4</sup> 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.

In a loose sense, Paul did comply with Roman law by sending Onesimus back to Philemon. Even more remarkably, Onesimus, by willingly returning to Philemon, was complying in some fashion as well. But their actions do not imply that Roman law regarding fugitive slaves was just: it was not. Nor does Paul ever cite Roman law as his reason for sending Onesimus back to Philemon. His reason was entirely different.

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 supercedes 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. (35)

---

<sup>2</sup> If Robbins is correct on this point, then the American Revolution was unbiblical. Not raising arms against the leadership of the Church is far different than raising arms against the state. That's why it's tenuous to draw an analogy between Israel as a nation state, and Israel as the predecessor of the Church. In the Church, we lead by persuasive example and not by coercive power – WHG

<sup>3</sup> That may have fit the times, but probably does not make a useful rule in other political environments, and certainly not in Church polity. The Reformation established national churches, not the biblical form of the Church – WHG

<sup>4</sup> Like any good soldier, ours not to make reply; ours not to reason why; ours but to do and die (Tennyson). Taken to the extreme, however, this would require us to ignore evil, which Scripture will not allow. The only exception is for offenses made against us *personally* in the discharge of our Christian duties. In such cases, we are to turn the other cheek (Mt 5:39) – WHG

This law regarding fugitive slaves also makes the fugitive slave laws of the United States sinful, and the *Dred Scott* decision of the United States Supreme Court reprehensible.<sup>5</sup> The Old Testament contains other provisions regarding slavery with which Paul would have been familiar. *Exodus* 20:15, for example, is the Eighth Commandment, and it forbids stealing. The relevance of this is that the Hebrew term for kidnapping is *manstealing*, and it is a capital crime: “He who kidnaps a man and sells him, or if he is found in his hand, shall surely be put to death” (*Exodus* 21:16). The Eighth Commandment forbids more than theft of property; it forbids theft of persons. Both kidnapping – enslaving – a man and slave-trading are capital crimes under God’s law. Further, both aliens and Hebrews were supposed to be equal before God’s law in ancient Israel: “You shall neither mistreat a stranger nor oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt” (*Exodus* 23:9). “And if a stranger sojourns with you in your land, you shall not mistreat him. But the stranger who dwells among you shall be to you as one born among you, and you shall love him as yourself; for you were strangers in the land of Egypt: I am the Lord your God” (*Leviticus* 19:33-34). Paul, well-educated in the Old Testament, knew these laws very well. Christ called the last commandment, “you shall love him as yourself,” the “second greatest commandment.” These laws regarding slavery were not for ancient Israel alone, but are in force in perpetuity.<sup>6</sup> (36)

With God’s law in mind, Paul commands Philemon to receive Onesimus: “You, therefore, receive him.” Now why would Paul have to command Philemon – or why would Paul think he has to command Philemon – to receive his own slave back? Would not the slaveowner Philemon have accepted the slave Onesimus without such a command – in fact, even demanded his return? And what is the purpose of the “therefore” in this command? These questions arise because Paul’s command is too narrowly understood. Paul’s command is not simply that Philemon receive Onesimus, but that he receive him as Paul’s “own heart,” that is, as Paul himself. From the beginning of this letter Paul has been identifying himself with Onesimus. First, Paul called himself a prisoner; then he called Onesimus his son; and now he calls Onesimus himself: “my own heart.” 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 – as himself. Paul is applying to this specific case the injunction to love one’s neighbor as oneself.

Back in verses 8 and 9 Paul had said that “though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love’s sake I rather appeal to you...” But here in verse 12 Paul does command Philemon to receive Onesimus back as Paul’s “own heart.” Has Paul changed his mind? Is this a contradiction? Or is “what is fitting” something different from “receive him, that is, my own heart?” I think the answer to all these questions must be, No. The answer to them all is to pay closer attention to what Paul writes: Paul does not consider this command to Philemon as being “very bold.” He has couched it in diplomatic, tactful language, in expressions of love and thanksgiving, in an appeal to Philemon’s love for all the saints. The “therefore” is there

---

<sup>5</sup> Chief Justice Roger Taney wrote the *Dred Scott* decision in 1857; he was a Roman Catholic, his Church favored slavery, and it held slaves itself in the nineteenth century.

<sup>6</sup> Based on Robbins’ reasoning, we are wrong to have immigration laws and we must not deport illegal aliens. Obviously, this biblical principle is valid in perpetuity only for the Church, not for the state – WHG

because Onesimus is no longer unprofitable to Philemon as a slave, but profitable to him as a believer and a free man.<sup>7</sup> (37)

Paul goes further. He tells Philemon that he wished to keep Onesimus with him in Rome, so that “he might minister to me in my chains for the Gospel.” Paul again incidentally reminds Philemon of his chains, of the fact he is unjustly imprisoned and a slave, of the fact that he needs help in promoting the Gospel. But Paul sends Onesimus back to Philemon, forgoing all the benefits that he – Paul, the old man and prisoner – might receive from Onesimus’ help. But once again, that is not all Paul says: He says that Onesimus would be doing this “on your behalf.” As the legal property of Philemon, whatever help Onesimus might have given to Paul would legally be help from Philemon. Paul’s unstated suggestion is that Philemon should be helping Paul promote the Gospel. Calvin makes an excellent point: “He who endures persecution for the sake of the Gospel ought not to be regarded as a private individual, but as one who publicly represents the whole church... All believers ought to be united in taking care of it, so that they may not, as is frequently done, leave the Gospel to be defended in the person of one man.”

### **The Importance of Consent**

Then Paul gets directly to the heart of the matter: “But without your consent I wanted to do nothing...” Paul here directly and explicitly raises the matter of consent for the first time. He has hinted around about it for the entire letter, but now he makes it explicit and obvious. Philemon cannot ignore the issue. But though Philemon cannot ignore the issue, many commentators have managed to. (38)

Paul states a general principle: “Without your consent I wanted to do nothing.” Although he has apostolic authority – which both he and Philemon realize – Paul’s authority does not include the use of force, coercion, or compulsion. In this case, Paul is even forgoing giving Philemon bold commands in Christ. He wants Philemon’s consent, because he wants to impress upon Philemon the importance of consent. He wants Philemon to understand that it is consent alone that makes the difference between theft and sharing, and that this principle applies to human beings as much as to property. Paul is teaching Philemon what theft is, and how the law against theft applies to manstealing. That is why he raises the issue of consent, and says he is not willing to do anything without Philemon’s consent. Although Paul here speaks of Philemon’s consent, he is teaching Philemon that the principle of consent applies to all men. Taking is theft not only when the property of Christians is taken, but when any property is taken without the consent of the owner.

Paul wants Philemon’s consent so that “your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary.” Here Paul makes the contrast as stark as possible. On the one hand, compulsion; on the other, consent and voluntarism. The two are opposites, and Paul clearly favors freedom, consent, and voluntarism, and opposes compulsion. That is, Paul opposes slavery. Paul will not treat Onesimus as a slave, and he commands Philemon to receive him back as if he were Paul himself, that is, as a free man. Even more impressively, Onesimus returns to Philemon freely and voluntarily. But Paul is so tactful that he makes the reference personal to Philemon, not to

---

<sup>7</sup> The notion that free men are profitable to one another is elaborated in the discipline of market economics, which discusses such concepts as the division of labor, comparative advantage, and voluntary cooperation. List to my lectures on economics at [www.trinityfoundation.org](http://www.trinityfoundation.org).

Onesimus, saying that he is not willing to treat Philemon as a slave: “without your consent I wanted to do nothing.” Paul makes it clear to Philemon that the same justice Philemon expects to be accorded to him – nothing without his consent – should also be accorded to Onesimus. What does Paul mean by “your good deed” in this sentence? It seems he is referring to Philemon’s help by proxy: the help Onesimus might have given Paul. (39)