

WHY DID THE APOSTLE PAUL NOT CONDEMN THE INSTITUTION OF SLAVERY IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE, AND CALL FOR ITS ABOLITION?

In our age, slavery is viewed as a horrendous evil, on a moral par with genocide. Yet, in his letters to churches and individuals, Paul did not confront or denounce the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire. He urged slaves to obey their masters and masters to be fair with their slaves (Ephesians 6: 5-9). In the letter to Philemon, he did not explicitly ask Philemon to set his runaway slave, Onesimus, free, and certainly did not call for the abolition of slavery. Why would a Christian leader, one of Christ's apostles, and an author of many texts preserved in the Scriptures, not do this?

Some ideas towards an explanation

1. We want Paul to have been against institutionalised slavery, a terrible evil. But he simply wasn't.
2. Many slaves wanted freedom for themselves, but all the evidence from ancient Rome suggests that slavery as an institution was taken for granted, even by slaves. The Roman economy functioned and prospered on the backs of slave labourers.
3. It just never occurred to Paul to challenge such a fundamental social and economic institution. Abolition of slavery was not a priority for Paul. What mattered to him was the preaching of the gospel, the salvation of individuals and communities and the spreading of the Kingdom of God.
4. Paul had no desire to challenge Roman and Greek customs. He urged obedience to secular authorities (Romans 13: 1-7). He wanted nothing done to bring disgrace to the message of the gospel in society, hence for example, his insistence that women wear head-coverings in church gatherings (1 Corinthians 11), as in that society, almost the only women who appeared in public bare-headed were prostitutes. By the way, slaves were not allowed to cover their heads in Roman society. – an interesting connection.
5. Paul urged slaves to be obedient and respectful to their masters, who were to behave humanely towards their (Ephesians 6: 5-9). In terms of contemporary values, Paul was relatively humane.
6. In Philemon, Paul is subtly but radically subverting ambient Graeco-Roman culture, by referring to Onesimus, a thieving runaway slave, as his son, and appealing to Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a 'beloved brother' (Philemon 10 and 16).
7. The test for freedom for slaves was not an abstract moral imperative calling for the abolition of slavery. Rather it was an answer to the question, "Given the fact of slavery, what are its advantages for the proclamation of the gospel?"

8. In 1 Corinthians 7: 20-22 and Galatians 3: 28, Paul seems to be saying that social, economic and religious standing are of no significance in the church. Believers should live without anxiety in their present circumstances whether married to a believer or an unbeliever, whether they had come to Christ as Jews or Gentiles, whether they were slaves or free, whether men or women.

Slavery: A theological metaphor

1. Slavery is a sustained metaphor used by Paul to explain salvation by God's grace through faith in Christ (Romans 6: 19).
2. Paul described himself as a slave of Christ (Romans 1: 1 and Philippians 1: 1).
3. Paul amplifies that idea in Romans 6: 15-23 – We are slaves to the one whom we obey, whether obedience to sin leading to death or obedience to Christ leading to righteousness. He uses the terms 'slaves to righteousness' (v. 19) and 'slaves of God' (v. 22), leading to righteousness, holiness and eternal life.
4. For Paul, the one who is truly free is a person who is a slave of Christ. This is a strong paradox – The one who is enslaved to Christ is ultimately free; free from sin and death and free to do the will of God and live.
5. Three key words, all related to slavery, sustain that metaphor throughout Paul's writings:

Redemption (Ephesians 1: 7; Colossians 1: 14) – Gk. *apolutrosis* – literally the paying of a ransom or price for a slave, who is set free by the one who bought him.

Justification (Romans 3: 24) – Gk. *dikaiosis* – the act of being judged and found not guilty, describes the freedom received by a slave upon manumission.

Reconciliation (Romans 5: 11; 2 Corinthians 5: 18-19) – Gk. *katallage* – the bringing together of those who had been estranged. Used to convey that as slaves were excluded from the rights and privileges of a free society, and become members of that society upon manumission, so one coming to Christ becomes part of God's new household, family and community.

Conclusion

None of this is fully satisfying to most contemporary Christian readers of Paul's letters. Doubtless, if Paul lived in our society, his views would be different, especially as support for slavery today would bring the gospel and the church into shameful disrepute, avoidance of which was a top priority for Paul. We have to accept that Paul was a man of his times, but a man with a particular calling from God, a man whom God used remarkably in the establishment of God's Kingdom in the earliest days.

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