

Philemon Christianity and Slavery

Onesimus was a slave and Philemon his master, and it is from this position that Paul writes. To fully appreciate the book, one will need an understanding of slavery in the Roman Empire.

Slavery was taken for granted as a normal part of life in the ancient world. Indeed, the whole structure of Roman society was based on it. Dr. Marvin Vincent said, "Slavery grew with the growth of the Roman state until it changed the economic basis of society, doing away with free labor, and transferring nearly all industries to the hands of slaves." Also, we find, that during the wars of conquest, most slaves were war captives. By the time of the New Testament, however, most slaves were born into slavery. The number of slaves within the Roman Empire was enormous. It has been said, that the number was so great, that slaves made up as much as one third of the population of the Roman Empire.

Slaves were not actually considered persons, but property. They could be sold, exchanged, given away, or seized to pay their master's debt. A slave had no legal right to marriage, and slave cohabitation was regulated by their masters. Master's had unlimited power to control, and punish their slaves. It has been said, that Juvenal, a Roman writer, told of a wealthy woman who ordered the crucifixion of a slave and refused to give any reason except her own good pleasure.

With the spread of Christianity, and the New Testament era, however, slavery was changing. Treatment of slaves was improving, in part because masters came to realize that contented slaves worked better. Although not legally recognized as persons, slaves began to acquire some legal rights. Dr. Merrill Tenney in his Encyclopedia of the Bible (5:459) states, "In A. D. 20, the Roman senate decreed that slaves accused of crimes were to be tried in the same manner as free men."

Also, it appears that after the decree made by the Roman senate, that in some cases, the wills of slaves were recognized as valid. They were often permitted to own property. Slaves were sometime seen, as being better off than freemen. They were assured of food, clothing, and shelter, while poor freemen often slept in the streets. Freemen had no job security and could lose their livelihood in times of economic calamity. Many slaves ate and dressed as well as freemen.

It was not uncommon for a Roman to train a slave at his own trade. They had opportunities for education and training in almost all disciplines. Slaves could become doctors, teachers, artists, musicians, and many other things.

By the first century, freedom became a real possibility for many slaves. Owners of slaves now see the benefit of leaving their slaves with the hope of freedom. This change brought about a better work force and a deep shared friendship between master and slave, which benefited both parties. One study indicated that in the period 81-49 B. C., five hundred thousand slaves were

freed, and many received part of their master's estate after his death. However, by the time of Augustus Caesar, so many slaves were being freed upon the death of their master that a law had to be passed restricting that practice.

In summary, it is significant to note that nowhere in the New Testament is slavery attacked directly. According to various sources, "Had Jesus and the apostles done so, the results would have been chaos. Any slave insurrection would have been brutally crushed, and the slaves massacred. The gospel would have been swallowed up by the message of social reform. Further, right relations between slaves and masters made it a workable social institution, if not an ideal one.

Christianity, however, sowed the seeds of the destruction of slavery. It would be destroyed not by social upheaval, but by changed hearts."

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