

SLAVERY IN PAUL'S TIME

Quoted and summarized from Harold Hoehner, Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary; Clinton Arnold, Ephesians; and John R.W. Stott, The Message of Ephesians.

The widespread practice of slavery in Greco-Roman times (when Paul wrote Ephesians) does not give moral justification for its existence (it is estimated that anywhere from one-fifth to one-third of those in the Roman empire were slaves). Slavery always involves the ownership of one or more persons by another that constitutes the deprivation of their freedom. When we read Paul's letters, we find that he never gives a theological basis for slavery; he assumes its presence in society and helps believers understand what it means to live as a Christian within this socioeconomic institution.

We must be careful to observe the difference between ancient slavery and modern slavery in the New World so that we do not unwittingly import modern ideas of slavery into the biblical context. Here are a few important distinctions:

1. *Racial factors played no role.* Whereas slavery in America in the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries principally involved the acquisition of black African slaves forcibly taken from their homeland, Roman-era slavery had nothing to do with race or a particular people group. Roman slaves were of virtually every race of people in the Mediterranean region and involved people from every country. The most common source of slaves in Rome was prisoners of war. A smaller number of slaves resulted from the rescue of abandoned infants and from those who sold themselves into slavery because of debt, knowing that they could later regain their freedom. Some, however, did enter the slave market because they were captured by professional slave traders (1 Tim 1:10).
2. *Many slaves could reasonably expect to be emancipated during their lifetime.* A great number of slaves could even expect to be released by the time they were thirty years old. In fact, so many were being released from their servitude in the early first century A.D. that Caesar Augustus declared thirty years to be the minimum age for emancipation and then limited how many were freed each year. Owners paid their slaves an occasional sum of money (called a *peculium*) to reward them for their hard work. This fund was commonly used by the slaves to purchase their freedom. By contrast, slaves in the New World had no hope for manumission and freedom.
3. *Many slaves worked in a variety of specialized and responsible positions.* Although some slaves were confined to many years of hard labor in agriculture, manufacturing, or domestic duties, many others served as doctors, teachers, writers, accountants, agents, bailiffs, overseers, secretaries, and sea captains. African slaves, by contrast, were seldom entrusted with responsible positions nor did they have any skilled jobs. Furthermore, many slaves in the ancient world received education and training, and it was common practice for masters to invest in the education of their slaves, and to motivate them to a higher quality of workmanship by holding out the prospect of freedom after a specified time.
4. *Freed slaves often became Roman citizens and developed a client relationship to their former masters.* It was the common practice for an emancipated slave to gain Roman citizenship. Having gained their freedom, life out from under the provisions and protection of their former master could be difficult. With their former master now becoming their patron, transition to a more independent life was eased. Many times the former slave became wealthier than their patron.

In spite of these substantive differences between Roman-era slavery and New World slavery, we should not construe this ancient form of slavery as more humane or as a morally justifiable economic system. Slaves in each system were often treated no different than cattle, punished indiscriminately, allowed no legal existence or honor, and goaded into compliance through intimidation.

It must also be remembered that the abolition of slavery is a modern phenomenon. Certainly Paul and the early Christian church did not advocate the abolition of slavery as an institution. Christianity's emphasis has always been on the transformation of individuals and families who will in turn influence society, not the transformation of a society which will then influence individuals (1 Cor 1:18-2:16). Paul enjoins both slaves and masters to be servants of Christ as they carry out their duties. He depicts the slave as a free person in Christ and the free person as a slave of Christ (1 Cor 7:22). Furthermore, both slaves and masters are equal brothers in Christ (Gal 3:28; 1 Tim 6:2; Philemon 16) though they each may function in different roles. Nowhere does Paul suggest that slaves should give orders to their master or masters to be submissive to the slaves. He was concerned, however, that both masters and slaves carry out their responsibilities as to Christ.

Why did Paul not advocate the abolition of slavery? First, he was more concerned with the big picture, eternity. He taught that suffering in this life was nothing in comparison with the joy of eternity (Rom 8:18-30). Second, in Rom 13 he advocated obedience to government. To propose the abolition of slavery would defy the government. Third speaking speculatively, if he promoted the abolition of slavery, undoubtedly many slaves might have become Christians for the wrong reason. In sum, Christianity does not promise a release from the present circumstances but gives one power to endure those circumstances. Though Paul does not promote the abolition of the ancient institution of slavery, he does instruct believers to avoid becoming slaves (1 Cor 7:23). Furthermore, Paul enjoins those slaves who are able to gain freedom to avail themselves of the opportunity (1 Cor 7:21). In the end, Christianity's vision of a transformed individual who respects his neighbors and treats them as made in the image of God resulted not only in true spiritual liberty but, in time, in the earthly emancipation and liberty of physical slaves. Christianity undermines all forms of slavery.

