

Reflection Questions: Onesimus

The first followers of Jesus, the early church, had people of different classes who would all come together to worship together in one household. In the ancient world in which these first followers lived, people were not sorted as much by their race or their gender as they were sorted by class. “*Who one was and what one did were shaped by where one was located on the social ladder.*”¹ Onesimus was a slave, and slaves were at the bottom of the social ladder.

What did it look like for a master and a slave to be brothers/sisters in Jesus Christ? The truth is that people were still trying to work out what exactly this looked like, when the social order that existed outside the walls of the church gathering was transformed inside the walls of the church. The book of Philemon is a fine example of “what theology looks like on the ground level as the apostle becomes pastor and friend.”²

Interestingly (and maybe disturbingly to modern ears), Paul stops short of asking Philemon to free Onesimus. There are many possible reasons why this might be. Freeing a slave was not all that unusual in the ancient world. In addition, even when a slave was freed, they were often still dependent upon and indebted to their former masters. Also, Christians in the ancient world were able to reconcile in their minds both being a follower of Jesus and owning a slave – Christians continued to own slaves for quite a long time. Also, Paul was much more concerned with what was going on inside the walls of the church than he was in society at large. Paul’s vision “was about something *other than legal manumission*, that is, *a new creation sibling-based fellowship on the basis of adoption as children of God*. For Paul this was a nobler vision and one (for him) more penetrating.”³

In Galatians 3:28, Paul writes:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

But what exactly does this look like in real life? What exactly does this look like when masters and slaves worship alongside one another as brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ. How does a master who also loves Jesus treat his slaves? Does he have to stop beating them? Threatening them? Sleeping with them? Working them too hard? Feed them better? Make sure they have enough clothes? Should he even own slaves? They were trying to work all of this out.

1. We are still responsible to work out our relationship with God, following Jesus Christ, in context of the relationships in which we live. Which relationships can you think of that might be difficult for people who worship together to work out in practice? Do you have any examples of when being a brother/sister in Christ was difficult because of other relationships that you have with someone in the church? How do you work these things out?

Onesimus (probably) was a slave who had run away from his master, Philemon. For a slave “to flee required enormous courage, ingenuity, and emotional stamina on the part of the slave.” And yet, Paul

1. Scot McKnight. *The Letter to Philemon*. The New Testament Commentary on the New Testament. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2017), 12.

is sending Onesimus back to his master's household. There is a huge power imbalance here, where Philemon holds all the power, and Onesimus holds none. In all likelihood, Onesimus stood there, looking at Philemon, as either the letter was read (or it is possible he read the letter out loud himself).

2. How do you think Onesimus felt about returning to his master's household with this letter? How do you think he felt as he listened to (or read) this letter in the presence of his former master?
3. What relationships in the church today might be examples of a power imbalance between believers in Jesus?
4. What does this letter to Philemon teach us about dealing with such situations? Does the book of Philemon have anything to teach us about dealing with situations of power and inequality in the church today?
5. Have you ever felt this power differential in a relationship within the church – whether you felt you had the power, or you felt that you were powerless?
6. Does anything about Onesimus' life or story resonate with yours?

As we consider this letter in which slavery in the ancient world is so much a part, we cannot excuse ourselves completely. We need to ask ourselves what the letter to Philemon, and the apostle Paul might say in our world to our churches regarding slavery today. The statistics regarding modern-day slavery are astounding and disturbing. Here are some statistics for modern day slavery:

"The United Nations estimates – and the number staggers – that twenty-one million people are in slavery today,⁵ while one of the leading non-government organizations raises it to thirty-five million.⁶ The percentage of two particular slave sub-groups remains consistent: twenty-five percent of all slaves are forced into commercial sex services⁷ and about thirty percent of all slaves are under the age of eighteen.⁸ Males make up about forty-six percent and females fifty-four percent of modern slaves.^{9,10}

Scot McKnight concludes: "What Philemon begins to say already then is that the assault on modern slavery needs to begin with justice in the church that spreads into justice for all."¹¹

7. There are a number of excellent organizations that deal with modern-day slavery and injustice issues. Where might you go to learn about them? Is there something you can do to either educate yourself or help combat modern day slavery?

5. Havocscope, *Human Trafficking: Prices and Statistics of the Modern Day Slave Trade* (n.p.: Havocscope, 2015), under "74," Amazon Kindle edition.

6. "The Global Slavery Index." See <http://www.globalslaveryindex.org/>.

7. Havocscope, under "81."

8. Havocscope, under "332."

9. Havocscope, under "72."

10. This paragraph is from McKnight, 34.

11. *Ibid.*, 36.

Putting it together

Choose a bead to represent Onesimus' story.

Why did you choose this bead? What about it makes you think of Onesimus?
