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Slavery and Manumission in the Pre-Constantine Church

Abstract

This paper looks at the church's handling of the issue of slavery in the period before Constantine and the official recognition of Christianity. The time period is important because Christians had no political authority to end slavery, assuming they wanted to do so. Thus, the aim of the paper is discover how the Church as an institution alleviated the conditions of the slaves and how slaves were treated in the church and examine the relationship of slave to master in the church. This will be accomplished by examining certain doctrines of the faith church leaders applied to these problems as well as ancient understandings of what Paul had written and how it fit into their world and social context, which was the social context of the Bible itself. More specifically, by examining Paul's letter to Philemon, Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp, and the Didache, the paper argues that the early church, using a Scriptural model, worked within its circumstances to ameliorate slaves' material conditions, to bring all classes of people to the saving knowledge of Jesus Christ, and to ensure that, within the church, all people were treated as equals.

Keywords

Early Church, Church Fathers, Slavery, Paul, New Testament

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INTRODUCTION

Slavery is one of the oldest social institutions in the world. Scholars are not sure exactly when or even exactly why slavery began, but historical records make clear that the institution has existed in every major culture of antiquity. While it has only recently been eliminated in the western world, it still exists in places today in some form or another. Despite slavery's prevalence in society worldwide, there have only been five "slave-societies," with classical Greece and Rome the only two in antiquity.¹

It was within the social context of Roman Empire that Christianity, the primary driving force behind the abolition of slavery in the western, or at least Anglo, world in modern times, was born and developed. However, it is inappropriate to assume that because modern western society found within the pages of Scripture the rationale and authority to condemn slavery and work toward its abolition that early Christians in the Roman Empire did the same. Indeed, the political, and social circumstances that prevailed in the Roman Empire were entirely different from those which have prevailed in the western world since the Enlightenment. The cultural disconnect is even greater between the modern period and the first three centuries of the church because the church was persecuted, unofficial, and largely politically powerless in the time before Constantine.

So what were the attitudes toward slavery in the early church? This is a vast topic area and some limitations should be set. First, this inquiry is limited to the pre-Constantine church, specifically to the first two centuries A.D. Church historian Philip Schaff illuminates the rationale for this when he writes, "In the period before us ...the [complete] abolition of slavery ... was utterly out of the question. The church, in her persecuted condition, had as yet no influence at all over the machinery of the state and civil legislation."² Secondly, this study focuses more on how early Christians viewed the treatment of slaves and their manumission, and thus to some extent the institution itself, rather than how slaves should act toward their masters. And thirdly, not all of the writings of this period can be examined, nor can an exegesis of all of the Pauline slave codes be executed. Thus, the study here is limited to two early Christian texts, Ignatius' Epistle to Polycarp and the Didache, with a brief look at the Epistle to Philemon to provide the New Testament background. The specific reasoning for choosing these texts is given later.

However, before looking at the early Christian attitudes toward slavery, one must become acquainted with the Roman system of manumission as it existed in the first two centuries after Christ. These attitudes and practices were the cultural

¹S. S. Bartchy, "Slavery in the New Testament," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, vol. 4, ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 543. The antebellum American South was another slave society. Considering the current Sesquicentennial of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, the abolition of slavery in America, the topic of Christian interpretations of the Scriptural passages on slavery is particularly timely.

²Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, vol. 2 (Peabody, Mass: Hendrickson Publishers, 1858), 349.

and societal norms of the gospel writers and many of the early Fathers. It from this setting that the texts being examined were written. This background information is imperative, as nothing, not even the Bible, is written in a vacuum. This brief historical overview examines the Roman treatment of slaves and practices of manumission.

ROMAN SLAVERY: AN OVERVIEW

By the time of the Roman Empire, slavery was thoroughly institutionalized and ingrained in the Roman legal system. During the time of geographical expansion under the Republic, the slave population exploded, as Rome quickly conquered their neighbors in the Mediterranean basin.³ The Punic Wars proved especially helpful in not only providing slaves for Rome, but also securing for slavery the powerful place it was to hold in the imperial period.⁴ Slaves during the Republic had no rights, and as thus often received cruel treatment. Many times, the cruelty was officially sanctioned. As perhaps would be expected, slaves were considered property and not people. Because they could not legally marry, their children were illegitimate. Furthermore, they could own nothing and inherit nothing. Because they were viewed as property, there was no legal recourse for a slave when beaten by his master, which could happen at any time and for any reason.⁵

For the purposes of this study, any underlying philosophical, legal, or moral reasons for the treatment of slaves are not as important as the fact that these conditions existed. However, at least at a practical level, masters had little incentive to ensure that their slaves lived long and prospered. With Rome conquering new peoples, there was always a fresh supply of man power. By the time of the establishment of the Empire, however, the wars of conquest had ended. This meant that there would be no more mass importation of foreigners into Rome to serve as slaves. Slaveholders were forced to rely on peacetime means of maintaining the slave population.

Historian William Westermann lists six of methods of enslavement: slavery by birth, by exposure of infants (exposure was a way to kill unwanted children in which the child was left alone to die; if a child was found alive, he could be enslaved), by sale of children due to poverty, by sale from distant regions to closer ones, by voluntary submission, and by penal condemnation.⁶ Not only did methods of enslavement change with the change in government, but attitudes about the treatment of slaves changed as well.

³Keith Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves* (New York: Cambridge Press, 1978), 102.

⁴Milton Meltzer, *Slavery: A World History* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1993), 101. See also William J. Webb, *Slaves, Women, and Homosexuals: Exploring the Hermeneutics of Cultural Analysis* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2001).

⁵Ibid., 176.

⁶William L. Westermann, *The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity* (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955), 84.

The Treatment of Slaves in the Early Imperial Period

The plight of the slave improved during the imperial period. The emperors began to enact laws which provided more protection for slaves. Just as there may have been philosophical or legal theories which served as presuppositions for the harsh treatment of slaves during the Republic, so there also may have been philosophical or legal underpinnings for the changes in Roman law regarding the treatment of slaves. For example, Stoic philosophy may have been influential in ending cruelty toward slaves. The Stoic belief in a spiritual bond between men, and their belief that men were born free, downplayed the distinction between free and slave.⁷ To the Stoic, the slave was a person, and thus should not be treated like an animal, or worse. Yet it was this very transcendent moral order which released them from trying to change the social order. As historian and sociologist Keith Hopkins writes, "... Stoic philosophers were not social reformers ... they never aimed at abolishing slavery."⁸ However, there also seems to be a good practical reason for encouraging more humanitarian treatment of slaves.

With the cessation of conquest, the supply of slaves depended on chiefly the internal methods listed above. To be sure, Westermann goes on to say, "This shift of emphasis in the sources of supply ... became a factor also in a change which took place in the prevailing attitude toward the slaves in their treatment."⁹ From this it should not be assumed that the obvious need for fresh supplies of slaves and the problems with cruel treatment were ignored during the Republic. Rather, now these problems were called to the fore of society and had to be given the full attention of the Roman legal genius.¹⁰

In the first two centuries after Christ the right of the master to treat his slave cruelly was drastically reduced. For example, torture was restricted in several ways, as was testimony under torture, and women and children were exempt. Slaves could no longer be killed arbitrarily or cast out when sick. Furthermore, slaves could not be mutilated or sold as prostitutes. Eventually, a slave could only be killed by judicial authority, thus giving the slave some audience with an independent authority, even if that authority was comprised of free men.¹¹ Not only did the conditions of servitude ameliorate during the first two centuries after Christ, but the opportunities for slaves to be freed also increased.

⁷W. J. Woodhouse, "Slavery (Roman)," in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 11, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner's Sons, 1955), 625.

⁸Hopkins, 122.

⁹Westermann, 84.

¹⁰Woodhouse, 625.

¹¹Meltzer, 177, 178.

Manumission in the Early Imperial Period

By the second century A.D., the emperors were permitting more and more slaves to be manumitted. However, this increase in manumission was temporarily restricted at the dawn of the empire. By the time of Augustus, manumission was so common that steps were taken to curb it out of fear of the potential for economic and social instability.¹² Nevertheless, the freedman himself did come to enjoy many benefits. Ex-slaves could become businessmen or be elected to high office. They could marry anyone except a senator and for a time could serve in the navy.¹³ Hopkins writes that most freedmen received Roman citizenship, and these ex-slaves enjoyed most of the same rights and privileges as any other Roman citizen.¹⁴

Neither the fact that manumission was welcomed by an individual slave nor the fact that by the imperial period manumissions were relatively frequent indicate an abolitionist movement within the empire. There were several reasons for freeing slaves, and on an individual basis the master might do so out of affection for his slave. But generally manumission was motivated by the chance for further financial gain on the part of the master.¹⁵

By the time of the imperial period there were three main methods of manumission, besides a master simply freeing his slave. Two of these resulted in the citizenship of the ex-slave. The first was the *manumission vindicta*. This involved an act of legal fiat. In order to manumit his slave, the master would claim that he was wrongfully enslaved. He would then get an associate to take him before the magistrate on grounds of false enslavement, and the magistrate could then free the slave.¹⁶ The seeming generosity notwithstanding, the master usually was still able to profit from this, exacting some sort of paid labor agreement from the ex-slave. This oath for services was very binding though, and repudiation thereof brought harsh penalties.¹⁷

The second method of manumission whereby a slave could become a citizen was the *manumissio testamento*. Under this method, a slave obtained his freedom upon the death of his master. This act was written into the master's will. Although the master himself could obviously not profit from this, his heirs still could, and often did. Often the release of the slave was conditional, the condition being that slave had to compensate his master's heirs for the loss of his services.¹⁸ *Manumissio testamento* was practiced on a massive scale. Owners would often release hundreds of slaves at one time. The amendment of this practice was one way in which Augustus initially stifled manumissions. He declared that only a

¹²Ibid., 184.

¹³Meltzer, 184, 185.

¹⁴Hopkins, 116.

¹⁵Hopkins, 127-131.

¹⁶Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity*, (New York: Oxford, 2005), 305, 306.

¹⁷Woodhouse, 627.

¹⁸Hezser, 306.

certain percentage of a master's slaves could be freed and even then no master could free more than one hundred.¹⁹

The third way in which a slave could be freed was to simply buy his freedom.²⁰ With the increase in slaves' rights in the imperial period came an increase in purchased freedom. Because a slave was able to own property and amass wealth, he was often able to simply buy his freedom. Again, the master had a financial incentive for allowing the slave to be free. Hopkins observes, "The prospect of becoming free kept a slave under control and hard at work, while the exaction of a market price as the cost of liberty enabled the master to buy a younger replacement."²¹ But freedom did not necessarily mean immediate citizenship. Slaves who either purchased their freedom or had it granted to them by their master were known as *Junian Latins*, although this status and the fact of their former status did not preclude them from later becoming citizens.²²

This backdrop is vital to understanding early Christian attitudes toward slavery. This is the atmosphere of the New Testament. However, the early Christians were not completely influenced by the surrounding culture. They looked to the Scriptures in order to find the how and the why for behavior in the world. Because slavery was a fact of life in the Roman world, it is not surprising that the New Testament would address slavery.

SLAVERY IN THE NEW TESTAMENT: PHILEMON

Any look at early Christian beliefs must begin with an examination of the New Testament. The Greek term used in the New Testament for slave is δούλος; the term for master is κύριος. These terms are used most often in the New Testament in a spiritual sense, describing the relationship of the believer to Christ and vice-versa. It is the "secular" use, describing the relationship between a slave and master, which is of concern here. Biblical scholar Karl Rengstorf comments that this usage is found most often in the epistles. He continues by saying, "These few passages are enough, however, to show that the usage of the NT lies wholly within the framework of that of the time, and cannot be isolated from it."²³

Treatment and Manumission

Philemon is widely regarded to be the most thorough treatment of slavery in the New Testament.²⁴ Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, to whom Paul writes, is mentioned in Paul's letter to the Colossians (4:9). Because Colossians also mentions

¹⁹Meltzer, 184.

²⁰Hopkins, 126.

²¹Hopkins, 118.

²²Hezser, 306.

²³Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "δούλος," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 2, ed. Gerhard Kittle, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964), 270.

²⁴Michael P. McHugh, "Slavery," in *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, vol. 2, 2d ed., ed. Everett Ferguson (New York: Garland Publishing, 1998), 1066.

an Archippus who lives in Colossae, it is reasonable to assume that Philemon lived there as well, and thus it was from thence that Onesimus fled.²⁵ Thus, the letter to the Colossians shows Paul's general teaching on slavery, while Philemon is a more specific letter, which is still rooted in the situation at Colossae (Col. 3:22-4:1). Although many of the details are the subject of inference and speculation, the basic story-line is that Onesimus ran away from his master Philemon and came to Paul. The letter indicates that Onesimus was not a Christian before he met Paul, while Philemon is both known by Paul and is a Christian (Phile. 1, 10, 11).

Paul writes to Philemon and encourages him to welcome Onesimus back and not to treat him as most runaways would have been treated (12-15). Runaway slaves could be imprisoned, subjected to hard labor, or beaten.²⁶ Paul did not want Onesimus treated this way, but rather to be treated like Paul himself would be if he came to Philemon. Verses 18 and 19 speak of the possibility that Onesimus wronged Philemon. There are two suggested explanations for what the offense could be. It could simply be the financial loss caused by the act of running away. Or it could also be that Paul knows that Onesimus has wronged his master in some other way and owes him money.²⁷ Either way, Paul accepts responsibility for it and pledges to pay the debt. Thus, not only does he urge Philemon to be kind to Onesimus by not physically punishing him, Paul also does not want Philemon to exact a financial toll on his returned slave.

Paul never tells Philemon to free Onesimus. But there is debate over whether the language of the letter indicates a call to manumission. Verses 15-16 read, "Perhaps the reason he was separated from you for a little while was that you might have him back for good – no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother." In verse 17, Paul tells Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Biblical scholar Peter O'Brien does not see this as a call to manumission. He claims that Paul "is not stating that Philemon is to receive Onesimus back as a freed man and no longer a slave, or that he is to free him immediately on his return."²⁸ The change in Onesimus as a result of his conversion means that he is now really not a slave in any sense, regardless of whether Philemon acknowledges this fact. Onesimus was now a brother to Philemon in the same sense as Paul. O'Brien believes that the phrase "as a slave" indicates that Philemon can still keep Onesimus in servitude. Paul showed specifically how a

²⁵Peter T. O'Brien, *Word Biblical Commentary: Colossians, Philemon*, vol. 44 (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982), 266. Some recent scholarship argues that Onesimus was not a runaway at all. Rather, he could have been specifically dispatched from Philemon to Paul, or that Paul was writing to Philemon asking that he allow Onesimus to apprentice with Paul. The point here is not to argue about the interpretation. The early church did believe Onesimus was a runaway, and thus the traditional understanding works fine for this paper. See J. Albert Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006).

²⁶Westermann, 77.

²⁷O'Brien, 300.

²⁸Ibid., 296, 297.

slave-master relationship should be within existing social customs, but also in light of both slave and master serving the same Lord.²⁹

Religious scholar and sociologist Norman Petersen also admits that in traditional scholarship, the “as” is the interpretive key. Based on strictly an internal-textual argument, the correct assumption is that Paul does not tell Philemon to free Onesimus. Philemon is to treat Onesimus as brother, even though in reality, in the secular world, he is a slave.³⁰ But Petersen takes a more sociological approach to the letter. How can Philemon relate to Onesimus as both a slave in the worldly context and a brother in the churchly one? To Petersen, Paul is telling Philemon that the worldly relationship should conform to the churchly relationship. That is, they should be brothers at both levels, and thus Onesimus should be freed. To Petersen, the key verse is 21, in which Paul writes that he believes Philemon will do more than Paul has told him to do.³¹ So, while Paul never explicitly asks for manumission, he provides a chain of reasoning for Philemon himself to follow to reach that conclusion.

The Message of Philemon in Context

Paul’s exhortations for the humane treatment of Onesimus mirror the attitudes toward the treatment of slavery which were rapidly gaining ground in the Empire at the time. However, his command for the humane treatment of slaves goes beyond that of Roman law and even Stoicism. Masters should not seek profit from treating a slave well, nor is there a lofty, but vague standard of the transcendent unity of mankind. Rather, Christ, as the absolute master and standard, will be the judge of the master.

But why did Paul not explicitly urge for manumission, or even full abolition for all slaves? That issue is highly debated and must not become the main concern here. Nevertheless, some possible explanations may be given in order to lay the background for the thought of the early Church Fathers. Aside from the fact that Christians were in no political position to advocate for abolition, church historian Leonard Agate gives three reasons why Paul would not encourage manumission. First, Jesus left the details of his teachings to be worked out and implemented over time. Second, empire-wide abolition, or even abolition by Christians would severely disrupt the economic fabric of the empire and further bring the ire of the empire upon Christians. And third, the early church, even in the first centuries, was expecting the immanent return of Christ, and thus physical situations such as slavery were not as important as spiritual ones. Equal treatment because of equal standing in Christ became paramount.³²

²⁹O’Brien, 270, 296, 297. See also Agate, 603.

³⁰Norman R. Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 95, 96.

³¹*Ibid.*, 96, 97.

³²Leonard A. Agate, “Slavery (Christian),” in *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 11, ed. James Hastings (New York: Scribner’s Sons, 1955), 602.

Thus, what should be observed in the two different opinions on the subject is the fact the letter is not a universal call for manumission of slaves, and the choice is left to Philemon himself. If Paul did not ask Philemon to manumit Onesimus, that did not preclude Philemon from doing so anyway. If Paul did ask Philemon to manumit Onesimus, even if subtly as Petersen insinuates, Philemon should not feel pressure to do so out of fear of punishment for the wrong of slaveholding, but out of love for God and his fellow believer.

That being the case, a New Testament model is provided for interpreting and understanding how the early church thought about manumission. Indeed, many of the first and second century church fathers wrote only a few lines in their works concerning slavery, much in the same fashion as Paul.³³ However, examining a few early Christian texts shows how the newly established church dealt with the same problems in the same social context.

EARLY CHRISTIAN LITERATURE

The two texts under examination are Ignatius' *Epistle to Polycarp* (also referred to as *Polycarp*) and the *Didache*. *Polycarp* contains both an admonition for humane treatment of slaves and a statement about manumission. The *Didache* says nothing about manumission, but does give a Pauline-like exhortation concerning the treatment of slaves and the relationship between slave and master. Only the statement in *Polycarp* concerning manumission will be examined because it is this statement which has attracted the most attention and is unique in the Christian writings of the first and second centuries. The *Didache's* teaching on the treatment of slaves will be examined because it is one of the earliest documents written for a general audience and for the purpose of training new believers.³⁴

The Didache

Schaff writes that the *Didache* is "the oldest and simplest church manual, of Jewish Christian origin, from the end of the first century..."³⁵ Patristic historian Aaron Milavec notes that there is some debate about whether the document itself was actually written by the end of the first century. The *Didache* arose in an oral community, and thus the document itself is a compilation of oral traditions. He concludes by saying that "one must allow that the *Didache* might have circulated for a good many years before any occasion arose to prepare a textual version."³⁶ Determining the origin of the text is not the point here. Rather, all of this is to demonstrate the antiquity of the *Didache* and thus validate its usefulness here.

The text under examination reads:

³³Agate, 603.

³⁴Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 40, 41.

³⁵Schaff, 184.

³⁶Aaron Milavec, 41, 42.

10. Thou shalt not enjoin aught in thy bitterness upon they bondman or maidservant, who hope in the same God, lest ever they shall fear not God who is over both; for he cometh not to call according to the outward appearance, but unto them whom the Spirit hath prepared. 11. And ye bondmen shall be subject to your masters as to a type of God, in modesty and fear. (*Didache* 4:10, 11)

The language in verse 10 is very similar to Paul's language in the epistles. The first part of verse 10 commands slaveholders to treat their slaves fairly. Patristic scholar Kurt Niederwimmer explains that the phrase translated here as "enjoin aught in thy bitterness" means "to tell someone in an angry manner to do something."³⁷ The admonition is grounded in the same manner in which Paul grounds his, by appealing to the servitude of both under God. However, the content of the admonition slightly differs from that of Paul's admonition, at least initially.

Milavec views the prohibition against commands given in anger as a way of educating slaves about how to serve God as well as instructing the masters. He posits, "... it would appear that the slaves in the case were neither Christians nor in formation to become Christians..."³⁸ Thus, the prohibition is not just against a physical beating, but also against being a bad witness for Christ. Although there may have been pagan slaves in Christian households, there were not supposed to be, and the masters were to do everything they could to point their slaves toward God. Milavec bases his view on his understanding of the second part of verse 10 (for he cometh not...). Based on the use of the present tense of the verb, the Spirit of God is active in the world calling whom He will to Him, regardless of social status. By the actions of Christian masters, slaves will hope that the same God who called the masters will also call them.³⁹ Thus, harsh treatment or anger is prohibited.

Niederwimmer, on the other hand, thinks that the text is referring to both Christian slaves and Christian masters. The master should treat his slaves humanely because those slaves are fellow believers. Furthermore, "...also, the master must take into account that his slaves (if he treats them badly) will become bitter and will lose their reverence for God..."⁴⁰ Niederwimmer sees the second part of verse 10 as referring to either the first or second coming of Christ. Either way, the Spirit is given as a gift to the elect, and this gift is given regardless of social status. Here, both the master and the slave have been given the Spirit.⁴¹ Thus, the master is commanded to treat the slave fairly, and the slave is commanded to obey the master as he would the heavenly Master (4:11).

³⁷Kurt Niederwimmer, *The Didache: A Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), 110 n. 81.

³⁸Aaron Milavec, *The Didache* (New York: Newman Press, 2003), 164.

³⁹Milavec, 164.

⁴⁰Niederwimmer, 110.

⁴¹*Ibid.*, 111.

Although scholars disagree about the specifics of the book, there is a consensus concerning with the Christian testimony of the master. “The owners’ religion, which the slaves have also accepted, will become unworthy of belief if the master treats his slave badly,” concludes Niederwimmer.⁴² The injunction against the maltreatment of slaves follows in the Pauline house code tradition. But the nuance of the master’s Christian witness is something that is not seen in the Pauline epistles, the language of which more clearly refers to physical treatment.

Religious scholar Jennifer Glancy goes so far as to say that the main reason for the admonition is not the physical disciplining of slaves. She sees a parallel between the physical disciplining of children and the physical disciplining of slaves. Slaveholders should not be bitter toward slaves, but that does not necessarily preclude physical punishment, just excess and abuse. She postulates, “Although the *Didache* invites temperate treatment of slaves, the author mandates fearfulness as the suitable affect for the Christian slave.”⁴³ Thus, according to Glancy, it would seem that the *Didache*, unlike the Pauline epistles, does not issue equally binding commands on both slaves and masters, despite the fact that both slave and master serve the same Lord. While offering the Christian faith as a way to equalize the social classes, Glancy’s view seems to imply that the *Didache* nevertheless distinguishes between slave and master in the spiritual realm.

But Glancy seems to be drawing false parallels. Although the verse about disciplining children immediately proceeds the one concerning slavery, there seems to be a contrast here instead. The text is positioned to show the difference between the way children are made to fear the Lord and the way slaves are made to do so. This contrast could be drawn between children and slaves because of the status of subservience in the household that both shared. An adult slave, whether a believer or not, would be able to distinguish between right and wrong, whereas a child would not be able to do so, and must be treated differently.

Although there are different opinions as to the specifics of the teaching of the *Didache*, the general point of the passage has been shown. The *Didache* follows in the tradition of Paul in its commands for humane treatment of slaves. The traditions of Scripture have been incorporated into this early training manual. However, the *Didache* added an exposition and application of the Pauline teaching. In seeking to train converts, it did what any teacher would do. It went into more detail and further explained the doctrine for the benefit of the novice.

Ignatius and Polycarp

Attention now turns to Ignatius’ teaching on manumission in his *Epistle to Polycarp*. Ignatius led a church at Antioch at the end of the first century and the beginning of the second century. He was martyred early in the second century, but wrote seven letters to various churches as he was taken to Rome to be executed.⁴⁴

⁴²Niederwimmer, 110.

⁴³Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (New York: Oxford, 2002), 151.

⁴⁴Schaff., 655, 656.

The fact that this letter was written so early merits its examination. The writings of Ignatius represent the earliest efforts of Christians to consolidate and organize both doctrinally and ecclesiastically.⁴⁵

In the epistle, Ignatius specifically states, “Let them not long to be set free [from slavery] at the public expense, that they be not found slaves to their own desires.”⁴⁶ From the words, “at public expense,” it is clear that Ignatius is writing about a specific form of manumission. Harrill calls this “corporate manumission,” the practice whereby a private group would pay for the manumission of slaves.⁴⁷ In this case, the slaves in question would have been members of the church. Thus, it appears that Ignatius is forbidding manumission to be paid for by the church. His rationale is that he does not want slaves to become shackled by their own ambitions, goals, and even lusts.

Yet this passage is also heavily debated. Is Ignatius flat out forbidding corporate manumission, or is this a special case? The church was known to use its funds to help others less fortunate, like widows or orphans. Indeed, Ignatius himself commanded it in other letters. From this letter, it appears that some slaves did seek the financial help of the church in securing their freedom.⁴⁸ Would it not also seem logical to want to help slaves in the same manner?

Based on other Ignatian letters, Albert Rupprecht, sees the statement as a reference to a local problem, and thus not as a universal injunction. He offers little speculation, but concludes that whatever the case, Polycarp must supervise the use of church funds for manumission.⁴⁹ The key to the prohibition seems to lie in Ignatius’ wish that the slaves do not fall victim to their own desires. William Schoedel suggests that Ignatius was being paternalistic by trying to protect them.⁵⁰ While he does not want Polycarp and his parishioners to despise slaves, the slaves are also not to forget their place. Schoedel claims that many who bought their freedom had to sell themselves into prostitution to survive. He concludes by saying, “Slaves in particular were not to push for manumission for fear they would find themselves in morally questionable situations.”⁵¹ From this, it would seem that Schoedel advocates a more universal application to the letter, and that its sentiments are not limited to Polycarp and his congregation.

There are others who take a more pessimistic approach and view Ignatius as trying to suppress manumission in general and not just corporate manumission. Kimberly Flint-Hamilton reviews various interpretations before offering one of her own. She sees 5:1, which reads “Flee evil arts; but all the more discourse in public regarding them,” as referring to the actions of slaves. As it was not uncommon in

⁴⁵William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 1.

⁴⁶Ignatius, *Epistle to Polycarp* 4:3, *Ante-Nicene Fathers* 1:95.

⁴⁷J.A. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tubingen: Mohr, 1995), 129

⁴⁸Albert A. Rupprecht, “Attitudes on Slavery Among the Church Fathers,” in *New Dimensions in New Testament Study*, ed. Richard N. Longenecker and Merrill C. Tenney (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 263.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, 263.

⁵⁰William R. Schoedel, *Ignatius of Antioch* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 270.

⁵¹*Ibid.*, 271.

the Roman world for slaves to attempt to lie and cheat their way to freedom, Flint-Hamilton believes that it is this against which Ignatius warns. In her view, Ignatius is showing his contempt for and distrust of slaves rather than trying to protect them.⁵²

G.E.M. St. Croix also sees this as an attempt to keep slaves in bondage. He posits, perhaps somewhat sarcastically, "...[I cannot] see exactly how a more intense degree of labour on the part of the slave can enhance the glory of God."⁵³ But these positions seem either to over-analyze the text or under-analyze it. Although Flint-Hamilton provides historical-contextual reasons for her interpretation, she offers no good textual argument as to why 5:1 should be regarded as pertaining to the verses preceding it and not the verses after it.⁵⁴ St. Croix on the other hand, offers no analysis whatsoever, just an opinion. It seems that these views need to be discarded in favor of something more along the lines of Schoedel or Rupprecht has to say.

Harrill, similar to Rupprecht, sees this statement as referring to a specific situation, yet goes much farther than Rupprecht in ascertaining what the situation might be. Harrill writes, "In short, Ignatius considered manumission pledges by local churches (and their wealthy patrons) a threat to his efforts to legitimate his authority as bishop."⁵⁵ Thus, to some extent he also sees Ignatius as acting in a paternalistic fashion. Yet unlike Schoedel, Harrill asserts that Ignatius was indeed in favor of corporate manumission, just not its abuses. He also rejects Schoedel's interpretation based on the possibility of slaves becoming immoral.⁵⁶

In the ancient world, many private groups would recruit slaves with the promise of manumission, a practice which was looked at with suspicion and seen as a sign of societal decay.⁵⁷ Likewise, slaves might join the church (be baptized) simply in order to gain their freedom. Ignatius wanted slaves to be faithful, and in behaving this way slaves were not being faithful. "Ignatius want the Christian slave to imitate the model of a 'faithful slave' in both the Christian and pagan sense," argues Harrill⁵⁸ Unfaithfulness could end up disrupting both episcopal authority and church unity. Freeborn believers might reject those baptized freedmen who they thought only did so for money, and were thus slaves of their own lusts. Ignatius also wanted to protect the church from slander by pagans. Finally, unless the bishop had control of the funds, only the rich house churches could have afforded manumission, and thus unity would be threatened.⁵⁹

⁵² Kimberly Flint Hamilton, "Images of Slavery in the Early Church: Hatred Disguised as Love?" *Journal of Hate Studies* 2, no. 27 (2002/2003) : 37.

⁵³G.E.M. de St. Croix, "Early Christian attitudes to property and slavery," in *Church, Society, and Politics*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 20.

⁵⁴Flint-Hamilton, 37

⁵⁵J.A. Harrill, "Ignatius, *Ad Polycarp* 4.3 and the Corporate Manumission of Christian Slaves," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1993), 107.

⁵⁶Ibid., 112.

⁵⁷Harrill, 134.

⁵⁸Ibid., 134.

⁵⁹Ibid., 136.

Harrill's interpretation puts the letter to Polycarp in context and shows how Christians responded to the problems which arose due to the conflict between the spiritual and the physical world. Schoedel's analysis, although not quite as in-depth and rejected by Harrill, accomplishes the same thing. Either way, Ignatius had to deal with real situations and the early church could neither storm the ramparts of social normalcy and demand change nor fall passively in line with the status quo. Based solely on the text, it is clear that Ignatius is not against manumission altogether, or even corporate manumission all the time. Rather the church must be very careful in how it allocates funds. In order to ensure this care, the bishop should be allowed to control the purse.

CONCLUSION

When examining early Christian texts regarding slavery, one cannot rip them out of context or afford to be ignorant of the world in which they were written. Slavery was an institutionalized part of Roman society and Christians in the pre-Constantine era were simply not in a position to force a legal change. However, this did not mean that they could not be salt and light. But in being salt and light, they encountered problems. How should a Christian master treat his slave, especially if the slave is a Christian? How can abuses of corporate manumission by the church be stopped?

The answers to these questions have been demonstrated by analysis of early Christian literature, all the while keeping the New Testament model in mind. The antiquity of both the *Didache* and *Polycarp* shows how problems quickly arose in the transitional period right after the apostles died and the church began to unify both ecclesiastically and doctrinally. It is important for modern readers (especially Americans) not only to keep the Roman social background in mind but also remember that early Christians did not even have a fraction of the political power that they wield today in America, or have wielded throughout American history.

In light of this, modern Christians living in countries which oppress or do not recognize Christianity may be able to relate better to the messages of the *Didache* and *Polycarp*. Contextually, these people are in the same situation as Ignatius. They must find a way to deal with conflicts between faith and society which do not involve legislation. In this way, Americans may learn something. Working to change society from the ground (or church in this case) up can be just as effective, if not more so in some ways, than attempting to legislate change from the top. A basic Christian principle can be extrapolated from this study: True change must first occur within man and not forced upon him from without.

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