

BOOK REVIEW

of

John W. Robbins,

Slavery and Christianity: Paul's Letter to Philemon,
The Trinity Foundation, 2007.

This book is in the Evangel Library,
and this review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

Have you perhaps been of the opinion that the Bible endorses slavery, or that it at least condones it? If so, you would not be alone. John Newton, the famous hymn writer, a former slave trader, so the story goes, did not come to see the evil of the slave trade until years after his conversion to Christ. Before and after America's Civil War there were conservative, evangelical preachers, among them Robert Dabney, who defended slavery. What do the Scriptures teach on the subject? Are the Scriptures clear, or is there room for sincere differences of opinion? You might be thinking that this is not a topic of current interest, but there are at least two reasons why it should be. First, the integrity and clarity of Scripture should be of concern to all of us. And if we discover that the Scriptures are indeed clear on this subject, what does that tell us about human nature and the interpretation of Scripture, and what should our response be when it comes to reading the Bible for ourselves? Second, while slavery has been made illegal in the West, many people are enslaved today around the world. What should the Christian response be in those nations where slavery is still practiced?

The reason I find this small book (booklet, really) so interesting, is that while Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters in the New Testament, and we are perhaps apt to somewhat overlook it, Robbins has demonstrated how pregnant such a small, but inspired, book can be when properly read and understood. It should be a sound warning to us not to read the Scriptures lightly, but to earnestly seek the Holy Spirit's help while we read lest we miss what has been revealed. Assuming that you agree with Robbins' interpretation, it should provide affirmation that we live not by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.

This little book is only some 49 pages long, and is divided into the following headings: Introduction, Impediments to Preaching the Gospel, Paul's Signature and Salutation, Race and Christianity, A Prisoner of Christ Jesus, Fellow Workers for the Gospel, Prayer and Praise for Philemon, The Appeal to Philemon, State and Church, Paul the Old Man, Onesimus the Fugitive Slave, The Importance of Consent, The Plan of God, Do Even More Than I Say, The Superstition of Royalty, Substitution and Imputation, and Farewell.

The first thing I would like to comment on in a little detail is Robbins' referral to Old Testament Law, which he does only briefly on pages 35 and 36. While I would have acknowledged prior to reading this little book that New Testament teaching does not favor slavery (although perhaps condoning it [remember, I am better instructed now]), but I would have thought that Old Testament teaching did allow slavery. By appealing to the Eighth Commandment, Exodus 21:16, 22:21, 23:9, Leviticus 19:33,34, and Deuteronomy 23:15,16, Robbins' not only explains how the Old Testament teaches against slavery, but that slave-trading is punishable by death in the Old Testament economy, and that the Israelites were to protect escaped slaves. I am aware that more can be said on this topic, and that there were what we would call indentured servants in the Old Testament, and even those who volunteered to remain in a family as permanent indentured servants. But that the Old Testament taught against slavery is clear. Nevertheless the Bible is realistic, and openly acknowledges the existence of slaves in the Biblical world. Slavery was common in ancient civilizations such as the Assyrian, Persian, Greek, and Roman empires, and is still common today. But the Bible, the Old as well as the New Testament teaches against it.

Another important understanding that Robbins' expounds from Philemon is the relationship between Biblical teaching and civil law. We might say that this understanding concerns the separation between Church and State. Paul, in other places teaches that we are to obey civilian authorities. But what do we do when civilian law contradicts Biblical teaching? The Bible is clear: we are to obey God rather than men. How does this have bearing on our understanding of Philemon? Civil law required that escaped slaves were to be returned to their rightful (rightful as defined by civilian law) owner. However, as mentioned above, the Old Testament teaches that escaped slaves were to be protected. What did Paul do? He did not notify the authorities. How long would it have taken you or me to decide which course of action to take? The easy course of action would have been to obey civil law. But that was Rome, you say. What about the United States of America prior to the Civil War? What would you have done then? By Biblical standards, fugitive slave laws were sinful, including the Dred Scott decision of the United States Supreme Court. Being a law-abiding citizen and being a good Christian are not the same thing, even in the USA.

As a quick follow-on to the above paragraph, it needs to be said that peaceful civil disobedience is one thing, armed insurrection or revolution is quite another. Paul did not call for a slave insurrection, nor armed rebellion against Rome. But he did appeal to Christians to obey God's Law. He made no appeal to Roman law. But he did appeal to God's Law. So, if Paul is not going to appeal to civil law, and his appeal to God's Law contradicts civil law, he cannot apply God's Law by force. How does he handle this situation? By teaching and persuading. This is the Christian means of transforming society. Not by the power of law and police force, but by the power of teaching and preaching the whole council of God. Part of that whole council of God is that "You shall not steal" (not just a person's property, but his freedom), and the brotherhood of all, without distinction of race or nationality. Once these ideas get a strong hold in a society there will be no place for slavery.

So who is it that Paul is teaching and persuading in his letter to Philemon? Who is it that has done something wrong, Onesimus the escaped slave, or Philemon the slave owner? On page 25 Robbins writes "Paul, unbeknownst to many commentators, wrote this letter as a form and model of church discipline. Again, unbeknownst to many commentators, it is Philemon the slaveowner, not Onesimus the slave, who is doing something wrong." Robbins continues on page 29, "It is the law of the Lord Jesus Christ that governs in Philemon's situation, not Caesar's. Philemon's ownership of Onesimus was perfectly legal under the pagan laws of the Roman Empire, but Paul says that it was not morally proper, that is, it was sinful. . . . In his letter to Philemon Paul makes it clear that Christians must be governed by Biblical law, not pagan law, when the two differ." So what does Paul do, command Philemon to obey Paul upon fear of excommunication? No, but rather he gives Philemon the benefit of the doubt and apparently assumes that all he needs is to be better instructed. He praises Philemon for the good things spoken of him and that Paul knows to be true, and yet attempts to persuade him of a better way. Paul attempts to persuade Philemon that Onesimus is now a brother in Christ Jesus, referring to him as his own son (in the faith), and that not letting him go free and not accepting him as a true brother would be inconsistent and wrong. Paul stops short of commanding Philemon, but certainly makes it clear as to the proper course of action to take.

I admit that I had never studied Philemon before, but in the light of Robbins' commentary (really exposition) we see an amazing sensitivity, love, and powers of persuasion on the part of the Apostle Paul. We can either attribute the genius of this letter to Paul, or to the Holy Spirit that inspired it, but it is a truly remarkable letter, and especially it is remarkably concise. Philemon has about 430 words in it. Robbins' booklet has about 49 pages or so. This one-page review of Robbins' short book is more than three times the length of the letter to Philemon! Geniuses can be concise (at least when inspired!), others have difficulty. Consider Psalm 23. Consider the Lord's Prayer. Consider the Gettysburg Address. Shortness does not imply insignificance! This short letter to Philemon contains so much about slavery, the relationship between Church and State, Church discipline, powers of persuasion, civil disobedience, etc., that it is truly remarkable how much can be said in so few words.