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An Exegetical Study of I Corinthians 7:21 and its Contemporary Implications

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by

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this present decade much has been done and is being done by the Christian Church in an attempt to speak to the racial revolution in our country. While the Church, at times, has given substantial biblical reasons for her stance and involvement, she has often grasped for "biblical straws" in an effort to vindicate her role.[1] This has been due in part to the fact that the contemporary problems are indigenous and find no biblical precedent, but in greater measure, I suspect, to the fact that she has not carefully examined the biblical perspective on social issues. Consequently, not having a clear understanding of the social directives in the New Testament, she has been at a loss to answer hermeneutical questions of today. One possible point of departure is the New Testament understanding of slavery, for the marks of slavery are deplorably still a present reality.

To attempt to discuss the whole of the New Testament evidence on slavery is too broad for a paper of this nature. Therefore, I have limited myself to an exegetical study of I Corinthians 7:21 and some of its implications. This paper will specifically seek to isolate the thrust or message of the pericope and its relationship to the total Pauline corpus. I shall discuss the various textual problems,

especially the meaning of κλῆσις and the construction μᾶλλον χρῆσαι . Then I shall consider the pericope in its various contexts (the immediate context [verses 17-24], the seventh chapter, the entire book of I Corinthians, and the whole Pauline corpus).

This paper does not propose to resolve all the textual problems of the pericope, for "The translation of I Corinthians 7:21 is still an insoluble problem."[2] It will, however, present the various possibilities or alternatives and suggest, when possible, what interpretation is most likely.

NOTES

[1]James O. Buswell, Slavery, Segregation, and Scripture (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 60ff.

[2]Krister Stendahl, The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics, translated by Emilie T. Sander (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 33.

CHAPTER II

THE TEXTUAL PROBLEMS OF I CORINTHIANS 7:21

I Corinthians 7:21 is a good illustration of how one's understanding of the text and context affects what punctuation is employed. The majority of Greek New Testament editions and translations place a question mark (;) after ἐκλήθης,[1] indicating that there is a major break at this point in the verse. Luther, however, for reasons which will be made clear later on in this chapter, in his translation of the text inserted a comma and thus betrayed his understanding of the text. The verse, however, carries much more of an impact if one punctuates it with a question mark. Paul, in addressing himself to those who are slaves in the Corinthian congregation, employs a rhetorical question to introduce his advice to those perplexed by their predicament. He reiterates a question which they themselves had not resolved: "Am I to remain a slave now that I am called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ (cf. I Corinthians 1:9)?"

One other preliminary consideration is the syntactical placement of καί following εἰ, in 21b. Although there is no manuscript evidence for shifting the καί to precede the εἰ, it would greatly simplify the meaning of the verse, for εἰ καί generally introduces concessive clauses,

whereas καὶ εἰ appears in textually certain readings only as "and if." Another possibility is to omit the καί altogether, which is what the ninth century manuscript G (Boernerianus) did.[2] Neither of these suggested changes, however, can be utilized, due to the lack of substantial support. Moreover, in textual criticism, the more difficult reading is generally acknowledged to be the correct one, unless there is significant evidence to the contrary. It remains for us, therefore, to interpret the text in its accepted structure, i.e., δοῦλος ἐκλήθης; μή σοι μελέτω· ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ δύνασαι ἐλεύθερος γενέσθαι, μᾶλλον χρῆσαι.

Eric Malte has correctly pointed out[3] that the word δοῦλος should be translated 'slave.' When the New Testament wants to designate a person who is employed and who can be discharged or who may freely resign, it designates such a person by the words διάκονος, ὑπηρέτης, or παῖς. In fact, Calvin in his commentary on Ephesians 6:5 says, "To be sure the apostle is not speaking of hired servants such as are in use to-day (sic!), but of those who in ancient times were in perpetual slavery unless they were freed by the kindness of their owners. For their owners bought them for a money price, so that they could be employed upon the meanest services, and indeed they had a legal right of life and death over them."[4] The point, then, is that the

New Testament loses its vividness and the striking distinction between slave and free, if an understanding of the slave is not kept in mind. Moreover, it is generally recognized that Paul lived in a society in which more than half of the inhabitants belonged to the slave class. In fact, Paul employs the word δοῦλος more than twenty times in his epistles. Corinth itself, with an estimated 600,000 people, is thought to have had two-thirds of its population among the slave class.[5] So it is not surprising that Paul often employs δοῦλος and its antonym ἐλεύθερος. Galatians 4:1 gives further evidence that δοῦλος is "the classical picture of bondage and limitation."[6]

The picture Paul gives us of slavery most likely refers to household slaves. Such is certainly the case when he writes to Philemon concerning Onesimus (Philemon 2). Moreover, in Paul's other epistles he is speaking to those within the Christian Community in the relationship between slaves and masters. Paul worked principally in the Hellenized cities, and there seems to be no evidence that Christianity penetrated the slave-gangs of the great estates, or the mines. One can say this despite I Corinthians 1:26-29 and its stress on the ignorance and obscurity of the majority of converts in the Corinthian congregation. Paul's letter to this group of Christians does not suggest inarticulate and illiterate people but rather many who boast of

their knowledge and wisdom (cf. 4:8; 8:2; 13:2). Thus there was an admixture of people at Corinth which was partially responsible for the divisions and resentment toward one another; and those who were household slaves found themselves a part of this conflict.

One might expect to hear the New Testament at least occasionally speak disparagingly of the slave class, as was common in the Greek and Hellenistic world. On the contrary, "the judgment on the slave is always material, and it remains so even when it is severe. The δοῦλος is never despised or rejected simply because he is a slave."[7] This is most likely due to the fact that slavery was a legal institution in the days of the apostles. Consequently, since the Church was not in any position to abolish it, she incorporated it into the order of interdependence, i.e., churches received slaves into the fellowship of the Church and recognized them as human beings, a status which had been denied them by the law. This is highlighted by the fact that slaveholders were held responsible toward their slaves (cf. Ephesians 6:9; Colossians 4:1).

One other thing which should be mentioned at this point, in order that one might understand the import of δοῦλος, is the matter of manumission. A slave might be manumitted, i.e., set free, via a number of channels. A provision in the will of his master could entitle him to freedom upon

his master's death. Secondly, a grateful master might release a slave for a particular service rendered. Thirdly, a master might liberate a slave whom he found less expensive to free than to provide for. Fourthly, a slave might pay a certain sum to his master to purchase his liberty. Although in some cases a slave might find himself less well off financially upon gaining freedom, as a rule he coveted manumission, even though by Roman law he still owed some service to his patron. For example, although in business relations with the world, the former slave was a freedman (libertinus), he had to take his patron's name, adding his own name to it, and belong to his household. He no longer belonged to a dominus, but he was tied to a patronus.[8] Such a semi-servile relation, to be sure, is not what is generally recognized as freedom today.

A key word in Paul's advice to the slaves at Corinth is κλῆσις. Much of one's understanding of verse twenty-one hangs on its meaning. Interpreters have been particularly puzzled over Paul's use of κλῆσις in I Corinthians 7:17-24. Luther, Lietzmann, Héring, among others, have understood Paul in verse twenty to mean κλῆσις in the sense of Beruf, or one's status or position in life. On the other hand, H. Meyer, Robertson-Plummer, and K. L. Schmidt understand this verbal noun in the sense of Berufung, or one's call to be a Christian. Although both definitions of

κλῆσις are possible, usage of the word in the Pauline corpus leads one to understand the term as "one's call to be a Christian." This is said for a number of reasons. First of all, commentators who interpret κλῆσις as Beruf offer no solid substantiation for their choice. They merely think it fits the context better. Secondly, there are no parallels in Paul's writing to corroborate such a meaning. In the third place, there seems to be no necessity for suggesting a special sense in one verse when the normal meaning of the word is possible. Finally, Paul, especially in I Corinthians, is primarily concerned with God's call in Jesus Christ (cf. 1:1, 2, 9, 24, 26; 7:22).

Historically, it is understandable that Luther came to identify κλῆσις in verse twenty with Beruf rather than Berufung. Luther "had to demonstrate and prove that not only the monk has a vocation, but every Christian in the world and in secular employment as well."[9] However, in view of the whole Pauline corpus and the fact that κλῆσις, like καλεῖν, is a technical term, describing those who are the called (κεκλημένοι) by God (the καλῶν), it appears most likely that Paul intended the same meaning in our pericope. One other consideration, however, is "the possibility that Paul is purposely ambiguous in a kind of gentle irony."[10]

The use of εἰ καί in verse twenty-one is also prob-

lematical. How is one to understand this construction? In addition to the occurrence under discussion, Paul employs this exact construction only four times in his writings (II Corinthians 4:16; 5:16; 7:8; 12:11). In these four locations εἰ καί has a concessive sense, i.e., the apodosis is fulfilled in spite of the completion of the protasis. In terms of our pericope, this would mean that "although" or "even if" would properly convey the sense of εἰ καί. It is in this sense that J. Hering follows the interpretation of John Chrysostom, Peter Lombard, and Bengel.[11]

It is, however, also possible to understand εἰ καί as a conditional construction, such as one finds in the Revised Standard Version and New English Bible translations of I Corinthians 7:21 (i.e., RSV--"But if you can . . ."; NEB--". . .but if a chance . . ."). E. D. Burton gives evidence of such a usage when he cites I Corinthians 4:7 (εἰ δὲ καί) and I Corinthians 7:11 (ἐὰν δὲ καί) as cases "in which εἰ (ἐάν) is conditional and καί means 'and' or 'also,' or is simply intensive, emphasizing the following word and suggesting a supposition in some sense extreme."[12] Robertson and Plummer advocate such an interpretation of this construction in our pericope when they say, "The καί affects δύνασαι, not εἰ."[13] What has led commentators to seek an alternative to the normal rendering of εἰ καί as a concessive is the difficulty con-

fronted by the construction μᾶλλον χρῆσαι in the apodosis. A concessive rendering of the protasis almost decides one's interpretation of the apodosis since, if εἰ καί is understood as 'although' or 'even if,' the apodosis would then suggest τῇ δουλείᾳ after μᾶλλον χρῆσαι. Convinced, though, that χρῆσαι should be followed by τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ, some commentators have said that the use of εἰ καί in I Corinthians 7:21 is an exception to the normal rendering and, therefore, should be understood conditionally.

The verb χράομαι, 'to make use of' or 'employ,' is regularly supplied with a dative in order to complete the thought. As has been alluded to above, in the history of interpretation some commentators (e.g., Chrysostom, Bousset, Lietzmann, J. Weiss, H. D. Wendland, Goodspeed) have supplied τῇ δουλείᾳ, while others (e.g., Erasmus, Luther, Calvin, Lightfoot, Zahn, Schlatter, Moffatt) have preferred its antonym, τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ.[14] There are good reasons why many scholars have maintained that 'freedom' is the implied object. First of all, the word χρῆσαι is an aorist imperative. As C. F. D. Moule points out,[15] if Paul meant for a slave to remain in his present circumstances, he would have employed the present imperative, χρῶ. The aorist imperative denotes a point action, whereas the present imperative refers to a repeated or protracted action. Consequently, Paul is urging the Corinthian Christians to make use

once and for all of the opportunity to be free. Moreover, "Freedom was the last thing mentioned; and 'make use of' suits a new condition better than the old condition of slavery."[16] Then, too, μᾶλλον is understood in an elative sense (i.e., to intensify the verb) rather than concessively and so is translated 'by all means.'

Interpreters who maintain that τῇ δουλείᾳ is most likely the object of χρῆσαι offer the following reasons. First of all, they view the context (verses 17-24) of the verse as a reflection of Stoic ideas. "μή σοι μελέτω echoes a common Stoic phrase, 'Why mind that?' which was applied to external things as being indifferent to the inner freedom of the soul. This is the point of Paul's reminder that the Christian slave enjoyed spiritual freedom with his Lord, however he might be the thrall of an earthly lord."[17] Thus one belonged to a spiritual city, a city not made by hands, the citizenship of which was gained through spiritual insight, whether one was in bondage or free. Moreover, verses twenty and twenty-four are cited as evidence for maintaining the status quo. A concessive rendering of εἰ καί is also put forward for such a rendering. Likewise, μᾶλλον is also understood concessively.[18] Then too, Paul's discussion of the imminent Parousia in verses twenty-nine to thirty-one suggests that obtaining freedom is comparatively unimportant and paltry in view of the Parousia believed to

be at hand. Furthermore, "The tendency of the Fathers certainly was to urge the slave to be obedient, rather than to urge the master to set him free."[19]

Heinz Bellen, in a rather recent article,[20] proposes an interesting explanation for μᾶλλον χρῆσαι, favoring τῇ δουλείᾳ. He begins with a reference to Paul's discussion of marriage in the opening verses of chapter seven, in which Paul says it is καλόν for a man to remain unmarried. One may marry but the higher gift is continence. Bellen says the same analogy applies in verses eighteen to twenty-four. Either to remain a slave or to be free is possible, but the higher gift (μᾶλλον being the comparative of the adverb μαλά) is to remain as one is--a slave. He also suggests linguistic grounds for his position. δοῦλος corresponds in its function in the sentence to περιτετμημένος (used instead of ἐν περιτομῇ) in verse eighteen. Verse nineteen begins with ἡ περιτομή, which presupposes ἐν περιτομῇ, since ἡ ἀκροβυστία in verse nineteen refers to ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ in verse eighteen. Therefore, since δοῦλος in verse twenty-one corresponds with ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ (in the same way that περιτετμημένος corresponds with ἐν ἀκροβυστίᾳ), it would suggest remaining a slave just as Paul advises the uncircumcised not to become circumcised. Moreover, since δοῦλος equals ἐν τῇ δουλείᾳ by this analysis, the

parallelism of the context suggests τῇ δουλείᾳ after χρῆσαι. One has to grant that Bellen has a tightly woven linguistic argument. However, it is questionable whether the parallelism in structure is as clear-cut as he maintains. If Paul intended such correspondence with the question of circumcision, one would expect him to complete the analogy by the inclusion of τῇ δουλείᾳ rather than leaving it open-ended. Moreover, Bellen does not really address himself to the aorist mood of χρῆσαι.[21] Being a Roman Catholic from Koeln University, his presuppositions concerning virginity and celibacy somewhat obstruct his interpretation of the text. In fact, the title of his article gives him away--Verzicht Auf Freilassung Als Asketische Leistung? (i.e., Renunciation of Freedom As An Ascetic Achievement?).

It is apparent, then, from a consideration of the textual aspects of I Corinthians 7:21, that the pericope is fraught with various problems, ambiguities, and possible alternatives in interpretation. To begin with, the text has major punctuation or syntactical problems to resolve. It is evident that δοῦλος means one who is in the despicable state of slavery over against just a servant or hired hand. The meaning of κλῆσις, however, is not entirely clear. Should one interpret it in the usual sense of one's calling to be a Christian or is Paul, in verse twenty-one and the immediate context, employing the word in

the special sense of one's state or position in life? In addition, the construction εἰ καί can be rendered in two different ways. It can either be understood concessively and translated 'although' or 'even though,' or it can be interpreted conditionally and rendered 'if also.' Finally, we have examined the ambiguities of the construction μᾶλλον χρῆσαι, to which either τῇ δουλείᾳ or τῇ ἐλευθερίᾳ should be added. We have not suggested definitive solutions at all points, but we have tried to indicate a certain direction when the evidence has been sufficiently weighty.

NOTES

[1]Kurt Aland, et al., editors, The Greek New Testament (New York: American Bible Society, 1966), p. 593 (cf. punctuation apparatus).

[2]Erwin Nestle and Kurt Aland, editors, Novum Testamentum Graece (Stuttgart: Privileg. Wuertt. Bibelanstalt, 25th edition, 1963), p. 436 (cf. critical apparatus).

[3]"The Most Important Social Problem of New Testament Times," Concordia Theological Monthly, XIX (January 1948), 34.

[4]Frank Granger, "The Slave and the Workman in the Greek New Testament," The Expositor, XVIII (September 1919), 167.

[5]Claude J. Peifer, The First and Second Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1960), p. 3.

[6]Karl H. Rengstorf, " δοῦλος ," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley from Theologisches Woerterbuch, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), II, 271.

[7]Ibid.

[8]For a complete discussion of slavery (Primitive, Christian, Greek, Jewish, and Roman) cf. Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, edited by James Hastings (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1958), XI, 595-631.

[9]K. L. Schmidt, " κλῆσις ," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, III, 492 f.n.

[10]Walter J. Bartling, as an advisor, offered this consideration after having read the paper.

[11]The First Epistle of Saint Paul to the Corinthians, translated by A. W. Heathcote and P. J. Allcock (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), pp. 55-6.

[12]Syntax of the Moods and Tenses in New Testament Greek (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 114.

[13] A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1914), p. 147.

[14] William F. Arndt and Wilbur F. Gingrich, translators and editors, A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1957), p. 892.

[15] An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek (Cambridge: University Press, 1963), p. 21; cf. also J. H. Moulton, A Grammar of New Testament Greek (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1963), I, 247, and III, 76.

[16] Robertson-Plummer, loc. cit.

[17] James Moffatt, The First Epistle of Paul to the Corinthians (New York: Harper & Bros., 1938), p. 87.

[18] Johannes Weiss, Der erste Korintherbrief (Goettingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1910), p. 188.

[19] Leonard D. Agate, Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, XI, 603.

[20] " μᾶλλον χρῆσαι (I Cor. 7:21) Verzicht Auf Freilassung Als Asketische Leistung?" Jahrbuch Fuer Antike Und Christentum (Jahrgang 6, 1963).

[21] Bellen, op. cit., p. 180 f.n.

CHAPTER III

I CORINTHIANS 7:21 IN ITS CONTEXT

One can see some merit to F. W. Grosheide's suggestion that 'your vocation' should be supplied after μᾶλλον χρῆσαι,[1] for the word 'call' in either its verbal or noun form appears nine times in the space of eight verses (i.e., in I Corinthians 7:17-24). Although one finds it difficult to accept Grosheide's radical proposal, due to the obvious antithesis of δουλεία and ἐλευθερία in verse twenty-one, nevertheless, the significance of this concept cannot be minimized in the immediate context of our pericope. In fact, Paul states a general principle in verse seventeen, which, he goes on to say, was part of the "ground rules" for all those who became members of the Body of Christ: "Each person was to continue leading the life which the Lord assigned him and in which God called him." Then, after giving an illustration of what he means, he has an emphatic repetition of the rule in verse twenty. He follows his rule once again with a concrete example of how it is implemented and finally concludes with a second reiteration of his general principle in verse twenty-four.

There are several observations which can be made from the context. First of all, Paul certainly must have wanted his readers to get the major point, for he goes to great

pains to enumerate it three times. Secondly, his examples strike one as no hypothetical constructions but live issues which perplexed the congregation. Thirdly, Paul is not introducing an ad hoc rule to quiet his disgruntled readers but one which he apparently employed wherever he went. Fourthly, Paul does not appear to be laying down a hard and fast rule, even though he employs it throughout the churches (verse 17), but rather he stresses the rule in order to comfort those in such predicaments and encourage them to be responsible Christians. The question still remains, however, whether verse twenty-one is meant to coincide with Paul's general principle or whether he is possibly presenting an exception, to demonstrate that his rule is not a subtle form of legalism. If one understands κλῆσις in the usual sense of God's call in Jesus Christ, the possibility, of course, of a "Pauline exception" is heightened. Paul is then saying that the important thing is one's incorporation into the Body of Christ. One is not to overthrow his position in life just because he has entered a new and more meaningful relationship, but at the same time, there is nothing which binds one perpetually to the same status. If, as a slave, one is given the opportunity to be free, he should take advantage of it.

On the other hand, I Corinthians 7:20ff also fits well into the broad context of the Gnostic problem which plagued

Corinth.[2] The Corinthian Gnostics apparently bemoaned the fact that their freedom must take into account the edification of others (cf. I Corinthians 10:29f). They wanted to exercise their freedom to the fullest extent and ignore the responsibility they owed to the whole church, especially the weaker Christian. Paul has to remind them that love preempts knowledge (cf. I Corinthians 8:1ff). The possible indiscriminate use of freedom by manumitted slaves is perhaps one thing which concerns Paul. Moreover, he sees "the danger that in striving after freedom there will be entanglement in claims upon men, and therefore unselfish readiness for others will be impossible."[3] Then, too, Paul introduces a high religious motif in verse twenty-two. The phrase 'freedman[4] of the Lord' brings out the thought that the inner relationship of the spirit is a service in perfect freedom. The Christian stands in the paradox of being both free and yet a slave. He is a libertinus, but he still belongs to a Dominus rather than a patronus. Paul, then, in verse twenty-three continues to invest a well-known word with a deeper meaning. He says τιμῆς ἠγοράσθητε, which brought to mind the fact that many pagan slaves obtained freedom when they were purchased by a temple divinity in the market place (ἀγορά). The Christian slave, however, has been bought with the price of Christ's own blood and, therefore, should not be dependent upon men.

In the whole seventh chapter of I Corinthians, one finds a social conservatism and somewhat ascetic appeal. In his principles of marriage (verses 1-9), only by way of concession (verse 6) does Paul approve of marriage. He would rather have individuals maintain the status quo (cf. 7:8, 20, 40). Concerning those who are married, he appeals to a Logion of Jesus (verses 10-11), but when he addresses mixed marriages (verses 12-16) he offers only his own considered advice. It is pertinent for our pericope that Paul says an unbelieving husband or wife is consecrated by his or her spouse (verse 14). If such is the case, the Christian partner should not seek to dissolve the marriage, for something salutary is being effected through the union. Such a thought perhaps is implicit in his advice to slaves. An unbelieving master might well be consecrated by a Christian slave. Since the master-slave relationship was a close one, Paul may be advocating a continuance of it, due to the wholesome influence of the slave. It must be said, however, that with regard to marriage, Paul has a higher principle, namely, "God has called us to peace (verse 15)." If the friction between a Christian and non-Christian spouse is too great, he views a separation as permissible. Perhaps such a similar conflict is envisioned in verse twenty-one, and Paul may be making a provision for the slave so that he does not feel unreservedly bound to his master, if he wants

to set him free.

It is undoubtedly true that "Nowhere do the social implications of Paul's eschatological outlook come to view as plainly as in I Corinthians 7:26-35."[5] As one man aptly put it, "Every Christian, as it were, is all packed up for a trip, and simply waiting for the bus to arrive."[6] The Parousia in Paul's mind is right around the corner. Therefore, he manifests a reserve about marriage because "the appointed time has grown very short (verse 29) and the form of this world is passing away (verse 31)." In other words, because of the imminent eschaton, marriage and any other radical change should be avoided. "Everyone should remain ἐν τῇ κλήσει in which he was called (verse 20)." Moreover, to be concerned about anything but τὰ τοῦ Κυρίου is to be hampered by τὰ τοῦ κόσμου (verses 32-34). So good order and undivided devotion are essential (verse 35) lest the gospel be impeded and the church become fragmented through a spiritual schizophrenia.

One finds a concern for unity and a catholic sensitivity throughout I Corinthians. In the opening chapter of this personal letter, Paul urges the saints at Corinth to be in harmony and allow no schisms (σχίσματα) (verse 10). He has heard personally that there was strife among them (1:11; 11:18) as groups began to pitch their tents in the camp of Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or Christ (verse 12), and

this greatly disturbed him. Some people in the congregation were even filing public lawsuits against their brothers and thus adding to the divisiveness in their midst (6:1-6). There was a lack of sexual and moral restraint at Corinth (chapters 5-6). A Feminist movement was afoot (11:2-16), and a self-assertive movement in worship (11-14) had disrupted their sense of community. So Paul rightly sought to weld the congregation together again and give them a sense of cohesiveness and unity. Twice he has to add a corrective to their concept of freedom by saying, "'All things are lawful for me,' but not all things are helpful (6:12; 10:23)." One does not have a license to do whatever he pleases. Rather he must be concerned about the whole body and what effect his action would have on the rest of its members. Paul continually tries to make clear that the Church is the Body[7] of Christ and every member is of crucial importance if the Body is to function effectively (cf. especially chapter 12). Thus personal freedom takes its shape and definition from the more encompassing concern of unity and corporate harmony.

Paul cites himself as a concrete example of how one's life in Christ is to be implemented. In chapter nine, he demonstrates how he has refrained from using all the freedoms and privileges which are his. Of particular significance for our pericope is verse nineteen, in which he says,

"For though I am free from all men, I have made myself a slave (i.e., ἐδούλωσα) to all, that I might win the more." Paul exercises self-denial for the sake of the gospel (verse 23) in order that the body might grow rather than diminish. He is entitled to many rights but would "endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the Gospel of Christ (verse 12)." Slavery, it would seem, is of little significance when the unity of the Church and the proclamation of the Gospel are at stake. For after all, according to Paul what is really important is that "by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body--Jews or Greeks, slaves or free--and all were made to drink of one Spirit (12:13)." Paul is not insensitive to the plight and conditions of men, but he is convinced that what the Corinthian congregation needs to hear and respond to is the call to unity. "God is not a God of confusion but of peace (14:33)," and unless all things are done decently and in order (cf. 14:40), freedom from slavery or from any other burdening position will be meaningless, for the church will be so divided and fragmented that her impact on the city will be drained of its power.

Fortunately, for the present-day reader, Paul does not limit his thoughts about slavery and freedom to the Corinthian congregation. He speaks to the problem explicitly in at least seven of his epistles. In Galatians 3:28, Paul

demonstrates that the Torah has been transcended in Christ in at least three respects.[8] First of all, the wall of partition which existed between the Jews and Greeks has been torn down. Secondly, the line of demarcation between slave and free is conquered; and thirdly, the division made at creation (cf. Genesis 1:27) between male and female has been eradicated. In other words, in Christ "the dichotomy is overcome; through baptism a new unity is created, and that is not only a matter discerned by the eyes of faith but one that manifests itself in social dimensions of the church (Galatians 2:11-14)."[9] To limit these statements solely to man's relationship 'coram Deo' would be to render them practically meaningless. Moreover, all three sets of antitheses can be potentially implemented in the social and practical life of the church. There is no need to assume that they are spiritual ideals which offer comfort but no realistic hope. In Jesus Christ the Law has been radicalized, and people at Galatia are enjoined to concretely demonstrate their new life by love (Galatians 5:14-15).

To propose such an interpretation of Galatians 3:28, however, does not resolve the Pauline understanding of slavery. In fact, such an understanding flies in the face of what Paul says elsewhere. For example, in Ephesians 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-25, Paul enjoins slaves to obey their earthly masters. In I Timothy 6:1 he even suggests that

slaves should regard their masters 'as worthy of all honor,' and in Titus 2:9, Paul advocates that slaves 'be submissive to their masters and give satisfaction in every respect.' Paul's advice, however, will not seem quite so brutal to a modern reader if one understands the perspective from which he speaks. In Ephesians-Colossians Paul stresses the idea that through his service the slave is serving the Lord and not men. Besides, the Lord will reward him for his faithful service. So Paul gives his ethical injunctions an explicit theological basis, insisting that a servant's obedience is really rendered to Christ, who is the true Master of all Christians. Then too, if one is to be an imitator of him, as he is of Christ, one can expect suffering.

Both I Timothy 6:1 and Titus 2:10 mention the favorable effect on men's attitude to Christianity which a slave's good conduct may exert. This is one reason, perhaps, why Paul does not suggest the overthrow of the institution of slavery. In addition, those who have believing masters are to 'serve all the better[10] since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved (I Timothy 6:2).' Paul may have given this latter advice to curb already existing problems rather than to prevent future problems arising. It is difficult to ascertain. One further consideration is that "Paul's theological argument may have a humane base in the fact that for many slaves freedom would simply not be

an option. He wishes them to see their own value even in their base lot."[11]

It should also be noted that Paul addresses himself to masters as well as to slaves. His words, moreover, are equally strong. Slaves and masters have mutual duties and responsibilities and if the slave is to be obedient to his master, the master is to treat his slaves 'justly and fairly' (Colossians 4:1) and not threaten them, for Christ is Master of them both and with Him there is no partiality (Ephesians 6:9).

It remains for us to consider one more crucial letter, that of Philemon. Morton Enslin suggests that if Paul really opposed slavery, "he would have urged manumission even though he might have hesitated to proclaim these views abroad for fear of inciting Christian slaves to insurrection."[12] He thus understands the letter as advocating neither the abolition of slavery nor the approval of it. Instead, Enslin submits that Paul was not even entertaining the question. Paul saw no real difference between slavery and freedom. After all, one is a slave only according to the flesh. Such an interpretation is extremely inadequate. It is true that "the letter of Philemon is equally hard to assess as a witness to how Paul thought of Christ and slavery,"[13] but it is also true, as Krister Stendahl goes on to say, that "the tone of the letter is best under-

stood as a plea for having Onesimus set free."[14] In verse eight Paul says he is bold enough in Christ to command Philemon to do what is required but he prefers to appeal to him, for then he will make his decision not by compulsion but of his own free will (verse 14). Onesimus is Paul's 'very heart' (verse 12), 'one who is a beloved brother . . . both in the flesh and in the Lord' (verse 16), and thus, within the social structure of slavery, he appeals to Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother in every sense. Paul seeks to destroy every vestige of paternalism.[15] Although it is generally true in the Pauline epistles that the institution of slavery is not questioned but that "the whole interest is in the right conduct of an existing family relationship,"[16] Paul's letter to Philemon seems possibly to be an exception. One is led to such an understnading not only because the tenor and tone of the letter suggest that interpretation but also because Paul's existential confrontation with Onesimus must have had a tremendous impact on him to evoke a letter of this nature.

NOTES

[1]F. W. Grosheide, Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1953), p. 170.

[2]Heinrich Schlier, "ἐλεύθερος," Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, translated and edited by Geoffrey W. Bromiley from Theologisches Woerterbuch, edited by Gerhard Kittel (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1964), II, 501.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Arndt-Gingrich (A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, p. 83) say that ἀπελεύθερος is a hapax legomenon, used only of Christians, since they have been "freed from the powers of darkness, who are the slaveholders of this age."

[5]Mary E. Andrews, The Ethical Teaching of Paul (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1934), p. 79.

[6]Rupert E. Davies, Studies in I Corinthians (London: The Epworth Press, 1962), p. 56.

[7]Paul employs the term σῶμα more than thirty times in I Corinthians.

[8]I am indebted here and in much of what follows to Krister Stendahl for his excellent discussion of slavery in the Pauline corpus; cf. his work: The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics, translated by Emilie T. Sander (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 32-37.

[9]Ibid., p. 33.

[10]The construction here, μᾶλλον δουλεύετωσαν, is helpful in our consideration of the construction μᾶλλον χρῆσαι in our pericope.

[11]Walter J. Bartling, as an advisor, offered this logical, constructive consideration.

[12]Morton S. Enslin, The Ethics of Paul (New York: Harper & Bros., 1930), pp. 208-9.

[13]Stendahl, loc. cit.

[14]Ibid., p. 34.

[15]In addition to Stendahl's discussion, cf. Amos N. Wilder, Kerygma, Eschatology, and Social Ethics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), pp. 22-3.

[16]Edward G. Selwyn, The First Epistle of St. Peter (London: MacMillan & Co., 1946), Essay II, p. 429.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSIONS

To posit any definitive interpretation of I Corinthians 7:21 would be at best wishful thinking, if not untenable, for there are too many textual problems, not to mention the contextual ambiguities. So, of necessity, what one concludes is tentative and somewhat general.

When Paul addresses himself to slaves in I Corinthians 7:21ff, he is undoubtedly dealing with a special case which had special significance for the Corinthians, for there were apparently many slaves among the members of the Church. When the slaves heard about Christian freedom, they most likely related such liberty as being in the first place liberty from their human bondage and rightfully so. Slavery, as we have indicated, was no enviable position. Paul, therefore, seeks to cope with this problem of a young and struggling church as it seeks to define itself in a pagan culture.

Paul does not appeal to a Logion of Jesus in the immediate context (I Corinthians 7:20-24) but gives his own counsel. Although it is possible, especially on textual grounds, that Paul in verse twenty-one is making a parenthetical remark,[1] similar to verse eleven, the whole context of chapter seven seems to suggest otherwise. More

significant for Paul is the importance of being a responsible Christian where one is and disseminating the Gospel in the time that remains (verses 29-31). Moreover, in Corinth a more pressing concern than slavery was that of unity, and Paul felt compelled to check the abuses of fragmentation and discord before he sought to explicate a thorough social ethic. Then too, since it is generally acknowledged that Paul is addressing himself to the problem of household slavery, his principle concern is with the relations of slaves and masters rather than with the institution itself. So a slave who has been grasped by the redeeming love of Christ has a tremendous opportunity in a small and intimate community, where he is not reduced to a completely mechanical, sub-human condition, to bring a powerful witness to bear. Furthermore, in the context of a Christian community, Paul leaves no room for any distinctions (Galatians 3:28, Colossians 3:11). "Contempt or a feeling of superiority or lack of forbearance is unthinkable in such a situation because it is directed against a brother for whom Christ died, and strikes a death blow at the whole structure of Christian fellowship."[2]

One can designate such an understanding as an interim ethic, not in the sense that Paul's view has no application for the following generations, but in the sense that he realized that the present is always an interim in God's redemp-

tive activity in history and therefore sought to speak only to his own existential situation.[3] Such an understanding, at least, seems to correspond with his advice to the Corinthians.

With the possible exception in Philemon, it is certainly evident that Paul shows no urgency in the abolition of the institution of slavery. Yet today there are few Christians who would limit the implications of what Paul says to a strictly spiritual attitude without resultant social and political changes. How then is one who finds himself in the Twentieth Century to reconcile the apparently incongruous viewpoint of Paul? Being confronted by this dilemma in the past, the church has often offered false solutions. Some Christians have loaded their arsenal with biblical proof-texts and maintained that the church can concern herself only with man's relationship <u>before God</u>. Thus they have supported a <u>laissez faire</u> policy with regard to social and moral incongruities. On the other hand, Christians, who were sensitive to social injustices and felt constrained to relate the biblical message to them, usually ended up with such a harmonized New Testament that it was devoid of its tensions and richness. Walter Rauschenbusch, in the opening years of our century, is a good example of this latter approach. In contrast to both of these extremes, one asks whether there is not still another alternative which is both

faithful to the New Testament and, at the same time, seeks to eliminate man's inhumanity to man. Krister Stendahl, whom we have considered before, suggests such an alternative. After his discussion of Galatians 3:28 he suggests, first of all, that although the New Testament shows no urgency in the matter of emancipation of slaves, it does contain "elements, glimpses which point beyond and even 'against' the prevailing view and practice of the New Testament Church."[4] Furthermore he says, "It should not be such a strange idea for us that the full consequences of the new life in Christ are not immediately drawn and applied. Few are those who want to or can find a developed doctrine of the Trinity in Paul; and it helps little in this connection to appeal from Paul to Jesus and the gospels."[5] Rather what we find in the New Testament is that "When Paul fought those who defended the old--as in Galatia--his bold vision of the new expressed itself most strongly, as in Galatians 3:28. When he discerned the overstatement of the new he spoke up for the old, as in Corinthians. Our problem is not to harmonize the two tendencies into a perfect system. It is--as always is (sic!) truly Christian theology--to discern where the accent should lie now, the accent in the eschatological drama which we call the history of the Church and the world."[6] If we fail to do this, and choose rather to operate either with biblical proof-texts or a superficial harmonization of the New

Testament, we have ignored nineteen centuries of history in which God has been working through his people.

Thus while Paul does not address himself, except remotely, to the emancipation of slave classes, certainly that is a proper and logical extension of his concern for individuals. Besides, it might well be that he would have spoken differently if he had concerned himself with that problem. That, however, is in the realm of speculation. What is more important is that Christians today are called to live out our lives in the arena of God's world, and "there are no bleachers from which to observe the battle or the race. Our place is in the middle of events."[7]

NOTES

[1]cf. J. H. Moulton, A Grammar of New Testament Greek (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1963), II, 49, and A. Robertson-A. Plummer, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians (Edinburgh: T and T Clark, 1914), p. 148.

[2]Morton S. Enslin, The Ethics of Paul (New York: Harper & Bros., 1930), p. 41.

[3]Richard N. Longenecker, Paul Apostle of Liberty (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), p. 176.

[4]Krister Stendahl, The Bible and the Role of Women: A Case Study in Hermeneutics (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), p. 34.

[5]Ibid., p. 40.

[6]Ibid., p. 37.

[7]Martin H. Scharlemann, "Human Relations According to Ephesians," Concordia Theological Monthly, XXIV (October 1953), 77.

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Bible, Holy. New English Bible. New Testament.

Bible, Holy. Revised Standard Version.

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