

OpenTheo

March 17th: Proverbs 16 & Philemon

March 16, 2021



Alastair Roberts

Man proposes, God disposes. The book of Philemon and the New Testament teaching on slavery.

Reflections upon the readings from the ACNA Book of Common Prayer (<http://bcp2019.anglicanchurch.net/>).

If you have enjoyed my output, please tell your friends. If you are interested in supporting my videos and podcasts and my research more generally, please consider supporting my work on Patreon (<https://www.patreon.com/zugzwanged>), using my PayPal account (<https://bit.ly/2RLaUcB>), or by buying books for my research on Amazon (https://www.amazon.co.uk/hz/wishlist/ls/36WVSWCK4X33O?ref_=wl_share).

The audio of all of my videos is available on my Soundcloud account: <https://soundcloud.com/alastairadversaria>. You can also listen to the audio of these episodes on iTunes: <https://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/alastairs-adversaria/id1416351035?mt=2>.

Transcript

Proverbs chapter 16. Proverbs 16. Proverbs 16.

How much better to get wisdom than gold? To get understanding is to be chosen rather than silver. The highway of the upright turns aside from evil. Whoever guards his way preserves his life.

Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before a fall. It is better to be of a lowly spirit with the poor than to divide the spoil with the proud. Whoever gives thought to the word will discover good, and blessed is he who trusts in the Lord.

The wise of heart is called discerning, and sweetness of speech increases persuasiveness. Good sense is a fountain of life to him who has it, but the instruction of fools is folly. The heart of the wise makes his speech judicious, and adds persuasiveness

to his lips.

Gracious words are like a honeycomb, sweetness to the soul and health to the body. There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death. A worker's appetite works for him, his mouth urges him on.

A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire. A dishonest man spreads strife, and a whisperer separates close friends. A man of violence entices his neighbor, and leads him in a way that is not good.

Whoever winks his eyes plans dishonest things. He who purses his lips brings evil to pass. Gray hair is a crown of glory, if it is gained in a righteous life.

Whoever is slow to anger is better than the mighty, and he who rules his spirit than he who takes the city. The lot is cast into the lap, but its every decision is from the Lord. The first nine verses of chapter 16 of Proverbs form a unit.

All but verse 8 have the name of the Lord within them. These verses are bookended by Proverbs concerning the Lord's control over the plans of men, and the Proverbs that follow them in verses 10-15 mostly concern the King. Verses 1-4 are particularly focused upon the superintendence and providence of the Lord.

People may deliberate about the words that they are going to say in their heart, but when the time comes to speak, it is the Lord who is sovereign over what is said. In Luke chapter 12 verses 11-12 Jesus promises his disciples that he will give them the words to say when they are in a situation of trial. And when they bring you before the synagogues and the rulers and the authorities, do not be anxious about how you should defend yourself or what you should say, for the Holy Spirit will teach you in that very hour what you ought to say.

While it focuses upon speech, this verse makes a more general point about the way that the Lord oversees and superintends all action. We may have the most elaborate plans, but ultimately it is the Lord who decides what happens. 1 John chapter 3 verse 20 declares that God is greater than our heart and he knows everything.

Verse 2 speaks of the person who thinks, in his presumption, that all of his ways are right. The Lord, however, weighs both the paths that such a person takes and the spirit that governs him. He knows the true reality of a person's heart and even though we may delude ourselves, we cannot delude God.

God perceives and he judges the true intentions of our heart. Out of these first two verses arises the third. If the Lord is the one who ultimately disposes all our ways and our words and if the Lord is the one who truly knows the hearts of men and ways them, then we should commit our work and our plans to the Lord, praying that he will establish what we do.

God's sovereignty is expressed even further in verse 4. The Lord is the one who has made all things, not just in the sense of creation, but also in the sense of fashioning things towards their purpose in history. He has even made the wicked for the day of trouble. The apostle Paul speaks of this sovereign providence of God in Romans chapter 9 verses 17-24.

For the scripture says to Pharaoh, For this very purpose I have raised you up, that I might show my power in you, and that my name might be proclaimed in all the earth. So then he has mercy on whomever he wills, and he hardens whomever he wills. You will say to me then, Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will? But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is moulded say to its moulder, Why have you made me like this? Has the potter no right over the clay to make out of the same lump one vessel for honourable use, and another for dishonourable use? What if God, desiring to show his wrath, and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only, but also from the Gentiles? Knowing the sovereignty of our Creator, we should not have our hearts lifted up.

Whatever plans and intentions we might have in our hearts, God is greater than our hearts. Man proposes, but God disposes. Knowing this, we should humbly commit our ways to him.

However, the person who lifts themselves up in arrogance will be punished. Verse 6 speaks of iniquity being atoned for by steadfast love and faithfulness. There is debate about whether this is God's steadfast love and faithfulness, or whether it is a human being's.

Is the point here that a sacrifice needs to be confirmed by faithful practice, or is the point ultimately that the Lord is the one who atones, and that he does so on account of his steadfast love and faithfulness? That would certainly seem to be the more theologically attractive reading. Bruce Waltke doubts whether it is the actual reading, however. Given the use of this language elsewhere, he thinks it must refer to the human being's steadfast love and faithfulness.

We have another occurrence of such language in Proverbs 3.3. Let not steadfast love and faithfulness forsake you. Bind them around your neck. Write them on the tablet of your heart.

Michael Fox suggests that we might hear the language of Exodus chapter 34 verses 6-7 here. The Lord passed before him and proclaimed, The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness, keeping steadfast love for thousands, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, but who will by no means clear the guilty, visiting the iniquity of the fathers and the children, and the

children's children, to the third and the fourth generation. The second verset of the Proverbs speaks about the fear of the Lord as the means by which we turn away from evil.

If the first half is about the atoning for sin, the second half is about the transformation of life. The cause of this is the fear of the Lord, a profound sense of the Lord's holiness with a corresponding sense of humility and a desire to obey him and honour him in all that one does. If you want to turn away from evil, look to the Lord.

His greatness, his goodness and his holiness are a spur to transformation of life. Verse 7 gives us another reason why it is wise to commit one's way to the Lord. When the ways of a man are pleasing to the Lord, he will guard that person's way, he will protect them from harm, he will be a shield around that person.

A significant example of the Lord's protection of his people, ensuring that their enemies will not strike them, can be seen in Exodus chapter 34 verses 23-24. Verse 8 is the exception in verses 1-9. It's the one verse that does not include the name of the Lord within it.

However, it is very similar to a verse from the previous chapter which does include the name of the Lord. Better is a little with the fear of the Lord than great treasure and trouble with it. The righteous man won't necessarily be rich.

However, he will be far more secure and blessed than the wicked man will be. The wicked man ultimately will face his doom, but the righteous man will be established by the Lord and ultimately he will flourish and prosper. Verse 9 returns us to the principle described in verse 1. The plans of the heart belong to man, but the answer of the tongue is from the Lord.

Here however it is the Lord's establishment of the steps of a man that is especially emphasised. Knowing the providence and the sovereignty of God, we should commit our ways to him. We do not know the uncertainties, the hidden dangers, the obstacles and the false paths that lie before us.

We must therefore commit ourselves to the Lord, praying for his guidance, seeking that in his gracious providence he will preserve us from evil, that he will guide us in the good way, that he will establish the work of our hands and in his goodness that he will bring us at last to his heavenly kingdom. In verses 10-15 we move from the Lord to the King. However, the way that the King is described, we could replace the name of the Lord for the King and the Proverbs will be very similar to ones that we have encountered earlier.

The righteous King reflects the character of God. He acts in the name of God. Within the Davidic covenant, the righteous King is described as the Son of God.

The King here speaks wisdom that comes directly from God. An oracle is on his lips. His

lips are supposed to convey the judgement of God himself.

Justice ultimately comes from God and must be upheld by the King in the Lord's name. Elsewhere we see the word and the authority of God closely aligned with the words of the wise and also with the authority of parents. In addition to judgement, weights and measures must be true and just.

False measures are driven by covetousness. They are an attempt to defraud others. However, just weights and measures are pleasing to the Lord.

They are in keeping with the Lord's own character. The King is the exemplary man. In the character of Solomon and David we see this most powerfully.

Solomon, for instance, is the one who exemplifies wisdom. He is a new Adam ruling in the midst of a new Eden. Nations and kings' thrones are established by righteousness.

As we read through the story of 1 and 2 Samuel and the story of the kings, the fortunes of Judah and Israel are repeatedly seen to depend upon the righteousness or the unrighteousness of their kings. In addition to righteous deeds, the King is concerned for righteous lips. For a King to judge wisely, he has to be aware of the people around him.

He has to be alert to their character and he has to surround himself with just people. The King is on the lookout for those of righteous lips. Those who speak uprightly manifest their righteous character and as a result will be the sort of people with whom he wants to surround himself and by whose service and counsel he wants to rule.

In the King's desire for people of righteous lips, he is once again comparable to the Lord. In Proverbs chapter 12 verse 22, lying lips are an abomination to the Lord, but those who act faithfully are his delight. The King is a man not just of wisdom and righteousness, but a man of power.

His wrath is able to bring death. He has the power of death and life committed to him as an agent of the Lord's judgment. The wise man who counsels the King, however, is able to assuage the King's anger.

This implies both the power of the words of wisdom, but also the tractability of the King. A good King is someone who expresses anger when it needs to be, but also who surrounds himself with people who can assuage it when it would best be appeased. The King's countenance when it shines upon someone in favour is like the life-giving light of the sun.

Alternatively, his favour is like the clouds that bring the spring rain, the rain that would come to ensure the harvest. If death is in the power of the King in verse 14, life is in the power of the King in verse 15. Waltke suggests that in verses 16-19 we have something akin to a miniature prologue.

It reminds us of much of the material of chapters 1-9. Chapter 3 verses 13-14, Blessed is the one who finds wisdom and the one who gets understanding, for the gain from her is better than gain from silver, and her profit better than gold. Proverbs chapter 8 verses 10-11, Take my instruction instead of silver, and knowledge rather than choice gold, for wisdom is better than jewels, and all that you may desire cannot compare with her.

Chapter 8 verse 19, My fruit is better than gold, even fine gold, and my yield than choice silver. The righteous man is once again defined by his way. He both turns away from evil and he guards his way from unrighteousness.

By the negative implication of verse 18, he is also defined by humility. His heart is not lifted up. He fears the Lord and as a result does not hold an exalted opinion of himself.

His lowliness of spirit and his association with the poor might make us think of the Beatitudes and the way that Jesus blesses the meek and the lowly in spirit. Verses 20-24 are particularly concerned with speech. In verse 20 we see that the person who gives thought to the word will discover good, something that is paired with the blessedness of the one who trusts in the Lord.

The implication here is that trusting in the Lord is associated with giving thought to the word. The word here might be the word received, the word of the wise, the commandment of the Lord that is meditated upon. It might also refer to words that are spoken, that the wise man meditates upon and reflects upon before he utters.

The words of the righteous and the wise are not just upright and true. They are words that are carefully fashioned for the situation. They are words that are beautiful and persuasive.

They are sweet here and as a result they move people to appropriate action. Aristotle spoke of the various forms of persuasion as ethos, pathos and logos. The first relating to the personal character of the speaker, ethos, the second putting the audience into a certain frame of mind in order to move them, the pathos, and the third the logos, the reasoned discourse by which the case is proved.

The wise person has a depth, soundness and integrity of character that enables him to marshal ethos powerfully. He also has the faculties to make a strong and reasoned case for a position. And beyond these things he also has the power to delight and to move an audience, to speak to them in a way that moves their feelings.

In its own distinctive terminology, the Book of Proverbs here is speaking about all these different aspects of speech. The ethos of deep moral character and integrity that renders the speech of the wise man a fountain of life of good sense. The insight and understanding by which the heart of the wise can speak judiciously and persuasively.

And the pathos by which he can speak graciously and beautifully. Words that are like a

honeycomb, words that bring delight but also which bring healing. In verse 25 once again we see the limitations of man's understanding of his way.

A man may be presumptively confident in his actions and yet be on the way to death. This is why it is so important that we commit our ways to the Lord. This reminds us of verse 2. The worker's appetite is one of the things that drives him on.

If a man had no appetites he would not be spurred to act. A man's hunger, a man's desire for love, a man's desire for honour and status, all of these things drive him to work, to create, to produce, to perform great deeds. In this way a man's mouth, his hunger, can properly handled be something that plays in his favour, that serves to inspire him to productivity and greatness.

Verses 27-29 all concern different types of evil men. The worthless man, the dishonest man and the man of violence. The first man, the worthless man, is a troublemaker who plots evil and whose speech ignites and causes damage.

The dishonest man, through his lies, his rumours and his tail-bearing, spreads discord and he divides people who are once close together. The man of violence is one who spreads his violence to others by enticing other people to join him. Verse 30 describes the way that he communicates in a way that is deceptive and underhand, communicating furtively with his body language while saying something very different with his mouth.

The fifth commandment, to honour father and mother, can be applied more broadly in the honouring of elders. Respect for those of greater age is on a number of accounts. First, we are the beneficiaries of the sacrifices of such persons and those that inherit the legacy that they have left for us.

Second, they are people who have experienced a number of different seasons of life and as a result have the experience of sowing and reaping and the wisdom that comes with experiencing and observing a number of these different cycles in their own lives and in the lives of others around them. Such experiential wisdom can be communicated in words but it cannot just be reduced to words. Verse 32 expresses one of the great principles of the book of Proverbs.

The person who is slow to anger, who is not reactive and who is patient is someone who is truly mighty. While an impetuous man can perform great deeds of greatness in the world outside, if he cannot master himself, he is not able to exercise true rule. True authority and control begins with mastering yourself.

Once you have mastered yourself, you will be able to lead others. The person who cannot master themselves, however, is the reactive victim of all the forces that are around them. They are not operating by their reason but they are the plaything of their

untamed passions.

The true mighty man, the true leader is the one who rules his spirit, who has taken the inner city of his life. This same principle is expressed in a negative form in chapter 25 verse 28. A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls.

The analogy of the self and the walled city is a powerful one. The walled city can be besieged by all sorts of forces. There can be great tumult and unrest and war outside of the city.

But if the city has sure and certain and strong walls, life within the city can continue calm and untroubled. The final verse of the chapter returns us to the principles with which it began. The Lord is the one who disposes all events, the greatest event to the smallest event.

Even the small events that might be attributed to chance are actually the actions of God, in this case the lot that is cast into the lap. A question to consider, if a man's spirit is like a city that must be taken and ruled, what in our governing of our spirits might be comparable to the walls by which a city is defended? The Book of Philemon Paul a prisoner for Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother. To Philemon our beloved fellow worker and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier and the church in your house.

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I thank my God always when I remember you in my prayers, because I hear of your love and of the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints, and I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. For I have derived much joy and comfort from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

Accordingly, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do what is required, yet for love's sake I prefer to appeal to you, I Paul, an old man and now a prisoner also for Christ Jesus. I appeal to you for my child Anesimus, whose father I became in my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful to you and to me.

I am sending him back to you, sending my very heart. I would have been glad to keep him with me, in order that he might serve me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your goodness might not be by compulsion, but of your own accord. For this perhaps is why he was parted from you for a while, that you might have him back for ever, no longer as a bond-servant, but more than a bond-servant, as a beloved brother, especially to me, but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me. If he has

wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand.

I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me even your own self. Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you and the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say. At the same time prepare a guest-room for me, for I am hoping that through your prayers I will be graciously given to you. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, as do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Philemon is the shortest of Paul's epistles, and after 3rd and 2nd John, the shortest book in the New Testament. Although other theories exist, it was most likely sent to Philemon in Colossae, at the same time as the epistle to the Colossians was sent there by the hand of Tychicus.

It is written concerning a runaway slave named Anesimus. Some in the later tradition have identified Anesimus with the bishop of Ephesus, who was martyred in the reign of Domitian, possibly in the first half of the 90s AD. Slaves were a feature of the ancient world.

When we think of slavery we tend to think of the race-based chattel slavery of the American antebellum South, which was fundamentally founded upon man-stealing. Slavery in the ancient world was also a vast and brutal institution. Much of Rome's economy depended heavily upon slavery, and hundreds of thousands of slaves were captured in wars in Europe and elsewhere.

Others had been kidnapped by pirates. Some slaves had been rescued from exposure as infants. A few sold themselves into slavery to improve their conditions.

Some have estimated that over 30% of Roman society were slaves. It is important that we recognise the greater complexities of the institution. In many less developed societies slavery could not easily be wished away.

If a person was indebted or displaced the choice might be between being a slave or suffering in extreme hunger and want. Manumission, while an improvement in legal status, would probably not have been a step up in material conditions for many, but would have reduced them to destitution and the terrible indignities and cruelties of poverty in Roman society. The conditions enjoyed by slaves could vary widely.

Harsh and inhumane treatment of slaves was very common. However, in some cases slaves of wealthy and high status masters could enjoy influence and even wealth of their own. Masters provided the food, clothing and shelter that their slaves required.

Other slaves could be valued and honoured members of the households that they

served. Slaves could be found doing all sorts of jobs in society, with many levels of expertise. Epictetus, who lived around the same time as Seneca, became a great Stoic philosopher for instance.

In Galatians chapter 4 Paul compares the condition of the child in his minority to the state of a slave. The comparison could also work in the other direction. The slave was under the direct and practically absolute authority of another party over their actions, bodies and lives.

They could be corporally punished by their masters. Their position was one of great vulnerability. A very great many were used for sexual purposes and abused in this and other ways.

However, slaves could often enjoy much greater material security and provision than freedmen, who, without a master to provide for their essential needs, were at greater risk of extreme poverty. In neither the Old nor the New Testament is slavery rejected as illegitimate in principle. This is not, however, to suggest that either testament is ambivalent to the cultural practice.

The Old Testament tells us stories of slaves, stories of Hagar and Eliezer of Damascus, slaves of Abraham. The story of Joseph, sold into slavery by his brothers. Joseph illustrates both the ways that a slave could rise in their household, but also how vulnerable slaves were to oppression and mistreatment.

The story of the children of Israel brutally oppressed by the Egyptians is another story of slavery. However, while oppression is a theme in some of these stories, it is not a universal feature. Some slaves enjoyed great privileges.

Eliezer of Damascus, prior to the births of Ishmael and Isaac, was going to inherit the entirety of Abraham's household. We also see in Abraham sending his servant to find a bride for Isaac that that servant clearly enjoys great authority to act in Abraham's name and to manage his affairs. The Egyptians were saved from starvation in the famine through giving themselves over to slavery to Pharaoh.

Some slaves loved their masters, desired to remain in their master's households for life, and performed a right to bind themselves to their masters. There were forms of slavery designed to allow poor women to marry into richer families. The law reminds Israel of their own experience of slavery in Egypt, and while permitting them to own slaves, is concerned that the slaves are treated with justice and equity.

Deuteronomy chapter 15 verses 12 to 18 is an example of Old Testament teaching concerning slavery. If your brother, a Hebrew man or a Hebrew woman, is sold to you, he shall serve you six years, and in the seventh year you shall let him go free from you. When you let him go free from you, you shall not let him go empty-handed.

You shall furnish him liberally out of your flock, out of your threshing floor, and out of your winepress. As the Lord your God has blessed you, you shall give to him. You shall remember that you were a slave in the land of Egypt, and the Lord your God redeemed you.

Therefore I command you this today. But if he says to you, I will not go out from you, because he loves you and your household, since he is well off with you, then you shall take an oar and put it through his ear into the door, and he shall be your slave forever. And to your female slave you shall do the same.

It shall not seem hard to you when you let him go free from you, for at half the cost of a hired worker he has served you six years. So the Lord your God will bless you in all that you do. Treating slaves well was not really a matter of expediency in the law, expecting to get more work out of them.

It was a matter of basic morality secured by the Lord as the patron of slaves, and backed up by the rationale of Israel's own recollection of the experience of oppressive servitude. The New Testament continues in this same vein. Slavery is not directly condemned as an institution, but its cultural logic is radically undermined and replaced with a Christian logic that does not dispense with the form but utterly changes its principles of operation.

Colossians 3.22-4.1 Bond-servants, obey in everything those who are your earthly masters, not by way of eye-service as people-pleasers, but with sincerity of heart fearing the Lord. Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men, knowing that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward. You are serving the Lord Christ.

For the wrongdoer will be paid back for the wrong he has done, and there is no partiality. Masters, treat your bond-servants justly and fairly, knowing that you also have a master in heaven. Ephesians 6.5-9 Bond-servants, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ, not by way of eye-service as people-pleasers, but as bond-servants of Christ doing the will of God from the heart, rendering service with a good will as to the Lord and not to man, knowing that whatever good anyone does, this he will receive back from the Lord, whether he is a bond-servant or is free.

Masters, do the same to them, and stop your threatening, knowing that he who is both their master and yours is in heaven, and there is no partiality with him. In Paul's teaching then, servants were encouraged either to act toward their earthly masters as those living out of a more fundamental state of servanthood, to a gracious, loving, and good master, or to think of themselves as sons in relationship to Christ, acting obediently toward their earthly masters for his sake. Masters were to see themselves as slaves of a higher master, having this in common with their servants and being accountable for their treatment of them.

God is impartial, and unlike Roman courts, will not favour the unjust master over his abused servant. God is the patron and the protector of the weak. Even more importantly, Christ himself came in the form of a servant, and the pattern of Christian ethics is set by a master who willingly assumed the path of service.

The New Testament is not an egalitarian document. It assumes and sometimes justifies a hierarchical order in society, with rulers, parents, husbands, and masters occupying places over others, places which are not delegitimised. Perhaps more challenging to us, nowhere does the scripture suggest that a person's soul is in jeopardy by virtue of possessing a slave.

This is not because the scriptures are hesitant in calling out sin. However, nor is the scripture simply a book legitimating and supporting the status quo. Slavery, while not delegitimised, is neither idealised nor meekly tolerated.

The scripture frequently speaks into the institution to transform its operations on the basis of God's concern for the slave and the human kinship of the master and the slave, a kinship to which the scripture constantly alerts us. This transformation is not undertaken for the purpose of rehabilitating the institution though, as if slavery just needed a bit more spit and polish. Rather, throughout the scripture the movement is towards release from slavery and into the independence, maturity, and providence that slavery stifles, and for whose lack it could often substitute.

While our society may commit itself to equality in principle, it often struggles in practice, as people clearly are not equal in their talents, abilities, capacities, their economic standing, their social and family backgrounds, the authority that they enjoy, and any number of other criteria. While we talk about equality of opportunity or equality of outcome, for instance, we can try to realise equality in ways that set us up for constant frustration, as while there are areas where fairness must clearly be displayed, the natural differences between people will constantly produce diverging outcomes, and any attempt to level these outcomes will tend unfairly to stifle people in the expression of their gifts. Indeed, many of these attempts at equality can produce harsher situations, such as where the supposed justice of meritocracy leads to the justification of the much greater wealth or status of some being perceived as a natural right that they enjoy, when formerly it might have been attributed to the grace of God or unmerited fortune.

Such equality of opportunity may serve only to underline our great natural differences. Part of the power of the teaching that we find in Paul and in the rest of the New Testament then is the way that it speaks the levelling reality of the Gospel into situations where social hierarchies are taken for granted, are not expected to disappear, and in some cases are even affirmed. The Gospel does not abolish slavery, but it makes it impossible ever to think about it or practice it in the same way again, and, as many have observed, thereby sows the seed for the progressive social delegitimation and the later

abolition of the institution.

The Gospel focuses its vision of equality beneath the surface of the social order. In the process it denies the social order finality, and insists that it be approached and regarded in terms of a more fundamental and determinative reality, given by virtue of the facts of human creation and redemption. Every human being is beyond exchange value and is of incalculable worth in the sight of God.

Whoever someone is, wherever they stand in the social order, this is true of them. In the life of the Church, in particular in the light of redemption, this fact is brought into fuller expression. For an institution like slavery, characterised by the negation of the personhood of others, and their reduction to mere possession, a true recognition of this fact would over time prove fatal.

And now we are in a better position to appreciate the power of Paul's argument in Philemon, which is shot through with the logic of the Gospel. Onesimus, fleeing from Philemon, came to Paul, and apparently was converted through Paul's message. Paul sends him back to Philemon, but sends him back with an appeal.

Paul could have commanded Philemon. Philemon arguably owed Paul his spiritual life, and Paul was in a position where he could have laid requirements upon him. However, by appealing to him, he affords him the opportunity to act in the maturity and the freedom of love.

As Paul says, he desires Philemon's goodness not be by compulsion, but of his own accord. The Gospel more generally is characterised by a rhetoric of appeal, exhortation and persuasion, rather than direct command. As persons acting in the freedom of the spirit, rather than under the command of the law, we are those who obey from the heart.

And so we are appealed to as those who are mature, who are to obey from the heart, and with reasons that have been given to us and internalised. Prior to his escape, Onesimus was not a good servant to Philemon. But since his conversion, he has become of great assistance to Paul, and will likewise be of great usefulness to Philemon.

Receiving Onesimus back now, Philemon won't just be receiving a bond-servant, but someone beloved, as a now reformed man of his household, but also as a brother in Christ. Paul encourages Philemon to see God's hand in all of this. Through Onesimus' departure, God has brought it about that Philemon is receiving him back as something much more dear than he ever was when he left.

Verses 15-16 are not, I believe, referring to manumission. Receiving Onesimus back as a brother did not mean that he ceased to be Philemon's slave. However, it would necessarily transform the way that Onesimus and Philemon treated each other from that point onwards.

As brothers in Christ, and in the new humanity in Christ, also recognising their common dignity as human beings more generally, the master-slave relationship would take on a very different form, when occurring in the light of, and under the rule of, a much more fundamental reality. And at the heart of Paul's appeal is Paul's use of the work of Christ as a paradigm for his own appeal on Onesimus' behalf. So, if you consider me your partner, receive him as you would receive me.

If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand. I will repay it, to say nothing of your owing me, even your own self.

Yes, brother, I want some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ. In the Gospel, Christ, who was, in the very form of God, took on the form of a servant, identifying with us, so that we, as we are found in him, might enjoy his riches.

Paul stands between Onesimus and Philemon, assuming all of the burden of Onesimus' debts and wrongs, and offers himself as a guarantor for them. He identifies fully with Onesimus, so that glorious exchange can occur. Paul assumes Onesimus' debts, and Onesimus receives the welcome and the love that Paul himself would receive.

All of this rests upon the fellowship that we have in Christ, in which Christ has identified with us, so that we can enjoy his riches. However, this fellowship between head and body also calls forth a fellowship within the body, whereby we identify with each other, in whatever condition we may find ourselves. Rich must identify with poor, masters with slaves, men with women, rulers with subjects.

All must take concern for the other. Was Paul expecting Onesimus to be released? Perhaps the key consideration here is the cryptic statement in verse 21. Confident of your obedience I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

What is the even more than I say? I am not persuaded that manumission is primarily what Paul has in mind here. There was nothing wrong in principle in Paul's mind with a Christian owning a slave, or a Christian slave serving a master. However, the gospel necessarily transforms such situations, and provokes godly acts of gracious creativity and imagination.

Philemon's relationship with Onesimus could not be the same after this, and Paul is certain that Philemon receiving Onesimus back will provoke Philemon to consider ways that his relationship with Onesimus can become richer and more characterised by grace. One possibility is that he might send Onesimus to Paul, who clearly has found Onesimus to be of great assistance to him in his work, and has a deep affection for him as his son in the gospel. Onesimus might then have accompanied Paul as he travelled, assisting him in the work of the gospel.

The possibility that Anesimus is the Bishop of Ephesus mentioned by Ignatius of Antioch invites further speculation. But whatever happened, the gospel clearly transforms the relationship between slave and master, placing it on a completely different footing, denying it the ultimacy that it enjoyed in pagan society, and placing it firmly under the rule of Christ's grace. A question to consider, how might Paul's pattern of appeal here be adopted by Christians in our mission to those on the margins of our societies?