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A Note On I Corinthians 7:21

In I Cor. 7:23b Paul commands, *me gineshe douloi anthropon*, "Do not become slaves of human beings." His injunction comes at the end of one of the most controversial passages of the Pauline corpus, I Cor. 7:21, to which an entire monograph has been devoted.¹ The prevailing translation of this pericope ostensibly reads as a Pauline commandment for Christian slaves not only to remain in bondage but to reconcile themselves to their status as an appropriate exercise of their faith. The implications of this interpretation of Paul's words were not lost on subsequent commentators in slaveholding societies. It is on the basis of this passage that Theodoret, in his commentary on I Corinthians, forbids flight from servitude on the pretext of religion. Commenting on verse 21 he writes,

Grace knows not a difference between slavery and lordship. Therefore, do not flee from slavery as [being] unworthy of the faith. But if it happens that you may be free, continue being a slave.²

In similar language, eighteenth century American pro-slavery advocates pointed to Paul's purported exhortation in I Corinthians as a biblical proof-text for the perpetual bondage of African Americans.³

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¹ S. Scott Bartchy, *Mallon Chresai: First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of I Corinthians 7:21*. (Missoula, Montana: University of Montana Press, 1973).

² *Ouk oiden e charis douleias kai despoteias diaphoran, me toinun phuges hos anaxian ten douleian, alla kan tuchein tes eleutherias e dunaton, epimeimon douleuon.* (Trans. mine)

³ See, for example, "Petition to the General Assembly of Virginia from Amelia County, November 10, 1785," in Larry R. Morrison, "The Religious Defense of American Slavery Before 1830," *Journal of Religious Thought*, 37:2, p. 25.

Because it is only here in the entire corpus of Paul's undisputed correspondence that the concrete status of the Christian slave in the world is addressed, and because this pericope and its interpretation have been influential in shaping Christian attitudes toward the institution of slavery in both the ancient and modern world, this text continues to warrant careful consideration.

The proper context of I Cor. 7:21 is vv. 17-24, which constitutes an integral pericope with *hekaston*, *keklekan* and *theos* of v. 17 corresponding to *hekastos*, *eklethe* and *para theo* of v. 24 respectively.⁴ At issue here is *klesis*, which is at the conceptual center of the pericope, the logical, etymological and common translation of which is "calling." But we live in a post-Reformation world, where the glosses "calling" and "vocation" are fraught with associations totally anachronistic to Paul's usage. Paul speaks of *klesis* with respect to *kletos*, corporately the *ekklesia*, the group of those "called out" ("called out," in this case, by God) and not one's social or even one's religious position in the world. Thus *peritome* (circumcision) and *akrobustia* (uncircumcision) have no significance (v.19), not because such distinctions are eschatologically irrelevant or "relativized," but simply because they are not *klesis*. Context and Pauline usage therefore militate against a reading of *peritome*, *akrobustia*, and/or *doulos* (slave) as stations in life in the sense of the Lutheran *vocatio*. Such a gloss of *klesis* is therefore an inappropriate preunderstanding for the interpretation of this text.

Approaching the text afresh, some retranslation is in order. Verse 21a is simple enough: "were you called as a slave? Do not let it bother you." 21b immediately follows the full stop with *all' kai*, an emphatic adversative construction, i.e., "But on the contrary," followed by an "if" clause consisting of *ei* with the indicative, thus implying that the protasis is factual: "If you can be(come) free [which you can be]." *Chresai* is to be translated as "behave," "act" or "conduct (oneself)" as

⁴ See on this point Vincent L. Wimbush, *Paul the Worldly Ascetic*. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1988) p. 15, note 12.

it is, for example, in 2 Cor. 7.17, and in this respect is roughly synonymous with *peripateio* ("let him walk/act/conduct himself") of v. 17. Verse 22, taken as it stands, must mean that the slave, having been called (*klethesis*), becomes and *apeleutheros kuriou*, "a freedman of the lord." He is free after having been a slave, yet is still legally obligated to the patron who has freed him, to whom he continues to owe legally stipulated services.⁵ The gist of v. 22 is thus that both classes of persons, *doulos* and *eleutheros*, are under obligation to the lord, who is referred to explicitly in v. 22b (*tou Christou*). Important to the foregoing interpretation is that Paul refers to the erstwhile slave as *apeleutheros*. Because he is addressing a concrete situation, he is constrained to use this term to refer to one who had at one time been a slave. Such a person could never be factually described as *eleutheros*, a noun and adjective applied exclusively to free persons who were born that way. This forecloses a spiritualized or otherwise abstract interpretation of *eleutheros*, and so the passage as a whole. Vincent Wimbush lucidly states the case at hand.

Given what he [Paul] understands to be the position of some of the Corinthians, the question of change must refer *concretely* to social status or condition, even as such change would affect one's status with God.⁶

Paul here must be talking about statutory freedman status. Though "called" as slaves, Paul understands the addressee to be an actual freedman.

I would suggest, therefore, that behind this text lies the Corinthian

⁵ Such services were referred to in Roman law as the *obsequium*, which remained obligatory for the freedman for life. For a summary account of these obligations, see Francis Lyall, *Slaves, Citizens, Sons: Legal Metaphors in the Epistles*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984), p. 43.

⁶ Wimbush, p. 16, note 12.

practice of ecclesial manumission, by which the change in status from *doulos* to *apeleutheros* was effected. The church at Corinth would have been in the practice of obtaining the freedom of enslaved members by marshalling their collective funds to pay the price of said member's manumission. Such manumission is attested elsewhere in Christian literature. *I Clement*, addressed to Corinthian Christians about a generation after Paul's correspondence with Corinth, bears compelling testimony to the determination of some early Christians to meet the high cost of manumitting their coreligionists by bartering their own indentured labor: "We know that many among ourselves have given themselves to bondage that they might ransom others. Many have delivered themselves to slavery, and provided food for others with the price they received for themselves" (55.2). Ignatius, in his epistle to Polycarp, inveighs against the practice, no doubt common, of purchasing the freedom of Christian slaves with monies *apo tou koinou*, "from the communal fund" (4.3). This explains Paul's financial language in v. 23a, which I would read as a rhetorical question akin to v. 21 and on the pattern of the rhetorical questions in v. 18. "You were bought with a price, weren't you? Do not be slaves to human beings." Paul forbids those *apeleutheroi* who were *douloi* before their calling (i.e., previous to *klesis*) to relapse into considering themselves or allowing others to consider them as still in some way slaves, no doubt an important interdiction in a society which never allowed the freedman to forget his origins.⁷ This concern is further underscored by Paul's concluding command that each should remain in his own calling *para theo*, "according to God." Divine calling is here

⁷ Indeed, the freed person's very name often bespoke her or his previous status of servitude, especially those diminutive Greek and Latin nicknames so prominent among the lists of Paul's associates that appear in his correspondence, e.g. Fortunatus

("Lucky," I Cor. 16:17), Rufus ("Red," Rom. 16:13). For an extensive list and more comprehensive treatment of slave names in earliest Christianity, see W. G. Rollins, "Slavery in the New Testament," *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976), p. 831.

contrasted with human convention, acquiescence to which constitutes slavery to mere human beings.

The entire pericope may thus be rendered as follows.

17. But to each one as the Lord has apportioned. So let each one conduct himself as God has called him. And I command such in all the churches.

18. Was someone called having been circumcised? Let him not conceal [the fact of his circumcision.] Has someone been called in [the state of] uncircumcision? Let him not be circumcised.

19. Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing. But, keeping God's commandments,⁸

20. Let each remain in the same calling to which he was called.

21. Were you called as a slave? Do not let it concern you. But on the contrary, if you can be free, act like it!

22. For the one in the Lord who was called as a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise, the one called as a free-born person is the slave of Christ.

23. You were bought with a price, weren't you? Do not become slaves to human beings!

24. Let each one remain in the same calling to which he was called according to God.

In 1 Cor. 7:17-24 Paul is affirming a real change in the personal status of the slave that has already taken place, and presently obtains inalienably, a change effected through church-financed manumission of the Corinthian Christian slave. Paul here alludes implicitly to a practice which Clement mentions explicitly in his correspondence with the church at Corinth, a tradition of ecclesial manumission regarded as a both acceptable and laudable expression of Christian charity.

⁸ The punctuation I have provided here reads more smoothly, I think, and renders a clause that makes more sense given the context.