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## Slaves to God, Slaves to One Another: Testing an Idea Biblically

John G. Nordling

My interest in New Testament slavery goes back to graduate school days at the University of Wisconsin—Madison whence emerged a paper that was published in a New Testament journal.<sup>1</sup> Since then, I have had the privilege of writing *Philemon* for the Concordia Commentary Series<sup>2</sup> and several articles and book reviews on ancient or biblical slavery that have appeared since.<sup>3</sup> At seminary I have bounced my ideas off hapless students who express a polite interest in slavery sometimes, though colleagues are much more guarded on the topic, I notice. Not only are they busy with their own projects and preoccupations, of course, but slavery remains a contentious issue in polite society. Nevertheless, given the green light to hold forth on whatever I please at this, my inaugural lecture, I am prepared to provide as the title of today's lecture, "Slaves to God, Slaves to One Another: Testing an Idea Biblically." The idea to be tested, of course, is whether biblical slavery pertains in any way to being a Christian

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<sup>1</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus: a Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41 (1991): 97–119. This article is based on research conducted for a doctoral seminar in Roman law under the direction of Dr. John Scarborough, completed in fall 1988. I would like to thank the Revs. Roger Peters, Richard Lammert, and Robert Smith for their help with finding the sometimes widely scattered materials (articles and texts) that went into the article below.

<sup>2</sup> John G. Nordling, *Philemon*, Concordia Commentary (St. Louis: Concordia, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> John G. Nordling, review of *Slavery in Early Christianity*, by Jennifer Glancy, *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 73, no. 4 (2005): 1212–1215; "Slavery and Vocation," *Lutheran Forum* 42, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 12–17; "A More Positive View of Slavery: Establishing Servile Identity in the Christian Assemblies," *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 19, no. 1 (2009): 63–84; "Some Matters Favoring the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Neotestamentica* 44, no. 1 (2010): 85–121; review of *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, by Jean Andreau and Raymond Descat, *CJ-Online*: accessed Jan. 18, 2017, <http://cj.camws.org/files/reviews/2012/2012.12.07%20Nordling%20on%20Andreau%20and%20Descat,%20The%20Slave%20in%20Greece%20and%20Rome.pdf>; review of *Onesimus Our Brother: Reading Religion, Race, and Culture in Philemon*, edited by M.V. Johnson, J.A. Noel, and D.K. Williams, *CTQ* 78, nos. 1–2 (2014): 186–188.

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nowadays—or whether, perhaps, it is best to let sleeping dogs lie. I shall argue that slavery should be studied by Christians yet today on account of its pertinence to vocation—that is, to one’s life “in Christ” amid the varied circumstances wherein God has set each Christian in this world to be faithful. The sanctified life of a Christian, then, consists not only in a freedom by which Christ sets one free (e.g., Gal 5:1, 13) but also in being all but a slave to others among whom God has set one to be of service (e.g., Gal 5:13; Rom 6:16, 18; 1 Cor 9:19). Naturally, the “metaphorical nature” of biblical slavery is evident in such discussion,<sup>4</sup> yet not so metaphorical as to obscure the essentially servile nature of Christianity itself when carefully considered.

### I. The Servile Taint<sup>5</sup>

Slaves and servitude were on the minds of those who wrote the canonical New Testament originally, as even casual acquaintance with the New Testament demonstrates. Take a seemingly random New Testament text that speaks volumes not only to the telltale presence of slaves among the Christians at Corinth, for example, but also Greco-Roman society’s contemptuous estimation of the same. Paul writes:

For consider your calling, brethren, that not many are wise according to the flesh, not many are powerful, not many noble-born [εὐγενεῖς]. But God selected the foolish things of the world [τὰ μωρὰ τοῦ κόσμου] to shame the wise, and the weak things of the world [τὰ ἀσθενῆ τοῦ κόσμου] God chose out to shame the strong, and the low-born/ignoble things of the world [τὰ ἀγενῆ τοῦ κόσμου] God chose out, and the despised things [τὰ ἐξουθενημένα]—indeed, the things that are not [τὰ μὴ ὄντα]—in order to set at naught the things that are, so that no flesh may boast before God (1 Cor 1:26–29; my translation).

The servile taint is revealed by the neuter plural phrases that Paul uses rhetorically to adorn the passage: “the foolish things” (τὰ μωρὰ), “the weak things” (τὰ ἀσθενῆ), “the low-born things” (τὰ ἀγενῆ), “the despised things” (τὰ ἐξουθενημένα), and “the things that are not” (τὰ μὴ ὄντα). We may fairly conclude that Paul did not write merely about “things” here, but the phrases likely represent tags for slaves in the original situation.<sup>6</sup> As

<sup>4</sup> A. A. Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, ed. G.F. Hawthorne, R.P. Martin, and D.G. Reid (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1993), 882.

<sup>5</sup> This section is based on arguments presented earlier in Nordling, *Philemon*, 115–116; and Nordling, “A More Positive View of Slavery,” 78–79.

<sup>6</sup> “The *neuters* . . . indicate the category generally, it being evident from the context that what is meant is the *persons* included under that category.” H. A. W. Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Epistles to the Corinthians*, 6th ed., trans., rev., and ed. D. D.

nonbeings, slaves apparently comprised a significant portion of the epistolary audience at Corinth, for why else would Paul have kept repeating the phrase, “not many of you . . . not many of you . . . not many of you” (ὄ πολλοί . . . οὄ πολλοί . . . οὄ πολλοί, verse 26)?<sup>7</sup> Later pagans opined that educated persons could not be Christians, for that religion appealed only to “foolish, dishonorable and stupid” people—indeed, to “slaves [ἀνδράποδα], women, and little children.”<sup>8</sup>

In short, the preceding passage from 1 Corinthians demonstrates aptly enough that slavery was never too far removed from the thought world of the earliest Christians. Moreover, the passage argues against a tenet strenuously put forward by Martin Hengel that early Christianity “was not particularly a religion of slaves.”<sup>9</sup> Hengel’s argument was that the ancients were all too aware of what it meant for a criminous slave to bear a cross through a city and then be nailed to it: *patibulum ferat per urbem, deinde offigitur cruci* (Plautus, *Carbonaria*, fr. 2).<sup>10</sup> The very horror of the routine, as well-known as it was, would have turned people off, supposed Hengel, so that Christianity could not have attracted the lower classes of Greco-Roman society.<sup>11</sup> I would argue, on the contrary, that the vigorous Christianity revealed in the New Testament was quintessentially a slaves’ religion in that so much of it—epitomized by the death of Jesus on a cross—could not help but strike a responsive chord in countless slaves

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Bannerman and W. P. Dickson (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1884; repr., Winona Lake, IN: Alpha, 1980), 35; original emphases. Also, “the use of the neuter for persons emphasizes the attribute, Blass-Debrunner §138 (1), §263 (4) (with genitive).” H. Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, Hermeneia, trans. J. W. Leitch (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 50 n. 15.

<sup>7</sup> “In saying ‘not many,’ of course, Paul is well aware that some of their number were in fact well off by human standards (e.g., Crispus, Gaius, Erastus, Stephanas). Some of them indeed had their own houses and, according to 11:17–22, were abusing the ‘have-nots’ at the Lord’s Table. But primarily the community was composed of people who were not ‘upper class,’ although from this statement one cannot determine how many would have belonged to the truly ‘poor’—slaves and poor freedmen—and how many would have been artisans and craftsmen, such as Paul was himself.” G. D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 82.

<sup>8</sup> The view of Celsus, as cited by Origen, *Cels.* 3.44, my translation. See Nordling, *Philemon*, 115 n. 49.

<sup>9</sup> Martin Hengel, *Crucifixion in the Ancient World and the Folly of the Message of the Cross*, trans. John Bowden (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1977), 62.

<sup>10</sup> In Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 62.

<sup>11</sup> So Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 61–62.

who chafed under constant threat of crucifixion in the early centuries AD.<sup>12</sup> Hengel himself admits as much toward the end of his study, where he comments on the significance of the death of Jesus and how, in his opinion, the “passion story” formed a “solidarity” between the love of God and anyone who has ever experienced “unspeakable suffering.”<sup>13</sup> Hengel envisioned, in particular, slave experiences in the early centuries AD:

In the person and the fate of the one man Jesus of Nazareth this saving “solidarity” of God with us is given its historical and physical form. In him, the “Son of God,” God himself took up the “existence of a slave” and died the “slaves’ death” on the tree of martyrdom (Phil 2:8), given up to public shame (Hebrews 12:2) and the “curse of the law” (Gal 3:13), so that in the “death of God” life might win victory over death. In other words, in the death of Jesus of Nazareth God identified himself with the extreme of human wretchedness, which Jesus endured as a representative of us all, in order to bring us to the freedom of the children of God:

He who did not spare his own Son,  
but gave him up for us all,  
will he not also give us all things with him? (Romans 8:32).<sup>14</sup>

At the same time, the gospel was presented to the world in those days as a bold invitation to anyone and to everyone—regardless of social status—to become a slave of God in Christ by faith and baptism, taking up one’s metaphorical “cross” and following Jesus into a new life and destiny as a disciple of the Crucified One. Consider the “take-up-your-cross-and-follow-me” statements in the synoptic gospels, for example.<sup>15</sup> The historical origins of this language may derive from the carrying of a cross to public execution by condemned malefactors, opined Johannes Schneider (who wrote the article on crucifixion in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*).<sup>16</sup> That horrific act may possibly have suggested to onlookers “a beginning of [Christian] discipleship,” which would then become “a lasting state” for anyone who had been baptized into the death and

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<sup>12</sup> The slaves’ punishment (*servile supplicium*) hovered like a pall over ancient society in general. See Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 86–89.

<sup>13</sup> The quoted portions are taken from Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 88.

<sup>14</sup> Hengel, *Crucifixion*, 88–89.

<sup>15</sup> “Let him take up his cross [ἀράτω τὸν σταυρόν] and follow me” (Matt 16:24; Mark 8:34). In Luke 9:23, the evangelist appends “daily” (καθ’ ἡμέραν) to the saying.

<sup>16</sup> Johannes Schneider, “σταυρός, σταυρώω, ἀνασταυρώω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964–1976), 7:572–584, especially 578; hereafter TDNT.

resurrection of Jesus: "The disciple of Jesus is a cross-bearer, and [this] he remains . . . his whole life."<sup>17</sup> Thinking of this type likely penetrated the depths of society during the first centuries AD. The first Christians did not minimize the death of Jesus upon a cross but rather proclaimed it boldly before the unbelieving world, reveling in its scandal: "We preach Christ crucified [Χριστὸν ἐσταυρωμένον], a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God [Χριστὸν θεοῦ δύναμιν καὶ θεοῦ σοφίαν]" (1 Cor 1:23–24).

## II. Modern Considerations of Ancient Slavery

I would like to suggest that slavery should be studied in light of the ancient evidence and New Testament depictions of that institution—instead of, as so often happens, dismiss it out of hand, or labor under the impression that slavery as such is "utterly incompatible with Christian beliefs and values."<sup>18</sup> Indeed, New Testament slavery is compatible with Christian beliefs still today, as I hope overwhelmingly to demonstrate. Theologically speaking, of course, it ought to be conceded that slavery is one of the many results of original sin—that is, it came about as an unfortunate adjustment to life in a fallen world which is inherently unjust, brutish, and short. However, as I think it can be demonstrated, slavery in its New Testament guise (as a subset of ancient slavery) was far removed from that racist institution by the same name that brutally exploited dark-skinned Africans in the American South and elsewhere in early modernity. Before taking up biblical slavery's pertinence to Christian vocation, it would be helpful to address some questions that might naturally suggest themselves to any thoughtful person who reflects a moment on slavery, an institution quite far removed from the experience of most of us.

First, why did western society require some 1,900 years to do away with slavery, and did Christianity really provide a leaven toward emancipation as many assume?<sup>19</sup> Taking the last point first, the Marxist historian de Ste. Croix argued that Christianity did not lead to the dissolution of slavery but in fact intensified it:

Whatever the theologian may think of Christianity's claim to set free the soul of the slave, . . . the historian cannot deny that it helped to

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<sup>17</sup> Schneider, "σταυρός," 578.

<sup>18</sup> Richard A. Horsley, "The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 22.

<sup>19</sup> An earlier form of this argument exists in John G. Nordling, "Christ Leavens Culture: St. Paul on Slavery," *Concordia Journal* 24, no. 1 (January 1988): 48.

rivet the shackles rather more firmly on his feet. It performed the same social function as the fashionable philosophies of the greco-roman world, and perhaps with deeper effect: it made the slave both more content to endure his earthly lot, and more tractable and obedient.<sup>20</sup>

Why western society required so many centuries to get rid of slavery poses indeed a difficult question—and the question presumes that slavery has in fact vanished, whereas horrific forms of servitude continue in many parts of the world and have made an unfortunate comeback.<sup>21</sup> A plausible response to the question might run along the following lines: the economy of the Greco-Roman world depended upon large numbers of slaves in bondage to master classes and also upon the specialization inherent in slave labor.<sup>22</sup> Ancient peoples, like us, considered themselves to be civilized, and ancient civilization—in Greece and Rome, at any rate—relied heavily upon the enslavement of persons in the lower social orders or, indeed, marginalized outsiders. In a word, the ancients engaged in a slave economy.

Because the ancients were on the whole so accepting of slavery, a certain analogy follows—which, I admit, has not met with wholehearted approval by everyone who reads my work. Nevertheless, I think it works, so here goes: expecting ancient slave holders to give up slaves and lead “slave-free” lives makes about as much sense as expecting today’s average American to give up his automobile, electricity, and paper products rolled into one. Certainly such things *can be* sacrificed by moderns *to some extent*—temporarily, on a weekend camping trip, perhaps, or by the back-to-nature fringe of modern society. But for untold millions of people it simply will not do to go without gasoline-burning cars, microwave ovens,

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<sup>20</sup> G.E.M. de Ste. Croix, “Early Christian Attitudes to Property and Slavery,” in *Church, Society and Politics: Papers Read at the Thirteenth Summer Meeting and the Fourteenth Winter Meeting of the Ecclesiastical Historical Society*, ed. Derek Baker (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1975), 20.

<sup>21</sup> See M. A. Klein, *Historical Dictionary of Slavery and Abolition* (Lanham and London: Scarecrow Press, 2002), 25, 107–108; A. Cockburn, “21st-Century Slaves” *National Geographic* 204, no. 3 (2003): 2–25.

<sup>22</sup> W. W. Fowler, *Social Life at Rome in the Age of Cicero* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1965), 205–206; Moses I. Finley, *The Ancient Economy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 79; C. Osiek, “Slavery in the New Testament World,” *Bible Today* 22 (1984): 152; Keith R. Bradley, *Slavery and Rebellion in the Roman World, 140 B.C. – 70 B.C.* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 26–30; N.R.E. Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece* (London: Bristol Classical Press, 1993); Klein, *Historical Dictionary*, 48; J. Andreau and R. Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, trans. M. Leopold (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), 12.



or hand-held electronic devices for any appreciable length of time. Thus, in analogous fashion, did our cultural ancestors come to depend upon vast numbers of slaves for day-to-day existence. Slavery was everywhere; it was as much a part of ancient life as those technological gadgets one takes so much for granted nowadays. Only the Essenes at Qumran and the Egyptian Therapeutae appear to have rejected slavery in principle<sup>23</sup>—and, to be sure, Jesus and his immediate disciples did not keep slaves, according to the available evidence, nor Paul, Barnabas, or Timothy. Nevertheless, it is “agonizingly clear” that neither Paul himself, nor any other early Christian, called for the abolition of slavery as such,<sup>24</sup> and its inclusion in emerging Christianity merely “mirrored the reality of the time.”<sup>25</sup> Indeed, as Christianity expanded into the Gentile communities, became an urban phenomenon, and entered the social mainstream, there were many Christians who owned, had close dealings with, or were themselves, slaves.

Here is a second question moderns might do well to ponder: may one learn anything about ancient slavery by studying modern (North American, antebellum) slavery? And the answer is: of course one may, but that answer comes easy, both to modern Christians and to social historians nowadays. To be sure, both forms of slavery relied upon “compulsory labor in which part of the population legally owned other human beings.”<sup>26</sup> And certainly one may form some accurate ideas about what it meant to be sold, run away, or avoid recapture in antiquity by studying North American antebellum parallels.<sup>27</sup> However, slavery was a bewilderingly complicated phenomenon in both its ancient and modern guises, so careful interpreters of either ancient or early modern evidence should not assume any facile equivalencies. In fact, Bartchy observed that one’s awareness of modern slavery—and by this he meant, in particular, antebellum slavery in the American South—has done more to hinder than to help achieve “an appropriate, historical understanding” of ancient slavery.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, while the argument lacks credence that modern

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<sup>23</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, D. N. Freedman, ed., vol. 6 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 69; Andreau and Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, 135.

<sup>24</sup> G. Feeley-Harnik, “Is Historical Anthropology Possible? The Case of the Runaway Slave,” in *Humanizing America’s Iconic Book*, ed. G. M. Tucker and D. A. Knight (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 102.

<sup>25</sup> G. Corcoran, “Slavery in the New Testament. I.,” *Milltown Studies* 1 (1980): 3.

<sup>26</sup> Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” 66.

<sup>27</sup> See the examples in Nordling, *Philemon*, 88 nn. 287–291.

<sup>28</sup> Bartchy, “Slavery (Greco-Roman),” 66.

slavery does not pertain *at all* to ancient (and, by extension, to biblical) slavery, moderns by-and-large are hard-wired to regard all forms of slavery with a considerable suspicion on account of the largely negative impact that racism—antebellum slavery’s bitter legacy—continues to exert on modern society.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, I submit, ancient slavery existed many centuries before the racist institution did and so ought not, necessarily, be lumped together with modern antebellum slavery. Fair-minded persons should be able to see that there are important differences between ancient (and biblical) slavery and the racist institution by the same name that terrorized dark-skinned persons in the American South and elsewhere in early modern times.

I would like to point out, moreover, that the New Testament has had much to say about slavery overall,<sup>30</sup> so it would seem unusual if those many biblical passages—to which more could be added—have nothing to do with Christianity as it exists today. Indeed, the argument can be made that—in certain critical respects—biblical slavery is *paradigmatic for actually being a Christian* in every time and place including our own. In making the point I cannot, to be sure, deny that there have been those in the church who have maliciously used the biblical texts to keep slaves and oppressed persons “in their place;”<sup>31</sup> nevertheless, it seems plausible that—along with everything else—God placed biblical slavery within the canon of Scripture for a Christian’s “learning” (paraphrasing 1 Cor 10:11). Thus, there could be *theological* dimensions to slavery for modern Christians to consider, not merely incidental or historical dimensions. I submit that Christians should study slaves in the New Testament because, in so many ways, they resemble us and we resemble them. Paul’s portrayal of himself several times as a slave<sup>32</sup> suggests that the apostle strove to maintain an identity with epistolary audiences, a large percentage of whom were undoubtedly servile;<sup>33</sup> so it seems quite possible that Paul regarded Christianity itself as

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<sup>29</sup> So Klein, *Historical Dictionary of Slavery and Abolition*, 24–26.

<sup>30</sup> E.g., Matt 18:23–35; Matt 24:45–51 (Luke 12:42–48); Matt 25:14–30 (Luke 19:12–27); Luke 16:1–8; 1 Cor 7:20–24; Eph 6:5–8; Col 3:22–25; 1 Tim 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; Philemon; 1 Pet 2:18–21, etc.

<sup>31</sup> See, e.g., J.W. Blassingame, *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 61–63; Osiek, “Slavery in the New Testament World,” 154; Klein, *Historical Dictionary of Slavery and Abolition*, 64; A. G. Padgett, *As Christ Submits to the Church: a Biblical Understanding of Leadership and Mutual Submission* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 128.

<sup>32</sup> E.g., Rom 1:1; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:1. See also 1 Cor 9:19; 2 Cor 4:5.

<sup>33</sup> Nordling, “A More Positive View of Slavery,” 66–69. Of course, at this remove it is impossible to determine just what proportion of an ancient Pauline assembly was

a kind of “religion of the slaves,” and every Christian—including those who were legally free and so fully enfranchised—to assume the servile position.<sup>34</sup>

And as Paul’s “I am what I am” (1 Cor 15:10) indicated a confidence in God’s grace that allowed him henceforth to be a new person “in Christ,”<sup>35</sup> so Christian slaves would come to think of themselves as considerably more than “just slaves” in spite of past sins, current problems, and what would have been a wretchedly low estimation of slaves and the lower classes in the eyes of the world. There was now, in baptism, a new life and destiny for all believers, including the most down-trodden, despised, and desperate members of the human race as may have frequented a Pauline assembly. The early assemblies were expected to keep separate from the surrounding darkness and reflect the light of Christ into surrounding society: “For at one time you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord. Walk as children of light” (Eph 5:8).<sup>36</sup> Preaching in the early assemblies consisted mainly of helping all the assembled—both great and small, both named Christian and anonymous person at lower societal levels—to see that Jesus, the supreme *Kyrios*, had died a slave’s death upon a cross, risen triumphantly from the dead, and so had brought about a new destiny “in Christ” for any as had died to past sins baptismally and risen from the font in faith to receive the body and blood of the Lord Jesus in the Holy Communion—actions conceived of more corporately than individualistically.<sup>37</sup> Also urged upon the indeterminate masses was “the cross” that God gives: “let him take up his cross and follow me,” Jesus urges

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servile, freed, or free. See Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: the Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1983), 64.

<sup>34</sup> See Nordling, “A More Positive View of Slavery,” 68. Also, F. Lyall, “Roman Law in the Writings of Paul—The Slave and the Freedman,” *New Testament Studies* 17 (1970–71): 73–79.

<sup>35</sup> The phrase seems connected to baptism, although this possibility is not recognized by some of the authors of the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*: A. Oepke, “ἐν,” *TDNT* 2:541; W. Grundmann, F. Hesse, M. de Jonge, and A. S. van der Woude “χρίω, χριστός, κτλ.,” *TDNT* 9:550–551. Nevertheless, several of the “in Christ [Jesus]” formulations seem redolent of baptism, most importantly, “. . . as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus [εἰς Χριστὸν Ἰησοῦν] were baptized into his death” (Rom 6:3, added emphasis). For the formulations ἐν Χριστῷ and ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ see Rom 6:11; 12:5; 1 Cor 1:4; Gal 3:28 (cf. 3:27); 2 Tim 1:9.

<sup>36</sup> See K. R. Snodgrass, “Paul’s Focus on Identity,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168 (2011): 262.

<sup>37</sup> See Nordling, “A More Positive View of Slavery,” 78–80; Snodgrass, “Paul’s Focus on Identity,” 269, 270–271; S. Muir, “Vivid Imagery in Galatians 3:1—Roman Rhetoric, Street Announcing, Graffiti, and Crucifixions,” *Biblical Theology Bulletin* 44, no. 2 (2014): 78–79.

identically in both Matthew (16:24) and Mark (8:34), and Luke adds “daily” (καθ’ ἡμέραν) to the saying (9:23). Such a “cross” is all but code for what the Lutherans would later call “vocation”: “the disciple of Jesus is a cross-bearer, and [this] he remains . . . his whole life.”<sup>38</sup>

### III. Slavery as Vocation

Simple observation reveals that there is nearly always a balance of power between overlings and underlings in complex human societies, and that those in power best accomplish goals through persuasion and skill, not brute force, violence, or intimidation. This balance is as true today as it ever was thousands of years ago, both among the redeemed at church and among quite worldly people in secular situations. Some do not see matters thus and so argue (implausibly, I believe) that there must be a “threat of force” to maintain inherent inequalities,<sup>39</sup> and certainly many examples can be produced to document dominical savagery—if not outright sadism—against recalcitrant slaves.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, “cracking the whip” was hardly the only way available to ancients to motivate slaves, nor was it ever the best way. Thus, attempts to redefine all slavery as a perpetually violent institution<sup>41</sup> are mistaken in principle and can be shown at many points to contradict the evidence. Much more was it the case that the person in charge was not so much a cruel taskmaster as an encouraging coxswain (κελευστής, as described by Xenophon)<sup>42</sup> who urged a crew to row with utter abandon upon the seas; either rowers concluded such voyages jubilantly, dripping with sweat and congratulating each other, or they pulled into port hours later, sullenly hating their leader as much as he hated them. Xenophon, writing his *Oeconomicus* five centuries before Paul, indicates that military generals, commanders, bailiffs and other persons set into power were required to inspire a certain “love of work” (φιλοπονία τις)<sup>43</sup> in their charges; once that objective had been met, troops followed

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<sup>38</sup> Schneider, “σταυρός,” 578.

<sup>39</sup> So, e.g., de Ste. Croix, “Early Christian Attitudes,” 16.

<sup>40</sup> See the many examples in Nordling, *Philemon*, 57, nn. 109–110. Also, B. Cho, “Subverting Slavery: Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul’s Gospel of Reconciliation” *Evangelical Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (2014): 104–105.

<sup>41</sup> So Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1982), 13, and many subsequent interpreters.

<sup>42</sup> *Oeconomicus* 21.3, my translation. The term was so named because the coxswain gave the rowers their time, their beat (κέλευσμα). See Sarah B. Pomeroy, *Xenophon Oeconomicus: A Social and Historical Commentary* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 343.

<sup>43</sup> *Oeconomicus* 21.6, my translation.

commanders through every danger, “even through fire,”<sup>44</sup> and slaves could be counted upon to be “enthusiastic, eager for work, and persevering.”<sup>45</sup> Xenophon obviously had the “gentleman farmer” in mind<sup>46</sup> as he wrote movingly of good family life on the farm and harmonious relationships, and it is true that this idealized picture pertained especially to the very rich.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the more positive view must also have rubbed off on many—including those who, of course, were not quite so well off and did not manage their estates as well (and so never reached the harmonious ideal). While slaves were, to be sure, more liable to physical punishments than members of the citizen class,<sup>48</sup> masters at Athens could not punish slaves with complete impunity (as is often imagined) for under the law, women, children, and slaves received some minimal protections.<sup>49</sup> Likewise, prefects at Rome investigated complaints set before them by slaves concerning the injustice of their masters.<sup>50</sup>

Hence, many of the modern assumptions lack insight into the very *psychology* of slavery, for even the most docile slave *could be*—and often *was*—motivated to take pride in his or her work, do it to the best of his or her ability, and live for no other purpose than to please the master—heart, soul, mind, and body.<sup>51</sup> Modern treatments that reduce the genuineness of a slave’s devotion to mindless automatism (e.g., “extension of a master’s power;”<sup>52</sup> “stereotyped slave personality”<sup>53</sup>) quite miss the point. Certainly there is evidence of the type of “dilatatoriness and poor work performance”

<sup>44</sup> *Oeconomicus* 21.7, my translation.

<sup>45</sup> *Oeconomicus* 21.9, my translation.

<sup>46</sup> Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, 42.

<sup>47</sup> Andreau and Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, 68. To be sure, Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: a Study in Social Control* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987), 24, and S. Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam: A Critical Edition, English Translation, and Study of Bryson’s Management of the Estate* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 268, mention excessive cruelty to rural slaves by such ancient agronomists as Columella.

<sup>48</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 113–137; Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam*, 263.

<sup>49</sup> See Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, 58–65.

<sup>50</sup> See J. Carcopino, *Daily Life in Ancient Rome* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1940), 57, on the basis of Justinian, *Digest* 1.12.1.

<sup>51</sup> Andreau and Descat, *The Slave in Greece and Rome*, 109; J. K. Goodrich, “From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God: Reconsidering the Origin of Paul’s Slavery Metaphor in Romans 6,” *Bulletin for Biblical Research* 23, no. 4 (2013): 528 n. 64.

<sup>52</sup> Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death*, 4.

<sup>53</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 35.

that indicates dissatisfaction on the part of slaves,<sup>54</sup> and some indication that kindness to slaves made them work harder.<sup>55</sup> Nevertheless, it seems clear that slaves and masters were capable of getting along quite well together—and that their relationship had staying power.<sup>56</sup> In the Greek, Roman, and also Jewish worlds, capable slaves regularly represented their masters' interests and so represented them as trusted agents.<sup>57</sup> It was in this sense, then—an extremely positive understanding—that slaves came to be thought of as physical extensions of the master's body: "the hand of a slave is as the hand of his master."<sup>58</sup> Thus, modern attacks against slavery rather resemble attempts to denigrate the employer-employee relationship of today—or any of the other human relationships, for that matter—that make the world go round: husbands-wives, fathers-sons, teachers-students, etc. Most can see that such bedrock relationships are part of human life "here below" and that dispensing with them will come only at the Last Day when, as Christians suppose, the Lord Jesus Christ will return in glory to judge the living and the dead.<sup>59</sup> Then, to be sure, human life as we know it will cease, and there will be no further need of dealing with each other in the stations of life wherein each finds him- or herself.

The argument can well be made, therefore, that the first Christians also conceived of their standing before God in quite servile terms, before whom every human being—regardless of relative status in human society—is but

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<sup>54</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 32. Cf. Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, 79–80.

<sup>55</sup> Swain, *Economy, Family, and Society from Rome to Islam*, 264–265.

<sup>56</sup> So, e.g., R. H. Barrow, *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (London: Methuen, 1928; repr. New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1996), 48–49; Fisher, *Slavery in Classical Greece*, 72–73; Nordling, *Philemon*, 49–51.

<sup>57</sup> U. Roth, "Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus: a Christian Design for Mastery," *Zeitschrift für die Newtestamentliche Wissenschaft* 105, no. 1 (2014): 121.

<sup>58</sup> From the Babylonian Talmud (Tractate Baba Mesi'a, at *b. B. Mesi'a* 96a): "R[abbi] 'Ilish asked Raba: . . . Or, on the other hand, even on the view that a man's agent is not as himself, that may hold good of an [independent] agent, but as for a slave, 'the hand of a slave is as the hand of his master'?—He replied: It is logical that 'the hand of a slave is as the hand of his master.'" *Hebrew English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud* (London: Soncino Press, 1986), no page. For more on a slave's ability to represent his master's interests in Judaism see C. Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), particularly chapter 12: "Slaves as Intermediaries in Business Transactions," 275–284. For this aspect of Greco-Roman slavery see E. Harris, "Were there Business Agents in Ancient Greece? The Evidence of some Lead Letters," *The Letter: Law, State, Society and the Epistolary Format in the Ancient World*, ed. U. Yiftach (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2013), 105–124; and A. Watson, *Roman Slave Law* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1987), 105–106.

<sup>59</sup> Stanley K. Stowers, "Paul and Slavery: a Response," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998): 307.

a slave: "You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:5).<sup>60</sup> Indeed, it can be maintained that at least quasi-servile relationships exist today, in the very midst of the western democracies' marked tendencies toward egalitarianism and fairness.<sup>61</sup> For example, university professors wield the awesome power of the grade—and hence of the future career—over every college student. Yet wise holders of that power realize that grades should be used as a stimulus for genuine learning (never as an end in themselves), and certainly not to cow surly or disagreeable students into submission. Indeed, the best teachers motivate initially reluctant students to learn quite difficult subjects with joy and aplomb so that, over time, only a small amount of coercion—or even no coercion—is necessary. Likewise, pastors possess in their office that frightful power of the keys (Matt 16:19; John 20:22–23; cf. Rev 1:18; 3:7), by which they must admonish manifest sinners, retain the sins of the impenitent, and even hand such over to Satan (1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20)—that is, remove them from the congregation and participation in the means of grace.<sup>62</sup> However, excluding the impenitent is only part of the pastoral office, and the "alien" part at that, for the principle task of a pastor is "rightly to divide the Word of Truth."<sup>63</sup> This obligation consists, above all, of presenting the gospel clearly and winsomely to the entire congregation and, in particular, of absolving penitents.<sup>64</sup> Finally, police officers, soldiers, and magistrates are required by God to wield the sword—not, of course, to advance personal interests, but rather to execute God's wrath on evil-doers.<sup>65</sup> Yet the most worthy wielders of the sword would prefer not to have to wield it at all—who, were it up to them, would walk away from a fight if they could, or even suffer wrong themselves before dealing out death and destruction to others. However, the wicked are a constant reality in this world, and so

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<sup>60</sup> See also Matt 22:37; Mark 12:33. For some other scholars who have made the connection between Deut 6:5 and biblical slavery see G. Corcoran, "Slavery in the New Testament," *Milltown Studies* 1 (1980): 4; Feeley-Harnik, "Is Historical Anthropology Possible?" 114–115; Goodrich, "From Slaves of Sin to Slaves of God," 524 n. 48.

<sup>61</sup> An earlier form of this argument appears in Nordling, *Philemon*, 103–105.

<sup>62</sup> "I believe that, when the called ministers of Christ deal with us by His divine command, especially when they exclude manifest and impenitent sinners from the Christian congregation, . . . this is as valid and certain . . . as if Christ, our dear Lord, dealt with us Himself." Martin Luther, *A Short Explanation of Dr. Martin Luther's Small Catechism* (St. Louis: Concordia, 1943), 18 (on the Office of the Keys and Confession).

<sup>63</sup> C.F.W. Walther, *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*, trans. W. H. T. Dau (St. Louis: Concordia, 1929), 286.

<sup>64</sup> Luther, *Small Catechism*, 18.

<sup>65</sup> Rom 13:4; cf. Luther, *Small Catechism*, 59.

competent police officers and soldiers had better ply their metaphorical swords aggressively when called upon to do so, carrying out their God-given vocations:

Wait until the situation compels you to fight when you have no desire to do so. You will still have more than enough wars to fight and will be able to say with heartfelt sincerity, “How I would like to have peace. If only my neighbors wanted it too!” Then you can defend yourself with a good conscience, for God’s word says, “He scatters the peoples who delight in war” [Ps 68:30]. Look at the real soldiers, those who have played the game of war. They are not quick to draw their sword, they are not contentious; they have no desire to fight. But when someone forces them to fight, watch out! They are not playing games. Their sword is tight in the sheath, but if they have to draw, it does not return bloodless to the scabbard.<sup>66</sup>

It seems, then, that certain members even of the egalitarian-tending societies of the west have been entrusted with varying amounts of power, authority, and influence in order to serve (from Lat. *servio -ire*)<sup>67</sup> others, not “lord it over” them—although, to be sure, many casual observers fail to see it thus. A genuinely Christian doctrine of vocation holds, however, that “God grants office so that you may serve” (*Deus dedit officium, ut servias*).<sup>68</sup> Thus, the rare Christian prince is, at the same time, a “servant of all” because he genuinely puts the affairs of subjects ahead of his own—as Elector Frederick did, for example, who harbored Luther at great personal risk.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, those opportunities in life that seem at first to be so beguiling—educational opportunities; love for one’s spouse; aspirations for money, power, prestige, etc—end up placing greater burdens on Christians in the end than if they had not been realized in the first place. In this back-handed way God assigns the tasks of creation to everyone on earth, including the most humble Christian:

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<sup>66</sup> Martin Luther, “Whether Soldiers, Too, Can be Saved” (1526), trans. C. M. Jacobs, revised by R. C. Schultz: vol. 46, pp. 118–119, in *Luther’s Works, American Edition*, vols. 1–30, ed. Jaroslav Pelikan (St. Louis: Concordia, 1955–76); vols. 31–55, ed. Helmut Lehmann (Philadelphia/Minneapolis: Muhlenberg/Fortress, 1957–86); vols. 56–82, ed. Christopher Boyd Brown and Benjamin T. G. Mayes (St. Louis: Concordia, 2009–), hereafter AE.

<sup>67</sup> “To be subject to (with dat[ive]), to be a servant or slave,” D.P. Simpson, *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* (New York: Macmillan, 1959), 550.

<sup>68</sup> Gustaf Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. C. C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg, 1957), 128–129.

<sup>69</sup> Martin Luther, “Psalm 101,” AE 13:157–159; cf. Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 126–127.



He hustles young people into matrimony with pipes, drums, and dancing. They enter the marital estate joyfully and think that it is nothing but sugar. In the same way He also confers great honor and glory on princes and lords, hangs golden chains about their necks, seats them on velvet cushions, lets people genuflect before them and address them with “Your Grace,” gives them large castles, and surrounds them with splendor. As a result people who do not know better suppose that this is nothing but joy and pleasure. But in this way God must lure them into a net before He throws the rope over their horns.<sup>70</sup>

There is much more to Christian vocation than can be considered here, but how it works, basically, is that God the Father calls the sinner to faith through the humble means of grace (the gospel and sacraments), which is all Christ and the Holy Spirit’s doing. Thus, I “look above” to see what Another (Christ) has done in my place: how he lived; how he fulfilled the law perfectly in my place; how he has defeated sin, death, and the devil; how he intercedes for me before the heavenly Father, etc. Thus, it is with “an upward look” to heaven with which the Christian is concerned while here on earth and whither he directs his gaze.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, God sets the Christian very much into specific contexts “here below” to be to others of genuine service by which God the Father “channels” his copious and manifold gifts to all people on earth, whether Christian or unbeliever.<sup>72</sup> None of the mundane circumstances amid which the individual Christian has been set are ever arbitrary or coincidental; no, struggling with inborn tendencies toward pride, ambition, arrogance, a reluctance to serve others, etc., is the means by which the “old Adam” dies daily with Christ and the “new” man or woman of faith comes daily into being, fellowships with other Christians, and serves even persons who are far outside the fellowship of faith. Although Christ does everything for my salvation, the Christian “cooperates” with God in matters here below and submits to his will, a submission that always involves the death of the “old Adam” and the resurrection of the “new” man or woman of faith.<sup>73</sup> Thus, Christians of even quite lofty status—princes, kings, the wealthy, burgomasters, the learned, etc.—are genuinely “slavish” in that each (like Jesus) serves others

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<sup>70</sup> Martin Luther, “Sermons on the Gospel of John, Chapters 14–16,” AE 24:377.

<sup>71</sup> Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 124–125.

<sup>72</sup> Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, 126.

<sup>73</sup> Synergism, which misuses the language of “cooperation,” was roundly condemned by the Lutheran confessors in the Formula of Concord: FC SD II 5–15, 77. Nevertheless, the word may be used more positively in Scripture of regenerate man’s “cooperating” with God solely through the operation of the Holy Spirit. See, e.g., Rom 16:3, 9, 21; 1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 1:24; 8:23; Phil 2:25; 4:3, etc.

amid the mundane affairs of this life, not just the self (e.g., Matt 11:29; 18:4; 23:12).

Thus, passages directed to slaves in New Testament congregations are surprisingly relevant to Christians of diverse vocations still today, and shall be so until the Lord Jesus Christ returns in glory:

- “. . . so that we would no longer be *enslaved* to sin [τοῦ μηκέτι δουλεύειν ἡμᾶς τῇ ἀμαρτίᾳ]” (Rom 6:6);
- “do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient *slaves* [δούλους], you are *slaves* [δοῦλοί ἐστε] of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?” (Rom 6:16);
- “but thanks be to God, that you who were once *slaves* of sin [δοῦλοι τῆς ἀμαρτίας] have become obedient from the heart to the standard of teaching to which you were committed” (Rom 6:17);
- “but now that you have been set free from sin and have *become slaves* of God [δουλωθέντες... τῷ θεῷ], the fruit you get leads to sanctification and its end, eternal life” (Rom 6:22);
- “for you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love *serve* one another [δουλεύετε ἀλλήλοις]” (Gal 5:13).

Italicized words in preceding passages indicate that much of the Pauline paraenesis was intended *for slaves* in the original situation, and that the metaphorical nature of slavery was early understood: “the one who is enslaved to Christ is ultimately free . . . from sin and death and free to do the will of God and live.”<sup>74</sup> A robust theology of vocation would maintain, however, that such language continues to hold currency in the sanctified lives and callings of common Christians yet today. Proper study and explication of such passages might genuinely help today’s church as she wrestles with such potentially divisive matters as, for example, the role of women in families and the church, the way Christians worship together, vocation, sexuality, or any of a number of other issues. One should study the slave passages diligently, therefore, and learn from them rather than assume—incorrectly, I believe—that they are outmoded relics of an earlier age and no longer applicable to us. Indeed, they do apply to Christians still today, and always have. To cite Paul once more: “For whatever was written in former days was written *for our learning* [εἰς τὴν ἡμετέραν διδασκαλίαν], that through endurance and through the encouragement of

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<sup>74</sup> Rupprecht, “Slave, Slavery,” 882.

the Scriptures we might have hope" (Rom 15:4 added emphasis). Early it was understood that the word of God would stand forever, and that Scripture is rightly read as a word of address to the eschatological community of God.<sup>75</sup> So the church continues to hear the word of God in every age, and pastors strive to apply the word to Christians of every time and place, including their own. Although one could certainly overlook slavery as a cultural artifact of the first and following centuries AD, biblical slavery—as has been shown—remains remarkably pertinent today to varying types of Christians who become mindful of their standing before God and others in contemporary society. And although Christians of the west are set today within radically egalitarian societies, this article has shown—at the very least—that such has not always been the case historically, so perhaps the church ought to resist tendencies to "go with the flow" of increasingly radicalized social agendas.<sup>76</sup> At its best, the church is healthily countercultural, standing with God and his word against the passing dictates of society and culture whose norms vary widely (Acts 5:29). Mature Christians see themselves in relationship to the redeemed community through baptismal incorporation into Christ (Rom 6:3–4; cf. 1 Cor 12:13; Gal 3:27), rather than as autonomous persons involved in highly emotional—and therefore unstable—"relationships" with Jesus Christ. Corporate Christianity values rather steadfastness, continuity with the past, and maturity—lest one be "tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine" (Eph 4:14; cf. Matt 11:7; Heb 13:9; James 1:6; Jude 12).<sup>77</sup> Still, the faith of the apostles can hardly be reduced to a kind of doughty conservatism. The center consists rather of the community's sharing in the forgiveness of sins and of extending that through the church's ministry to outsiders (Matt 6:14; 2 Cor 2:7, 10; Eph 4:32; Col 3:12–13; 1 Pet 3:8).

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<sup>75</sup> R. B. Hayes, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 166.

<sup>76</sup> Contra Cho, "Subverting Slavery," 114.

<sup>77</sup> For the idea recently, see Paul S. Cable, "IMITATIO CHRISTIANORUM: The Function of Believers as Examples in Philippians," *Tyndale Bulletin* 67, no. 1 (2016): 105–125. Christ is the ultimate exemplar and source of the content of the exhortation (especially Phil 2:6–11; cf. 3:21), but also Paul himself (throughout the letter), Timothy (1:1; 2:19–23), and Epaphroditus (2:25–30; 4:18). For earlier forms of essentially the same idea see Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross, New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperOne, 1996), 374–375; J.G. Samra, *Being Conformed to Christ in Community*, Library of New Testament Series 320 (New York: T & T Clark, 2006); and James W. Thompson, *Moral Formation According to Paul: The Context and Coherence of Pauline Ethics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 43–63.

#### IV. Conclusion

Professors at Concordia Theological Seminary—while true academicians in every sense of the word—never stop being pastors to the many clients we find ourselves serving in this place: students, colleagues, other pastors and entities of Synod, and also laypersons in many and varied capacities. Before coming to the seminary in early August 2006, I had been a full-time parish pastor for not quite four years<sup>78</sup> and a professional classicist at both Valparaiso and Baylor Universities for twelve years in toto. As I considered the call to the seminary, it dawned on me that I was at risk of forsaking the hallowed halls of academe for duties much more closely related to the office of the ministry. Would I be up to that challenge, given my previous twelve years as a classics recluse?

Well, I can honestly say that the past ten years have been the best of my life, professionally speaking, for which I owe my wife Sara my gratitude for allowing us to make the move to Fort Wayne. Sometimes, to be sure, I miss reading Caesar for Caesar's sake, or any of the other great classical authors I was privileged to read and teach during my years as a professional classicist; however, the Greek New Testament is a wonderful document to be working on as a classicist, and Paul has been a much more satisfying author to be studying than Caesar ever was. The New Testament is a text that many millions hearken to as the word of God, not some dusty museum piece a few specialists dally with to satisfy their own and others' intellectual curiosities. Likewise, in spite of many shortcomings I now get to join my seminary colleagues in forming pastors and deaconesses for the present and future generations. In my case, I mainly introduce fresh students to the Koine Greek of the New Testament they will be studying and preaching upon for the rest of their lives.<sup>79</sup> I am scarcely worthy of this undertaking, given my past track record; truly there is fulfilled in me Paul's statement that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners, "of whom I am the worst [ὡν πρῶτος εἰμι ἐγώ]" (1 Tim 1:15 NIV).

Then there is the whole concept of the pastoral ministry itself which God in his mercy has brought me to have a greater appreciation for in late career. Matthew's Jesus states that "whoever finds his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake [ἐνεκα ἐμοῦ] will find it" (Matt 10:39). Nothing about the passage indicates the presence of slaves necessarily, but that possibility exists given the servile taint perceptible in so many other

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<sup>78</sup> At Grace English Evangelical Lutheran Church and School, Chicago, IL, 1990–1994.

<sup>79</sup> For some sense of what is involved, see John G. Nordling, "Teaching Greek at the Seminary," *Logia* 21, no. 2 (2012): 69–75.

New Testament passages, as we have seen: the logion follows hard upon Jesus's statement about not taking up one's cross and so being unworthy of him (Matt 10:38; cf. 16:24).<sup>80</sup> Also, who more than slaves would have understood what it meant to "lose" one's life, and by losing it so to "find" it?<sup>81</sup> Slaves were the ones quintessentially who lacked personhood in antiquity. As Justinian's *Digest* states, summarizing the legal opinions of several earlier jurists: "we compare slavery closely to death" (*servitutem mortalitati fere comparamus*).<sup>82</sup> The ministry and death of Jesus upon a cross offered such non-persons hope and the prospects of salvation. So the point of Matthew 10:39, as all should see, is that to be Jesus's disciple requires a constant dying-to-self, impossible to achieve by one's own reason and strength. Such death-to-self and the lack of any personhood whatsoever for the slaves who presumably heard Jesus' statement originally provides a point of contact for the hearer of today—or, for that matter, anyone who really would be a Christian.

Still, the stark logion contains a promise too: "Whoever loses his own life for my sake *will find it*" (Matt 10:39; cf. Luke 14:33; John 12:25). I submit that any slaves who were within earshot of Jesus originally would have been particularly susceptible to the dynamics of "losing" oneself and "finding" the new life in Jesus. That same dynamic obtains today, not only for pastors and deaconesses, of course, but for anyone and everyone who really would be a Christian. Authentic Christianity consists in a perpetual dying-to-self and being-raised-to-Christ through the things of God that are shared at church and in this place: holy Baptism; the preaching of Christ crucified, risen, and ascended; the body and blood of Christ in the Lord's Supper; the consolation of fellow believers, and so much else that we nearly take for granted. Hence, if you will permit me, we are all slaves in this place and in the congregations of our synod where our students are headed to serve for the remainder of their lives: slaves to the Lord Jesus Christ pre-eminently, of course, who is the Christian's true κύριος (slave master); but also slaves to one another in the vocations so essential to godly living here below: husband to wife; father to son; professor to

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<sup>80</sup> The idea of taking up one's cross and following Jesus has been associated with servility earlier in this article. See notes 15 and 17 above.

<sup>81</sup> For the notion of "losing one's life" (*ἀπολλύναι τὴν ψυχὴν*) see Matt 10:39; 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24; 17:33; and John 12:25. For the possibility that behind such passages lies a martial context see the following aphorism: "One who risks his life in battle has the best chance of saving it; one who flees to save it is most likely to lose it." Tyrtæus (7th cent. BC), frag. 8, in E. Diehl, *Anthologia Lyrica Graeca* (1936–42), in Frederick W. Danker, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), s.v. ἀπόλλυμι, 3.

<sup>82</sup> *Digest* 50.17.209, in Nordling, *Philemon*, 44 n. 30.

student; pastor to congregant; employer to employee, and so on, and reciprocally: wife to husband; son to father; student to professor; congregation to pastor; employee to employer. Such vocational ties mirror accurately enough the master-to-slave and slave-to-master relationships that transpired routinely between many millions of persons in the ancient world, several glimpses of which we have considered today. Indeed, our serving of others, and being served so magnificently by the Lord Jesus Christ in the humble means of grace, is suggested by a memorable line from the *Te Deum Laudamus* that we sing often together in chapel:

We therefore pray You to help Your servants,  
whom You have redeemed with Your precious blood.  
Make them to be numbered with Your saints  
in glory everlasting.<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod, Commission on Worship, *Lutheran Service Book* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2006), 225.