

# “He Who Was Free . . . Is a Slave of Christ”

## 1 Corinthians 7.21-24 — The Use and Abuse of a Pauline Metaphor

Ross Macdonald

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“For decades, a classic joke has been circulating among Lacanians . . . a man who believes himself to be a kernel of grain is taken to a mental institution where the doctors do their best to convince him that he is not a kernel of grain but a man; however, when he is cured (i.e. convinced that he is not a kernel of grain but a man) and allowed to leave the hospital, he immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—there is a chicken outside the door, and he is afraid it will eat him. “My dear fellow,” says his doctor, “you know very well that you are not a kernel of grain but a man.” “Of course *I know*,” replies the patient, “but does the chicken?”<sup>1</sup>

The punchline is absurd, but that is the point. The whole joke operates on the patient’s failure to understand that although he had come to properly understand his identity, others might see him as none other than a kernel of grain. Suppose we change the characters: imagine, for a moment, that the ‘doctor’ of the joke is the Apostle Paul. His ‘patient’ is a household slave in Corinth—a new convert to Christ—who was sent on his way after Paul had preached a rousing sermon on the great freedom belonging to believers in Jesus Christ. The slave “immediately comes back, trembling and very scared—[his master is] outside the door,” and he is afraid to be beaten. “My dear brother,” says the Apostle, “you know very well that you are not a slave but free in the Lord.” “Of course *I know*,” says the slave, “but does my master?”

Is it far-fetched to imagine that there had been such consequences to the teachings we have from Paul? Hardly—in fact, we’ll come to see that the paradoxical metaphors of the believer’s “freedom” and “slavery” would have been especially jarring to the Apostle’s original audience; who perhaps would have added this seemingly incongruent dynamic to the laundry-list of Pauline “. . . things that are hard to understand” (2 Peter 3.16).<sup>2</sup> The paradox is stated most clearly in 1 Corinthians 7.22: “*For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the*

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<sup>1</sup> Slavoj Žižek: “Žižek’s Jokes: Did You Hear the One About Hegel and Negation?” (Boston: MIT Press, 2014), p. 67 (emphasis added). ‘Lacanians’ here being those in the philosophical camp of Jacques Lacan; the joke is used “to exemplify the role of the Other’s knowledge” (ibid).

<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise specified, all English Scripture quotations follow the *English Standard Version*, with the caveat that I will render the Greek word δοῦλος to “*slave*” instead of “*servant*” or “*bondservant*” (see n. 11). All Greek references follow the United Bible Society’s *Greek New Testament* (4th Edition).

*Lord. Likewise he who was free when called is a slave of Christ.*” What exactly was Paul communicating to his early readers? What would they have received from a statement like this? Insulated as we are by nearly two millennia, pursuing answers to such questions may only lead to further questions. Indeed, seeking a thorough answer within the confines of this essay is not possible—a comprehensive subject like the history of ancient slavery has produced secondary literature in legions, notwithstanding the scant evidence for reconstructing the lives of ancient slaves who are remembered almost exclusively *through* the eyes of their culturally elite masters.<sup>3</sup>

Given the voluminous nature of the subject (and my immodest boldness to approach it), we will only seek to pursue what the subtitle of this essay indicates: the use and abuse of Paul’s paradoxical metaphor in 1 Corinthians 7.21-24. After a more proper introduction to the topic at hand, we will underscore the nature and function of metaphors (I); then move to consider the context of our passage (II); and then it’s use and abuse (III) before concluding.

## Introduction

Slavery was not unique to the world of the New Testament, but the sheer population figures and economic underpinnings of slavery was unique by comparison.<sup>4</sup> Slaves could be found everywhere in Roman society, and so accordingly their omni-presence was reflected in the writings of the time:

“Slaves are everywhere in Roman literature. They serve masters faithfully or plot their undoing in Roman comedy. They are topics of concern in agricultural

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<sup>3</sup> Speaking on the embedded remnants of ancient ‘popular’ culture within the evidence we retain, Forsdyke notes this difficulty: “...we cannot assume that these appropriations are direct reflections of popular culture and can therefore be simply lifted from elite texts unproblematically... On the one hand... we only have direct access to the composite forms of culture that survive in literary texts written by elites. On the other hand, the very fact that popular culture has infiltrated or been appropriated into elite literary texts means that some aspects of the “living” culture of non-elites have survived (albeit in mediated ways) to be studied by scholars. The trick is to recognize these appropriations and to decode what these images and themes would have signified to non-elite audiences.” Sara Forsdyke, *Slaves Tell Tales: And Other Episodes in the Politics of Popular Culture in Ancient Greece* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), 7-9.

More to the point, Bradley writes: “Regrettably there is little evidence from Roman slaves themselves that allows direct views of their responses to slavery to be seen. Rome produced no Frederick Douglass or Harriet Jacobs to give detailed accounts of slaves’ experiences of life in slavery - or if it did, the accounts have not survived. The history of Roman slavery depends instead on sources of information that overwhelmingly represent the views of the slave-owning classes, and this means that any attempt to penetrate the mind of the slave - a necessary condition for explaining slave behavior - has to be largely a matter of inference.” Keith R. Bradley, “Resisting Slavery at Rome” in Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (eds.) *The Cambridge World History of Slavery — Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 362.

<sup>4</sup> Robert Knapp, *Invisible Romans* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2011), 125.

manuals. They act as go-betweens in love poetry and as figures of ridicule and disdain in satire... Roman authors dismiss them, love them, hate them and sometimes ignore them. In their writings, slaves receive whippings or rewards, serve or betray masters, stand as moral paradigms and blend into scenery of house, city, and fields.”<sup>5</sup>

Even the reflection of slavery within the contemporaneous literature depicts an institution that was as far-ranging as it was far-reaching. Across previous empires in disparate lands, ancient slavery took different forms; “debt-bondage, helotage, temple slavery and something akin to serfdom are all attested.”<sup>6</sup> Yet while the Roman period refused a monolithic form, chattel slavery—by far the most ubiquitous form in the Graeco-Roman environment—marginalized every other category in its comparative extremity. In chattel slavery

“...the slave was conceptualized as a commodity, akin to livestock, and was owned by a master who had full capacity to alienate his human property, by sale, gift, bequest or other means. For the slave... [this meant] a state of social death<sup>7</sup> in which all rights and sense of personhood were denied. The appearance of this form of slavery in the ancient Mediterranean has led to the dominant modern view that Greece and Rome offer the first examples in world history of what can be called genuine *slave societies*.”<sup>8</sup>

With a New Testament world built upon chattel slavery as an economic resource, it comes as little surprise that the modern reader finds the pervasive nature of slavery an obstacle to interpretation. Even more opaque is the social-stratification that accompanied a culture enmeshed with slaves, and the loss of stature such a position often communicated. Keith Bradley, an eminent authority on ancient slavery, emphasizes the grim nature of this ‘social death’:

“Roman slaves were deracinated, disempowered beings who enjoyed no personal or social identity other than that which derived from association with their owners. They were permitted no formal ties of kinship and, lacking all legal

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<sup>5</sup> Sandra R. Joshel, “Slavery and Roman Literary Culture” in Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge, (eds.) *The Cambridge World History of Slavery, Volume 1: The Ancient Mediterranean World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 214.

<sup>6</sup> op. cit., 1.

<sup>7</sup> On this facet of Graeco-Roman slavery, see Sandra Joshel, “From Captive to Slave: Fungibility and Social Death” (Annual C. May Marston Lecture, 2/2005), available through Seattle Pacific University on iTunesU.

<sup>8</sup> Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (eds.) *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, (ibid.), 1 (emphasis mine).

personality and rights, were forcibly held at their owners' discretion in shameful, infantilizing subjection..."<sup>9</sup>

Biblical skeptics have grown confident in dismissing the Bible as a 'backward artifact', by pointing to such harsh realities and exposing what appears to be erstwhile compliance to an evil institution. After all, the New Testament refers to slaves as a part of the typical Graeco-Roman household, and the 'household codes' (or *haustafeln*) of Paul and Peter broach the subject with little sense of scandal (cf. Eph. 5.22–6.9; Col. 3.18–4.1; 1 Peter 2.18–3.7).<sup>10</sup> Historically speaking, such texts have proved to be a fateful embarrassment. Roy Ciampa writes:

"English-speaking readers of the Bible found a basis... for the view that the Bible condoned modern slavery—and even the transatlantic slave trade... The fact that the slavery of the Roman world... was of a different nature and origin than modern racism and slavery, was deemed inconsequential. It was sufficient that the Bible spoke of slavery without explicit condemnation, and thereby the direct transference condoned a more modern institution of slavery... Since slavery is no longer an acceptable part of Western culture... when readers come to biblical texts that mention slaves and masters they realize instantly that the texts, if they are to be applied, cannot be directly transferred."<sup>11</sup>

The interpretive challenge is often found not only in *what* to transfer but *how* to transfer it. For the reader nearly two-thousand years removed, 'what hath Sharon to do with Corinth?' It must be maintained that Paul has given Spirit-wrought words that do not shirk their historical

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<sup>9</sup> op. cit., 362. Nonetheless he concedes such slavery was not one-sided: "Slaves were human chattels, and human agency could manifest itself in the relationship from moment to moment. Unlike the animals to which they were often compared, slaves were not easily manipulable, but had to be managed with thought and discretion to make sure that they did what was required of them" (363).

Knapp favors this concession: "Slavery does not so much reduce the slave to a dehumanized 'thing,' as it creates a different order of existence, an environment in which the slave is 'rehumanized' in a social or cultural role. Romans never denied the 'humanity' of slaves, their 'personhood' as men, not beasts, no matter how much they compared them to beasts as chattel property, or spoke of them as morally inferior, weak human beings. They just wanted them to be socialized to their slavish role. From the slave's perspective, his or her life as a negotiation of that slavish role reveals what it meant to be a human in an enslaved condition." Robert Knapp, *Invisible Romans*, (ibid.), 125-6.

<sup>10</sup> It should be noted that 1 Cor. 7.16-24 is widely regarded as parallel to the *haustafeln*, which appear (though less prominently) in 1 Tim. 2.8-3.13; 5.1-6.2 and Titus 2.2-10. Stephen Motyer, "The Relationship Between Paul's Gospel of 'All One in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3.28) and the 'Household Codes'" *Vox Evangelica* 19 (1989), 33-48.

<sup>11</sup> Roy E. Ciampa, "Ideological Challenges for Bible Translators" *International Journal of Frontier Missiology* 28.3 (Fall 2011), 142-3. He adds: "...one of the reasons some members of the ESV translation committee supported a decision to change the translation of δούλος in 1 Corinthians 7 from "slave" to "bondservant" is because the former term could too easily be identified with slavery as it is known by English readers and the second translation was felt more likely to cause readers to hesitate before making such an identification. This changing of terms is one approach to avoiding premature transference based on the assumption that the text addresses the reality we are familiar with" (ibid). While the desire to avoid 'premature transference' is commendable, there is inevitably a cost to the substituted terminology.

occasionality, but rather are embedded within it.<sup>12</sup> Because 1 Corinthians is largely occasional in nature, we are more prone to fill any gaps in our understanding of the text with our own presuppositions. The task of reconstructing the context is an inescapable necessity when interpreting passages which remain relatively obscure. Richard Bauckham writes: “the letter genre... enables a writer to address specified addressees in all the particularity of their circumstances. Even if other people read 1 Corinthians... the genre encourages them to read it *as* a letter addressed to the Corinthians.”<sup>13</sup>

The danger of an illegitimate transfer of the interpreter’s context into that the ‘gaps’ of the original context is pressing.<sup>14</sup> When it comes to the context of 1 Corinthians, and a world so pervasively inhabited by slavery, interpreters often fail to acknowledge how evasive that context can be (given our lack of evidence and familiarity with such sociological features):<sup>15</sup>

“Most studies of the Corinthian epistles assume that the basic beliefs and practices of the first-century world within which the church members lived are relatively easy to establish and describe... but confidence... is both misplaced and misleading. Unless we begin by attempting to reconstruct a context of interpretation that rescues the non-elite of the first century from the ‘enormous condescension of posterity’, our interpretations, however sophisticated or useful, are bound to be fallacious.”<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bailey regrets the “conclusions many others come to... [finding that] the book is, as it were, ‘written on the run,’ and that its outline is dictated by the list of questions that came... orally and... in writing from Corinth.” Kenneth Bailey, *Paul through Mediterranean Eyes: Cultural Studies in 1 Corinthians* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2011), 25.

<sup>13</sup> Bauckham, ‘For Whom Were Gospels Written?’ in *The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), 9f. Cited in Michael Lakey, *Image and Glory of God: 1 Corinthians 11.2-16 as a Case Study in Bible, Gender and Hermeneutics* (LNTS 418; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 2010), 138.

<sup>14</sup> Postmodern hermeneutics has cast a veil of doubt over the possibility of consciously dismantling our own interpretive contexts. In a knee-jerk reaction to such a milieu the church has often sought to counterattack by interpreting the Scriptures with Enlightenment-style constructs of autonomy and objectivity; yet “...it will aid no one if, alarmed by the sheer relativism that the most consistent forms of postmodernism open up, we retreat into modernism as if it were a sanctuary for the Gospel.” D. A. Carson, “Is the Doctrine of *Claritas Scripture* Still Relevant Today?” in *Collected Writings on Scripture* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2010), 189. All too often there is an implicit straw-man in the postmodern affirmations of relativism and social-knowledge; which says that if can’t know the truth of everything then we can’t know the truth of *anything*!

<sup>15</sup> Another way of expressing the concept of ‘occasionality’ in contextual interpretation is the distinction between an ‘open’ and ‘closed’ text. If a text is ‘closed’ it only means that our interpretive framework needs to be both increasingly informed and keenly self-aware. Lakey explains: “If... 1 Corinthians is relatively closed... it presumes the immediate experiences and competences of the first-century Corinthian community and its hermeneutical grid, then, paradoxically, it becomes open to all manner of modern misunderstandings. This is because closed texts... are perennially open to interpretation according to ‘aberrant presuppositions and deviating circumstances.” Lakey, *Image*; (ibid.), 138.

<sup>16</sup> J. J. Meggitt, “Sources: Use, Abuse, Neglect. The Importance of Ancient Popular Culture” in Edward Adams and David G. Horrell (eds.) *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 242.

With sufficient caution in hand we can look toward the interpretation of 1 Cor. 7.21-24, where Paul's paradoxical metaphor of freedom and slavery is best posed. At the very start, it is important to consider the *fact* that he is writing with powerful metaphors; and so we turn our attention to the nature and function of metaphor as a rhetorical construct.

## I. Approaching Metaphor — Considering Levels of Meaning

“In the last decade or so the study of metaphor has become, for an ever-increasing number of philosophers, a way of approaching some of the most fundamental traditional concerns of philosophy. Metaphor is no longer confined to the realm of aesthetics narrowly conceived; it is now coming to be recognized as central to any adequate account of language and has been seen by some to play a central role in epistemology and even metaphysics...”<sup>17</sup>

One of the key thinkers of such studies, Paul Ricoeur, confronted the established view of the metaphor as merely a *substitution* of the individual term with another; developing a theory of metaphor based upon *tension*. Ricoeur emphasized that metaphors, far from solely functioning on the basis of an individual term (‘semiotic level’), involve at least the sentence (‘semantic level’), if not an entire work (‘hermeneutic level’).<sup>18</sup> His theory begins

“...by distinguishing... between a semantics, where the sentence is the carrier of the minimum complete meaning, and a semiotics, where the word is treated as a sign in the lexical code. Corresponding to this distinction between semantics and semiotics I propose a parallel opposition between a *tension theory* and a *substitution theory*. [That is, *tension theory*] applies the production of metaphor within the sentence taken as a whole, [whereas *substitution theory*] concerns the meaning effect at the level of the isolated word... It should be remembered in this connection that, in discourse, it is the word that assumes the function of semantic identity: and it is *this* identity that metaphor modifies.”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Dan R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur: New Directions in Hermeneutical Theology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 106. Stiver is citing Mark Johnson from a work published in 1981; and so it should be noted that the “last decade or so” in view refers to the 1970s!

<sup>18</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*; trans. Robert Czerny, Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello, SJ (London: Routledge Classics, 2003), 3-5. Ricoeur's book is composed of eight studies which grew out of a seminar course given at the University of Toronto in Autumn 1971.

<sup>19</sup> *op. cit.*, 2-3 (emphasis added).

When moving from the sentence (or ‘semantic level’) to the work as a whole (or ‘hermeneutic level’), the central feature is no longer the *form* of the metaphor as a word-focused figure of speech, but rather the *reference* of the metaphor in its ability to ‘redescribe’ reality.<sup>20</sup>

“Like any form of discourse, a metaphor communicates something to someone about something— produced as event, understood as meaning. Only “living metaphors” are at the same time both event and meaning. A “dead metaphor” has lost its event character when it becomes sedimented into a traditional stock of expressions adopted by a community... A “living metaphor”, on the other hand, is a truly novel expression in the sense of a “metaphorical twist” that produces a new, surprising meaning. In a living metaphor there is tension in the way something is described metaphorically and how we normally understand it to be. *In order to grasp the differences and resemblance that constitute a metaphor we must see through the first-order, ostensive reference to the second-order, creative reference to understand how it redescribes the world...*”<sup>21</sup>

The contrast between ‘dead’ and ‘living’ metaphors is important. Dead metaphors settle into jaded idioms (unless you use them with foreigners!), whereas “living metaphors have a way of provoking new meanings and insights... instead of... being secondary ornaments to univocal language.”<sup>22</sup> In the older system of mere ‘substitution,’ metaphors were reduced to enhancing ideas, and therein it was far easier to resist the concept that metaphors can *redescribe* reality—and therefore cause us to *reconceive* experience. If a metaphor is powerful enough to bring experience into conformity to it, then “it alters the conceptual system that gave rise to it in the first place.”<sup>23</sup>

For those well-conditioned to the language of the Scriptures, the vitality of theologically-loaded metaphors may often fly beneath our radar. In the West, metaphors rarely have the deeper

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<sup>20</sup> Ricoeur states: “The most fundamental support of this transition from semantics to hermeneutics is to be found in the connection [within] all discourse between sense, which is its internal organization, and *reference*, which is its *power to refer to a reality outside of language*.” op. cit., 5 (emphasis added).

Kaplan views Ricoeur’s *The Rule of Metaphor* as “a transitional work between the hermeneutics of texts of the 1970s and the hermeneutics of action of the 1980s, [because] Ricoeur “grew dissatisfied with his theory of metaphorical reference. It lacked any account of the reader who connects the metaphorical utterance with its interpretation, transforming the new way of ‘seeing-as’ with [a] new experience of ‘being-as.’ For what is redescribed is... the reader’s experience of belonging to the world.” David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 49.

<sup>21</sup> op. cit., 48 (emphasis added). Kaplan continues: “The tension in a living metaphor between literal and imaginative must be preserved, not overcome to be understood. There is no tension in dead metaphors” (48-9).

<sup>22</sup> Dan R. Stiver, *Theology After Ricoeur*, (ibid.), 107. On metaphors and the issue of ‘hermeneutical control’ (i.e. ‘is there any limit to the interpretation of a metaphor?’) see Stiver’s cogent discussion: 109-111.

<sup>23</sup> John L. White, *The Apostle of God: Paul and the Promise of Abraham* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 10 (White builds on the work of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson).

mechanics evident in their use by Biblical writers. Anthony Thiselton concurs: “Most English translations... simply abstract the conceptual content of the metaphor from its forceful emotive imagery.”<sup>24</sup> For instance, we fail to grasp the fullness of Paul’s arguments if we fail to see the brilliance of his metaphors. Kenneth Bailey explains that

“...it is easy to see these metaphors as ‘illustrations’ brought in to elucidate a point. But to make this assumption in studying a biblical text is to miss much of what the Middle Eastern author is trying to say. Middle Easterners *create meaning* through the use of simile, metaphor, parable and dramatic action.”<sup>25</sup>

Such claims support (if not utilize) Ricoeur’s approach; one of his central themes is the creative capacity of language, especially metaphorical language. This capacity to create meaning allows certain aspects of reality to emerge that might otherwise remained obscure. The unconscious strategy of metaphorical language is not necessarily to improve communication or argumentation but “to shatter and to increase our sense of reality *by shattering and increasing our language*.”<sup>26</sup> If we are to, in a manner of speaking, pick up the shards of language at the semantic level, it must be for the sake of assembling—from them—the *larger* reality to which they were deposited. Metaphors, in this way, reveal dormant aspects of the world in which they first operated. David Williams delineates:

“The prophet whose images were of pastures stricken by drought (Amos 1.2), of the hungry lion roaring for prey, and of the shepherd finding the remains of its prey—a few bones and an ear of a sheep (3.4, 12)—was himself a man of the country, a shepherd. If metaphors are an index to their user’s world, it is equally true that a knowledge of that world is necessary to understand well and appreciate his or her metaphors.”<sup>27</sup>

The task before us is precisely that—to understand Paul’s context in order to understand the metaphors he employs in 1 Cor. 7.21–24. Due to the breadth of the topic, our engagement must be introductory in nature and constrained in focus. “Our hermeneutical problem is how to direct social history... back to the interpretation of texts, the main function of the exegete.”<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 1053.

<sup>25</sup> Bailey, *Paul*; (ibid.), 30 (emphasis mine).

<sup>26</sup> David M. Kaplan, *Ricoeur’s Critical Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 48 (emphasis mine).

<sup>27</sup> David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors: Their Context and Character* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999), 2. It is worth noting that Williams does not seek to discuss the philosophical aspects of metaphor at any length.

<sup>28</sup> J. A. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (HUT: 32; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 2.

## II. The Problem of Paradox — Slavery in Paul’s Context

The historical realities to which Paul’s metaphorical language could referentially draw upon explicate the importance of socio-historical context. James Barr, well before Ricoeur published his distinctions between ‘semiology’ and ‘semantics,’ criticized the tendency within Biblical Theology to abstract biblical words from their cultural usage.<sup>29</sup> In the past four decades, historical research on the New Testament has afforded more robust investigations into the social realities of the Graeco-Roman world. An early proponent of such work, Bengt Holmberg,<sup>30</sup> summarizes: “among areas of special importance for the historical reconstruction of Corinthian Christianity one can point to:

- the social location of Paul and social stratification within his congregations;
- class and status in the Roman Empire, and in Corinth specifically; the phenomenon of status dissonance (or status inconsistency)...
- patron/client relations, social networks, relation to social elites;
- specific status indicators (like property, ownership of slaves and business, recognized social positions or offices, eating habits, attitudes to the human body, litigation, [and] rhetorical education).”<sup>31</sup>

The turn to such research has been well received in the ivory tower, but the results are frequently contested due to the limited availability of evidence and the ever-evolving fads of scholarship. This is especially true of a broad social demographic like slavery.<sup>32</sup> Justin Meggitt

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<sup>29</sup> James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961).

<sup>30</sup> See Bengt Holmberg, *Sociology and the New Testament: An Appraisal* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990). Other groundbreaking works being: D. M. Scholer (ed.), *Social Distinctives of the Christians in the First Century: Pivotal Essays by E. A. Judge* (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), which reprints some of his pioneering essays; A. J. Malherbe, *Social Aspects of Early Christianity* (Second Edition; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity: Essays on Corinth* (reprint; Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2004); and Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (Second Edition; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003).

<sup>31</sup> Bengt Holmberg, “The Methods of Historical Reconstruction in the Scholarly ‘Recovery’ of Corinthian Christianity” in Edward Adams and David G. Horrell (eds.) *Christianity at Corinth: The Quest for the Pauline Church* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 259-60.

<sup>32</sup> op. cit., 260 n. 15 states: “D. C. Verner... estimates that only one-fourth of the free families were wealthy enough to own even one slave. The presence of slave owners in Pauline Christianity tells us something, then, about the socioeconomic range of these congregations.” Holberg is citing Verner’s *The Household of God: The Social World of the Pastoral Epistles* (Chico: Scholars Press, 1983), 60-61. The danger rises in making certain regions or periods normative for data; and so such an appeal flattens distinctions that show incredible variance between a city like Corinth circa 50 AD and Thessaloniki or Antioch at the same time. Given its merchant-alluring location on the isthmus, Corinth was a ‘boom-town’ comparable perhaps to California in the 1840s, thus evidencing greater distributions of trade—and with greater amounts of wealth, greater amounts of slaves.

raises such a challenge to what seems to be a most elementary distinction—that between ‘slave’ and ‘free’:

“...it is commonly held that society within the Roman Empire was rigidly stratified, and that everyone was expected to know their place (something that, for many exegetes, is a significant factor in explaining the tensions within the Corinthian correspondence)... Indeed, *even the clear distinction between slave and free*, surely something assumed to be obvious and central to first-century life... may not have always been obvious or central.”<sup>33</sup>

His basis for this challenge rests upon the first-century biography *Life of Aesop*, where Aesop, the fabled Greek slave, has a “telling exchange” with a poor farmer. Aesop reveals his position only to be rebuffed by the farmer: “Did I ask you whether you are a slave or free man? What do I care?”<sup>34</sup> For Meggitt, the miserly farmer’s rude dismissal is evidence that the difference between ‘slave’ and ‘free’ is larger to the modern Western interpreter than it might have been for the ancient.

But can this quote really establish ambivalence toward social stratification? “One of the basic polarities descriptive of human relations is ‘slave or free.’ As the Roman jurist Gaius wrote... “The *first* division of humanity is into free and slaves.”<sup>35</sup> Aesop’s fables are never quoted with ease, built as they are on all the witty subversions that have endured generations of readers<sup>36</sup>; can we expect anything less in the biographical *Life of Aesop*? It is just as easy to find the writer revealing that the slave was *more* concerned about his ‘identity’ than the free farmer was.<sup>37</sup> Or perhaps we find the subversive element in the way the free man retorts: “*Did I ask* you whether you were a slave...?”, preserving the rhetoric of a ‘master’ who controls even the *speech* of the slave.<sup>38</sup> To use Meggitt’s reading as normative evidence would be akin to a future historian arguing that the powder-keg of racism in our day has been fabricated due to an extant story in which a caucasian taxi driver is underwhelmed by the ethnicity of his customer.

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<sup>33</sup> J. J. Meggitt, “Sources: Use, Abuse, Neglect. The Importance of Ancient Popular Culture” (ibid.), 247 (emphasis mine).

<sup>34</sup> op. cit., 247 (quoting *Life of Aesop* 60). Meggitt also points to Seneca, *Clem.* 1.24.1, but in any case his challenge is hardly sustainable.

<sup>35</sup> Joel B. Green, *1 Peter* (THNT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2007), 73-4 (citing Gaius, *Institutiones* 1.9).

<sup>36</sup> For an interesting discussion, the reader is directed to the BBC podcast episode “Aesop” (November 20, 2014) from ‘*In Our Time*’ with Melvyn Bragg; available on iTunes.

<sup>37</sup> “There is only one thing that brings shame to slaves—the name itself.” Euripides, *Ion.* 854.

<sup>38</sup> “The unfortunate slaves are not allowed to move their lips, let alone talk; the birch keeps murmuring down. A cough, a sneeze, a hiccup is rewarded by flogging, with no exceptions. Any break in the silence is severely punished. They stand at the ready all night, tense and mute.” Seneca, *Ep.* 47; cited in David J. Williams, *Paul’s Metaphors* (ibid.), 112.

The point here is that reconstructions of the slavery of Paul's context, and his concomitant interaction with it, is often polarizing. John Byron speaks of

“...the divergent opinions of how slaves were treated in antiquity... Slavery was a relationship of domination. It was the powerful exploiting the powerless. But it also needs to be emphasized that not every slave that lived in the Roman Empire was brutalized and worked to death... A slave's quality of life depended upon their function, relation to the master and the degree of responsibility carried by the slave... A slave was a financial investment and it was the the master's advantage to take care of and provide for the slave... *slaves could expect a combination of protection, provision, abuse, and exploitation.*”<sup>39</sup>

This corresponds to the negative connotations of slavery, where Roman law gave the head of the household absolute power over his slaves (*dominica potestas*).<sup>40</sup> Any positive treatment was not derived from philanthropic concerns but rather the perspective of investment, because “slaves were classed as chattels, not persons, and could be bought and sold and punished at the will of the master.”<sup>41</sup> Attempts to soften the harsh contours of slavery, as variegated as it may have been, ultimately fall short of the negative connotations that slavery—*qua* slavery—possessed in the Graeco-Roman world. Murray Harris elaborates:

“In the first-century... the δούλος word group would have generally evoked feelings of repugnance in the hearts of free persons and the vast majority of slaves... for most people, whether slave or free, the very term δούλος or *servus* (the Latin equivalent) would have aroused negative feelings—feelings of dehumanized and unwilling servitude... To be made a slave was to be disgraced and undergo social death. To call a person a slave was to insult him. Crucifixion, the most execrable form of capital punishment, was described as ‘suitable for slaves’<sup>42</sup> because they were regarded as forming the lowest and most contemptible stratum of society.”<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> John Byron, “Paul and the Background of Slavery: The *Status Questions* in New Testament Scholarship” *Currents in Biblical Research* 3.1 (2004), 133-34 (emphasis mine).

<sup>40</sup> David J. Williams, *Paul's Metaphors* (ibid.), 112.

<sup>41</sup> op. cit., 112.

<sup>42</sup> Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.11; cited in Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ* (NSBT 8; Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1999), 141.

<sup>43</sup> op. cit., 140-41. J. A. Harrill gives the analogy of slave-traders as the ‘used car salesmen’ of our day... our idiom of their sleazy practices is transparently a generalization; yet even in using it nobody insists that used cars should not be sold. We might extend the image to lawyers, who often have the same cultural connotation of distrust; and yet we would not forbid law practices.

The legal and social power of the master over his slave could (and likely often did) extend to sexual exploitation. This sad fact begins to connect the social reality of slaves to the ethics of Paul: it has often been suggested that 1 Cor. 7.21–24 belongs to a larger discourse on sexual morality.<sup>44</sup> Earlier, Paul commands that men in Corinth must not engage in sexual relationships with prostitutes (1 Cor. 6.12–20). In addressing his readers as τὸ σῶμα, Paul underscores his concern with bodily relationships. “To be joined” to a prostitute (v. 16a) is compared with “being joined” to Christ (v. 17a), and in each case a man enters into a union that determines his identity:

“The body is not within a man's own control, it [along with his identity] is determined by the relationship into which it enters.... The bodies of Christian men are addressed as members of the dead and resurrected body of Christ, which they have become by baptism.... It is this unity that is threatened by sexual unions with prostitutes since such unions destroy this Christian cosmology.”<sup>45</sup>

Dale B. Martin makes much of the somatic references in 1 Corinthians, believing “... the theological differences reflected in 1 Corinthians *all* resulted from conflicts between various groups... rooted in different ideological constructions of the body.”<sup>46</sup> But it is *Paul* who provokes the Corinthian’s view of the body, not the various factions quarreling with one another (1.12). Doubtlessly the believers were at different levels of the ‘social scale’—but it was the *same* scale; their relative stature was not something that could be independently constructed.

Meggitt concurs: “[Dale] Martin’s fundamental interpretive premise is flawed: it is unlikely that there were... conflicting ideological constructions of the body [correlating to] socio-economic status in Corinth.”<sup>47</sup> 1 Cor. 7.21–24 belongs to the larger discourse because, for Paul, *all* believers’ bodies are members of Christ (1 Cor. 6.15) and were “*bought at a price*” (1 Cor. 6.19–20). Paul provokes the *identity* of those who think they are in command of their own bodies, by comparing them with slaves whose bodies belong to a master.

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<sup>44</sup> “We suggest that in 4.18–7.40 Paul deals primarily with issues related to sexual immorality, first in a negative treatment of its manifestations in the church in Corinth (4.18–6.20) and then in a positive treatment of marriage and sexual relationships.” Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, “The Structure and Argument of 1 Corinthians: A Biblical/Jewish Approach” *New Testament Studies* 52 (2006), 210-11.

<sup>45</sup> Halvor Moxnes, “Body, Gender, and Social Space: Dilemmas in Constructing Early Christian Identities” in Bengt Holmberg and Mikael Winninge (eds.) *Identity Formation in the New Testament* (WUNT/I 227; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 171. See the helpful review, relied upon here, by Markus Cromhout, “Identity Formation in the New Testament” *HTS Theological Studies* 65.1 (2009).

<sup>46</sup> Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), xv (emphasis mine). Contra J. J. Meggitt, “*Sources...*” (ibid.), 248.

<sup>47</sup> J. J. Meggitt, “*Sources...*” (ibid.), 249.

### III. The Challenge of Interpreting 1 Cor. 7.21–24

In the short section of vv. 17–24, Paul repeats three times the maxim that believers should remain in the condition that God called them; apparently their position in life at the time they first accepted the preaching of the good news about Christ. Richard Hays likens the structure to “a club sandwich: in between the three-layered repetition of the maxim (vv. 17, 20, 24) [Paul] inserts two illustrative analogies.”<sup>48</sup> The issue of marriage and sexual morality forms the bookends of this section, where Paul considers the circumcised/uncircumcised (vv. 18–19) and slave/free distinctions (vv. 21–23).

Hays finds “no indication that circumcision and slavery were contested issues at Corinth”<sup>49</sup> and therefore believes Paul’s sole concern is that believers should not seek to change their marital status. This seems to confirm the critique of James Barr mentioned earlier; the way biblical terms escape their cultural moorings. Paul is doing more than appealing to slavery and circumcision as two mere illustrations en route to marital counseling; indeed, his teaching of the Gospel (inasmuch as we see it contained in the epistles) would have struck questions deep in the quarry of social identity. Hays does pick up on the centrality of these elements to Paul’s thought; when “combined with the surrounding discussion of sex in the Christian life, parallel precisely the three elements in Paul’s baptismal catechesis [what he deems Gal. 3.27–28 to be]:

As many of you were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.  
There is no longer Jew or Greek [cf. 1 Cor. 7.18–19]  
there is no longer slave nor free [cf. 1 Cor. 7.21–23]  
there is no longer male or female [cf. the rest of 1 Cor. 7]  
for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.”<sup>50</sup>

He goes on to use Gal. 3.28 as the ‘hermeneutical key’ to 1 Cor. 7.17–24, believing the “binary polarities... [form] markers of human identity [which] have been rendered meaningless in light of the Gospel.” ‘Meaningless,’ is the word of choice for Hays, because Paul states that whether enslaved or free— μή σοι μελέτω (‘don’t let it concern you,’ v. 21). He continues: “marriage, like ethnicity and social status, belongs now to the category of *adiaphora*: matters

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<sup>48</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1997), 122.

<sup>49</sup> *op. cit.*, 122. Contra David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 307.

<sup>50</sup> *op. cit.*, 123.

that fundamentally make no difference.”<sup>51</sup> It may ‘fundamentally make no difference’ in an office at Duke Divinity School — but for a first-century slave, it made *every* difference! If Paul is urging every believer to ‘remain... in their calling,’ in view of the triumph of Christ and their new birth, surely he reasons on more than relativizing *adiaphora*. In any case, if it makes ‘no difference’ whether a believer is a slave or free, why urge the maxim “to remain” *three* times? Hays seems aware of the disjunct:

“In view of Paul’s strong proclamation elsewhere of the world-transforming power of the gospel (cf. 2 Cor. 5.16–21), this may seem like a disappointingly conservative account of the social implications of the new life in Christ. We must remember, however, that Paul writes under the conviction that “the present form of this world is passing away” (1 Cor. 7.31b). To scramble for new social positions is like rearranging the deck chairs on the *Titanic*: it is a pointless exercise that only generates anxiety... The maxim “Let each of you remain in the condition in which you once were called” means, in effect, “Bloom where you are planted; *don’t worry about trying to become something you are not.*”<sup>52</sup>

Floral pleasantries aside, wouldn’t this have been a discouraging blow from Pastor Paul? After all, the slave could respond: “I’m *not* worried about ‘trying to become something I’m not’ ... you said, I am free in the Lord!” Or was that just a throw-away phrase? Paul is, after all, encouraging believers to acquiesce to the condition in which they were called; whether marital, racial, or social.<sup>53</sup> So why not just command it and stop there? Why would Paul introduce a pair of paradoxical metaphors to mix (v. 22)?

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<sup>51</sup> *op. cit.*, 123. The term is technical and has been used to find parallels between Paul’s ethics and the Stoic philosophical thought of his period. “The topics of slavery and freedom were common among Greco-Roman moralists, and *adiaphora* (“indifferent matters”) formed a central reasoning strategy among the Stoics.” Rollin A. Ramsaran, “1 Corinthians 7.17–24: Considering Stoic Argumentation and the *Adiaphora* of Slavery and Freedom” in *One in Christ: Essays on Early Christianity and ‘All that Jazz’ - Essays in Honor of S. Scott Bartchy* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 150. Ramsaran is following J. Beker, and identifies Paul as a ‘Jewish apocalypticist’: “In considering 1 Cor. 7.17–24, we note that Paul is not a Stoic, but he is capable of making use of Stoic argumentation to help community members identify and make right moral choices *in the time before God’s coming triumph*” (*ibid.*, 153 emphasis mine).

<sup>52</sup> *op. cit.*, 123 (emphasis mine).

<sup>53</sup> David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos of the Corinthian Correspondence: Interests and Ideology from 1 Corinthians to 1 Clement* (SNTW; Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), 161. Bruce W. Winter sees in this passage an argument against ‘social mobility’ and understands Paul’s rhetoric as a summary and not a fully developed argument. See his *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (FCCGRW; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1994), 163.

If the primary reference of the words καλέω ('to call') and κλησις ('calling') is to the calling from God to live as a believer,<sup>54</sup> it could be readily argued that Paul is equating a person's κλησις with their position in society. Horrell reasons: "...the symbolic revaluation of such slaves as 'the Lord's freedpersons', can easily become an encouragement passively to accept whatever social state one finds oneself in."<sup>55</sup> It is harder to deny this fact given how far removed we are from Paul's initial audience, which "may contribute to the formulation of a theological ideology which encourages slaves to retain their social position."<sup>56</sup>

In this vein, a dilemma arises on how best to render v. 21, a perennial crux for interpreters of Paul's interaction with slavery. The difficulty exists because 1 Cor. 7.21b, coming off the heels of μή σοι μελέτω ('don't let it concern you') lacks an object: "ἀλλ' εἰ καὶ δύνασαι ἐλεύθερος γενέσθαι, μᾶλλον χρῆσαι" ('but if indeed you are able to become free, rather use it').<sup>57</sup> Use what? The alternatives for μᾶλλον χρῆσαι are either "slavery" or "freedom"—Paul is either urging the slaves at Corinth to 'stay as they are'<sup>58</sup> or 'take their freedom'<sup>59</sup>!

The traditional interpretation of 7.21b is represented in the NRSV translation: "Even if you can gain your freedom, make use of your present condition [slavery] now more than ever."<sup>60</sup> On the other end of the spectrum, the ESV follows suit with the RSV, NIV, and NEB: "But if you can gain your freedom, avail yourself of the opportunity." Horrell writes:

"One possibility, which would support the 'remain a slave' interpretation, is that there was an emancipatory movement among Christian slaves... which was

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<sup>54</sup> op. cit., 162. Horrell is citing S. Scott Bartchy's work on 1 Cor. 7.21, but see Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NICNT; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1987), 308 n. 8.

<sup>55</sup> op. cit., 162.

<sup>56</sup> op. cit., 162 (though Horrell goes on to supply evidence that this was not Paul's intention). J. A. Harrill, *Slaves in the New Testament: Literary, Social, and Moral Dimensions* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003), 173, notes that early slavery abolitionists relied on 1 Cor. 7.21 (and 1 Tim. 1.10) to make their case.

<sup>57</sup> My rough translation, which is surprisingly close to the NKJV (not elaborating on the 'use it' of v. 21).

<sup>58</sup> Interpreters favoring "slavery" include C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (BNTC; Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993), 170; Hans Conzelmann, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1988), 127; and Will Deming, *Paul on Marriage and Celibacy: The Hellenistic Background of 1 Corinthians 7* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 157-61. While 1 Cor. 7.21 could potentially be translated in this way ('believers are to remain in the situation in which they were called') Fitzmeyer writes that if this were so: "one would expect the present imperative, not the aorist χρῆσαι." Joseph A. Fitzmeyer, *First Corinthians* (AYBC; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 308.

<sup>59</sup> Interpreters favoring "freedom" include David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (BECNT; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 314; Roy Ciampa and Brian Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians* (PNTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2010), 320; Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2000), 558; and David G. Horrell, *Social Ethos* (ibid.), 166.

<sup>60</sup> Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (ibid.), 125.

causing disruption and social disorder, inspired perhaps by the apparent transcendence of social divisions [being] proclaimed (1 Cor. 12.13; Gal. 3.28)”<sup>61</sup>

Yet Paul, like Peter, seems to address the typical behavior and unwillingness that would have always associated itself with serving as a slave. There is no sense of specific instructions given in an attempt to stave off the next Spartacus. Though it is unquestionable that Paul’s Gospel had led to some of the questions that arose within the Corinthian church, there is no evidence indicating some sort of ‘emancipatory movement’—the *haustafeln* treat slavery in due course and with no sense of pressure (e.g. 1 Peter 2.18–20, cf. Eph. 6.5–8, Col. 3.22–25). Horrell in fact agrees with such an assessment:

“While the ‘illustrations’ regarding Jew and Gentile, slave and free must presumably have been relevant enough to make sense to the Corinthians... the very lack of urgency in these matters indicates that they are not at issue. Would Paul have written ‘...μὴ γίνεσθε δοῦλοι ἀνθρώπων’ (v. 23b; ‘do not become slaves of men’) if he was seriously confronting such a situation and instructing slaves to remain in slavery?”<sup>62</sup>

It makes better contextual sense to find in v. 21b the Apostle making an important exception to the general maxim ‘remain as you are’: it should not concern the believer whether he remains a slave, but if an opportunity for freedom arises—use it! The manumission of slaves was a relatively common event at the time, so it is hard to find any reason why Paul would not accept it as a desirable pursuit. In most cases a slave had at least the prospect of manumission. As Horrell records, “the chance of freedom was a ‘carrot’ used to encourage good behavior.”<sup>63</sup>

We are led to wonder if Paul is now using this ‘carrot’ as his *own* carrot—to encourage the ‘good behavior’ of the Corinthian believers. Given this historical context we can be confident

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<sup>61</sup> David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos* (ibid.), 163.

<sup>62</sup> op. cit., 163–64. S. Scott Bartchy argues that a slave could neither refuse nor demand manumission, and on this basis challenges the ‘take your freedom’ interpretation, maintaining that “manumission was not an act which was “accepted” or “refused” by the slave. It happened to him.” This leads Bartchy to translate v. 21: “But if, indeed, *you become manumitted...*”

However, as C. K. Barrett points out [*The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (ibid.), 174] this ‘omits to translate the word δύνασαι in its attempt to convey the lack of choice which the slave had...’ S. S. Bartchy, *First-Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians 7:21* (SBLDS 11; Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1973). J. A. Harrill, *Manumission* (ibid.), 102, disputes Bartchy’s claim that slaves were unable to refuse manumission in the first century, so (according to Bartchy) Paul could not have instructed slaves to remain in slavery if freedom were to be offered. Harrill points out that since Corinth was a Roman colony, Roman manumission practices provide the clearest insight into Paul’s focus: “Romans saw manumission as the regular reward for their deserving urban slaves” (ibid., 127). For a brief review of Harrill’s treatment, see Stanley E. Porter, “Understanding Pauline Studies. An Assessment of Recent Research (Part Two)” *Themelios* 22.2 (1997), 13–24.

<sup>63</sup> David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos* (ibid.), 164.

that Paul is assuring the slaves amidst his audience that seeking manumission is not only acceptable, but desirable! (cf. v. 23). In 1 Cor. 7.17–24, Paul provides an illustration of the way his vision for the Corinthians’ social identity differs from their current conception of their own identity.<sup>64</sup> Though the social structures of his day are not repudiated, Paul’s metaphors expand the perspective of his hearers to comprehend the cosmic dimensions of the Lordship of Christ. Far from supporting the status quo of the believers’ social milieu, he supplants it, confronting the conception of status from the outset:

“For consider your calling (κλη̃σιν), brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God (1.26–29).” Thiselton concludes that the ‘weak’ of Paul’s Corinth were the economically vulnerable:

“Hence these are people who are most probably the vulnerable in sociopolitical terms, forced into dependency on patrons, owners, or employers... The weak stand in contrast to those with social power, influence, political status... ability or competence in a variety of areas and by contrast have ‘low social standing’ and crave for identity, recognition, and acceptance.”<sup>65</sup>

It is the marginalized who have been specifically chosen by God (1.26–29); the weakest members of the community have the right for their consciousness to affect the behavior of even the strongest member (8.1–11.1); and the ‘have-nots’ must be full and equal sharers in the community meal (11.17–34).<sup>66</sup> This did not eliminate each believer’s social position, to be sure, but it did subvert the status indicators prone to disrupt the unity of Christ’s body:

“Paul’s rhetorical strategy was to transform the Corinthians’ Roman social identity, thus forming an alternative community with a distinct ethos... He is forming an alternative community, *both in continuity and discontinuity with the broader civic community*, and he seeks to establish an ethos that allows for social identification while maintaining the boundaries necessary for the salience of an ‘in Christ’ social identity.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> J. Brian Tucker, *“Remain in Your Calling”*: Paul and the Continuation of Social Identities in 1 Corinthians (Eugene: Wipe & Stock, 2011), 66.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (ibid.), 705.

<sup>66</sup> David G. Horrell, *The Social Ethos* (ibid.), 164–65.

<sup>67</sup> J. Brian Tucker, *“Remain in Your Calling”* (ibid.), 65 (emphasis mine).

Against this background, we can begin to observe how Paul is using these metaphors rhetorically. The ‘status reversal’ in 7.22 (“he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freedman of the Lord. Likewise, he who was free when called is a slave of Christ”) recalls the similar reversal proclaimed in 1.26–29.<sup>68</sup> These paradoxical metaphors point the Corinthians toward their fundamental unity ‘in the Lord’.<sup>69</sup> To this end, Paul repeats the “bought with a price” metaphor (7.23) that he had used already in 6.20, reinforcing the theme of believers as ‘slaves of Christ’.<sup>70</sup> Paul draws upon slavery as metaphor elsewhere with similar effects. It forms the controlling image throughout Rom. 6.15–23:

“The vocabulary of the pericope affirms this view: ὑπακούω and ὑπακοήν resonate with the obedience of the slave; δοῦλος and δουλόω can do nothing but affirm a slavery motif; and the theme of “being set free” (ἐλευθερώω) represents the partial antithesis to being enslaved. It is also recognized within biblical scholarship (though perhaps less so) that the important terms sin and righteousness are well integrated within the slavery motif...”<sup>71</sup>

The importance of the slavery metaphor is highlighted by Paul here as well. In contrast to those who want to see the slavery motif as merely a rhetorical device used to persuade his hearers to behave morally, Paul speaks of slavery and two different masters because of his presupposition that “slavery functioned to depict not just moral obligation but also *salvation*.”<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> See Matthew Malcolm, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reversal in 1 Corinthians: The Impact of Paul’s Gospel on His Macro-Rhetoric* (SNTSMS 155; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> A major theme of the letter. See B. Hansen, *All of You are One: The Social Vision of Gal. 3.28, 1 Cor. 12.13 and Col. 3.11* (LNTS; London: T & T Clark, 2010), 107ff; there are various studies that from one degree to another focus on the body imagery in 1 Corinthians; cf. D. B. Martin, *The Corinthian Body* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); A. R. Hunt, *The Inspired Body: Paul, the Corinthians, and Divine Inspiration* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1996); Y. S. Kim, *Christ’s Body in Corinth: The Politics of a Metaphor* (PCC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2008).

<sup>70</sup> “While it may be technically true to say that Paul nowhere explicitly refers to Christians in general as ‘slaves of Christ’, such an inference may be fairly drawn from Rom. 6.16, 22 and 1 Cor. 7.22–23 within the Pauline corpus.” Murray J. Harris, *Slave of Christ* (ibid.), 128. He notes: “[Dale B.] Martin contends that... the phrase ‘slave of Christ’ is a title of leadership, denoting those who, as agents of the founder of their communities, are representatives of his authority. But Martin’s principal focus is on 1 Corinthians 9.16-18, where, he argues, Paul presents himself as an *oikonomos*, a middle-level, managerial slave who has both authority and high standing in the household of Christ” (128–29).

<sup>71</sup> David J. Southall, *Rediscovering Righteousness in Romans: Personified δικαιοσύνη Within Metaphoric and Narratorial Settings* (WUNT/II: 240; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2008), 83-4.

<sup>72</sup> op. cit., 84, citing F. S. Malan, “Bound to Do Right” *Neotestamentica* 15 (1981), 118.

At least one writer argues that Paul's "*entire understanding* of the position of the believer vis-a-vis his or her relationship with Christ is bound up in the metaphor of slavery."<sup>73</sup> While that may be overstating the case, it certainly points us to the significance of this metaphor.

### Conclusion—Metaphors at Work

Paul was not immune to the insults of slavery. Peter Marshall contends that Paul's opponents accused him of being a 'servile flatterer' and labelled him a sycophant who became 'all things to all people' [for his own gain].<sup>74</sup> Paul's response is understood to be 1 Cor. 9.19–23: "...though I am free from all, I have made myself a slave to all, that I might win more of them... to the weak I became weak, that I might win the weak. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some" (vv. 19, 22). He subverts his opponents' rhetoric:

"Rather than respond in kind or deny accusations, he takes up the language of invective... to describe his work as an apostle... His ironic use of the slave metaphor, the ethic of "pleasing all" and the notion of "gain" are all intended to communicate in a subtle and subversive way that Paul's slavery is self-imposed and for the purpose of saving others."<sup>75</sup>

Paul became weak to the weak in the sense that he 'voluntarily enslaved himself'. He "took on the lifestyle and condition of the weak... he lowered himself to the social status of the weak by refusing the patronage of the rich and becoming a manual laborer (1 Cor. 4.10, 12)."<sup>76</sup> As David Garland rightly argues, Paul viewed his ethic of 'becoming weak to the weak' as an imitation of Christ who *became* weak to the weak.<sup>77</sup> Paul "plays on the soteriological meanings

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<sup>73</sup> I. A. H. Combes, *The Metaphor of Slavery in the Writings of the Early Church: From the New Testament to the Beginning of the Fifth Century* (JSNTS: 156; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 82 (emphasis mine).

<sup>74</sup> *Enmity in Corinth: Social Conventions in Paul's Relations with the Corinthians* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1987), 309.

<sup>75</sup> David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews: Jewish Contours of Pauline Flexibility in 1 Corinthians 9* (WUNT/II: 304; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2011), 110. Speaking of Dale Martin, Rudolph writes: "[he] understands Paul's self-enslavement as a missionary strategy to the weak and a rhetorical strategy for communicating his leadership model to the strong. It also communicates the theological principle that self-humbling precedes salvation" (ibid.)

<sup>76</sup> op. cit., 111. See also Robert S. Dutch, *The Educated Elite in 1 Corinthians: Education and Community Conflict in Graeco-Roman Context* (JSNTS 271; London, T & T Clark, 2005), 38.

<sup>77</sup> David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians* (ibid.), 434 (emphasis mine). It is worthwhile to reflect on Phil. 2.7 here.

of metaphorical slavery by showing that his own self-lowering will bring not only the salvation of his converts but his own eschatological salvation as well (9.23, 27).<sup>78</sup>

Even self-referentially, Paul utilizes metaphors imbibed from his social context to describe the *soteriological* significance of the death of Christ. These “social images (redemption, reconciliation, adoption, justification) make metaphorical use of transactions that move people from a negative social... condition to a positive one: from slavery to freedom, from alienated to reconciled, from stranger to son, from condemned to acquitted.”<sup>79</sup> Redemption, as one such social image, has had enough currency through the ages to risk becoming what Ricoeur deemed a ‘dead metaphor’—and yet, to the ears of a first-century slave, the *redemption* found in Jesus Christ would have been an abundantly ‘living metaphor’!

How can we ‘resurrect’ such language, as those who might hum ‘freedom isn’t free’ to a different tune? Slavery, despite the historical onslaught of its sinful forms, is not immoral in the abstract sense, but amoral. The ‘freedom’ that is found in Christ is markedly different than the utterly debased autonomy to which Americans almost uniquely aspire; and in seeking it hauntingly echo the Jews who could startlingly utter “we... have never been enslaved to anyone” (Jn. 8.33)! Jesus knew better than they did that Israel was not called out of serving Pharaoh to pursue ‘life, liberty, and happiness’ but rather, as the Lord declared, “...that they might *serve Me* in the wilderness” (Exod. 7.16). He, correspondingly, does not offer freedom from authority in this autonomous sense—but a different *yoke* (Matt. 11.29–30).

When it comes to slavery, we do not have the means to draw from the well of cultural experience; but that does not mean such metaphors cannot resonate deeply within us, to ‘shatter and expand’ our experience of reality: We, as they, have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God; we, as they, “are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption (ἀπολύτρωσις) that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3.24).<sup>80</sup> We experience and partake of the very redemption in Christ that Paul was drawing the Corinthians’ conception of reality toward: far beyond the pride-humiliating act of being purchased as a beast by men (cf. 1 Cor. 7.23), to the soul-humbling act

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<sup>78</sup> David J. Rudolph, *A Jew to the Jews* (ibid.), 111.

<sup>79</sup> Stephen Finlan, *The Background and Content of Paul’s Cultic Atonement Metaphors* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature Press, 2004), 1.

<sup>80</sup> “The noun λύτρον denotes “means of deliverance,” “ransom,” or, occasionally, means of expiation. λύτρον became the specific term for ransoming, and the particular form ἀπολύτρωσις in Jewish literature designates “ransoming a captive or prisoner of war from slavery.” But by Paul’s time this term was more often used for the purchase or manumission of slaves...” op. cit., 164.

“...purchase is present whether the main image behind ἀπολύτρωσις is Israel-redemption or Graeco-Roman slave purchase, or whether redemption is interpreted as a kind of sacrifice. But a purely biblical explanation is unable to account for the market word ἐξαγοράζω. *It is not possible to keep the Graeco-Roman world out of Paul’s letters.*” op. cit., 168 (emphasis mine).

of being purchased as a bride by God (Acts 20.28).<sup>81</sup> If Paul's theologically-rich metaphors settle into our vocabulary with dull and fainting connotations, what is lost? Finlan finds

“...it bears repeating that, for Paul, salvation is not free. Paul sometimes emphasizes the act of purchasing, and other times the new status of the redeemed people, but always there is this *transaction* at the heart of salvation. The transactional nature of captive-ransoming or slave-purchasing is easily conflated with the transactional nature of sacrifice, which resembles a tribute-payment to God. The crucial ideas of justification, redemption, and atonement are chained together in Rom. 3.24–25. We are justified *through* (διὰ) the redemption that [is in Jesus Christ].”<sup>82</sup>

The paradoxical metaphors of being both free *in* Him and enslaved *to* Him are simply that: paradoxical. One is not more true than the other; nor are they ever true at different times. The only resolution is to hold them together, and thereafter marvel that “...having been set free from sin, [we] have become slaves of righteousness” (Rom. 6.18). In the deepest caverns of our experience, we may find these metaphors shattering the comfortable familiarity of our evangelical glossaries and ‘re-describing’ the event and experience of redemption in ever-deepening ways. An English poet expressed this glorious tension best:

“Batter my heart, three-person'd God, for you  
As yet but knock, breathe, shine, and seek to mend;  
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me, and bend...  
...Take me to you, imprison me, for I,  
Except you enthrall me, never shall be free,  
Nor ever chaste, except you ravish me.”<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> “Since Paul uses ἀγοράζω purchase-words in soteriological metaphors four times ἀγοράζω in 1 Cor. 6.20; 7.23 and ἐξαγοράζω (in Gal. 3.13, 4.5), it is quite likely that ἀπολύτρωσις in Rom. 3.24 has resonances of purchase.” op. cit., 166.

<sup>82</sup> op. cit., 168 (emphasis original).

<sup>83</sup> John Donne, *Sonnet 14*.