

Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and History

“History is like therapy for the present – it makes it talk about its parents”

Maya Jasanoff

1. History and how it works....

(this section is for reading out. Each paragraph can be read by a different voice)

What was history like when you were in school?

Many of us were left with the impression that history was about ‘facts’ – finish.

History is about facts, but it is always shaped and re-shaped by interpretation.

We always read history from our ‘now’, our present, our world.

That’s what decides which facts are remembered and which forgotten.

That’s what decides which facts are ‘important’ and which can be ignored.

But always there’s the chance of going back and reading again.

Always there’s the chance to hear voices that others have silenced.

That, in a very dramatic way, is what happened to the statue of Edward Colston.

Edward Colston died in 1721. His statue was not erected in Bristol until 1895.

The 1895 inscription said he was “*one of the most virtuous & wise sons of this city*”

That is what Bristol chose to remember 174 years after he died.

Recently, multi-cultural Bristol has heard other voices telling other parts of the story.

Colston was now acknowledged as a major slave trader in a slave trading city.

He played an active role in the enslavement of over 84,000 Africans

Campaigns for the statue’s removal or to at least rewrite the inscription were begun.

Then “Black Lives Matter” protests swept through 2020.

In a dramatic piece of street theatre (of dubious legality) the statue went for a swim.

Whatever you think of that deed, it highlights that history is what we choose to tell.

For a long, long time we capped off the story of British involvement in slavery.

We told the story of the abolition movements instead.

Now many voices, Black British voices, Caribbean voices & African voices

are pleading with us to tell the whole story of slavery and British involvement.

Now we are uncovering ugly history to help us understand who we are.

Now we are using history to help us identify and address the legacies of slavery;

legacies affecting Africa and the Americas, legacies directly affecting the UK.

Take five minutes to discuss what we make of history and history-making
(don’t get lost in a long dispute about that statue, though!)

History, and the histories we choose to tell, also affect how we read the Bible.

We’re going to take a look at one of the most contentious texts about slavery in the Bible, and both see how we read it ourselves and how it has been read in the past.

2. Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and History

Paul’s letter to Philemon is only 24 verses, so let’s begin by reading it in the New Revised Standard Version:

Paul's 'Letter to Philemon' in the New Revised Standard Version

1. Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, to Philemon our dear friend and co-worker,
2. to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house:
3. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
4. When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5. because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith towards the Lord Jesus. 6. I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7. I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.
8. For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, 9. yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love – and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. 10. I am appealing to you for my child Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.
11. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. 12. I am sending him, that is my own heart, back to you. 13. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; 14. but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. 15. Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, 16. no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother – especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.
17. So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. 18. If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. 19. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand; I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self. 20. Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. 21. Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.
22. One thing more – prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.
23. Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.
24. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

The people involved and the roles they play: This letter comes from a triangular story of three Christians – **Paul, Philemon & Onesimus**. Between you, take a moment to identify and describe each of them and note whose voice we hear, who is spoken to in this letter and who is silently, but massively, affected by it.

Now, look again at each of them in relation to enslavement:
(some of your answers may be “we don’t know!”)

- **Paul** was a Christian leader and a free Roman citizen, not a slave, did he own slaves? Did he condemn slavery? He seems to recognise that Onesimus has been a slave, but does he speak of Onesimus as if he were property? What is his attitude to Onesimus?
- **Philemon** was a Christian leader (with a church in his house). Was he a slave owner? He hasn't freed his slaves when he became a Christian – why not? What might be his attitude to Onesimus?
- **Onesimus** has become a Christian and a valued companion of Paul, yet somewhere in his past he has been a slave in the household of Philemon. What might be his attitude to Paul and to Philemon? What might he have thought about slavery? Why is he prepared to go back to confront Philemon?

What is Paul asking Philemon to do?

Paul sends this letter with Onesimus as he goes back to confront Philemon. What do **you** think Paul is asking Philemon to do? Do you all agree in your interpretation?

Historically, the text has been read in two main ways:

- **The majority of interpreters down the centuries** (*almost all are white men in no danger of being enslaved themselves*) have assumed that Paul is affirming Onesimus as a Christian Brother, but asking Philemon to accept him back as a slave and keep him as a slave
- **Olaudah Equiano** (*an 18th Century African who spent much of his own life enslaved in London & in the Americas*) seeing much of his personal story in the story of Onesimus, is adamant that it is utterly wrong to read the Letter to Philemon with the assumption that Onesimus must remain as a slave. Paul must expect Philemon to embrace Onesimus' freedom because (he says of the letter) "*the whole tenor is in behalf of the slave*".

These two interpretations are reflected in modern Bible translations of vv. 15 & 16.

The **Good News Bible** assumes Onesimus must remain a slave saying:

And now he is not just a slave, but much more than a slave: he is a dear brother in Christ. ... And how much more he will mean to you, both as a slave and as a brother in the Lord!

The **Jerusalem Bible** assumes Onesimus must remain free saying:

you could have him back for ever, not as a slave anymore, but something much better than a slave, a dear brother;

So, whose voices do we listen to? How do we read Paul & Onesimus and their intentions? What history is shaping us as we read?

3. Questions for discussion

1. Can you name any Christians who were involved in, or profited from, transatlantic slavery? What was their involvement?
2. One famous example is William Alers Hankey who was a Congregationalist, was co-founder of the British and Foreign Bible Society and a onetime treasurer on the London Missionary Society. He gave evidence to the 1832 Select Committee on the

Extinction of Slavery saying that the ‘negroes’ were not yet ready for emancipation. What do you think about his views?

3. Are there any individuals connected with your church or town or neighbourhood who were involved in, or profited from, transatlantic slavery? Find out about their history (see, for example the *Legacies of British Slave Ownership* website run by University College, London - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/lbs/>)
4. What, if anything, should we do about those historical links with slavery?
5. Race-based slavery shaped economic and social development on both sides of the Atlantic in profound ways. Even if we cannot identify specific ancestral figures for our church or our family who engaged directly in the trade or its role in colonisation, in what ways has slavery shaped our inheritance and our society down to today?

John M Campbell
for the URC Legacies of Slavery Working Group