

# Bias Can Lead You to Twist Bible to Rationalize Actions

We would be hard pressed to find a piece of literature that has had a more painful effect on the lives of Americans than Paul's letter to Philemon.

Because the letter's context is the sending of an escaped slave back to his Christian master by the Apostle Paul, it isn't difficult to see how it played such a painful role in the adoption and defense of slavery in America.

This year is the 400th anniversary of the first slaves being brought to American shores in 1619, which meant that addressing Paul's Letter to Philemon was important for me to address from the pulpit.

In England, the custom was that a person couldn't keep a Christian as a slave because they were spiritual brothers or sisters.

So, in 1667, the Virginia Assembly passed legislation stating that converting to Christianity does not bring freedom to blacks.

One of the primary examples used to promote this new law was the book of Philemon because Paul did not explicitly tell Philemon to free Onesimus from enslavement.

Unfortunately, such interpretations were only beginning to inflict their damage.

A few years ago, the movie, "Twelve Years a Slave," based on the real-life story of

Solomon Northup, won the Academy Award for best picture.

Northup was a free black man living with his wife and daughter when he was kidnapped by slave hunters commissioned to find escaped slaves and bring them back to the South.

With no legal deterrent or recompense, slave hunters simply kidnapped blacks suspected of being runaways and sold them back to plantations in the South. Many free blacks were brutalized by this practice.

Hoping to avoid a civil war, the U.S. government allowed the practice to be codified in the 1850 Missouri Compromise. The book of Philemon was used to promote this law.

Another distressing fact is that Deuteronomy 23:15-16 says not to send an escaped slave back to their master. "Slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them. They shall reside with you, in your midst, in any place they choose in any one of your towns, wherever they please; you shall not oppress them."

This means that the way Paul treated Onesimus wasn't even scriptural.

We all know that when we interpret a biblical text it is essential to give utmost attention to its context.

I can hear my seminary professor's voice in my head saying, "Don't take a text out of context and make it a pretext."

The context for the book of Philemon isn't just its position in time and space -

2,000 years ago in the most powerful and brutal empire of its day - but also its place within the Christian canon and the good news of Jesus Christ.

When we hold Jesus' life up, he was a man who always sided with the dispossessed and the oppressed. By his own words, his mission was to set captives free (see Luke 4).

Can you imagine Jesus ever sending a slave back to his or her master? I simply cannot.

What Paul did may have been the right thing to do in that context because it appears to me that Paul is implicitly calling for Onesimus' manumission, or release from slavery.

I hope Paul wouldn't have sent Onesimus back if the outcome wasn't certain. But Paul was still clearly a product of his time.

We also read the third chapter of Paul's letter to the Colossians in worship the week I preached on Philemon because it illustrates the revolutionary claim that there is neither free nor slave but all are one in Christ.

Yet, within the same chapter, Paul goes on not only to enforce the patriarchal norms of the day, but also to command slaves to be obedient to their masters in everything.

Why didn't he call for the emancipation of slaves? Paul seems so close sometimes, but he just can't quite make the jump. He's still a product of his day and age.

Yet, even in this there is good news and a challenge. If we can see Paul honestly -

as a flawed person who was used by God to change the world - then it sets us free to look at ourselves honestly also.

Are there aspects of our culture we've baptized in biblical proof-text to justify our own beliefs, practices or apathy?

One obvious example comes to mind: Paul's words in 1 Corinthians and 1 Timothy are still being used to oppress the voice of women and, in doing so, to handicap the church.

Yet, I am proud to say that a few weeks ago several of my staff ministers at NorthHaven Church met for lunch with other female ministers across the state of Oklahoma at the behest of national Baptist Women in Ministry's ["Come to The Table" challenge](#).

At a table with guacamole in the middle, Oklahoma Baptist Women in Ministry was born for the very first time, and they will have their first BWIM annual celebration in February at First Baptist Church of Oklahoma City.

My staff was able to shape history in Oklahoma because at NorthHaven we see the biblical passages cited to restrict pastoral leadership to men as misguided interpretations and applications.

Paul may have been correct in his statements about women's role in the Corinthian church. I don't know; I wasn't there.

But to say these passages are applicable in all churches at all times would not only be incorrect, but also would stifle the Spirit's work among us.

Paul may have been correct to send the slave Onesimus back to his master Philemon. I don't know; I wasn't there.

But today, it stands as an inspired reminder that we all have inherited biases from our time and place that can lead us to faulty conclusions and questionable actions.

Every single one of us, no matter how enlightened, still has work to do.

*Editor's note: This article is adapted from a sermon preached on Philemon 1:1-21 and Colossians 3:9-21 at NorthHaven Church in Norman, Oklahoma, on Sept. 22, 2019.*