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We were nearing the end of a course in which we had explored the book of Colossians in some depth with our students. In this session we were addressing one of the most difficult and controversial passages in the book: Paul’s instructions in Colossians 3:18—4:1 to wives and husbands, children and fathers, slaves and masters.

As we finished reading the passage, Anthony, one of our students, began the discussion. It was clear that as far as he was concerned, this passage called into question everything we had done so far in the course. His argument was this: We can argue until we are blue in the face that Colossians is good news for an oppressed and marginalized community at the heart of the Roman empire, but unless this good news is for those truly at the margins—slaves, children and women—it is nothing but a noisy gong and a clanging cymbal. And this household code not only reinscribes the traditional oppressive ordering of a household in the empire, it is also “the integral consequence of Christ’s universal lordship.”

Anthony continued: The letter doesn’t just root the household codes in the transcendent language about Christ’s lordship over all. These instructions also contradict those places where Paul does appear to be proclaiming a liberating gospel. Thus this code makes it possible for subsequent Christian interpreters to ignore the message of liberation that flashes out occasionally in the letter. This tension, according to Anthony, is handled in the letter by an overspiritualizing of the Colossians’ baptismal identity with otherworldly overtones and by a personalizing of their calling. He supported this interpretation by reading the beginning of chapter 3 as an attempt to transcend the Colossians’ earthly situation and by reading the ethical injunctions of chapter 3 in terms of personal conduct.


2Ibid., p. 11.
We have already suggested an interpretation of chapter 3 which challenges such a dualistic, personalistic reading, but Anthony's questions still remain. Does Paul's teaching about the structure of a Christian household stand in fundamental tension with the rest of Colossians? Are the injunctions to wives, children and slaves legitimated by a language of transcendence that is oppressively hierarchical? And if so, then does our whole reading of Colossians as a text subversive of empire—both ancient and contemporary—come crashing down under the weight of a repressive household ethic? If Paul is reinforcing an imperial view of the household—and especially slavery—then how can this really be an ethic of secession? And if this is an ethic of community, just how liberating is it for those who were at the bottom of the social structures of the day?

When Anthony framed these questions for us in print, he did so by writing an open letter to Onesimus, asking for his voice to be heard in the reading of Colossians. Because the questions Anthony raised provide a profound challenge to our reading of Colossians as a whole, we have answered his letter with one of our own. Our letter, however, explores these verses from the perspective of Onesimus, a carrier of Paul's epistle to the Colossian community (Col 4:9).

The Epistle of Onesimus the Slave to Paul the Apostle

Onesimus, a servant of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to Paul, my father in the faith. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank God for you when I remember you in my prayers, because of your encouragement in the Lord and the love you have shown me. Such encouragement provides steady hope in the controversy that has erupted with our coming to Colossae. Indeed, controversy is a mild word to describe the chaos your letter created in the community. Not that I myself am in any danger. Tychicus has made it clear that I am under his protection, and not only his but also yours, and so no harm has come to me. In fact I was so able to efface myself that the discussion your letter generated took place in my presence, though my input was not solicited, in spite of your commendation that I could tell them about everything.³

The community here is very much as Epaphras had reported it to us, and indeed much as I had left it. Tensions notwithstanding, the brothers and sisters continue to live in faith, love and hope. But fear of further persecution is also prevalent. And that fear shaped many of the responses to the letter you sent with Tychicus and me. As you can imagine, every member of both house churches in Colossae was present for the reading of your letter. By God's grace Nympha was also present, since she was in Colossae to meet with one of her textile merchants. No small interest was generated by my presence, since everyone knew that your letter would address my

status in the community. What would Paul suggest be done with Onesimus, runaway slave, supposed thief, betrayer of his master? As they listened to the letter I could feel that tension was building, along with bewilderment and unease.

Then when you did finally mention Tychicus and described me as a good and faithful brother, the room erupted. Tychicus had to restore calm to finish the letter. As he did there was a look of blank disbelief. That's all? No specific advice to Philemon? Everyone looked disappointed—more than that, enraged—except for Archippus, who flushed and then went pale. He clearly knew what was up.

Well, before Tychicus could even announce that he had another letter for Philemon—the letter, in fact, that would answer their concerns—the arguing began. And Tychicus, with a little mischievous grin, sat back and enjoyed the fun. You would have enjoyed it yourself, I think, if only as an example of how people read and misread your letters. There were three basic views on what you were saying.

The first was the predictable one, the position you actually argued against throughout the letter. (I'll call these men "the philosophers.") "See," they argued, "Paul is affirming the household structure as we've inherited it from Aristotle. Paul would never try to undermine the natural order of society. He affirms the God-given order of husband over wife, father over children and master over slave. Without such a structure our society would lose its moral and economic moorings; it would crumble." In fact, one young scholar got up and began to solemnly intone the crucial sentences from Aristotle:

For the male is by nature better fitted to command than the female . . . and the older and fully developed person than the younger and immature . . . All human beings that differ as widely as the soul does from the body . . . are by nature slaves for whom to be governed by this kind of authority is advantageous. . . . For the free rule the slave, the male the female, the man the child in different ways; for the slave has not got the deliberative part at all, and the female has it but without full authority, while the child has it but in an undeveloped form.4

He was stopped when an elderly Jewish brother broke in. "But this is precisely the kind of philosophy according to human tradition that Paul referred to in his letter! A philosophy that takes us captive and makes us take and keep others captive. Paul is definitely not affirming Aristotle here. Why, look at how widely his instructions differ from Aristotle's!" And he stopped for a breath.

One of the philosophers jumped in the breach. "Of course he is affirming Aristotle. Even your own philosophers affirm that this is the divinely ordained structure of society!"

“One of our own philosophers?” While the older man kept calm, he was white
with anger. “And who might ‘our own philosophers’ be?”

“Philo, of course, and Josephus. They both affirm that ‘the male head of the house­
hold is intended by nature to rule as husband, father and master, and that not to ad­
here to this proper hierarchy is detrimental not only to the household but also to the
life of the state.’”

“You would do well to remember,” the older man replied, “that a Hellenistic Jew
such as Philo”—he almost spat the words out—“and a Roman sympathizer such as
Josephus”—then he did spit—“hardly reflect the views of faithful Jews.”

But he knew the philosophers had touched the point that was crucial for the com­
munity. Not to adhere to this hierarchy could be interpreted by outsiders as treason­
ous to the empire, as an undermining of the social order. And we know that over the
last number of decades the emperors have made legislative changes directed at ensur­
ing that the social order be strengthened and maintained.

Various people in the group spoke to this concern. What the argument boiled
down to was this. It is fine for you, Paul, to say that Jesus has triumphed over the
principalities and powers, but the daily experience of this community is that the evil
spirits of this age are very present and working against them, and the rule of Rome
and its military authority still hold all the power that matters. It’s very well for you to
say that those who are clothed in Christ no longer need the sabbath and food regula­
tions, asceticism or the beneficial intercession of angels. But this community needs
such practices for good order, to deflect outsiders’ suspicion that Christian house­
holds are undermining the social order. Moreover, as a number of the leaders pointed
out, to tamper with such an obviously natural order would be economically disas­
trous. Best to have a severe, though restrained, ethic, and best to uphold the eco­
nomic status quo of the empire when it comes to the paterfamilias.

Even if such a status quo can be brutal at times (as it was for Onesimus, I could see
some of them thinking), the way to deal with such suffering is to patiently wait for
our escape from this world of death. In a higher spiritual realm such earthly situations
are irrelevant. This is the true wisdom.

They didn’t look at me as they spoke, but I could tell what the result of such a phi­
losophy would be for me. No matter how unbearable my situation, I should have
stayed. I should glory in my abasement and realize that I’m not really a slave before
God. But in this earthly life I need to take what my master dishes out. And that would
likely mean stiff punishment for running away, I could see that immediately.

Others wanted a softened version of this stance. It was true: Paul would not want
to undermine a social order that is a natural outworking of the very order of creation.

Testament 74 (1999): 100. The relevant texts are Philo De
Decalogue 165; De
Hypothetica 7.1-14; Josephus
Contra Apion 2.108-212.
But they wanted to take the rest of the letter a little more seriously. After all, Paul had talked at length about Jesus’ reconciling all things in heaven and on earth. Surely such reconciliation should affect the structures of the household. And surely his exhortations to get rid of anger, wrath, malice, slander and abusive language, to be clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness and patience, to live in forgiveness and peace and thanksgiving, should affect the way we work within creational structures.

They argued that this ethic does affect creational structures. Paul doesn’t just speak to husbands, fathers and masters. He also speaks to wives, children and slaves. And it is clear that he recognizes that they have some will in this matter, that they can choose to be subject. What he says to the heads of the household is also unusual: husbands are to love their wives, fathers are not to provoke their children, masters are to treat slaves justly and fairly. Surely what Paul has done is transform the natural order of things so that it might undergo the reconciliation of Jesus. While he may be supporting the status quo, he is doing so in a way that makes the natural order of things palatable. Love patriarchy, that’s what Paul is arguing for.\(^6\) This is a kinder, gentler economic and social hierarchy.

The men who argued for this position did look at me as they spoke. They even smiled. You could see that they felt they were being very generous toward me. And given the way most slaves are treated, they were being generous. With such a love patriarchy, Philemon would be bound to take me back gently, treat me fairly and justly, and not abuse me. Not bad.

While this group was speaking, the older man who had spoken earlier was shaking his head sadly. Finally he looked pointedly at Archippus and said, “Archippus, you heard what Paul said to you: ‘See that you complete the task that you have received in the Lord.’ Perhaps now is the time.”\(^7\)

Archippus took a deep breath, stood up and addressed the assembly.

“Men of Colossae,” he began, “holy and beloved, called to bear fruit and grow in the wisdom and knowledge of God. You know that I have now for many months been attending the synagogue in order to receive instruction in the Scriptures of Israel, the ancient texts of our Messiah, Jesus, and of many of his followers both here in the Ly- cus Valley and throughout the world. The story found in these texts is known to many of you, as is the story of Jesus the second Adam, in whom the image of God dwells fully, the One who came to bring salvation to Israel and bring God’s new kingdom of peace to both Israel and the whole world through his death on the cross and his rising from the dead. As you know, I have been studying this story and these Scriptures for some time now in preparation for my teaching ministry in this community. Today I must begin this ministry.

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\(^7\) *Colossians* 4:17
"It is indeed true that in the letter we have heard today Paul refers to the ordering of our households as found in the ancient philosophers and as taught by imperial decree. But I ask you today, do we worship the gods of the philosophers? Do we worship the gods of the empire? Or do we worship the living God, who raised Jesus from the dead to free us from all bondage to powers on earth and in heaven, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or powers, even the authorities we have been taught are according to nature?

"In this letter Paul appeals not primarily to the ancient philosophers, nor to the edicts of the emperor, but to the ancient stories of Israel. Those stories describe how, in the shadow of empire, Israel was called to form an alternative covenant community rooted in the Torah of a God who freed the slave, loves the refugee and cares for the widow and the orphan. As that community was called to be holy, so we are called saints, the holy ones.8

"The kingdom of Jesus is just such a covenant community. Paul describes the story of that kingdom as a story of forgiveness. He began his letter to us by calling the kingdom of the Son a kingdom of forgiveness. He said that through Jesus all things in heaven and on earth are reconciled to God; he also said that God made us alive in Jesus when he forgave us our debts, erasing the record that stood against us with all its legal demands. And then he called us to forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven us, so we should forgive.9

"And the story of forgiveness in Jesus is rooted in an even larger story. Remember how God decided during the exodus that the way he will deal with a stiff-necked people, who glory in a golden calf, is by forgiving them.10 In our Scriptures, forgiveness of sin and redemption from slavery are always at the heart of God's dealing with the covenant people. In the community God called together to bear his image, such forgiveness and redemption were to be most obviously evident in the forgiving of debt and freeing from slavery.

"Every seven years the Israelites were to forgive debts and free slaves.11 In fact, Israel's Torah reaches its climax in the jubilee year, when a complete economic leveling was to take place involving not only release of slaves but also the return of land.12 Laws like this were rooted in Israel's memory of its God: because God releases slaves out of Egyptian bondage, so Israel is called to image that God by being a slave-releasing community.13 This story shows that in the new covenant reality to which God calls his people, forgiveness permeates all of life, especially our households. In this epistle, Paul has told us that through Christ, God was pleased to reconcile all

8Colossians 1:2; Exodus 19:6; Leviticus 19:2; 20:26; cf. Psalm 16:3; 34:9; Daniel 7:18; 8:24.
10Exodus 32—34.
11Deuteronomy 15.
12Leviticus 25.
things. His whole letter has been calling us to live out of that reconciliation and to practice the reign of Christ in every area of life. And he explicitly told us that in this renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian—slave and free!  

“So far no one has mentioned these breathtakingly radical words of Paul and asked how they might shed light on his advice for our household lives. Are these empty words? Or do they mean a radical change in how we followers of Jesus organize ourselves?

“You see, Paul didn’t use just the language of forgiveness to describe our story; he also used the language of inheritance. As I recall, it went like this: we are enabled to share in the inheritance of the saints. In Israel’s story, forgiveness and inheritance always come together.

“Now it may be that you are thinking Paul’s language about inheritance is irrelevant to the problem of slavery. After all, Onesimus here is more likely to be part of an inheritance than receive one. But Paul did say something about an inheritance when he was talking to the slaves. Tychicus, perhaps you could read that section to us again.”

So Tychicus read the relevant section, that bit we had labored so hard over: “Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Master and not for your masters, since you know that from the Master you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Master Christ.”

Then Archippus went on. “Paul seems to think that slaves will receive the inheritance. This is the central theme in Israel’s story, a story lived always in the shadow of empire, a story of a kingdom that turns empire on its head. Don’t forget that we are a people who were freed from slavery in the exodus. The laws appeal to this event again and again, especially when calling for Israel to free slaves (with a good portion of wine and grain and livestock) and when calling for Israel to practice not merely justice but unexpected graciousness and generosity to the orphan, the widow and the alien.  

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14 Colossians 1:20; 3:11.
15 Colossians 1:12.
16 The biblical texts regarding inheritance are plentiful. The promise to Abraham that he will inherit the land is found in Genesis 12:1-7, 15:7-12 and 17:1-8. The promises to Israel in the exodus that they will be given the land as their inheritance are found in Exodus 3:17-8 and 23:20-33; Leviticus 20:24; Numbers 34:2; Deuteronomy 4:20-40, 12:10 and 1:20. The promise during the exile that the land will be given as an inheritance in a new exodus event is found in Ezekiel 36:8-12. And in intertestamental Judaism, the promises that the faithful will inherit the whole earth are found in Jubilees 22:14-15 (in a blessing on Abraham) and 32:19; 1 Enoch 5:7. This is affirmed by Paul in Romans 4:13, where he restates the promise to Abraham as a promise that Abraham would inherit the whole earth.
17 In Leviticus 25:46 slaves are listed as part of the inheritance that may be passed on to one’s children.
18 Colossians 3:23-24, our translation. It needs to be noted that the Greek word kyrion can be translated “Lord” or “Master.” By using “Lord” for God and Jesus but “master” for human masters, most English translations lose some of the nuancing that is found in the repetition of the same word in the Greek.
Israel and we ourselves are called to be gracious and generous because we once were slaves in the land of Egypt and God saved us from our slavery.

"This movement from being slaves to being sons who receive the inheritance is central to the story of Israel. And forgiveness is central to slaves receiving the inheritance as well. This is why the sabbath laws are about rest and freedom for slaves.\(^\text{20}\)

The jubilee, which is the climax of the sabbath, is precisely about slaves receiving an inheritance. They are freed, and they inherit once again the land that was taken from them. In fact, some groups interpret this story to mean that Jews should not keep slaves at all, because the God we worship is a God who sets slaves free.\(^\text{21}\)

"Look at what Paul does. Yes, he addresses wives, children and slaves. Yes, he transforms the relationships by asking husbands to love wives, fathers not to provoke children and masters to treat slaves justly and fairly. But he does more. You serve the Master Christ, the messianic Master! This is your true Master. He completely strips earthly masters of their ultimate sovereignty over their slaves. In fact he tells masters that they have a Master in heaven. The categories are completely undermined by Paul's language here. They no longer have validity.

"This is what Paul is really saying. This is our story. The letter is clear if you know the story, if you are aware of the way our God has acted in history up to now. In contrast to the economics of the empire, Paul here proclaims a countereconomics of sabbath and jubilee rooted in the forgiving love of Jesus. By telling the slaves in our midst that they have an 'inheritance,' Paul is recalling for us the traditions of jubilee; he is reminding us that Israel's story—and now, through Jesus, our story—is a slave-freeing story.

"Look closely at what Paul is doing here. First he says that there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, Scythian and barbarian, slave and free. Then he says that in Jesus' kingdom slaves who follow the messianic Master (the Lord Christ) will receive the inheritance. We are called to fill in the missing step."

Well, by the time Archippus had finished speaking, I felt like cheering. Well done!

Then Tychicus, with that grin of his still hovering, spoke up and told one of the parables that Luke loves about Jesus. You know, the one about the master who comes and finds his slaves waiting to open the door, and so he sits the slaves down and serves them the banquet.\(^\text{22}\) He didn't push it, just pointed out the reversal.

And then came the question, the main one. If Paul wanted to say that slaves are to

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\(^{20}\)See Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:14; 15:12-18.

\(^{21}\)Both Josephus and Philo, in their descriptions of the Essenes, assert that the Essenes have no slaves, for they consider slavery an injustice and a transgression of the law of nature (Philo Omn. Prob. Lib. 79; Josephus Jewish Antiquities 18.21). See Geza Vermes and Martin Goodman, The Essenes According to the Classical Sources (Sheffield, U.K.: JSOT Press, 1989), pp. 21, 55. However, see also Damascus Document 12.11, which indicates that some Essenes may have owned slaves. That slavery was a contentious issue in both preexilic and postexilic Israel is evident in Jeremiah 34:8-22 and Nehemiah 5:1-13.

be freed, then why didn’t he come out and say it? But even as it was asked, everyone knew the obvious answer.

Even so, Tychicus replied: “You know what happens to these letters. They’re read aloud at many gatherings, copied, sent to other cities, such as Laodicea. You know the importance of slaves, wives, even children in the social and economic hierarchy of the empire. You know what would happen if Paul ever committed such advice to paper, ever made such a declaration public.”

“For those who do not have ears to hear, for those who do not know the story, either of Israel or of Jesus, this advice seems innocent enough. It appears to uphold the status quo while advising tolerance. But for those who know the story, the clues are there, the allusions are made, and the hidden meaning is understood. For those with ears to hear, the message is clear: this is a God who proclaims a different kingdom from the ensnaring oppression of the empire, a God who frees slaves and calls for his followers to do likewise.”

Then he stopped.

So there it was, our whole rhetorical strategy laid out in simple terms. And it looked as if the debate would go on for some time, especially about the economic feasibility of such a teaching (“so many of our house churches depend on slaves”). Of course Philemon, who had been pretty quiet, pointed out that if he freed one runaway slave he would have chaos in his household.

As if on cue, Tychicus drew out the letter for Philemon, Apphia and Archippus. By that point everyone in the community wanted to hear what you, Paul, had to say in this more private epistle. They wondered if you would dare to put your wishes more clearly in writing to these three leaders or if you would be circumspect once more. They weren’t disappointed. For even though you had chosen your words carefully to this community that had already experienced persecution, your wishes were pretty clear: that I be released by Philemon as a voluntary good deed, that Philemon welcome me, that he forgive my debts or at least transfer them to you, and that you are asking more than you even dare say in the letter.

By this time it was clear that you were walking a pretty narrow tightrope between what you dare say explicitly in a public epistle and the hidden message of the ethic you are actually espousing. (I should add that such circumspection is appreciated by almost everyone here; no one wants the authorities to pay more attention to us than is absolutely necessary, especially in the current political climate).

But then the totally unexpected happened. As the room fell silent a voice was

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23On the distinction between public and hidden transcripts, see James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1990). While the public transcript of Colossians 3:18—4:1 might appear innocuous to an outsider, the hidden transcript—the jubilee text for those who had ears to hear—was socially, economically and politically subversive.

24Philemon 13-14, 17-21.
raised at the back, “What about the women?”

There was a stir as people turned around to see who had spoken. It was Nympha, the textile merchant from Laodicea. As I have mentioned, she was in Colossae on business when your letter arrived. Since she leads the Christian community that meets in her house, she had stayed to hear the reading of the letter.

As the people in the room gaped at her in surprise, especially as they had just heard your letter ask them to send her your greetings, she continued, “Paul doesn’t just talk about slaves here, although that is clearly his main concern; he also addresses husbands and wives. If this really is a story about liberation for slaves, is it also a story about liberation for women? Are women also to be freed from the cruelty and abuse that the heads of households often display? Are women also to be freed from the power of their husbands?”

No one said a word. For some reason none of the men wanted to break their silence. Then Apphia spoke up. “Nympha,” she said, “Paul is concerned in this letter about slaves, not about women.”

Nympha wasn’t convinced. “But you just heard what Paul said to wives. They are to be subject as it is fitting in the Lord. Our Lord is the Lord Messiah, not our husband, and in Jesus we are all to be subject to one another, husbands and wives alike. And Paul tells husbands to love their wives. Such love can only mean that the hierarchy is gone. You know, Apphia, how harshly authority is practiced in our homes. There is no room for that where love is.”

Apphia countered. “Scripture doesn’t support that. It is clear about slaves but not about women. There is no jubilee for women; there’s no provision for women to be set free from their husbands.”

Nympha was having none of it. “Jubilee is rooted in sabbath,” she argued, “and the sabbath laws applied equally to women. It says in the law, ‘On the sabbath you shall not do any work, you or your son or your daughter, your male slave or your female slave.’ Rest and freedom are for men and women equally, whether slave or free.

“And what about the Messiah?” she continued, “Did he not have women followers who provided for him and who proclaimed that he had risen from the dead? Were they not the first to proclaim the gospel of the resurrection?”

She paused. When no one responded, she singled out one man. “Tell me, Tychicus,” she said. “You brought this letter here; you work with Paul. What is Paul’s practice in this matter? Are women subject to an enslaving philosophy that slaves are to be freed from?”

Tychicus answered slowly but truthfully, pointing out that throughout the communities in which you minister there are women in positions of authority—even some

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25 Colossians 4:15.
26 Exodus 20:10; Deuteronomy 5:13.
An Ethic of Liberation

whose husbands are not. "Phoebe is a deacon in Cenchreae, Junia is a prominent 
apostle, Priscilla is a woman who teaches and proclaims the gospel equally with 
(some even think better than) her husband, Aquila, and many other women work 
hard to proclaim the gospel in their respective places," he said.

Apphia remained skeptical, remarking that while women in leadership might go 
over in the larger metropolitan centers such as Rome or Corinth, it’s a different story 
here in the Lycus Valley. But she trailed off as she realized that she was speaking to 
Nympha, not only a successful textile merchant but the leader of a house church in 
Laodicea, just ten miles from Colossae.

Tychicus added that he had heard the formulation “There is no longer Greek and 
Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free” also include 
“There is no longer male and female.”

Nympha pursued the point. "It’s clear that Paul is undermining the structure of the 
household in the empire, especially in relation to slaves. We need to listen clearly to 
his words, for when he suggests that slaves be freed, he does so in the context of the 
whole household system by also mentioning both women and children. My fellow 
believers, you know that when we became part of this Christian community, we gave 
up these allegiances. You know that we all became part of a new household, which 
does not support the hierarchical economic structures of the empire but in which all 
exist for the benefit and mutual service of others. You all experienced the coming of 
the Spirit, promised to both old and young, sons and daughters, slaves and free. You 
know how Paul’s teachings have challenged the very basis of our society by contra-
dicting the emperor’s edicts on compulsory marriage, by urging widows to remain 
single, by urging us all to choose a life free of the encumbrances of marriage. It is 
no surprise then that Paul is also challenging the basis of the paterfamilias, which the 
empire regards as fundamental and which we have replaced with a new household in 
Christ Jesus our Lord."

As she paused, the older Jewish brother slowly got to his feet. “Our sister is right,” 
he said. “We should not let our fear of the emperor keep us from following the call of 
our brother Paul to end these worldly structures. We have suffered for this gospel be-
fore. It may be that we will suffer again. But we are subject to Jesus, not Caesar. And 
we are citizens of the kingdom of the beloved Son, not the empire.

“We now need to spend some time in prayer, so that we may wisely discern how

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28Romans 16:1-12; Acts 18:26; Philippians 4:3; Colossians 3:15.
30In the Leges Juliae "widowers and divorcees of both sexes were expected to remarry after a period of one 
month. Widows at first were expected to remarry after a one year period, but, following protests, that 
period was extended to three years" (Schüssler Fiorenza, "Praxis of Coequal Discipleship," p. 233). Cf. 
1 Corinthians 7; Paul Zanker, The Power of Images in the Age of Augustus (Ann Arbor: University of Michi-
gran Press 1989) n 157
to be a community of mutual submission. And I would like to ask our sister Nympha to lead us in such prayer, for I perceive in her the working of the Spirit." It was a benediction as well as an invitation.

As Nympha prayed, Philemon quietly left and did not return. The meeting ended. Tychicus and I are enjoying the hospitality of Archippus, and tomorrow I await my judgment. Philemon could choose to do as little as the philosophers expect, or he could choose to do even more than you have asked of him. Either way, his choice is not easy.

I am left with one question, the tension between what is safe or prudent to commit to writing when advising these struggling communities on the one hand and the actual outworking of the gospel that is practiced by you and your followers on the other. Perhaps in a hostile world it will never be safe to bluntly state the radical demands of the gospel; from the gospel as Luke told it to us, even Jesus seemed to hold back from speaking clearly until he knew the end was in sight. But his lived ethic conveyed much more than his words. When will the followers of the gospel ever be able to commit to the insecurity of written word the radical ethic they are called to obey? Will it not be until the kingdom has dawned and the glory for which we await has been revealed?

Give my greetings to Epaphras, Aristarchus and especially Luke, who labored so carefully on my behalf. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your Spirit.

What Slaves?

I would really like to believe this reading of Colossians 3:18—4:1, but it raises even more questions for me. I am wondering what this whole discussion of slavery has to do with our world. How would you translate the question of slavery into the twenty-first century? What names would you name?

Listen to this description of working conditions in factories located in “export processing zones,” where low-wage workers make products cheap:

Regardless of where EPZ’s [Economic Processing Zones] are located, the workers’ stories have a certain mesmerizing sameness: the workday is long—fourteen hours in Sri Lanka, twelve hours in Indonesia, sixteen in Southern China, twelve in the Philippines. The vast majority of the workers are women, always young, always working for subcontractors from Korea, Taiwan or Hong Kong. The contractors are usually filling orders for companies based in the U.S., Britain, Japan, Germany or Canada. The management is military style, the supervisors often abusive, the wages below subsistence, the work low-skill and tedious.31

Sure looks like slavery to us. What names would we name? Well, just take a look at the tag in the clothing that you are wearing. If that article of clothing was produced

31 Naomi Klein, No Logo: Taking Aim at the Brand Bullies (Toronto: Vintage Canada 2000) p 205
in what was just called an Economic Processing Zone, then the odds are pretty good that you can name the brand of clothing you are wearing as a slave trader. And all of us who purchase these goods are thereby complicit in slavery.

But let us allow one of the largest clothing manufacturers in the world to explain how this works. Explaining his decision to shut down twenty-two plants in North America, John Ermantinger, president of the American division of Levi-Strauss, said, “Shifting significant portions of our manufacturing from the U.S. and Canadian markets to contractors throughout the world will give the company greater flexibility to allocate resources and capital to its brands. These steps are crucial if we are to remain competitive.”32 Translation? Move the production side of the operation to Economic Processing Zones, where there is no restrictive labor legislation or bothersome environmental protection laws, thereby producing the clothing more cheaply and releasing more resources to the more important local task of advertising the brands.

It all sounds rather sinister when you put it that way.

There is nothing innocent about economic oppression. There is no room for Christians to be “balanced” and “careful” when we are talking about an economic idolatry that will sacrifice children in its service. Slavery is sinister no matter how it gets packaged.

Then what are we to do? How do we proclaim Colossians’ liberating word to slaves when they are halfway around the world? It’s not as if we have any power over their working conditions. It’s not as if they are our slaves whom we need to release.

But that’s just the point. They are our slaves. Every time we step into a Wal-Mart or Niketown or Gap or Winners and exclaim over the great deal we can get on an article of clothing, or how trendy we now look, we’ve made sweatshop workers our slaves. Every time we buy coffee that isn’t shade grown and fairly traded, we’ve made those coffee producers and their children into our slaves.33 Every time we have purchased a product—any product—that says Made in China, or Indonesia, or the Philippines, or Sri Lanka, it is pretty likely that we have made someone our slave.

But we have no choice about buying products made in those places. Some things can be bought only from these companies! Buying some of these products is inevitable.

The language of inevitability is the language of empire. Whenever we hear “We have no choice,” our ears should perk up. It is precisely the strategy of the empire to take our imagination captive so that we think we have no choice. When a certain lifestyle seems to be inescapable, you need to realize that you are imprisoned.

The truth is that we have many choices. The simplest action anyone can take is to stop purchasing these products. There are still local tailors and seamstresses who make clothes and sell them in shops, and there are clothes made in cooperatives all over the world that are part of an international fair-trade network. Such clothes are

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32Quoted in ibid., p. 196.

available through Oxfam's Bridgehead stores and through the Ten Thousand Villages stores sponsored by the Mennonite Central Committee. But maybe you can't afford to pay more for clothes that are locally or fairly made. Perhaps you will simply decide to have fewer clothes as a result. Or perhaps you will decide that if you are going to end up wearing sweatshop-produced clothing, then at least you will do it in a way that will serve the poor locally by making your purchases at secondhand shops. That way, a local charity benefits from your purchase.

But maybe that won't be enough for you. You might decide to lobby these corporations to end their oppressive labor practices. Or you might decide to join one of the projects or campaigns that work to end child labor and support workers' rights. Maybe you will lobby your government to withdraw from trade agreements that legitimate oppression and call on your political leaders to draft new legislation that seeks to end the global market's equivalent of slavery.

Our point is that when there are options available—whether various consumer choices or lobbying—to decide not to do anything at all is itself a choice. The Gospels call it the wide and easy path. But we can choose another path. There are ways to proclaim and enact Paul's word of release to slaves, women and children.

All these choices that you list seem overwhelming to me.

That's why we spent so much time talking about an alternative community in the previous chapter. No one can attempt to nurture an alternative imagination on their own without a community gathered around a crucified and risen Lord and enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Perhaps since Paul felt it important to spend a significant amount of time instructing this community about slavery, we should take that seriously and devote some adult Christian education time in our churches to discussing the contemporary manifestations of slavery and how we as followers of Jesus live in the face of it.

That would sure put a different twist on Sunday school in my church. But I want to ask about the issue of parents and children. You discussed in your epistle what Paul's words might mean for husbands and wives, but the passage also talks about fathers and children. Did Paul's liberating message to slaves also apply to parents and children? And what would that look like in the way we structure our families today?

Well, what do you think? If the household structure of women, children and slaves was crucial to the economy of the empire, and if contemporary slavery is crucial to the economy of the empire today, then how is it that the structure of our families, par-

\[34\]Some projects and programs concerned with child labor issues include Coffee Kids, Plaza Esperanza, 1305 Luisa Street, Suite C, Santa Fe, NM 87505 (800-334-9099); United Nations Works Programme, Department of Public Information, Room 5-955, New York, NY 10017 (ask for information on child labor). On general labor issues related to workers in Economic Development Zones, consult International Labour Organization, International Labour Office, 4 Route de Morillons, CH-1211, Geneva 22, Switzerland (41-22-799-6111); U.S. Labor Education in the Americas Project, PO Box 268-290, Chicago, IL 60626 (773-367-6807)
particularly the way we raise our children, is still in service of the empire? Do our children have any function in this empire?

You mentioned earlier the way advertising targets children, so I guess they are seen as valuable consumers.

That's true, children are increasingly targeted as consumers. And where does such targeting happen?

Television would be the obvious place, and the Internet.

Exactly. Television is one of the most obvious places that our children are shaped to be part of an economy of consumption. So maybe one way to wrest our children from the control of the empire is removing the television.35 Such a simple act, but so deeply subversive!

The Internet brings us to an even more insidious form of marketing to our children. Not only does regular Internet service enable companies to place "cookies" on e-mail addresses in order to send targeted marketing, but the in-school computer network Zap Me! "monitors students' paths as they surf the Net and provides this valuable market research, broken down by gender, age and zip code, to its advertisers. Then, when students log on to Zap Me! they are treated to ads that have been specially 'microtargeted' for them."36

This last example brings us to another place where our children are trained to be obedient to the authority of the empire: schools. Schools are the latest avenue for corporations to reach children. With the mandatory viewing of "Channel One" in schools, which reaches an estimated eight million students in North America, as well as cafeteria menu items named by Disney and Kelloggs, fast-food chain kiosks in cafeterias, exclusive sale deals with Pepsi and Coke, sports team sponsorships, and curricula provided by Nike and other corporations, students are now surrounded by advertising in every aspect of their school life.37 This sort of education not only creates consumers but trains our children to be promoters of consumption as well.

What does this have to do with the question of parents—or, in Paul's case, fathers—having authority over their children? This seems to me to be an abdication of authority, not a misuse of it.

Precisely. Remember what Paul says, "Fathers, do not provoke your children, or they may lose heart" (Col 3:21). Handing our children over to the captivity of the empire actually allows the empire to provoke them to become dutiful subjects, obedient consumers who have lost the heart for any kind of resistance.

This is our deepest suspicion of mass, mandatory and state-controlled education.


36Klein, No Logo, p. 94.
37Klein, No Logo, chap. 4.
While it may seem to be self-evidently a good thing that we have established school systems to educate our children, and that it is clearly a matter of civilizational progress for us to attempt to ensure that all children gain literacy and numeracy skills, there is also a downside. You see, the role of schooling in producing docile consumers in the empire is consistent with the vision of mass education from the beginning. We must remember that “schooling” is not the natural and necessary way of educating the young that it purports to be.\(^{38}\) Rather, schooling as we know it is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back no further than the industrial revolution.\(^{39}\) Together with the media, schooling shapes our children into obedient subjects of the empire.

How does all of this relate to my question about parental authority? Are you saying that simply by sending our kids to school we are handing over their formation into the hands of so-called experts who will socialize them to be servants of the empire?

We are at least raising the question.

So what’s the alternative? Are you saying we all have to send our children to Christian schools?

Actually we believe we need to rethink the whole notion of schooling—Christian or otherwise.\(^{40}\) Our question is this: if it is true that schooling is an institution of the modernist progress myth and is preoccupied with quantification, testing, standardization, passivity, docility and consumption resulting in a dazed, numbed-out, stupefied, disinterested, disempowered and unmotivated population of unthinking consumers, then why are Christians playing this educational game of schooling at all?\(^{41}\) Why are we subjecting our children to an institutionalized education system that strips them of their creativity, discourages alternative thinking and literally makes them “lose heart”? And insofar as Christian schools are applauded in our society as producing fine, middle-class, hardworking and hard-consuming citizens, we are not sure that they are providing much of an alternative.

So what would an alternative educational practice look like?

Let’s begin by asking the question of what education is for. Why do we think it is important to “get” an education?

\(^{38}\)From a postmodern perspective, we need to “denaturalize” the idea of schooling and demonstrate that this is a cultural construct designed for social control. See Peter McLaren, Critical Pedagogy and Predatory Culture: Oppositional Politics in a Postmodern Age (New York: Routledge, 1995).


\(^{40}\)An example of such a rethinking of education is the Small School in the U.K. See Satish Kumar, “Human-Scale Education: Re-inventing Schools to Meet Real Needs,” Green Teacher 73 (2004): 9-13. See also David Sobel, Place-Based Education: Connecting Classrooms & Communities, Nature Literacy 4 (Great Barrington, Mass.: Orion Books, 2004).

Well, apart from all the lofty language about the benefits of gaining literacy skills and knowledge—that is, the "three R's"—I think the real issue behind education these days is that it is the prerequisite for life in our society. Without an education there are few doors open to us for employment, few paths up the career ladder.

Interesting metaphor, isn't it—"up"? The proper place for an educated person in our society is "up." Wendell Berry has some comments on this metaphor. Observing that "education is the way up" and that the popular aim of education is to put everyone "on top," Berry wryly notes, "Well, I think that I hardly need to document the consequent pushing and tramping and kicking in the face" involved in getting to the top and staying there. He muses that perhaps "up" is "the wrong direction." We would add that "up" is the wrong metaphor and misshapes the imagination of our young. Rather than instilling in them a desire to get to the top, to move up, we want to encourage our children to develop a sense of calling and service, including an awareness that this may require a process of downward mobility, a decision not to strive for the top but to care for those who are on the bottom.

Environmental ethicist David Orr points out, "Education is no guarantee of decency, prudence or wisdom." Indeed "more of the same kind of education will only compound our problems." Orr questions education from an ecological perspective. Simply stated, Orr wants to know, if we are the most educated people in history, then why are we so ecologically blind, stupid and malevolent? Why does a rise in linguistic literacy seem to parallel a concomitant increase in ecological illiteracy? In biblical terms, what is lacking is wisdom. And if our children are not to lose heart in this confusing and fragmentary culture, then we need to instill wisdom in them.

How do you do that?

Primarily by example, we suspect. If they are raised in a household and a community that exercise the kind of ethic of secession and virtue we have been talking about in the last few chapters, it is certainly more likely that they will have the resources within themselves to live an alternative life. And if their imagination is shaped by the life of that community, its literature, poetry, music and art—and most foundationally, its subversive narrative of a kingdom that turns the values of the empire on their heads—then that liberated imagination will, we pray, engender a liberated child. We hope that our children will not need to secede from the empire, because they were never captive to it.

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But doesn't this mean that you'll need to isolate your children from the world? Won't they end up being social misfits?

We hope so. Yes, social misfits, that's what we long for. May it be that we raise up a generation of social misfits, because to "fit into" this culture, to find your place of comfort in it, is to be accommodated to the empire. We have argued that this is precisely what this subversive little tract called Colossians is arguing against.

But no, it's not a matter of isolationism. The issue here is not to isolate our children from the world but to expose them to the world through the liberating vision of a biblical worldview. Precisely where the powers that be don't want children to make connections, don't want them to really see, we want our children's eyes to be opened. We want our kids to see through the targeted advertising of McDonald's toys, games and playlands and recognize them as the manipulative come-ons they are. We want them to see through the packaging and grease in order to see that the stuff being served is not food. We want our little girls to be offended, not enamored, by Barbie's figure. We want them to know that while the news of war that they are constantly hearing on the radio and on the street makes them worry, there are other little girls in places like Palestine, Israel, Iraq, Colombia, Guatemala, Sierra Leone and Zimbabwe who have to live with the daily fear of war in their very neighborhoods. We want them to think about the little girls who work the fields producing cash crops or who slave in the sweatshops producing cute clothes for little girls in North America.

But that's not all. If all of this is rooted in our desire that our children grow up to be people of deep prophetic discernment, we also long that they be wise. Wisdom is a matter of making connections. To be wise is to know one's place in the world and to know the web of interconnections in which one lives. So it is important to be able to identify the migratory and nonmigratory species of birds in the neighborhood and to take delight in those creatures. It is important to know that there are foxes, and now coyotes, in the ravine down the street and to know what kinds of environmental factors make these species either flourish or decline. To be wise is to be able to make connections between the food you eat, the store where it was purchased, the transportation systems that brought that food, the land where it was produced and the people who produced it. It's good to know why the local organic strawberries this year were so small and how that might be related to climate change. And children should know how to grow their own food and be involved in the garden work, rejoicing in the harvest. Just as we want them to see through the lies of the empire, so also do we want them to delight in the truth that is still to be received from this gift known as creation. Our prayer is that they will have a rich imagination and an abiding curiosity about this world God has given us, so that they will learn how to be careful and loving stewards of our creational home.

We could go on and on, but the point we're making is simply this. From a Christian perspective influenced by this reading of Colossians, responsible parental au-
An Ethic of Liberation

Authoritative and responsible education of the young, is an authority that subverts the principalities and powers of the culture and educates our children for discipleship. Whether this educational responsibility is exercised in schools, churches or homes, the goal is the same: to raise up children who are subversive to the empire because they are subjects of the kingdom. Parents, do not provoke your children, do not break them, and for God's sake, do not offer them up for sacrifice before the idols of our age. Model for them an alternative way of life, a kingdom vision with a lifestyle and daily habits that engender the virtues of compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, forgiveness, love, peace, gratitude, wisdom and worship. Then, whatever they do, in word or deed, will be done in the name of the Lord Jesus.45

45On children see also Marva Dawn, Is It a Lost Cause? Having the Heart of God for the Church's Children