

ESSAY 1

WHEN GOOD EVANGELICALS READ BADLY – BIBLE STUDIES AND ESSAYS

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Evangelical Christians read the Bible.

Being able to read is a great privilege; to read God's Book the Bible is a greater privilege; to have one's own copy to read is an even greater one although Christians in the West so often take this, and so much else, for granted.

But studying the Bible well is actually not all that easy and reading it does not always mean we understand it as well as we could or should, given our high claims and high standards. When we read we do not always use the same set of rules which the original writers used when writing; nor do we always understand what they had in mind and what their intention was as they wrote. As well we very often try to impose our intentions, our agendas, our own interpretations on what they have written rather than doing the hard work of finding out their point of view.

The following essays are written for anyone who is interested in knowing how to do Bible Study better, especially at a somewhat more advanced level. They are not aimed at beginners but are however meant to be straightforward and not very technical or academic. They are meant to assist Bible Study leaders and other serious readers who might be thankful for a bit of help.

The first essay on 'Guidelines' for Bible Study is designed to highlight some of the most common mistakes made by modern Western Evangelicals worldwide, and not only in my native Australia. The other essays are linked together by the way in which they discuss these mistakes and also show how various individual Bible texts can be read better and more constructively. Very often I will show where I think a commonly accepted view is wrong and the tone will seem to be negative and argumentative (and of course slaying other people's sacred cows is always deeply resented and therefore dangerous) but the search for truth is itself positive and I hope these essays will help some Christian somewhere, somehow and sometime.

For those who want to know where I am 'coming from,' I was born in 1945 in NSW, Australia, and when I was 6 ½ years old I knew 'Jesus loves me because the Bible tells me so.' Since the age of 15 I have been grappling in one way or another with the questions which are found in the essays which follow. I have had the very great privilege of some years of formal theological training and enjoy a modest

competence in reading the Greek of the NT (New Testament).

The following essays will, I hope, reflect the Bible-reading tradition known as 'Christ-centred Biblical Theology.' The views expressed in them are my own and based on my own reading of Bible texts. I have avoided using later writers and secondary sources and I am happy to say that all the following essays are **FREE OF COPYRIGHT**. The 'Guidelines' for Bible reading which form the first essay are not meant to be exhaustive but rather meant to supplement other books you should read on how to study the Bible, but I will sometimes try to correct or improve what those books say, and the collected Essays which follow are designed to illustrate many of the points made in the 'Guidelines' and to stimulate further thinking.

I encourage you to copy and to quote these essays as freely as you may wish, although like almost all writers I would like to be acknowledged as the source. May the Lord God bless us all as we read his word.

The following essays are planned and may be added to from time to time:

- 1 Some guidelines for Bible Study among adult Evangelicals in the West.
- 2 What can we learn from Matthew 1:17 and its 14 generations?
- 3 The Primacy of the Apostles in the NT.
- 3A Evangelism: an Appendix to Essay C
- 4 What is the 'Fruit' of the 'Vine' in John 15?
- 5 Why does Jesus teach in parables and Paul quote Isaiah 6 at the end of Acts 28?
- 6 Who is an 'Ambassador of Christ' in 2 Cor 5:20?
- 7 'Living sacrifices' – How do Romans 12:1 and Romans 12:4—5 fit together?
- 8 Peter and charismatic evidences in Acts 9,10,11.
- 9 'You are hereby accused ...' In court with I Peter 3:15
- 10 Six generations of the faithful in the NT.

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ESSAY ONE

SOME GUIDELINES FOR BIBLE STUDY AMONG ADULT EVANGELICALS IN THE WEST

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1: Beware the Spirit of your age: We are thinking here of the dominant spirit or tendency or outlook or worldview of any human society at any time. Each one of us born into a culture will be shaped by that culture in a multitude of subtle ways we are not aware of. We are unwitting captives to it. We naturally accept the things going on around us as the norm, but when the Gospel comes into our lives we see that it is a very different message – God's message – one which must be allowed to challenge and judge all the tendencies and values in our own society and in every other human culture. The Gospel finds us *conformed* to our world but seeks to *transform* us, that is to free us from our captivity to this world. When we read the Bible we cannot stop ourselves bringing with us the values of our society but we must constantly be careful not to impose those cultural values on our reading of the Bible, but rather to have our values challenged and changed by our reading.

2: Beware your own spiritual 'Default Settings': The spirit and tendency of every age and every culture is marked by sin, therefore it will be more or less resistant to God's truth, rebellious against his authority, and deluding and spiritually dangerous to Christians who are trying to conform to a new culture with new spiritual default settings. So what does the Spirit of our age look like and what dangers does it hold for us? Especially, how does it stop us reading and understanding the Bible in an effective manner, which is our main concern in this paper? We must each of us become more aware of what we as individuals bring to the table when we read the Scripture:

2(a) Our modern western culture is marked by an extreme, even pathological individualism, isolationism and mobility. For instance our families are nuclear (consisting of two parents and their children only) or subnuclear (single-parent families) and our sense of community is under attack, however both parts of the Bible which we want to read and understand are very different from this. Both the OT (Old Testament) and the NT (New Testament) are communalistic – they had large extended family units, with low technology and very little social or physical mobility.

2(b) Along with (a) above goes our strong sense of democracy and social levelling and human rights. Further, in our society there is no TRUTH which is 'given' from

above or from outside – we each make our own truth and everyone's opinion is equal so we resent authority both in state and church. We Christians are thus, as just one example, constitutionally unable to read the NT and accept what it is saying about the centrality and primacy of the Apostles in the early churches. Our churches today do not have apostles so we airbrush them out of the NT text. We simply don't see them, or resent them if we do find them there.

2(c) Our society is changing very rapidly; our sense of history shrinks; we seek instant gratification and are orientated to the present, the here and now, and are impatient with either the past or the future. Reading the Bible demands that we reorientate ourselves to both the distant past and the distant future – to eternity in fact – but the gap between our culture and the Bible world is getting wider and at an increasing rate.

2(d) We are prey to fads and fashions: Books and ideas can appear suddenly, disturb a lot of people, and disappear leaving mainly hurt and damage. This is as true in church life as in secular life and we must guard against it. The text of scripture is old but it is tried and true and the old ways are usually the best ways.

3: It's not all about YOU: This points to perhaps the strongest and most disturbing thing I notice in modern Evangelical church life. We seem to foster an unthinking self-centredness which approaches arrogance and which is carried over into how we read the Bible. It is of course old-fashioned human pride at work. When we pick up a photo whom do we look for first? Ourselves, surely. It is the same with the scriptures – they are a mirror in which we expect to find ourselves. Nay – we DEMAND to find ourselves. Finding ourselves in every portion of scripture has become, among Evangelicals, a sort of sacred duty – the height of piety and faithfulness. But what if we are NOT there in a certain text we are reading – how then can we fulfil what we see as our sacred duty? Often the answer is that we will strive to force ourselves into the picture by hook or by crook, and the results are often very crook indeed. We will twist and torture perfectly innocent and unsuspecting parts of scripture until we force from them the confession that they were talking about US all the time.

Now most of us are well aware of the rule that we must *exegete* and not *eisegete* the scriptures. These two Greek words mean that we must lead out the meaning that is already there in the text, and not lead in the ideas and values and conclusions that are already in our own minds. We must let the text talk to us and change us, rather than somehow changing the text to suit ourselves. Broadly speaking we know these things and agree with them, but not so many of us are aware that the thing that we Evangelicals most often inject into the Bible text is OURSELVES, so then it is no surprise that we so readily manage to find ourselves in every text. It is something we do immediately we begin reading and we do it without thinking about it because it has become our default setting as Evangelicals.

Preachers can encounter real trouble here. Even though we are Christians we believers can still suffer from itching ears and lustful hearts and always the pressure is on preachers and teachers to tell their people what the people want to hear rather than what the particular Bible passage may be saying, with the result that our prejudices and presuppositions and innate self-worship are confirmed and rewarded rather than challenged and changed.

4: Beware 'The Great Evangelical Leap': This sounds dangerous and it is. It is the reverse of the process of inserting our modern selves into an ancient text where we have no business. 'The Great Evangelical Leap' is a way of describing how we read an ancient text, reach in and grasp a single verse, and then surpass any Olympic gymnast, even Superman himself, by leaping over nearly 2,000 years of history, crossing continents, language borders, and revolutions of all kinds, and arriving a split second later in our own time and in our own group, with that verse held triumphantly aloft and intact and not a hair out of place. It is breathtaking to watch and I see it all the time. The painful thing is that these 'Leaping Evangelicals' are either not aware of what they are doing or if they are aware of it they think it is the sort of 'application' of scripture that is required of them – indeed the very height of piety. The level of teaching among us on this point is very poor and there is much confusion. [For more on this key word '**Application**' see point 15 below].

5: Beware the 'Evangelical Fruit Salad': (i) To Prepare this dish – Take: 1 can of Paul; 1 can of John; 1 can of Matthew; 1 can of Hebrews; 1 can of Mark; 1 can of Peter; 1 can of Luke; 1 can of James; a pinch of Jude; 1.5 cans Piety. (ii) Mix thoroughly. (iii) Serve.

6: Beware of the 'Traditions of the (.....) Fathers': In the gap provided you can insert the name of your own tradition, such as Catholic, Evangelical, Lutheran, Charismatic etc. Every denomination, every creedal statement and every tradition has its own favourite ways of reading any Bible passage and its younger members learn to read these texts without ever having to think about them. But these traditions can often stop us from reading for ourselves what is in front of us, and our tradition may simply be wrong at some given point, so how can the truth in a passage break through to us if it is always obscured by the traditions in our particular church? I try always to beware of the 'Traditions of my Evangelical Fathers' but at the same time to read the Bible's documents as carefully as I am able to – **for myself**.

7: Beware of 'Misappropriated' Authority: Human life is all about authority. We all want to be the boss, we all want to run our own lives. So what happens when we pick up the Bible and start reading it? Who then is the boss – where does the authority lie in this interaction between the text and the reader? Evangelicals like to talk about the '*Authority of the Scriptures*' but very often I see the authority lying with the reader or speaker and not with the text being read. It is the reader who is clearly in charge of the process, and the Bible text takes a back seat, or is simply used as a proof-text to support a speaker's favourite idea, or used as a tool to build a scheme, or

a weapon to smite an opponent. But in each of these cases the reader has misappropriated the authority which belongs to the Bible text. We arrogate to ourselves an authority which is not ours, and this stems from arrogance on our part. Certainly we act arrogantly when we say 'How can I use this passage?' rather than humbly asking the question 'How does this passage seek to use me?' Humility is required when we read the Scripture.

8: Resist the urge to be an 'instant expert': (1) Read the whole Bible – God's book must become your book. You need to grasp its big picture and this can hardly happen if there are parts of it you have never read.

(2) Be humble – expertise takes many years to build up. A former college principal correctly observed that many home Bible Studies involved a 'pooling of ignorance.' This could be because of lack of formal training but also because everyone present is encouraged to express an opinion – it is the modern way after all. In today's society in general we are encouraged to express an opinion on everything even when it is quite clear to ourselves that we know almost nothing about it, and this also influences us as Christians when we meet and study and discuss the Bible, so let us all try to continue to grow in our knowledge and strive for expertise – with humility.

9: Avoid piety and sentimentality. The scripture itself avoids these, even when it is otherwise packed with emotion. It tends to favour the bare facts and to be hard nosed and hard hitting, especially in relation to the 'passion' or suffering of the Lord Jesus where so many later readers have been so mawkish. The scripture tends to say: 'These things happened folks – let's get over it and get on with it.'

10: CONTEXT, CONTEXT, CONTEXT: So important I said it thrice – and in capital letters! There is always more to learn when it comes to Bible Study – you will die long before you learn everything. We will consider different types of context:

10 (a) Textual Context: You have chosen a text to study: Where does your chosen text sit within its paragraph, its chapter, its book, its Testament? How do we make sense of this text in terms of the whole Bible? What words does it use and what are the grammatical constructions in it and around it? Who is talking, where and when and to whom and about what? The checklist needed here is very long indeed and you can hardly put too much time and effort into such textual questions.

10 (b) Historical and Social Contexts: There are also larger Historical and Social Contexts which must be understood if we are to understand a text. Ancient societies were very different from ours: their language was different – their worldview included slavery on a vast scale – they had ancestor worship and mass illiteracy and they lacked scientific understanding. The result is that we simply cannot pick up the NT letters and read ourselves into them – we weren't there, they were not written to

us directly, and we don't fit most of the time. We need to understand ancient history better because even the New Testament is by now very old indeed. Fortunately the tools for understanding all these contexts are becoming better all the time because there simply are more real experts researching these topics and publishing their results than ever before in Christian history. This is very encouraging for us, and further encouragement comes from the fact that recent 'Study Bibles' such as those of the NIV and ESV have extensive footnotes which are so informative, accurate and faithful that they really form an almost complete Bible College course in Biblical Theology. They are not perfect, of course, but they are well worth a thorough reading by anyone interested in building up accurate Bible knowledge.

11: Jewish Context: As time goes by our modern western Christianity has less and less feel for the Jewishness of the NT documents. The NT writers were all Jewish (with the possible exception of Luke) and the 'Jewish Question' is never far below the surface of any portion of the text. The relationship between Christianity and Judaism, that is between JESUS and MOSES, is the subtext of much of the NT and if we are ignorant of and insensitive to the Jewish context we will never be able to do full justice to many texts.

12: Do not 'Cut and Paste' Bible Passages. This warning is important as we try to notice and respect the context of a passage. It is true that young Christians have to cut and paste texts from the four Gospels in order to build up a composite picture of Jesus Christ himself as they go through the process of deciding whether to commit themselves to him, but mature believers should try to outgrow this approach to NT texts generally. We must understand that not only is each writer an individual and different from all the others but individual letters from the same writer can address very different questions and have quite different contexts from time to time. Each writer must be respected and allowed to speak to us in his own voice, but all Christians face the temptation to replace the thoughts and words of the Apostle with our own thoughts and words – the words we wish he had written, or which he is at fault for NOT having written. We make these changes subtly and invisibly in our minds but it is all the more dangerous because it is invisible.

This warning against 'cut and paste' is more important than might appear at first, not least because it prevents laziness in us. By this I mean that when a question arises in any passage **the answer must be sought within that passage** or in material as close as possible to that passage. The Bible writers were very clever, so we can be assured that the answer will almost always be there in the same context – you just have to do the work of looking for it. So do not jump to another NT writer whose topic and context is likely to be very different, cut out part of his text, and paste it into the first text. This is lazy, disrespectful to both the writers involved and to the Lord, and often yields false and misleading results which are in turn unhelpful and disrespectful to modern readers and hearers. * Essay 4 on *The Vine, the Branches and the Fruit in John 15* especially illustrates this point.*

13: Think 'Paragraph' not 'Single verse.' (a) Single verses all too often become 'proof texts' but frequently all they prove is how little we understand them.

(b) The original NT writers did not use punctuation but their thoughts usually fall into convenient groups we call paragraphs. These then are the basic units of their writing and our reading – whole paragraphs – not single words or even single verses. We must **exegete paragraphs** rather than verses because the paragraph controls the verse and provides the overall context of the Apostle's thought – the larger context which we too must observe. *Essay 7 (below) on Romans 12:1 explores this further.

14: Respect the Old Testament: This is another very very big point which deserves very close attention indeed and we will note three parts to it:

(a) Every NT text has an OT background of some sort – every one without exception – so there can be no proper understanding of a NT text without an understanding of its OT background, whether quite specific or very generalised.

(b) Do the work – spend time reading the texts – join the dots. Our lives are too busy, but the more time we spend reading the OT the more links we will see to the NT and the more OT echoes will will hear in the NT.

(c) OT quotations in the NT are not random nor are they merely used to illustrate a point. They are in no way dispensable or decorative, but almost always they act as very serious and very skilful EXEGESIS of the OT. As a vital part of their overall job the Apostles are deliberately showing us how to exegete the OT properly, so if you have ignored the OT quotations in a NT passage you in turn have not done your job. The NT writer clearly valued the OT text and wants the reader to value it as well, so you must do what he has already done – you must go to the OT text he quotes, ask how it worked in that OT context, and try to work out why the Apostle is using it at this point in his own argument and how it enriches, undergirds and indeed very often CONTROLS his context. The OT both controls and drives the NT! It does – truly!

A big task overall? Yes indeed. After reading this paragraph your task as Bible reader and Bible Study leader has probably just got a whole lot bigger!

15: Avoid the temptation to 'Instant Application.' Sound application can only follow sound exegesis, so application is the very LAST step in a lengthy process, not the first. Put briefly, the exegesis of a passage must come first and drive the application – the 'Exegetical Imperative' must precede the 'Pastoral Impulse.'

More on 'Application.' The demand for 'Application' has become a vital part of our

default settings as Evangelicals, but other streams of Christianity do not experience this to the same extent. Overall I find 'Application' to be a very 'fuzzy' idea which we need to think about more clearly. What on earth does it mean – Can we remove some of the fuzz and see if there really is anything inside?

Many Evangelicals will think of 'Application' in an outward and visible sense so that when the Scripture says 'Visit the prisoners' they obey by going and visiting the prisoners. That is a visible and entirely correct reaction to the Scripture, but many other Scripture passages are not like that – they are not the sort of thing which will launch us into action. Many of the OT Psalms, for instance, are inward, meditating passages full of praise and thanks to God. We are invited to read these ancient poems and react to them, but their impact on us is likely to be inward and heart-orientated and not outwardly visible. Likewise many sermons can be effective because they cause great inward changes where little or nothing may be seen on the outside.

As far as I am concerned this inner impact is just as much 'Application' as any outward movement of the body. Reading a Bible text is itself 'Application' – and so is trying to understand it, asking questions about it, changing one's opinion about it, even simply believing it! Internal, invisible impact by a Bible portion is just as much 'Application' as any external action we might make, and it is exactly this that I am concerned with in these 'Guidelines' and in the many pages of 'Essays' which follow – and if my words can help some Christians to understand a little better how they are currently reading the Scriptures then that is the sort of 'Application' I want – internal, invisible, but satisfying.

16: Learn Greek if you can. Not everyone can, of course, but I want to put the challenge out there. Why should you even consider doing so? Because:

⑩ Although it will take some years of hard work it is well worth the effort because it puts you (as closely as is possible today) in the position of the first hearers and readers of the Apostles' words, and that is a rare privilege. It will also, by the way, give you access to the *Greek* version of the OT, which is the text almost always quoted in the Greek NT.

- Even if it is not possible for you to learn Greek you should in any case aim to raise your Bible knowledge to a level which is not less than your secular training and qualifications so that you can be as useful in your church as you are in the working world. Anything less than this may suggest that God is getting your second best.
- When you see young Christians around you who have been given academic ability, always encourage them to seek the best Bible knowledge they are capable of over the course of their whole lives.

7: Test everything – respectfully of course. Test everything in your Bible reading, especially testing your own default settings. Do not be afraid of any question or

person or reputation. Courage and clear thinking are required.

Notes on the 'Cultural Distance' between our world and the world of the NT now follows.

CULTURAL DISTANCE – Between The First Century AD and Today Paul Meeth ORANGE NSW Oct 2017

While basic human needs and characteristics have remained the same throughout history, today's world is very different from that of the first Christians. Our minds are very different from theirs and our ways of thinking and acting are very different from theirs, as are our cultural experiences thus far and expectations for the future.

The NT documents are products suited to their time, written by men of their time for the people of their time. They were not written by people just like us and not written for people just like us and not written just a few months ago. They are **ancient history**. They are products of ancient cultures at a great distance from our own – a gap we must not ignore but which we need to cross carefully with our eyes open – and the following points will try to help us better understand some of the differences between them and us.

What were their '**Spiritual Default Settings**' which would have been already in place before they heard the Gospel for the first time?

In the first century the great majority of people had very little formal education and they could not read or write. They had no need of these things. Quite simply there was nothing to read so there was no need to read – there were no paper products, no books, magazines, newspapers or advertisements. Scrolls or books were prohibitively expensive and everything had to be copied by hand. There was no 'publishing' as we know it, writers were not paid for their work so writing was done by rich amateurs for rich readers like themselves, and a 'reading public' did not really exist anywhere in the West before the London coffee houses in the early 1700s.

Again, infant and mother mortality was very high in the first century while ours in the West is very low. Warfare and natural disasters also killed many people and destroyed many communities. Infectious diseases were not understood and while surgical operations and extractions were carried out it was without any effective anaesthetic or understanding of internal medicine until quite recent times. Children worked very hard from the age of six to seven and the average lifespan was close to 35—40 years. The Roman man ruled his household with absolute power and many men married a number of times because so many women died in childbirth and many had to resort to the adoption of male heirs because none of their male children survived. The vast mass of the working poor were little better than slaves and had no savings, very little

disposable income for discretionary spending, and no state run Social Security such as we enjoy. Consumer goods as we think of them were simply not part of the scene and, compared to the West today, a 'middle class' hardly existed.

The extended family was the basic social and economic unit of society, ruled over by the oldest male – his will was law and his word meant life or death for anyone, including the wife and the oldest son. House ownership was a sign of some wealth, and occupations and tools were inherited. As in many societies which we would today call 'traditional,' loyalty to the family was crucial and shaped by Honour and Shame and Merit and Reward to an extent we can hardly understand. There are frequent references to both honour and shame in the NT and the imagery is very strong and meaningful. The cross of Christ was the ultimate shame but also the Christian's ultimate reward and glory. The long-cherished pagan Roman and Jewish concepts of Merit soon invaded Christianity and banished the concept of Grace from its heart for 15 centuries.

Everything in both the public and private environments had at least one god or goddess attached to it, as Paul notes for us in Acts 17. Households had gods and shrines in abundance, especially the domestic shrine where the ancestors were at least revered and honoured, if not simply worshipped. These ancestors had after all passed on a good name and a dwelling and had successfully protected the family from many calamities which had fallen on other families, so they deserved thanks and respect. The gods of the ancestors had also done their bit so it was essential to keep worshipping them too. Marble tombs of wealthy individuals were often placed beside busy roads, with written invitations for passers-by to shout out “Hello!” to the deceased – a clear attempt to keep the dead person as a member of the living family unit. Within the new universal family of faith called 'Christianity' the common ancestors were the founding saints such as Mary and the Apostles, whose 'merits' could be drawn upon and who could reward those in the family who worshipped them. These pagan beliefs have continued to be very influential even today.

'Conversion' was seen as dangerous because of the anger of the ancestral spirits, and also seen as dishonourable and shameful and disruptive to the family, putting the whole family at risk. More widely in society your conversion was seen, and in many places is still seen, as a radical rejection of your society as it has existed so far. In terms of the Roman Empire, conversion could be seen as a threat to the whole basis of human society and the precious and hard-won 'peace' which Rome had imposed (at least for a time) on an unstable and violent region. Conversion can still be a matter of life or death as we all know – some Jewish families even today hold a burial service for their living but apostate ex-member to reinforce their disgust at what that person has done.

The NT documents are Jewish documents, and Jesus himself was, and still is, Jewish. Jewish people were found widely in the Roman Empire but they were also widely

disliked for their laws of separation and purity and for their 'atheism' or rejection of the pagan gods. They were often subjected to local persecution but their proven long cultural history stood them in good stead and the Caesars continued to give them special exemptions regarding public worship and taxation. Beyond the Jews and Christians, throughout the Empire the imperial family was worshipped as divine, an agreed public cultural requirement even though privately everyone could see the idea was ridiculous. 'Roma' itself was a female goddess and, in the provinces of the Roman Empire, temples to Roma were erected by rich donors in search of imperial honours and merit and local revenues. To be chosen as a local priest of a temple dedicated to Roma was a great but expensive (and potentially very lucrative) honour.

Slavery was universal, with perhaps 20 – 25% of the total population reduced to slavery. They were often regarded as 'living tools' and of less value than pack animals. Slaves had almost no rights, were owned by another person who had power of life or death over them, could not marry legally, could not inherit, and their children were born and remained slaves. Rich Roman senators were sometimes said to own up to 40,000 slaves on farms and businesses spread across the empire. This number may simply mean 'a very great number,' but it may not be so startling when we learn that some Protestant pastors in the southern colonies of America owned up to 65,000 black slaves! Slaves could buy or be granted their freedom but as members of the social class of 'Freedmen' they remained under certain social and financial obligations to their former owners and often acted as a sort of personal bodyguard and political power base for him. They were a direct indicator of his wealth and power.

The NT says little about slavery. For the Apostles in general it was just a fact of daily life, and Paul's own family, as Jews who enjoyed citizenship of the City of Rome itself, must have had influence and money so Paul would have been raised in a slave-owning household. If you were a slave when God called you to faith then you should accept this situation, even while seeking to free yourself for Christ's sake, and work diligently, giving respect to your earthly master while of course asking your heavenly master to help you day by day.

The City of Rome at its very best was what we today would call a third-world country. Human life was cheap, short, nasty and often brutal. There was no street lighting, no sanitation at all so the stench in the poorer areas must have been dreadful, and no effective policing. Law was haphazard and generally corrupt. 'Human Rights' may be part of our thinking but it was certainly not part of theirs. Slavery was punishment, but since it saved you from death it was also a form of mercy, so you could not demand fair treatment, nor even expect any further mercy or generosity. A superior could always show you mercy but not because you had 'rights' as such – more likely he was after some reward known only to himself.

Democracy was unknown except as an abstract idea. Society was highly regimented

and driven by wealth and status, and by ties of reciprocal obligation and gift-exchange called by the confusing term 'Friendship.' The term did not denote being informal bosom-buddies but being in a formal relationship of gifts and promises and mutual obligation. Pontius Pilate was a 'Friend' of Caesar but the two men did not have to be close in personal terms – just in terms of social obligation. Pilate was possibly more of a 'Client' of Caesar who was in turn his 'Patron,' and the whole public and political life and the commercial world of finance and credit was run on the basis of Patron – Client relationships. These two people were usually introduced by a 'Mediator,' often an existing client of the Patron. No person could get far in business without a patron, and the clients of the same patron often became 'Friends.' There were thus many mediators between man and man but the NT insists there is only one possible mediator between God and Man, even Jesus Christ. With all this in mind you should read Paul's letter to Philemon and try to work out what Paul is trying to achieve in terms of Patron--Friend--Client relationships. It is a little historical gem embedded in the matrix of the first century society and does not easily translate into anything we are familiar with today.

An overwhelmingly great difference between their time and ours is their attitude to change and the rate of change. Our world is changing quicker than ever before and will continue to do so. We expect and even welcome change – they did not. Their world did change, but slowly. Travel was slow and often perilous and what we would call 'communication' trod the same path. If you wrote a letter from Jerusalem to Rome you might get a reply in 16 weeks, while we today can call that person on our mobile phone.

Our mind is scientific – theirs was superstitious. They were not trained to think in terms of cause and effect and therefore could not fully understand the physical world of seasons and tides, so when bad things happened they were usually blamed on evil people or evil spiritual forces and everything had a personal rather than mechanical explanation. Our mind is also highly individualistic whereas for them family and group membership were most important. Even Paul, who was so aware of himself as an individual, was nevertheless so attuned to the communal spirit of the First Century that we find it hard to do justice to him and appropriately apply his words to ourselves today. We must proceed with caution and humility because although we think we are the latest and therefore the best representatives of Christianity we Western Evangelicals are actually only a tiny minority in the total sweep of Christian history – the tiniest of slices in God's pizza.

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