

## **“Are You A User, Useless or Useful?”**

### **Philemon**

*Series: Wrestling with God Week 5 Why is the Church Responsible for So Much Injustice?*

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On January 11, 2019, Tire shop technician Cross Scott was test driving a car on the streets of Tucson, Arizona when he spied another vehicle flashing its hazard lights but the driver was slumped over backward. Parking his car, Scott took a rock and smashed the window. Once inside he began administering CPR to the unconscious woman. There is only one problem. He never learned CPR.

Scott, however, *had* watched the TV series *The Office*. On the show, the Dunder-Mifflin employees are taught to administer CPR to the tune of a Bee Gees song: “Stayin’ Alive.” The song’s tempo of 100 beats per minute is perfect for chest compressions. Singing along with Michael Scott in his head, Cross Scott went to work. After a minute or so, the woman, later identified as Carla, came alive and stayed alive. Some months later Cross and Carla were reunited on the Steve Harvey show. Carla, who speaks Spanish, told Scott, “I’m always going to be thankful for what you did,” she said. “And you will always be in my prayers.”

Cross Scott definitely made himself useful in that moment. He is an image of what the Church should be. Jesus sends us to the countless people stranded, struggling and dying on the roadside of life, to help and give life. So when these situations arise are we useful, useless or users? That’s today’s wrestling match: Why is the Church responsible for so much injustice? Many say the Church is completely useless and in fact has used many people. Far from helping people stay alive the Church is responsible for the enslavement, abuse, and murder of multitudes.

Bringing up the Crusades is a popular criticism among critics of Christianity. There are eight official Crusades which marshalled the forces of Europe to take possession of the Holy Land. The first Crusade reached its goal and set up a Christian Kingdom in 1099 AD. The Crusaders were in the land for about 200 years but they gradually lost ground to waves of Muslim armies and left in 1291.

Are Christians the only ones who advocate war? No. The Muslims captured the Holy Land from the Christians in 637 AD and went on to capture all the Christian lands along North Africa and Spain until they were finally stopped in France. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Ottoman Turks captured Constantinople and later advanced all the way to the gates of Vienna. In the 13<sup>th</sup> century Mongols left the steppes of Asia and rapidly conquered from the Korean peninsula to Eastern Europe.

Historians regard the Mongol devastation as one of the deadliest episodes in history. In addition, Mongol expeditions may have spread the bubonic plague across much of Asia and Europe, helping to spark the Black Death of the 14th century.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongol\\_invasions\\_and\\_conquests](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mongol_invasions_and_conquests)

So Christians are by no means the only cause of war. Perhaps a more accurate criticism is Jesus, the founder of Christianity, preached peace and praying for your enemies while the leaders of these other faiths and peoples preached the honor and courage of conquest in battle.

The Church was also a user in it's support for anti-Semitism, the subjugation of women, the promotion of slavery, the massacre of tribal peoples, clergy sex scandals and the persecution of homosexuals. That's a long list and I can't deal with them all. So let me give a few principles.

**Christianity was Used** by powerful people to perpetrate these abuses. When Jesus sent his movement out to make disciples of all nations, they had no power. Many were slaves, women, persecuted by Gentile and Jewish neighbors. From the very start they proclaimed a radical message in the history of the world. Paul reminds the Galatians:

So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Galatians 4:26-28)

All the divisions, subjugations and hierarchies no longer exist in the God's Kingdom. So what happened? Why didn't Christianity achieve a barrier-free beloved community? Once the Roman Empire became Christian, the Emperors seized on passages which justified their position and hierarchy and ignored the others.

I performed a wedding ceremony last week and the mother of the Bride said to me, "I'm so glad they don't read the passage "Wives, submit yourselves to your own husbands as you do to the Lord" (Ephesians 5:22). I just smiled. But what many forget is the verse before this one is, "Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Ephesians 5:21) and for nine verses after this one Paul instructs the husbands to sacrificially love their wives as Christ does for the Church. In the ancient patriarchal world this never was included. Another radical practice throughout the New Testament is acceptance of women as leaders in the church. Mary Magdalene, Mary and Martha, Priscilla, Phoebe, Lydia, the seven daughters of Philip – they all are honored as leaders in the church.

Another criticism is the Church's support of slavery. A passage used to justify it is:

Slaves, obey your earthly masters with respect and fear, and with sincerity of heart, just as you would obey Christ. Obey them not only to win their favor when their eye is on you, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from your heart. Serve wholeheartedly, as if you were serving the Lord, not people, because you know that the Lord will reward each one for whatever good they do, whether they are slave or free. And masters, treat your slaves in the same way. Do not threaten them, since you know that he who is both their Master and yours is in heaven, and there is no favoritism with him. (Ephesians 6:5-9)

Slavery is a very old institution practiced at one time or another by every culture on the planet and still going on today. It's clear Paul does not believe slavery is right. He accepts it as is. Why?

Throughout the New Testament there is the belief that **Christ Will Soon Return to Put Things Right.**

For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord forever. (I Thessalonians 4:16-17)

Paul believed Jesus would return to end slavery, oppression, poverty, class distinction and war and put all things right. He was convinced this would happen in his lifetime so he did not feel the need to mount a movement to end slavery or address other social problems.

While we still believe Jesus can return at any moment, over the last two thousand years the Church, in its best moments, has not been an abusive User or a Useless Bystander but a Useful Servant. As Tim Keller points out in his book the way to do this is not to be less Christian but to be fully Christian: to live and embody what Jesus' taught.

Paul shows his disdain for slavery and his desire to see it end with the small letter to Philemon. Let me set the stage for you.

His name is "Useful". A rather strange title to hang on a child. "Useful" - maybe his parents hoped he would live up to his name. "Hey Useful, go make yourself useful and do the dishes." "Useful" is the English translation. In his native tongue his name is Onesimus. Not a name for generals, senators or Roman citizens. It is commonly used for slaves. And that's what Onesimus is: a slave. But as a slave, Onesimus is not helpful, handy, or good to have around.

In fact Onesimus, Mr. Useful, is just plain useless ... according to his master, Philemon. We don't know how Onesimus became a possession of Philemon. He may have been born into slavery, a prisoner of war, or paying off his debts. Whatever the reason, Onesimus is a servant in the household of Philemon and his wife Apphia. A slave is a possession not a human being. They have no rights. A master holds the power of life or death over them.

But there's one thing more you should know about Philemon. He is a Christian. Years before he and Apphia met Paul, a traveling Jewish tentmaker, who spoke about a Jewish holy man named Jesus. According to Paul, this Palestinian carpenter and self-taught rabbi is the Son of the one true God. Although this Jesus died as a criminal by Roman execution, Paul declares his death set all people free from their sins and the power of death. But the most fantastic part of all is Jesus rose from the dead and opened the way to eternal life for all who believe in and follow Him. At first, Philemon and Apphia were skeptical and intrigued by this Good News. This strange and foreign promise of forgiveness and redemption struck a chord in their hearts and eventually they were baptized into the faith. Philemon was forever in Paul's debt.

They shared their new found joy with their family and the slaves of their household. Some were baptized ... but not Onesimus. Maybe Onesimus considered him Paul too zealous and narrow minded. Every nation under the sun worships gods. Why is the God of the Jews superior to them all? How can a man rise from the dead? No, there are too many questions and Onesimus isn't going to bow his head to any baptism. His body may be completely in the hands of his master. But Philemon will never get his soul.

This refusal by Onesimus ratcheted up the tension between slave and master. Already, Onesimus accumulated several blunders on his balance sheet. Broken pottery, mismanaged funds, poor trades in the marketplace. Irritated by all these mishaps, Philemon started calling him "Useless". "Useless, bring the pitcher over here, and don't drop it." "Useless, fetch my steed, and do it right this time." "Useless, carry these bundles out back, if you can." Every "Useless" was like a nail driven into his ego, a tightening of the chain around his neck. One day, Philemon even said, "You know Useless, if you would become a Christian, Jesus might be able to make something useful out of you."

That last tongue lashing sent him over the edge. While the darkened household slumbered, Onesimus grabbed a few silver trinkets from the treasury, a bit of food from the pantry and stole off in the night. Like all fugitive slaves he made his way to the imperial capital: Rome. But his money soon ran out and no one would hire him. Hungry, bitter and alone, Onesimus turned in desperation to the only person he knew in Rome: Paul. The preacher is a prisoner of the Emperor. He awaits trial before the Imperial tribunal in the capital city. Onesimus doesn't know how a prisoner could help him but it was worth a try.

Paul doesn't remember him at first. It is only when Onesimus mentions his master's name that a hint of recognition spreads across the weathered face. Initially, Onesimus deceives Paul. "My master sent me to care for you, to be your servant." Roman prisoners depended on friends outside the jail for their food, clothing, and daily needs. Paul gratefully accepts the generous gift. Onesimus receives room and board among the Christians of Rome. Gradually, over the weeks, a change occurs in the fugitive. Perhaps it is in the way the other believers treat him not as a slave, but as a brother. Paul's friendship calls out the best in Onesimus. The slave becomes like a son to Paul. And through the old apostle's love, Onesimus learns something new about himself. Though his body was enslaved to another, he believed he is free so long as he kept his soul to himself. No one can chain it, bind it, bend it or break it. Onesimus will always be free inside so long as he keeps his soul to himself.

One day, Paul asks Onesimus, "Do you want to be free, my son?" The question brought the slave up short. "Free from my master Philemon?" Onesimus inquired. "No," the old man replied, "truly free." As Paul told him about the freedom Jesus gives, Onesimus began to understand the grip he held on his heart was not freedom but a stranglehold. The anger, bitterness, shame and resentment stored up over decades of slavery chained and bound his soul. He was not free at all inside. So, in one simple act, he released his tight grip and surrendered his soul to Christ. Through the water of baptism, he became truly free.

But something still burdens the newborn Christian. "Paul," he cautiously says, "I have not been entirely honest with you. My master Philemon did not send me to serve you. I escaped. I am a fugitive." It was a dreadful, difficult sin to confess but it confronted Paul with an even more painful decision. Onesimus had become very dear to Paul, like a son. He knew that captured slaves were nearly always tortured and executed. How could he send him back? And yet he also loved Philemon. This break between Onesimus and Philemon must be healed. Thus, Paul resolved that there was only one thing to do.

The knock on the door was loud and urgent. Philemon opened the portal and stopped short. There in the entry way stood the fugitive. "Onesimus" Philemon growled in a low threatening

voice. But as he reached out to grab his property by the collar, the slave thrust into his hand a small scroll. Puzzled, the master unraveled the leather roll and poured over the letter. His eyes widened as he read the name Paul. This, in essence, is what he wrote,

Philemon, my dear friend and partner

As your father in the faith of Christ, I could be tough and order you to do the right thing. But I would rather, on the basis of the love we share, to ask a favor of you. You know me, Paul, I am an old man, a slave and prisoner of Christ Jesus. The favor I ask is for my son Onesimus. Yes that's right, I said my son. He became my son while I was in prison. The Lord set his heart free.

He tells me that you once called him "Useless." But now he has become useful to you and me. Although it breaks my heart, I send him back to you. I want to keep him here with me. In a way, he is your representative. He cared for my needs just the way you would have if you were here. Now I send him to you as my representative. Welcome him as though you were welcoming me. If he has done you any wrong, if he has stolen from you, if he owes you anything, put it on my tab. The Lord knows that you owe me more than he owes you. But let's call it even.

Perhaps the reason he ran away is so that you could have him back for good. He left you a slave, a possession, a fugitive. He returns as a person, but even more, as a believer in Jesus Christ, and your brother in the Lord. I could force you to accept him. But I would rather you willingly welcome him with open arms. Onesimus is no longer your slave. He is your brother.

Over the centuries, the Church has done a lot wrong. We need to confess when we've used people. There are also many times when Christians have stood on the sidelines and been completely useless. Turning our heads, looking the other way, hoping someone else we do something. Today we can make ourselves Useful. Please get out your Connection Card. We are hosting Family Promise this week and we need people who will step forward and say, "I can help." Family Promise is working – we are already seeing families who are guests move from homelessness to jobs and apartments and hope. You can also be useful by sharing the Love and Good News of Jesus with your friends, family, coworkers and neighbors by hosting a group this fall for Follow. The study is easy to lead for anyone. You can help people like Onesimus find their way back to God.

Whatever happened to Onesimus? Some years later, Saint Ignatius wrote a letter to the Church of Ephesus. And he addressed it to the Bishop of the Church - named Onesimus. God made him useful after all. He can do the same with others if we reach out and be useful.