

BaptistWay: Employer

July 20, 2015

• *The BaptistWay lesson for August 2 focuses on Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-25; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Titus 2:9-11.*

On being a slave, or how to make people mad

I don't like using Paul's letters as instruction on how to relate to employers. I don't like it because I abhor likening my employment to slavery. It's an affront to both my pride and to slaves.

Slavery past and slavery present is foreign to my direct experience. I've always had a choice of whom I work for and don't work for. Slavery, however, by definition is devoid of choice. So, I struggle to lift a Pauline work ethic from his letters as though my situation is equivalent to that of a slave.

Well, just ignore the "slave" bit

To ignore or bracket out the term "slave" is to make light of the very real slave industry still alive and well today. After all, how do we tell a young woman forced into the sex trade that she should obey her slave master "with sincerity of heart," doing whatever she does "with all [her] heart, as working for the Lord, not for human masters" (Colossians 3:22-23)? Is this really what Jesus wants?

Perhaps we deaden our anxiety by saying that Paul's instruction is for Christian slaves and does not apply broadly to all slaves. Even if that was some relief, we can quickly dispense with it by remembering we have brothers and sisters in Christ who are enslaved today, who are forced to do unspeakable things.

My dilemma

I cannot use Paul's instructions to slaves as though my situation is equal to theirs. And yet, if I am to find biblical instruction for how I should go about my work, where else might I turn for such direct counsel? What am I to do?

I must get off center

If these letters from Paul were all I had for biblical instruction on my relationship with an employer or employee, would I discount Paul's words because they were written to slaves and slave owners? Or, longing for a word from God and being given these letters from an acknowledged mouthpiece of God, would I try to find something there to help me be a Christian in the workplace?

Or being someone who claims to have subordinated my will to Christ's, would I simply submit to what I take to be God's instruction given through Paul?

If I choose the latter, it might be—though probably isn't—because I believe what Paul wrote in Ephesians: "Obey them ... as slaves of Christ" (6:6).

In Paul's understanding, Christians are slaves of Christ whether or not they are slaves of human masters (Romans 6:18; 1 Corinthians 7:22-23a). Jesus would concur, though not in exactly the same terms (Matthew 6:24), as would Peter (1 Peter 2:16). This sets me back on my heels. I was trying to understand how to gain counsel for my relationship with my employer, and Paul makes me a slave of Christ, even if I'm not a slave of any human.

If, then, I am a slave of Christ, what does Christ command of me in relation to my employers? How can I best reflect Christ in my work?

- According to Ephesians 6:5-7, I am to respect those I work for. I am to obey them and serve them wholeheartedly as though I am serving the

Lord and not another mere human.

- According to Colossians 3:23, I am to do all my work with an undivided heart as though I am doing it for the Lord and not for another mere human.
- According to 1 Timothy 6:1-2, I am to respect those I work for so I do not bring God's name into disrepute.
- According to Titus 2:9-10, I am to try to please those I work for, speaking respectfully to them, not arguing with them, and not stealing from them so I will make God attractive to them.

The common thread in all four instances is that what I do for my employer is never just for my employer. It is always in service of God and God's name, which makes sense if I am God's slave.

The real rub

To be a slave is a direct attack on our dignity. We take pride in being "a slave to no man." For us, the workplace is the place where we assert our rights as employees, where we fight for the future of our careers, our financial well-being, and our reputations. But if we do what Paul tells us, we're as good as dead in the workplace.

Ah, but if we are Christians, we are dead already, for we have been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:20).

As for employers, Paul does not exclude them. They, likewise, are slaves of God held to the same standards as earthly "slaves;" for with God there is no favoritism (Ephesians 6:9).