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a brother or sister falsely. We need to guard against heresy. We need also carry out the mission Christ has given us in this lost and broken world.

How do the various epistemological positions in theology relate to the integration of theology and science, and to missions and our relationship to non-Christian religions? These are questions we will explore in the next article.

To be continued in May/June TSF Bulletin.

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ETHICS

Onesimus: A Study In Ethics

by Vernard Eller

I think I understand why so many Christians find some sort of arky-faith* as essential to their creed. The logic, heard on every side, runs thus: If the good people (we Christians, of course) don't organize (as holy power-blocs) to bestow (read: "impose") our goodness upon the world, no improvement will ever take place and society will simply continue its slide into hell. The argument assumes there is only one possible way social good can happen.

It may come as a surprise to hear that I am quick to agree that this is the correct and, indeed, inevitable conclusion—if we are supposing that *political reality* (i.e., that of human probabilities and possibilities) is the only reality there is; that ours is not a God who takes it upon himself to intervene in humanity's public affairs. If God is left out (or edged out) of the picture, then it undoubtedly is correct that our one and only hope of social salvation is for good people with their messianic arkys to bring down the forces of evil and install a new and just regime.

If such is indeed the very fact of the matter, then, of course, we have no option but to skin the cat this way, doing it as well as we can manage. Even so, we ought to be honest enough to recognize just how forlorn a hope this is. From a theological-biblical perspective, Karl Barth (perhaps better than anyone else) has shown us how presumptuous and wrongheaded it is for any crowd of human beings to claim they have such master of, and facility with, "the good" that they can power it into place as the society of peace and justice.

Also, we have seen that the idea of "just revolution directed by the saints of God" is by no means an invention of the late 20th-century but has been tried time and time and time again. And yet, whether such revolution succeeds or fails, more often than not the

social gain is zilch—or less! The direct-action method of messianic arkys is hardly recommended by its track record.

Finally, we have heard the personal testimony of Jacques Ellul—a saint as qualified as any, both as a biblical theologian on the one hand and a socio-political scientist on the other—who labored for years in different attempts at the Christian transformation of society and came away with the opinion that the method is unrealistic and unworkable.

Nevertheless, if this be the only possible way of getting the cat skinned, we will have to go with it—no matter what. Yet honesty would compel us to admit that our hope, now, is little better than no hope at all.

I have been trying to bust us out of this closed, constricted, no-option system that says, "There is only one way; if it's going to be done, we are the ones who will have to do it out of our own resources." Hear then the gospel, the liberating word of God: "There is more than one way to skin a cat" (I'm certain it's in there somewhere, but my concordance must be faulty).

Politics is not the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. There is also *theology* that can speak of actual, socio-political differences made by the presence of God. There is a *modus operandi* of history different from that of the human-bound method of triumph—that, of course, being resurrection made possible by the grace and power of one who is Wholly-Other-Than-Human.

So, in this article, I want to describe how "Another Way" can and did work in a matter of radical, broad-scale structural social-change usually thought of as being the special province of revo-

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* In his book, Dr. Eller uses "arky" as an anglicizing of the NT Greek word translated "principalities." "Anarchy" (un-arkyness), then, is essentially skepticism regarding how much good can ever be expected from arkys (power-blocs), namely, any and all human ideologies, parties, systems, or schemes claiming "principal" value in the reform or governance of society. "Arky faith," on the one hand, is, then, the common assumption of both secularists and Christians that good (God-sponsored) arkys are precisely the means by which the good of society (God's will for it) is to come to accomplishment. And "Christian Anarchy," on the other hand, is argued to be the truly biblical stance that puts its faith totally in the Arky (Kingdom) of God, consequently viewing all other arkys (and particularly "holy" ones) with dire suspicion.

lution and the class-struggle.

We already have heard but need again to be reminded that Christians can do and have done a great deal of good in the way of social service and action—and that without at all forming political power-blocs, without taking an adversarial stance toward any government or social institution, without presuming to condemn or fight anybody. Modern liberationists are wrong in sneering at these efforts as being insignificant compared to their big push to turn the world right-side-up.

In fact, although the results are neither quick nor spectacular, it may be that *social service* has a better record in effecting even structural change than has *revolutionism*. Not through pressure and imposition, but simply through *modeling*, the service-presence cannot but have some ameliorative effect upon the social structures around it. Would it be correct to say that—no matter how bad off some of these nations may be at present—there is no country into which Christian missionaries and service workers have gone that is not now better off in the way of social justice than would be their case if that Christian presence had never been there? Revolutionary liberationism is *not* the only method of effecting helpful social change. There *is* more than one way . . . However, the case study here presented speaks of a way that is much more of a “direct action” than simply “Christian modeling.”

In my book *Towering Babble* (pp. 169-79) I developed what I called “voluntary self-subordination” as being the uniquely Christian way—not necessarily for skinning cats but for accomplishing many other good ends. And just the verbal contrast between this phrase and “arky-contest” is, of course, conspicuous. But as the rubric of this concept—its most fundamental and essential statement—I cited Jesus’ solemn decree from Mark 8:34-35:

“If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel will save it.”

And although we haven’t time to say more here, that book develops the idea in depth and demonstrates that it does indeed characterize the whole New Testament.

Now it is my observation that a goodly number of modern Christians are willing at least to consider voluntary self-subordination as a method of operation for their *personal, one-to-one relationships with other individuals*. However, when it comes to political reform, radical social change, human liberation, the accomplishment of social justice, or whatever you call it, they don’t see the method as having relevance or applicability at all. No, on this level, “justice” can only be spelled “political contention for equity.”

In this regard, then, Jesus and the New Testament become something of an embarrassment to liberationists. According to their view, Jesus (and the New Testament believers proceeding from him) *should* appear in the role of modern-day reformers out demanding and contesting for the just society. The trouble is they don’t fit the mold and can’t convincingly be made to do so.

The embarrassment becomes acute, then, with the realization that the early church lived in a society where the terrible injustice of human slavery was common practice. Yet, rather than fighting or even protesting this evil, the church apparently condoned it—and that not only in the life of the large society but even within its own circles. And it follows that Paul’s little letter to Philemon may represent the greatest embarrassment of all. Here, circumstances as much as force the Apostle into a direct confrontation with the institution of slavery—and he poops out completely. He makes no move to protest the injustice of the practice, speaks not one word in condemnation of Philemon’s being a slaveowner, makes not a hint of a witness to social justice and human rights.

However, I read Philemon quite differently. So I now undertake to establish this miniscule missive as the very model of social justice accomplished through distinctively Christian self-subordination. It is a picture of liberation and social change so radical that the proponents of arky-justice haven’t had a glimmer of what it’s all about.

Philemon is a most frustrating book—a brief personal note that doesn’t begin to tell us what we need to know in order to understand it. As much as we do know is this: Paul is writing to his friend

Philemon regarding Philemon’s slave, Onesimus. Yet, although he belongs to Philemon, Onesimus has just spent some time with Paul and is now carrying the letter from Paul to his master.

Philemon lives at Colossae and is a leader in the church there. Whether there or somewhere else (the book of Acts never places Paul at Colossae), Paul had apparently converted Philemon and become his close Christian brother. There seems little doubt that Colossians—Paul’s letter to the *church* at Colossae—and this note to a *private individual* in Colossae belong together. Most likely, Tychicus, one of Paul’s lieutenants, delivered the letter to the church, while Onesimus delivered the note to his master (Col 4:7-9).

At the time of his writing, Paul is in prison—although he isn’t thoughtful enough to tell us where. Because the matter has something to do with the rest of the story, we are going to guess “-Ephesus.” (Acts never has Paul *in prison* in Ephesus; but it does have him spending enough time in the city that an imprisonment would not be incredible. It is not like Paul to stay out of jail for two years in a row.) But what makes Ephesus a good guess is that it is the major metropolitan (and Pauline) center nearest the little town of Colossae, about a hundred miles off. It is, accordingly, by far the likeliest spot for a Colossian slave to try to lose himself—as well as have a chance of coming upon Paul. Then too, it is the most likely spot from which Paul would write that he hopes soon to be released and would Philemon have a guest room ready for him (vs. 22).

Onesimus, we know, is Philemon’s slaveboy (“my child, whose father I have become,” Paul calls him in vs. 10, which could make Onesimus as young as a teen-ager). The name “Onesimus,” by the way, is based on the Greek root meaning “beneficial,” “of benefit,” or “useful.” It is a name an owner might well give to a slave in the hope of its influencing his character. Paul does word play with the name in both verses 11 and 20.

Onesimus is Philemon’s slave. Yet he has just been with Paul in Ephesus rather than Philemon in Colossae. Paul opines that he has been “useless” rather than living up to his name “useful” (vs. 11). And Onesimus’ returning to Philemon raises questions as to how he will be received. Only this much the letter actually tells us. But it can hardly add up to anything other than “runaway.” We don’t know whether Onesimus knew (or knew about) Paul and so sought him out through the Ephesian church or whether he just happened to be thrown into the same jail cell with him. But in either case, he is now not only a spiritual son but even a working colleague of the Apostle.

In the note Onesimus delivers, Paul is probably asking three things of Philemon: (1) At the very least, he is asking that Onesimus be received with kindness and forgiveness rather than what would be customary for a runaway slave—which, legally, could include anything up through torture and death. (2) Surely, he is also asking that Onesimus be released from slavery (“no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother”—vs. 16). And (3) there are strong hints that Paul wants Onesimus released to come back and serve with Paul at Ephesus (“I want some benefit [some ‘Onesimus’] from you”—vs. 13 & vs. 20).

This is as much as the epistle itself can tell us. So let me now try an interpretation.

In running away from his master, the slave Onesimus was doing precisely what modern revolutionism says he should do. He was moving to effect his own liberation—get out from under terrible oppression and claim the equity of being a freeman alongside Philemon. Although it was a slave revolt of only one person, it was an entirely praiseworthy one—a blow against gross injustice and a move toward a truly just society. This is liberation theology—and a model of what all slaves should do. So, far from feeling any sort of guilt, Onesimus should have been proud of what he did.

Of course, I don’t know how Onesimus *did* feel; but let’s assume he felt good about his thrust toward freedom. Yet the evidence would indicate that, particularly after he became a Christian and began to learn from Paul, he started to have second thoughts. His way of getting liberated did not have things as “freed up” as he expected they would be. “Running away,” he must now have sensed, left something to be desired as a “freeing” action. Being a runaway slave is neither as secure nor as relaxed a position as one might hope. To have always to be looking over your shoulder to see who

is coming to get you can hardly be the truest sort of freedom. And I wonder whether anyone can ever run away, or lie, or cheat, or kill—even in the name of freedom—without feeling pangs of remorse and guilt in the process.

But more, as a Christian, Onesimus must have realized that his act of “freeing” himself had to have had a reverse effect on Philemon. Onesimus’ grab for equity would inevitably have created an adversary alignment and made Philemon “the enemy,” who now had been put down, cheated, robbed of a valuable possession he undoubtedly had acquired in all honesty. No, there were all sorts of things about Onesimus’ new freedom which just could not be right.

So, with Paul’s help (although certainly not at his *demand*), Onesimus *freely* chose another method of liberation—that of voluntary, Christian self-subordination. He decided to *go back*, to exercise his freedom by giving it up, to save his life by losing it.

And just think what this action had to mean for Onesimus. Here was a runaway slave—guilty from every legal standpoint—offering to put himself at the mercy of his offended master. His only defense is a scrap of paper signed with what he hopes is the magic name “Paul.” It is hardly likely that Onesimus stood afar off and sent Tychicus in with the note, awaiting Philemon’s response before deciding which way to move. Hardly. Onesimus must have himself handed that note to Philemon, putting not just his hard-won freedom but his very life into jeopardy, ready to accept whatever might result—fully convinced, whatever that result might be, that this was the only way to true freedom.

Consider, then, that Onesimus’ original running away had not been a truly *free* action—it was too much motivated by self-interest, a being driven by one’s own self-serving needs and desires. No, it was rather his going back, his *voluntary* subordination, his willingness to lose his life for Christ’s sake and the gospel—only this was “free” in a way no other action could be.

And Onesimus’ earlier running away had not been a “freeing” action, either. We already have conjectured what must have been the side-effects that led him to want to undo that one. But, precisely the opposite, we can be certain that his going back *did* create all sorts of freedom. And we can say that even without knowing how Philemon responded. And bear in mind that we don’t know. All we have is the note; and Scripture gives us not one word as to how it was received. And this is how it should be. Onesimus’ action was *right*, no matter what the consequences. My belief is that Onesimus would have *wanted* to go back—would have felt himself freed in going back—even if he had known ahead of time that he would be returning to slavery, torture, and execution. Yet, even at that extremity, consider the freedoms that would have ensued.

Through his act of repentance, reconciliation, restitution, and asking forgiveness, Onesimus would have freed himself from the guilt of his previous action. He would have freed his relationship to Philemon of all its animosity, ill will, and adversarial conflict. And although it does not figure into our customary calculations, don’t assume that a *dead* slave is for that reason *unfree*. No, just because he had acted as a child of God, Onesimus had guaranteed for himself the coming revelation of what his sponsor Paul called “the glorious liberty of the children of God.” And what Paul wrote to the Galatians he could as well have addressed to his Philemon-bound friend: “For freedom *Christ* has set us free; stand fast therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery [slavery to what the world calls ‘freedom’].” And most certainly, Onesimus is included when Paul says, “For he who was called in the Lord as a slave is a freeman of the Lord.” We have all sorts of arky-liberated people running around who don’t begin to know the sort of freedom experienced by the Christian slaveboy who may voluntarily have gone to his death.

Because the success of voluntary self-subordination is not measured by its outward results, the story of Onesimus is right—is the very model of Christian action—even though we don’t know what consequences there may have been. Yet this, of course, is not to suggest that the outcome had to be that of enslavement and death. Indeed, the probability is quite otherwise. Paul, apparently, was a rather good judge of character; and if he was reading his pal Philemon at all right, then Onesimus likely was soon on his way back to Ephesus with Tychicus. Again, it would take a pretty tough nut

to resist the blandishments and loving arguments of Paul’s most crucial effort in salesmanship. I don’t think there’s a chance in the world that Philemon could have held out against this one. Finally—and to my mind most conclusive—is the fact that the letter has survived.

Think about it: if anything had happened to Onesimus other than his being freed and sent on his way to Paul, who would have wanted to save the letter? It was saved, obviously. So who would have wanted it? Well, it belonged to Philemon, and he undoubtedly valued it. Yet my guess is that (except for his Christian inhibitions) Onesimus would have knocked him down and taken it, if Philemon had shown reluctance about giving it up. After all, to Philemon it was a nice letter from a friend; but to Onesimus, it was his reprieve from death and charter of freedom. What they probably did is make a xerox copy so that both could have copies. In any case, that note was preserved for some period of years until it could be incorporated as a one-of-a-kind entry in the New Testament.

“And is that the story?” Well, maybe so and maybe not. New Testament scholar John Knox is the one who ferreted out what may be its continuation. We have to go clear beyond the New Testament now; but there is more.

Fifty to sixty years after the most probable time of Paul’s writing, there was, in Syria, a Bishop Ignatius who was apprehended by the Romans and escorted overland to Rome, where, eventually, he was tried and executed. Because Ignatius was a prominent figure in the church, as his party came to (or even close to) any Christian locales, the congregations sent out representatives to visit and offer him hospitality. After he arrived in Rome, then, Ignatius sent “thank you notes” to a number of the churches that had hosted him. These letters—dated about A.D. 110—have been preserved (not in the New Testament, obviously, but as some of the earliest Christian literature outside the New Testament). One of them is addressed to the church at Ephesus (EPHESUS, note!); and therein Ignatius waxes eloquent about the welcome he had received from the Ephesian delegation headed by their Bishop Onesimus.

Hold on! Don’t go jumping to conclusions until I say. When I tell you, we can all jump to the conclusion at once. There is nothing in the way of positive proof; and “Onesimus” is not a completely rare name. Yet the place and timing are right. If our slaveboy went back to help Paul in Ephesus, he could have worked his way up in the congregation and been a seventy-some-year-old bishop at the time Ignatius came through.

More, in the first six paragraphs of his letter, Ignatius names Bishop Onesimus three times and refers to him eleven other times. And it is in this same section of the letter (and not elsewhere) that scholars also pick up subtle echoes of the language of Paul’s letter to Philemon—including one play on the word “benefit” that is almost identical to Paul’s. Apparently, Ignatius knows the Philemon letter and is teasing its language into his compliments of Bishop Onesimus. You can decide how conclusive that is in proving that Ignatius knows which Onesimus the Ephesian bishop is; but I am ready to jump. Now!

Here, we must move beyond Ignatius; but the plot continues to thicken. Scholars are pretty well convinced that the letters of Paul did not come into the New Testament one by one, from here and there. The greater likelihood is that, beforehand, someone had become interested in Paul and made inquiries among the congregations as to whether they had any of his letters and would be willing to share copies (xerox copies, of course). It would have been this earlier Pauline collection, then, that was introduced into the New Testament as a unit.

Now where would such collecting most likely have taken place? Among the Pauline congregations, Ephesus is as well situated and thus as good a guess as any. And who is most likely to have been the moving spirit behind such a project? Why not Bishop Onesimus? He has as good a reason for remembering and loving Paul as anybody (and a whole lot better reason than most). And, with this suggestion, we get a really nice answer to one of the most troublesome questions regarding the epistle to Philemon. Within the Bible, it is a unique specimen—a brief personal note addressed to a private individual on a matter involving neither the life of a congregation nor the teaching of the faith. So why should it be in the New Testament? And how did it get there in the first place?

Without recourse to "Bishop Onesimus," I don't see that those questions are answerable. With "Bishop Onesimus," they become easy. If Onesimus is the collector of the Pauline *corpus*, he would, of course, be eager that "his" letter be part of it. Likewise, the Ephesian congregation would very much want *this* letter included, as a gesture of respect and gratitude—and a matter of record—regarding their own slaveboy bishop. Yes, the very presence of the letter within the New Testament canon may be the strongest proof that the Ephesian bishop of A.D. 110 is indeed the very same person as Philemon's slave.

Earlier—under the possibility that Onesimus actually was returned to slavery and executed—we portrayed the *minimum* of freedom, liberation and justice that might have resulted from his going back. Now—whether or not it is the *maximum*—we have portrayed just how incredibly far God may have taken that slaveboy's Christ-like decision to take up his cross and go back. And Onesimus' personal rise in equity from slave to bishop is only a starter. The Ephesian congregation seems to have received the godly leadership that not only made it a strong church but may even have spelled its survival into the second century (it is not evident that all Paul's congregations lasted so long). But most of all, it may be that God used Onesimus' going-back to give us the Pauline one-fourth of our New Testament and so preserve an understanding of the faith that has been of untold value in the life and history of the church to the present day. When God is in the picture, who's to say how "useful" one "Onesimus" can be?

But more! I am ready to say that—in a proleptic, representative way—the example of Onesimus marks the truer freeing of more slaves than all the Emancipation Proclamations ever proclaimed and all the class-warfare ever waged. In this one, indeed, God sounds the death knell of slavery (all sorts of slavery) for the whole of creation for all time. There is not the slightest doubt that the Christian church—the Onesmian church—went on to become the greatest force for freeing slaves that the world has ever seen. And it strikes me that the Onesmian method of ending slavery is the only sure method of doing so. The secular way of "revolutionary arky-contest" may be quicker and more spectacular; but it is also far less dependable, carrying all sorts of negative side-effects. Emancipation Proclamations and Civil Wars may create a degree of justice and eliminate some aspects of slavery. But they also create all sorts of animosities and hatreds, leave battlefields strewn with corpses, and take us out of slavery only to put us into Jim Crow.

The Onesmian approach is much more powerful. It may take a while, but no slaveholder can forever hold out against the loving persuasions of a Paul, the loving self-sacrifice of an Onesimus, or the loving Spirit of an Almighty God. That owner actually has a much better chance of resisting political pressure and the violence of class warfare. Moreover, the Onesmian way, rather than demanding the denunciation and destruction of the moral dignity of the slaveholder, offers him a gracious way out. Onesimus was lib-

erated without Philemon's having to be demeaned in the process. And best of all, of course, to go Onesmian leaves everyone involved—slave, owners, and apostle—as brothers in Christ. The side-effects are all positive, without a trace of contention's negativity.

Yet the most essential distinction, I suggest, is this: The political struggle for liberation is posited wholly on human wisdom, idealism, and moral ability. It thinks there is only one way . . . It operates in a closed system that neither seeks nor expects anything more than its human methodology can be calculated to achieve—though seldom do the final results come to even that much. Human beings (and especially well-intended doers of good) are noted for overestimating the power of their own piety.

But with Onesimus, things are quite otherwise. Because his was a theological action taken at the behest of *God*, in the service of *God*, through the Spirit of *God*, with the enablement of *God*, and to the glory of *God*—this action invited God in and urged him to make of it what he would. And the results? Completely incalculable—even to the preserving of the Pauline gospel for the ages. There is absolutely no telling how much good, how much social change, how much freeing of slaves, how much gospel, how much kingdom, might follow from an Onesmian laying down of one's life for God.

Finally, then, consider how totally Onesimus' was "Another Way"—an anarchical way bearing no likeness at all to the accepted arky-method of skinning cats. Not one of the characteristics of arky-faith is to be found.

To be sure, slaves are freed and the classless society is formed. Yet, throughout, each of the principals (slave, owner, and attendant theologian of liberation) acts and is acted toward simply as the human individual he is—brothers three, only that and nothing more. No one (least of all the theologian directing the action) tries to use Onesimus as symbol of "the oppressed but righteous poor" whose consciousness of injustice must be raised to the point that he will join the class-struggle. Paul, rather, convinces him to quit "fighting it" and go back—even into slavery. No one (least of all the theologian directing the action) tries, conversely, to use Philemon as symbol of "the evil, oppressing, slaveholding class," exposing his injustice as a means of recruiting class-warriors to fight against him. No one (least of all the theologian directing the action) has any interest in anybody's fighting anybody, in even seeing the matter as an adversary alignment.

The problem of human slavery is, of course, a *political* one. But our "theologian of liberation," being truly a *theologian*, says, "There just has to be more than the one *political* way of skinning this cat (i.e., the way that is limited to human probabilities and possibilities). Let us act *theologically* (i.e., in a way that both obeys God and, at the same time, invites him into the action). Let's try it that way—and see where God chooses to take it."

So they did. And so He did. And just see how far it went. You know, it's true: There actually is more than one way . . .

CHRISTIAN FORMATION

Meditative Prayer

by Richard J. Foster

Jesus Christ is alive and here to teach his people himself. His voice is not hard to hear; his vocabulary is not hard to understand. But we must learn how to hear his voice and to obey his word. It is this ability to hear and obey that is the heart and soul of Christian meditation. In this article we will seek to understand the biblical basis and the purpose of meditative prayer. We will discover how the imagination can aid us in our task and consider the three major steps into meditative prayer. We will see how learning to read with the heart can draw us into the love and life of God, and, finally, we will consider seven common problems in the practice of meditative prayer.

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The Biblical Basis for Meditative Prayer

The biblical basis for meditation is discovered in the great reality of the speaking, teaching, acting God which lies at the heart of the scriptural witness. God brought the universe crashing into existence by the word of his command. In the Garden of Eden, Adam and Eve talked with God and God talked with them—they were in communion. Then came the Fall, and in an important sense there was a rupture of the sense of perpetual communion, for Adam and Eve hid from God. But God continued to reach out to his rebellious children, and in stories of such individuals as Cain, Abel, Noah and Abraham we see God speaking and acting, teaching and guiding.

Moses learned, albeit with many vacillations and detours, how to hear God's voice and obey his word. In fact, Scripture witnesses that God spoke to Moses "face to face, as a man speaks to his