

“Seeing Clearly”

Rev. Stephen Milton
Lawrence Park Community Church,
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Letter to Philemon

How many of you use reading glasses? Can I see a show of hands, please? Can I ask, when did you start needing reading glasses? How many were under 20? Ok. Under 40? How many started needing them when you were in your forties? Right, that's most of you over 40. And that's natural. Most people in their forties start losing their ability to focus on close objects. This has been true for millennia. Fortunately, back in the 13th century¹, eye glasses were invented. This extended the reading life of people who in former times would not have been able to read or write anymore. This simple bit of technology has helped make mass literacy possible, and to make old age much more enjoyable.

But what was it like before eyeglasses were invented? How did someone in Christ's time read and write in their forties? We know from Roman records that there were many people in this age group who led very successful lives, writing books and reading them. But how did they do it?

The answer is that they relied on educated enslaved people. Scribes and readers. We usually think of enslaved people as working in the fields and working as domestics inside the house. But, there was also educated slaves, who were chosen as children to learn to read and write. They were trained to take dictation, and read books out loud to their owners. This was the way most business was done. If you think back to the age before computers, few business people wrote their own letters, they were often dictated to secretaries. The Romans did that, too, but to a far greater degree.

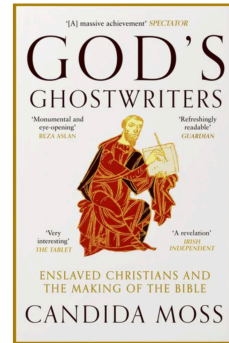
This has interesting implications for our faith. Jesus died when he was in his early 30s. Most of his disciples were in their twenties or older. But the gospels weren't written down until 40 and fifty years later. That means that the eyewitnesses to Jesus' life were too old to read and write, since they would have been in their sixties, and suffering from failing eyesight². So how did they do it? They relied on enslaved people to take dictation, and read to them other small accounts of Christ's life. The gospels we have know were most likely written down by enslaved people.³

¹ <https://www.college-optometrists.org/the-british-optical-association-museum/the-history-of-spectacles>

² Candida Moss, *God's Ghostwriters: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible*, (New York 2024), 65-6.

³ Moss, 93.

That is the argument of Candida Moss, who has written a fascinating book called *God's Ghostwriters*. In it, she shows that the Romans usually relied on scribes who were enslaved to write down pretty much everything. They took dictation in shorthand, and then filled it out later.



If this seems unlikely, consider Paul's letters. At the end of his letter to the Romans, we find this line :

I Tertius, the writer of this letter, greet you in the Lord. (Romans 16:22)

Paul dictated his longest and most famous letter to an enslaved person named Tertius. He took it down in shorthand, then expanded it later. Candida Moss suggests that some of the original turns of phrase we hear in the gospels and Paul's letters may actually have been written by enslaved people⁴. In fact, she suggests that the Gospel of Mark may be named after the slave who wrote it all down for Peter.⁵

The fact that slaves worked as scribes was so common that in today's letter, Paul has to make a point of saying that he wrote this letter on his own, in his own hand. Why would he say that? Because this letter is asking for a slave to be set free. That is exactly what a slave might say in a forged letter. So, Paul makes a point of writing this letter himself. This may explain why it is so short. He's not used to writing his own letters, and his handwriting may be awful. So he keeps it short and to the point.

His letter is written to Philemon, a fellow Christian and slave owner. It sounds like Paul converted him, and is his spiritual father. In this letter, Paul is subtly and no so subtly asking Philemon to free his slave, so he can be a free citizen. Paul clearly sees this as a way of more fully realizing Onesimus' humanity. This would be the right thing to do.

Paul could just give the command and force him to free Onesimus. But he doesn't. He wants Philemon to make the decision on his own. He is hoping Philemon will rise to a higher moral standard that he usually occupies.

There's a note of condescension in Paul's voice, like a parent talking to an older teenager. Parents often find themselves in Paul's position. Children require a lot of

⁴ Moss, 70.

⁵ Candida Moss, *God's Ghostwriters: Enslaved Christians and the Making of the Bible*, (New York 2024), 65-6.

training to become adults. At first, adults must instruct them very clearly on what's allowed and what isn't. As children get older, we try to teach them the principles that lie behind the rules. We don't leave leftovers on the counter because the food will spoil and attract bugs. So, please put it away. For a long time, children see chores as simply external rules and regulations they must follow, which they would happily ignore if left to their own devices.

But, as children get older, there is a tipping point. One day, a parent may come home to find that not only has a child cleaned up the kitchen, but they have done something extra. Perhaps they cleaned the fridge, too. Or, they took out the recycling without being asked. Maybe, in addition to mowing the lawn, they did some weeding. Or maybe, just maybe, they cleaned their room, and even cleaned the bathroom a bit, even though it wasn't their turn.

This doesn't always happen, some kids leave home never doing anything extra. They may learn to serve the common good when they are living with roommates, or when they move in with a lover. But at some point, children become adults when they see the collective good and act on it, without having to be told or commanded. This is a key step to achieving maturity. They move from acting based on commands, to acting based on their concern for the public good.

But this approach to ethical action becomes more complicated at a societal level. Imagine that there is a busy street corner in a neighbourhood. Drivers come to a four way intersection. To be safe, they should slow down, look both ways and proceed. But in practice, some people are not so careful, and there are accidents, perhaps even a pedestrian or cyclist is hit. Personal will alone is not consistent enough for the corner to be safe.

So a second stage appears. Neighbours get together to discuss the problem. They decide that for the good of everyone, stop signs are needed. They lobby the City to put one in. So, the will to protect the common good is translated into law, in the form of a stop sign. It's no longer up to each driver to stop, they must obey the stop sign. Public Will has become public command.

This balance lies behind most of the laws and regulations we live by. Seatbelts, traffic lights, food labels listing ingredients, health and safety regulations - most were inspired by public concern over accidents and deaths, which led to laws. Public concern led to legal commands.

But we are now living in a time when many people feel that we are overburdened with laws and state regulations. People feel like their personal freedom has been overwhelmed by rules and policies. Conservative governments usually argue that there is too much red tape, slowing down the exercise of personal and public enterprise. The Ontario government argued that it was city rules and regulations which were slowing down the building of new houses and apartments.

In Florida last week, the state announced children would no longer be required to get vaccinated to go to school.⁶ Now it will be up to parents whether their children are vaccinated. At the federal level, Washington is reducing the power of many departments, from the Environmental Protection Agency to the IRS.

We are witnessing a shift between public will and legal command. This process is also at work in Canada.

Mark Carney's first act as Prime Minister was to get rid of the carbon tax. He is now proposing the construction of more pipelines so our gas and oil can be sold and burnt in other countries. That will mean more jobs, but also more carbon in the air.

If Canadians want a cleaner environment, it will be up to us as individuals to use less gas and less electricity. We will not be commanded to drive less by higher gas prices.

It seems the public mood is shifting, asking for less government regulation and more personal discretion for how we live. But there is a risk here. When command gives way to personal will, it makes a big difference how we perceive ourselves. If we dismantle government oversight so we can act like selfish teenagers, society and the environment as a whole will suffer. It matters whether we see our personal will as simply being about us, or whether we also have a concern for the public good. If we take away the stop signs, the onus is on us to slow down anyway for the good of everyone else.

So how do we insure that our personal choices result in public good? Paul gives us an indication in his letter to Philemon. He is writing about Philemon's slave, Onesimus. It's not a real name. It means "useful" in Greek⁷. Slaves didn't have birthdays⁸ or shoes, or real names, they were treated as nobodies who could be ordered around. But Paul tells Philemon that he loves Onesimus. This "nobody" is now loved like Paul's own son. He says this in hope Philemon will free this adopted son.

Paul shows us how to inspire a compassionate will. Invoke love. Make faceless nobodies into somebodies. It is like he is asking Philemon to put on ethical eyeglasses. To see this slave as a real person, full of potential. To us, this can mean seeing strangers as family members. To see the person in the other car as a full human being, with a family, with every right to live a full life, like we do. So that even without a stop sign, or a law demanding obedience, we act ethically. To see people who suffer across town or across the world as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters. In African

⁶ <https://www.nbcnews.com/health/health-news/florida-surgeon-general-says-state-will-eliminate-vaccine-mandates-rcna228835>

⁷ The New Oxford Annotated Bible, 4th edition, p.2101, note f.

⁸ Sandra R Joshel, Slavery in the Roman World, (Cambridge, 2010), 43.

nations, respected strangers can be called auntie and uncle. Treating nobodies as beloved somebodies is how personal will can become a desire for public good without commands.

Will we act ethically without laws to force us to do so? Or will we elect governments who we will demand enact laws to constrain our behaviour? That is up to us, as long as we live in a democracy. So, we must think carefully about our power, and what it means to live ethically, in that balance between will and command.

Tradition tells us that Onesimus was set free, and he later became a prominent bishop.⁹ So Paul may have been right. This former slave became a blessing to many, more useful in freedom than he ever was as a slave. May we draw on our faith to improve our vision. To see more clearly, and demand that society show more care for citizens and the planet. All this we ask in the name of the one who said “I am the Light” - the light which permits us to see more clearly than we could on our own. Amen.

⁹ <https://www.oca.org/saints/lives/2009/02/15/100526-apostle-onesimus-of-the-seventy>