

Slave wages: Romans 6:12-23; Matthew 10:40-42

## **We are still free to choose whose slaves we will be.**

by [William R. O'Brien](#) in the [June 14, 2005](#) issue

In 1863 the Emancipation Proclamation marked the beginning of the end of slavery. The new air of freedom brought an unintoxicated euphoria. But a century later, freedom was redefined, this time as an absence of responsibility. The new air of license was inhaled and produced an intoxicated forgetfulness of anything that smacked of authoritarian inhibitions or paralyzing parameters.

“Good morning. What we have in mind is breakfast in bed with 400,000.” Who can forget Woodstock 1969? Writing for the *Times Herald-Record*, Elliot Tiber described the scene: “For four days, the site became a countercultural mini-nation in which minds were open, drugs were all but legal and love was ‘free.’”

What a way to usher out a decade marked by three political assassinations and a bloody, protested war.

French movie actress Jeanne Moreau, a sex goddess for moviegoers in the 1960s, played sophisticated amoral heroines who could completely destroy the men who loved them. In a U.S. interview in the early '60s she told a reporter that she was free, completely free. “I am free to choose whose slave I will be.”

Isn't that what Paul was talking about when he wrote to the believers in Rome? “Don't you know that when you offer yourselves to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness?” Paul then breaks into a doxology of praise because those to whom he was writing had been set free from sin and had become slaves of righteousness.

Can slavery produce rich benefits for anyone but the slave owner? Paul says yes, if you choose the right one to whom you enslave yourself. Those who become slaves to God reap the benefit of holiness, the results of which are eternal life. That sounds

weird enough to be considered otherworldly—not something for the here and now. In reality, however, this here-and-now form of slavery yields the most fulfilling and purposeful form of life.

Paul's writings are directed to relatively new believers in specific geographical locations. They were dealing with issues in their faith communities without the benefit of much church history or tradition to which they could refer. All of his epistles were composed in the context of an overarching cultural phenomenon: Pax Romana.

The Greco-Roman world was the setting for all the early churches Paul had been instrumental in starting. The power and dominion of Roman rule spread its tentacles into every nook and cranny of human existence. Beginning with god Caesar as lord of all, every area of life ultimately submitted itself to that rule: military, economic, cultural, philosophical, educational and familial.

In the Roman-dominated world, new believers may have had their spiritual status changed as it relates to new life in Christ, but their politics and culture did not get saved overnight. So when Paul reminds Roman believers they have been set free to become slaves of righteousness, he is reminding them of a much bigger story, one that can fuel their resistance to being sucked back into the old idolatries. Without those reminders they could become the victims of what Brian Walsh and Sylvia Keesmaat call "covenantal forgetfulness":

The Decalogue is prefaced by a reminder that Yahweh is the God who led Israel out of Egyptian bondage, precisely because forgetting this foundational story always results in breaking the commandments prohibiting idolatry. Deuteronomy insists that the central temptation of a life of security and abundance in the land will be that Israel will forget its story of liberation, will forget its liberating God and his healing word, and will embrace idols.

Walsh and Keesmaat say that in the letter to the believers at Colossae, Paul's attack on the predominant philosophy of the day was animated by a similar concern—to remember the story. They write, "His most potent weapon against the idolatrous worldview that threatens to take the community's imagination captive is precisely the retelling and remembering of the community's founding story."

Postmodernists would ask why anyone would want to buy into the “big story” when there is no such thing as a metanarrative. But the freedom *not* to choose any story as superior to all others can become an enslaving state of mind—one is doomed to aimless wandering among the altars of relativity and reductionism. Perhaps one of the reasons the church in the West is irrelevant to postmodernists is because of its own covenantal forgetfulness.

Christ followers in Africa, Asia and Latin America have no problem with the Christian metanarrative. The way they read the Bible leads to the marriage of word and deed, faith and action. Why do their churches look and act so different from churches in the West?

As churchpeople in the Southern Hemisphere are being set free to become slaves to righteousness, they are led to a set-apartness (holiness) forged through persecution, harassment, injustice and poverty. They have not forgotten the bigger story. They are willing to trade the wages of idolatry and sin for a life worth living in the here and now, which will crescendo into the everlasting nature of the redeemed life.

We are still free to choose whose slaves we will be. The Christian story holds the key to a covenantal memory that can point the way to true freedom.