

# SLAVES AND FREED PERSONS SELF-MADE SUCCESS AND SOCIAL CLIMBING IN THE CORINTHIAN CONGREGATION

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In general, scholarship has recognized 1 Corinthians 7:17-24 as an *inclusio* in which Paul admonishes the Corinthians not to seek a change of religious or social status in response to their call by God.<sup>1</sup> Paul's "theology of calling" taught that "God's call had come to the Corinthians without regard to their various religious and social-legal situations...any attempt by the Corinthians to 'improve' their relation with God by making any change in their social or religious status was

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<sup>1</sup> C.K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians*, BNTC (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1968), 168; Hans Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 126; Gordon Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 307; Margaret Mitchell, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation: an Exegetical Investigation of the Language and Composition of 1 Corinthians* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 123-25; Bruce W. Winter, *Seek the Welfare of the City: Christians as Benefactors and Citizens* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 145-64.

tantamount to *not* continuing in God's call."<sup>2</sup> Previous religious and social status was irrelevant to the believer's position in Christ and the church. In conjunction with this theme Paul introduces some brief comments/instructions concerning the practices of circumcision and slavery.<sup>3</sup>

Many commentators do not consider Paul's advice to slaves in 7:21-22 as a reflection of an actual slave problem within the Corinthian congregation. This conclusion is based on the lack of internal evidence indicating circumcision and slavery were contested issues at Corinth. Paul merely uses these issues as illustrations to support his advice that Christians should not seek a change in their social status but remain in the condition in which God called them.<sup>4</sup> Others, however, have not reached similar conclusions.<sup>5</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, for instance, considers Paul's statements as supportive illustrations for his "theology of calling" but also says: "Paul appears suddenly to leave his illustration to address directly those Christians in Corinth who were in slavery. Remembering that some of these

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<sup>2</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, *First Century Slavery and 1 Corinthians 7:21*, SBLDS 11 (Missoula, Mont: Society of Biblical Literature, 1973), 140.

<sup>3</sup> I have nothing to contribute to the discussion surrounding the exegetical problems of 7:21 and the interpretation of the elliptical phrase *μᾶλλον χρῆσαι*. For a discussion of the problems and possibilities see: Bartchy, *First Century Slavery*; J.A Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1995); Brad Ronnell Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution: 1 Corinthians 7:17-24*, SBLDS 181 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

<sup>4</sup> Robertson and Plummer, *First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 2d ed., ICC (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1967), 144; Conzelmann, *1 Corinthians*, 126; Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 307-308; Gregory W. Dawes "But If You Can Gain Your Freedom," CBQ 52 (1990): 681-697; Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 122; Richard A. Horsley, *1 Corinthians*, ANTC (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 102-103.

<sup>5</sup> In commenting on circumcision in this passage C.K. Barrett says: "It does not appear that the demand that Gentile Christians should be circumcised caused a major problem in Corinth. This has sometimes been taken to show that Judaizers cannot have been at work at Corinth. All that can be rightly said however is that Judaizing propaganda took a different form in Corinth from that which it took in Galatia" (168-69).

Christians might be manumitted at any time, Paul spoke a special word to them in order to urge them to live according to their calling in Christ in their new social status as freedmen."<sup>6</sup> More recently, B. R. Braxton has challenged the conclusion that Paul uses circumcision and slavery merely as illustrations by contending that this is the only example in 1 Corinthians where scholars fail to discover a window into the concrete social practices of the Corinthians. Braxton argues that considering these issues as purely illustrative may conceal some of the social complexity that informs Paul's rhetoric.<sup>7</sup>

While it is impossible to determine with any certainty that slavery was an issue in Corinth, there are some complications with viewing Paul's advice here as purely illustrative. It is apparent that Paul's statements in 1 Corinthians 7:18-22 are parallel with those of Galatians 3:28.<sup>8</sup> In Galatians Paul makes it clear that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free. In 1 Corinthians 7:19 the labels of circumcision (περιτομή) and uncircumcision (ἀκροβυστία) can be easily identified with the Jew/Gentile divide. The same parallelism cannot be applied as easily to the discussion of slaves. In Galatians the formula is simply neither slave (δούλος) nor free (ἐλεύθερος). In 1 Corinthians, however, Paul seems to go out of his way to recognize that an emancipated slave can only ever become a *freed person* (ἀπελεύθερος) and never a *free person* (ἐλεύθερος).<sup>9</sup> Why did Paul consider it necessary to point out the important distinction between the

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<sup>6</sup> Bartchy, *First Century Slavery*, 157-58.

<sup>7</sup> Braxton, *The Tyranny of Resolution*, 39, 55-57.

<sup>8</sup> Bartchy, *First Century Slavery*, 162-65; Hays, *First Corinthians*, 123.

<sup>9</sup> For a discussion of the metaphor of slavery in 1 Corinthians 7:22 and in Paul's other letters see mine: *Slavery Metaphors in Early Judaism and Pauline Christianity: A Tradition-Historical and Exegetical Examination*, WUNT 162 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003).

social status of slaves, *freed persons* and *free persons*? Certainly these statements reflect the social realities of Paul's day, but why did he not feel obligated to reflect upon them in Galatians as well? Furthermore, why does Paul tell slaves in 7:22 "do not worry about being a slave" instead of simply emphasizing for all of his readers, as he does in Galatians, that there is neither slave nor free?

Paul's readiness to acknowledge differing social statuses in 1 Corinthians 7:22 leads one to speculate that there may be more to Paul's address to slaves than a simple illustration. It is this author's suggestion that the answer may be found in Paul's use of the *freed person* term ἀπελεύθερος, which is a *hapax legomenon* in the NT as well as a technical term in Roman slavery practices.<sup>10</sup> This may be demonstrated on two levels. First, the social setting of Roman Corinth created the ideal opportunity for former slaves to succeed unlike any other city in the Roman Empire. While freedom was the dream of every slave, those at Corinth had particular incentives for them to seek a change in their social status. Second, internal factors of the Corinthian congregation's social practices, which when compounded with the broader social setting of Corinth, would have encouraged slaves to seek an opportunity to change their status from slave (δοῦλος) to *freed person* (ἀπελεύθερος). These combined factors would have led slaves in the Corinthian congregation to seek their freedom and may have prompted Paul to advise them that being a slave, although far from the ideal of social statuses, was something that should not concern them (7:21).

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<sup>10</sup> Liddell and Scott's *Greek-English Lexicon*, 185; Thomas Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Crown Helm, 1981), 46.

## I. Corinth: A City of Freed Persons

When speaking of "Paul's Corinth" one must limit the discussion to Roman Corinth, which was different from Classical Corinth. During the Achaean military campaign of Lucius Mummius in 146 B.C. the Romans destroyed Classical Corinth. The city remained, for the most part, in ruins until 44 B.C. when it was established as a Roman colony.<sup>11</sup> Strabo records that when Julius Caesar founded the colony he sent settlers to Corinth who were predominantly from the class of *freed persons*. These former slaves enriched themselves by looting the ruins and graves of old Corinth and selling the artifacts in Rome at high prices (*Geogr.* 8.6.23).<sup>12</sup> The local native populations became resident aliens while Corinth's most recent denizens became Roman citizens in control of a new city.<sup>13</sup> This displacement of the indigenous people by former slaves seems to have caused justifiable resentment. Criangoras, a poet from the island of Lesbos, was part of an embassy to Julius Caesar in 45 B.C. and present when plans to resettle Corinth as a Roman colony were being made. He laments:

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<sup>11</sup> James Wiseman concluded that the destruction of Corinth was not as extensive as some scholars have believed and that there was some continuity between the two cities including a "Corinthian" population (*Corinth and Rome I: 228 B.C.-A.D. 267* [ANRW II, 7.1; Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1979], 491-96). See also the comments by Cicero who is the only eyewitness to record his visit to Corinth inbetween its destruction and establishment as a Roman colony (*Tusculan Disputations* 3.53).

<sup>12</sup> Jerome Murphy-O' Connor notes that Strabo's description of Corinth's favorable position in economic terms harmonizes with the claim that the new colonists were *freed persons* in contrast to Plutarch (*Caes.*, 47.8) who says that they were veterans (*St Paul's Corinth: Texts and Archaeology* [Wilmington, Delaware: Michael Glazier, 1983], 66).

<sup>13</sup> Ben Witherington III, *Conflict and Community: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 7.

What inhabitants, O luckless city, have you received, and in place of whom? Alas for the great calamity of Greece! Would, Corinth, that you be lower than the ground and more desert than Libyan sands, rather than wholly abandoned to such a crowd of scoundrelly slaves, you should vex the bones of the ancient Bacchiadae!<sup>14</sup>

While the poem does not accurately reflect the new colonists' status as *freed persons*, it does express the indignation felt by some Greeks that former slaves had come to inhabit the once glorious and free Corinth. Furthermore, the status of these new inhabitants seems to have been known by many in the Empire as confirmed by Epictetus who, in a passing comment, also identifies the Corinthians as the *descendants of slaves* (ἐκ δουλῶν, 4.1.157). Thus, the city's well known history and demographics would have led many in the Empire to consider Roman Corinth as a *freed persons* city.

An important element in Roman Corinth's identity as a *freed persons* city may be found in the radical decision that allowed *freed persons* to become chief magistrates in the city.<sup>15</sup> Usual practice dictated that only the descendants of former slaves (i.e. *free persons*) could become *decurions* and administrators of the city.<sup>16</sup> The fact that Roman Corinth departed from this practice suggests the existence of a large number of *freed persons* in the city in comparison to the number

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<sup>14</sup> Criangoras, *Anthologia Graeca* 9.284 (LCL); Translation from Murphy-O' Connor, *St. Paul's Corinth*, 51.

<sup>15</sup> Wiseman, *Corinth and Rome I*, 498. The only other known instance of *freed persons* being permitted to freely acquire such offices is in another colony established by Julius Caesar in Urso, Spain. A.M. Duff, *Freedmen in the Early Roman Empire* (Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons Ltd., 1958), 66.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Treggiari, *Roman Freedman during the Late Republic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), 52-64; Peter Garnsey, "The Descendants of Freedmen in Local Politics: Some Criteria," in *The Ancient Historian and His Materials: Essays in Honour of C.E. Stevens on His Seventieth Birthday*, ed. Barbara Levick (Westmead: Gregg International, 1975), 167-80.

of *free persons* who would normally qualify for the job. Moreover, this situation must have further embittered the already disenfranchised native Corinthians who suffered the double indignity of being made aliens in their own city as well as being ruled by former slaves.

In general *freed persons* in the Roman Empire were upwardly mobile and could become very wealthy.<sup>17</sup> As former slaves these individuals often held an economic advantage over poor *free persons* by virtue of the skills and business experience they acquired while living and working as slaves.<sup>18</sup> T. B. Savage comments:

Indeed ex-slaves were adept businessmen and dominated commerce and banking in Roman cities. The most prosperous even owned land. Their wealth became proverbial. Of a rich man Seneca wrote: "he had the bank account...of a freedman" (*Ep.* 27.5).<sup>19</sup>

Success often led to excessive boasting by *freed persons* through gratuitous public displays of their wealth and the erection of monuments in their own honor.<sup>20</sup> Roman Corinth was no less susceptible to this practice and by the time Paul arrived many of its inhabitants had acquired Roman citizenship and substantial wealth.<sup>21</sup> Of the 104 inscriptions found in Corinth dating prior to the reign of Hadrian, 101 are in Latin while only three are in Greek.<sup>22</sup> Some

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<sup>17</sup> Keith R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire: A Study in Social Control* (Revue d'études Latines 185; Brussels: Latomus, 1984), 82.

<sup>18</sup> Ramsay MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations: 50 B.C. to A.D. 284* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 93, 103.

<sup>19</sup> Timothy B. Savage, *Power through Weakness: Paul's Understanding of the Christian Ministry in 2 Corinthians* (UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 39.

<sup>20</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 39.

<sup>21</sup> John Harvey Kent, *Corinth: The Inscriptions 1926-1950 Volume VIII, Part III* (Princeton, New Jersey: The American School of Classical Studies at Athens, 1966), 20.

<sup>22</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, 18-19. Coins from the period also suggest that Latin was the official language until at least A.D. 60.

inscriptions proudly declare the *freed person* status of the erector.<sup>23</sup> Others reveal status through a cognomen commonly held by slaves and *freed persons*.<sup>24</sup> Still others list the name of the person responsible for the monument's erection, but include no patronymic, also an indicator of their former slave status.<sup>25</sup>

The abundance of these inscriptions reveals important characteristics about the denizens of Roman Corinth. The proliferation of Latin names suggests many *freed persons* had not only become Roman citizens, but had also taken the name of their emancipator, as was common practice.<sup>26</sup> Many of the colonists apparently acquired enough wealth to dedicate monuments displaying civic pride at their own expense.<sup>27</sup> This is most evident in the inscriptions of the *freed person* Gnaeus Babbius Philinus who erected two such monuments at his own expense.<sup>28</sup> Another is an inscription found on a paving stone dedicated by the *freed person* Erastus, who may or may not be the same person mentioned by Paul in Romans 16:23.<sup>29</sup> C. Julius Laco and his son Spartiaticus who were direct descendants of the *freed person* C. Julius Eurycles, one of Corinth's greatest benefactors, also

<sup>23</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, no(s). 62, 240, 280, 281, 321.

<sup>24</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, no. 237.

<sup>25</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, no(s). 155, 232, 241, 259.

<sup>26</sup> Duff, *Freedmen in the Early Roman Empire*, 52-56. Many of the former-slaves were not necessarily Italian, but probably foreigners captured in war who fulfilled a period of servitude before being manumitted (Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 28).

<sup>27</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, no(s). 155, 241; Wiseman, *Corinth and Rome I*, 518; Murphy-O' Connor notes that the absence of his father's name suggests that Babbius was a freedman (*St Paul's Corinth*, 27-28).

<sup>29</sup> Andrew Clarke, *Secular and Christian Leadership in Corinth: A Socio-Historical and Exegetical Study of 1 Corinthians 1-6* (*Arbeiten Zur Geschichte des Antiken Judentums und UrChristentums* 18; Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1993), 46-57. Kent, *Corinth*, no. 232. Murphy-O' Connor, *St Paul's Corinth*, 37.



dedicated inscriptions to themselves.<sup>30</sup> This practice continued even after the time of Paul as evidenced by the second century city patron C. Cornelius Pulcher who was a descendant of *freed persons* and whose name is preserved eleven times.<sup>31</sup> All of these monuments are recognized examples of benefaction as well as self-promotion.<sup>32</sup>

For a slave, becoming a *freed person* meant acquiring certain social and economic advantages. Slaves owned by Roman citizens could, under certain requirements, become citizens themselves upon being emancipated.<sup>33</sup> This new status placed them in a social level over slaves and free non-citizens, but restricted their status below that of freeborn citizens.<sup>34</sup> However, former slaves who remained attached to their masters' house could receive economic and political boosts not normally available to poor *free persons*.<sup>35</sup> *Freed persons* leaving slavery may have learned a skill that enabled them to open a business practicing their profession.<sup>36</sup> Some even entered freedom with a bit of reserved capital from money they earned while serving as a slave.<sup>37</sup> The free poor, on the other hand, had very few means of production

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<sup>30</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 39-40.

<sup>31</sup> Kent, *Corinth*, no(s). 64-65; Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Gaius, *Institutes* 1.10, 13-17; Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Ant. Rom.* 4.23.3. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 88.

<sup>34</sup> D.F. Watson, "Roman Social Classes," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 1002.

<sup>35</sup> C.S. Keener, "Family and Household," in *Dictionary of New Testament Background*, ed. Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 366.

<sup>36</sup> Some inscriptions proudly record the business and skills for which a *freed person* had become known (See *CIL* 6.10067, 6.8583; *ILS* 7486, 7558, 7580, 7812; English translations may be found in Robert K. Sherk, *The Roman Empire: Augustus to Hadrian* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988], 216, 224, 228-29, 240); Watson, "Roman Social Classes," 1002.

<sup>37</sup> Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 108.

and relied on farm, construction, and dock work often doing the same jobs as and working side-by-side with slaves.<sup>38</sup> Socially they were at an advantage over *freed persons*, slaves, and freeborn non-citizens, but economically they were disadvantaged especially due to the inexpensive nature of slave labor. Furthermore, they were not able to gain many business opportunities or secure the appropriate loans as easily as *freed persons* could through a former master.<sup>39</sup>

Newly acquired freedom did have its drawbacks, however. The relation between *freed persons* and former masters was stronger than the typical patron-client relationship. It was an involuntary relationship that held more obligations and the *freed person* was always in a lower social status than *free persons*.<sup>40</sup> Even after manumission a former master might still control aspects of a former slave's life and finances.<sup>41</sup> Moreover the transfer from slave to free did not remove the shamefulness of their previous status, which disappeared after only two or three generations.<sup>42</sup> Former slaves were easily identified by their servile name, and their inability to record the identity of their father or tribe. The only identification *freed persons* could legally use was that of their patron's name which immediately revealed

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<sup>38</sup> M.I. Finley, *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York: Viking Press, 1980), 81-82.

<sup>39</sup> MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 124; Watson, "Roman Social Classes," 1001.

<sup>40</sup> Richard A. Horsley, "The Slave Systems of Classical Antiquity and Their Reluctant Recognition by Modern Scholars," *Semeia* 83/84 (1998), 50.

<sup>41</sup> *P. Oxy.* 494 is the will of one Acusilaus who freed five female slaves but required that, after his death, their services and earnings remain at the disposal of his wife. Epictetus, a former slave himself, relates the precarious situation of freed slaves who must now provide food, clothing and shelter for themselves (*Diss.* 4.1.35-37); Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire*, 98.

<sup>42</sup> Duff, *Freedman in the Early Roman Empire*, 50, 52; Horsley, "Slave Systems," 52; Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), 247.

their status as a former slave.<sup>43</sup> Even after death the effects of this stigma continued as demonstrated by numerous epitaphs describing the deceased as the former slave of so and so.<sup>44</sup> In reaction to this lingering stigma some freeborn descendants of slaves, in an effort to conceal their origins, discarded their servile or foreign names in exchange for a more respectable Latin cognomen.<sup>45</sup> But even if a *freed person* was able to escape most of the negative aspects of their new status, the upper-class aristocracy generally despised them as social climbers who were causing chaos within the social statuses.<sup>46</sup>

As a *Freed Persons* city, Roman Corinth seems to have been more accommodating or at least more tolerant of social climbing slaves.<sup>47</sup> When Paul arrived in Corinth many of its citizens and city officials would have been descendants of slaves who made their fortune as *freed persons* in the new colony.<sup>48</sup> In fact, as a city of former slaves with a habit of self-promotion, Corinth would have represented the ideal of social mobility for any slave. In Roman Corinth, being a *freed person* or the descendant of one was not a cause for embarrassment.<sup>49</sup> Rather it was a source of pride one could exhibit in dedicatory inscriptions. Many slaves would have been attracted to what Ben Witherington

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<sup>43</sup> Duff, *Freedman in the Early Roman Empire*, 55.

<sup>44</sup> Duff, *Freedman in the Early Roman Empire*, 53.

<sup>45</sup> Garnsey, "The Descendants of Freedmen," 169.

<sup>46</sup> Martial *Epigr* 1.81; Petronius Sat. 38, 57; Duff, *Freedman in the Early Roman Empire*, 67-68; MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 104; Dale B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990), 38.

<sup>47</sup> Savage, *Power through Weakness*, 39; Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 23.

<sup>48</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 24. Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, ed. and trans. John H. Schuetz (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1982), 100.

<sup>49</sup> Murphy-O'Connor suggests that *freed persons* experienced an insecurity complex that led to self-promotion (*Paul a Critical Life* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997], 270). This is an interesting psychological analysis, but seems difficult to prove from the meager information contained in the inscriptions.

identifies as Corinth's "self-made-person-escapes-humble-origins syndrome."<sup>50</sup> While the geographical origins of the initial *freed persons* in Roman Corinth are unknown, their situation seems to have placed them at an immediate advantage over that of *freed persons* in other cities. By relocating to the Corinthian colony, the settlers were freed from the normal restrictions and perhaps even obligations of the relationship between masters and *freed persons*.<sup>51</sup> Combined with Corinth's prominence as an international crossroads of travel and trade, the opportunity for a *freed person* to succeed in acquiring wealth and social prestige must have seemed all but guaranteed. As an example of this type of success Dale Martin offers an inscription found in Corinth from the Augustan era indicating that a *freed person* named Maecius had married his former master's granddaughter. Martin concludes: "in Corinth a slave could hope to rise high enough to marry the master's granddaughter even within in an important family."<sup>52</sup> Consequently, a slave living in Roman Corinth could conceivably be emancipated, become a Roman citizen, marry into his master's family, be elected as a chief magistrate of the city, acquire considerable amounts of wealth, establish a significant social heritage for his descendants and never be ashamed or ridiculed on account of his previous status as a slave. In Corinth, the status of *freed person* provided all, and even more, of its usual benefits but without many of the usual drawbacks associated with former slave status.

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<sup>50</sup> Witherington, *Conflict and Community*, 8, 20.

<sup>51</sup> Murphy-O' Connor, *St Paul's Corinth*, 66.

<sup>52</sup> Martin, *Slavery as Salvation*, 32.

As a traveling teacher who supported himself through manual labor in Corinth,<sup>53</sup> Paul would have certainly observed the "self-made success" attitude that must have permeated the city. It is possible that while making tents Paul worked side-by-side with slaves or, at the very least, encountered them daily.<sup>54</sup> Such encounters would have allowed him to observe slaves who were seeking their freedom and planning their own successful future. Paul would have also encountered individuals who, regardless of their efforts and well-laid plans, would never be successful or perhaps even freed from slavery. Such knowledge would have weighed heavily on him when he addressed those who had become Christians while enslaved. In 7:21 Paul's response to their present social status is: "Do not worry about it!" But it is also possible there was more behind Paul's words than an awareness of Corinth's "self-made-person-escapes-humble-origins syndrome." Certain social practices within the church itself may also have contributed to Paul's admonishment to slaves.

## II. Social practices in the Corinthian Congregation

The fact that Paul addresses slaves in 7:21-22 indicates they were members of the Church or, at the very least, present at Church meetings as part of a retinue belonging to a slave holding member.<sup>55</sup> The composition of the Corinthian congregation seems to have been a

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<sup>53</sup> For an examination of ancient social perceptions of manual labor in relation to Paul's ministry in Corinth, see Ronald F. Hock, "Paul's Tentmaking and the Problem of His Social Class," *JBL* 97 (1978): 555-64.

<sup>54</sup> Besides being a crossroads for international trade Corinth was also a well-known slave market (Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, 72-74).

<sup>55</sup> Gerd Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, trans. J.H. Schuetz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982) 105.

mixture of both upper and lower social statuses.<sup>56</sup> Gerd Theissen has demonstrated that it was the results of social stratification within the Corinthian congregation which prompted Paul to object to the way the common meal was being eaten during their meetings (1 Cor 11:17-34). Those who were rich and could afford to host meals in their homes were serving better food to those of similar social status and doing so before those members from the poor lower classes could arrive.<sup>57</sup> This would not have been an unusual aspect of social custom, however. As Theissen points out: "For some Christians it would not be at all strange to think that common meals, involving people of varied social status, should include food of varying quality. Such practice is well attested for the period."<sup>58</sup> He goes on to point out that at times of gathering for festival meals influential Roman patrons treated clients and *freed persons* at their banquets as second-class guests.<sup>59</sup> The results of such practices by the Corinthian congregation was that those who came early to the meal were able to do so because their socioeconomic condition allowed them more control over their time. Those from lower classes including slaves and the free poor who worked as day laborers were prevented from coming to the meal earlier by obligations to their masters and employers. Those who came early probably dined at the *triclinium*, served by slaves, while the latecomers were relegated to a side room or courtyard to eat a meal consisting of

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<sup>56</sup> Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 106; "The Social Structure of Pauline Communities: Some Critical Remarks on J.J. Meggitt, *Paul, Poverty and Slavery*," in *JSNT* 84 (2001): 65-84; Wayne Meeks, *The First Urban Christians* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 52-53, 57-59.

<sup>57</sup> Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 150-51.

<sup>58</sup> Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 156.

<sup>59</sup> Theissen, *The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity*, 161. See also Duff, *Freedman in the Early Roman Empire*, 68; MacMullen, *Roman Social Relations*, 105.

leftovers (if there were any!).<sup>60</sup> In summary of the situation, R.F. Collins comments: "The Physical location of the latecomers attested to their social location within the community and underscored the social division that rent the community at Corinth."<sup>61</sup>

Theissen's explanation of Corinthian social stratification may also lend insight to Paul's admonishment to slaves in 7:21-22. Although classed as the lowest of all statuses and relegated to eating with the free poor, slaves represented the only group among the lower classes with any real potential of changing their status. As noted above, *freed persons* held an economic and political advantage over the free poor. Because it was socioeconomic conditions that were determining who ate what and when, a slave's ability to change those conditions through manumission represented an opportunity to climb socially; not only within the broader society but within the Corinthian congregation as well.<sup>62</sup> As Theissen points out most Roman patrons treated *freed persons* as second-class citizens when hosting guests for a meal,<sup>63</sup> but the evidence suggests this would not have been the case in Roman Corinth. No self-respecting upper-class host would send the chief magistrate of the city to take his meal in a separate room simply because he was a former slave. Moreover, the host himself may have been a former slave or, even more probable, the recent descendant of a slave. Consequently, slaves in the Corinthian congregation would

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<sup>60</sup> Ronald F. Collins, *1 Corinthians* (SP; Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1999), 418-19.

<sup>61</sup> Collins, *1 Corinthians*, 418-19.

<sup>62</sup> It is highly likely that those who ate first had their meal served to them by slaves. This being the case, slaves would have experienced the double indignity of observing the partaking of the common meal by the wealthier Corinthians as well as being denied a portion of that meal until they could join the poorer members later. What more of an inducement would slaves need to begin seeking their freedom and a change in social status than the possibility of being able to join the wealthier members even if this was a deluded ambition.

<sup>63</sup> Duff suggests such attitudes may not have been quite as strong in the provinces as they were in Rome (69).

have viewed an opportunity to change their social status as way to distance themselves from the lower classes of society, which included the freeborn poor, non-citizens and perhaps even descendants of the original Corinthian population who had been disenfranchised by the colonists.

### III. Conclusion

While Paul does not address a problem of socially ambitious slaves directly, the history and social patterns of Roman Corinth and the Corinthian congregation render just such a situation possible. Christian slaves living in a city of *freed persons* with its impressive history of social climbing by Corinth's most recent inhabitants undoubtedly would have found it difficult not to let the possibilities capture their imagination. Their experience as second-class citizens within the Church would only have encouraged them to contrive even more elaborate scenarios of the "self-made-person-escapes-humble-origins syndrome." When Paul wrote to this congregation fractured by social stratification he would have been aware of the origins and history of the current Corinthian people. As he encouraged them not to seek a change in their social status, he was conscious that he was writing to people whose existence as a city was the result of a change in social status. He was also conscious of the influence such a setting could have on a slave and, in a side comment if not a direct address, tells those who are slaves: Don't worry about it! If you can become free then by all means do so, but don't seek to change your status as a way to advance in the Church. It is more important for you obey the commands of God than advance your own name and social status. It is better to be a *freed person* of the Lord than a social climber who fails to obey God!



## ABSTRACT

This article examines Paul's discussion of slaves and freed persons in 1 Corinthians 7:22. While Paul's discussion of slavery here is usually understood to be an illustration for his "theology of calling," this article suggests that Corinth's status as a city founded by former slaves may provide a window into the problem of social-climbing in the Corinthian congregation. Corinth was a city founded by emancipated slaves and these former slaves and their descendants established a wealthy Roman colony where evidence of self-promotion was replete. Combined with this setting was the problem of social stratification among Christians at the Lord's Table. Those of the lower classes were being excluded from fellowshiping with those of a higher social status. Paul's admonition that slaves not be concerned with their social status seems to be a warning not to seek a change of social status as a way to get ahead in the Church.

## 撮 要

本文探視保羅在哥林多前書七章22節對奴隸與得釋放的人之討論。就保羅對奴隸的討論，我們通常理解為保羅「蒙召神學」的例子說明。而本文作者認為，由前身是奴隸的人所建立的哥林多城，其地位或可開啟一扇窗戶，讓我們透視哥林多教會成員攀登社會階梯的問題。哥林多城是由獲釋放的奴隸所創立。這些前身奴隸與他們的後裔建立富裕的羅馬帝國社區。在這社區，自我提升的現象，比比皆是。再者，在主餐桌前，基督徒彼此間也製造了社會階層的難題。社會地位較高的信徒，排擠社會地位較低的信徒不與其交往及團契。保羅勸戒身為奴隸的信徒勿着眼於社會地位，莫圖尋求改變社會身分，以致在教會可以出人頭地。