

The Slave/Master Pericopes in Their Applicability to the Contemporary Employee/Employer Relationship

By: Henry Peter

Do They Apply?

It would indeed be strange if the slave master pericopes had nothing to say to us about the contemporary employee/employer relationship. We are agreed that Scripture pronouncements concerning other human relationships such as the following apply in our twentieth century, “Children, obey your parents in the Lord” (Eph. 6:1), “And, ye fathers, provoke not your children to wrath: but bring them up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Eph. 6:4) “Husbands, love your wives” and “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands” (Eph. 5:25,22). Why shouldn’t the slave/master pericopes be just as applicable today as they were nearly two thousand years ago.

Granted that today’s employee/employer relationship is different from the slave/master relationship of Paul’s day. But not that different. Apparently as long as this world stands, this type of relationship will have to exist. There is no way that we in our complex society could survive without the employee/employer relationship. It would be inconceivable that no one would be in the position of an employee, and just as inconceivable that no one would be an employer. According to the divine order of things not all are equally gifted. Some are by nature by leaders and others followers. Some give the orders and others submit. Perhaps the only significant difference between the slaves of Paul Paul’s day and the average employee of today is this: the slave was not free to decide to which master he would submit himself whereas today’s employee has some degree of choice as to which employer he will submit himself. When depressions and recessions strike our society, the employee’s freedom even in that respect is narrowed down somewhat by his need for a job. During prosperous times union leaders may be able to convince some of the laboring class that the employee is in the driver’s seat, that the employee can decide who he wants to work for and when and where. But God’s order of things just doesn’t permit employees and employers to switch roles - the employer submitting himself to the employee. Both communism and socialism are selling the laborer a bill of goods, when they promise him greater wealth more power, etc. Under these systems the laborer has often become little more than a slave. Nor would a completely Christian society have an effect on the divine order of things. If all were Christians in this world, the employee/employer-relationship would continue to exist.

The slave/master pericopes do apply to the contemporary employee employer relationship. I believe the word “employees could be substituted for “servant” in the slave/master pericopes and that “employer” could be substituted for “master”. Employees be obedient to them that are your employers with fear and trembling in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ. And ye employers, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening. The basic principles here laid down are just as applicable today as they were in Paul’s time.

How Do They Apply?

As we just said, these are basic principles. The Holy Spirit did not move Paul to elaborate on specific slave/master problems of the day, or to offer solutions to those problems. And rightly so. Each age has its own employee/employer or labor/management problems. Furthermore, is the Christian Church to let itself be embroiled in such problems? Is the Church to set itself up as an arbitrator for labor and management? Remember what Jesus said to the man who requested “Master, speak to my brother, that he divide the inheritance with me”. Jesus replied; “Man, who made Me a judge or a divider over you?” (Lk. 12:13,14).

As far as I could determines our Synod has never spoken out on specific employee/employer or labor-management problems. Apparently no articles have ever appeared in our synod’s periodicals on any such problems. Missouri’s Dr. C.F.W. Walther gave a series of lectures on “Socialism and Communism” in which he did speak out on the troubles of the laboring man and condemned the greedy employers. At the 1886 convention of the Eastern District of the Missouri Synod an essay was delivered entitled “*Welche Lehren gibt es fuer unser Verhalten in den gegenwaertigen Kaempfen zwischen Arbeit and Kapital, dass Christus uns Christen die vierte*

Bitte in den Mund legt: 'Unser taegliches Brod gib uns heute?' In this essay the author spoke on such matters as: *Die Gewerkvereine* (Trade Unions), *Die Arbeitsritter* (Knights of Labor), *Die Socialisten*, *Das Kapital*, *Das Monopol*. We would like to quote from an essay delivered at the 1900 and 1901 conventions of the Central District of the Missouri Synod ("*Die Arbeit im Lichte des goettlichen Worts, mit besondere Beruecksichtigung der 'Arbeiterfrage'*"). "*Sofern die Arbeiterfrage eine politische Sache ist, ist sie nicht sache der Kirche. Die Kirche ist nicht ein Reich von dieser Welt,, nicht ein social -politischer Reformverein, sondern eine Stiftung Gottes, dem Menschen den Weg zur Seligkeit zu zeigen. Zwar hat man gesagt, politische Fragen wuerden socialpolitische Fragenp and socialpolitische Fragen wuerden mit der Zeit religioese Frage. Allein das kann nur dort geschehen, wo man das weltliche and geistliche Reich nicht auseinanderhaelt. Die Loesung der Arbeiterfrage liegt der Kirche nicht ob. Sie soll mit dem Evangelium die welt nicht regieren wollen. Die Loesung der Arbeiterfrage ist Sache des buergerlichen Wesens. Wenn wir nun die Mittel erwaehnen, die man in Anwendung gebracht hat, din Arbeiterfrage zu loesen and zu lindern, so geschieht an nicht, als wollten wir bestimmte Loesungen, als nach Gottes Wort, besonders empfehlen, sondern nur im geschichtlichen Interesse. Ein Christ muss sich such ueber die Arbeitenfrage, die ihn in seinem buergerlichen Beruf so nahe angeht, informiren, und these Information waere ganz unvollstaendig, wollten wir nun nicht auch erwaehnen, wie man allerseits mit der Loesung der schwierigen Arbeiterfrage such abmueht*" (page 71).

In 1957 Concordia published *Labor, Industry, and the Church* by Pastor John Daniel. In the Publisher's Foreword this statement was made: "Although the Literature Board recommended the publication of this book to the Board of Directors of Concordia Publishing House, neither it nor Concordia Publishing House thereby necessarily endorses all of the author's points of view". Some quotes from Pastor Daniel's chapter entitled "What Can the Church Do?" "Point out the evils in capital and labor, in materialistic capitalism and materialistic communism. But, above all, preach the Gospel, and lead those who accept it to godly activity by Gospel admonition. Get close to both capital and labor with the love of Christ, or the 'isms' will get to the workingman first...In brief, to gain through an evangelical ministry the confidence and allegiance of laborer and industrialist, to Christianize both, is the best thing the church can do (p. 188)." "Lutheran church groups have taken two chief attitudes toward organized labor and the industrial world. Some have directly opposed any participation in labor-union activity. Others in the Lutheran Church have felt that such a negative attitude was wrong. In their view the need calls not only for resolutions, sermons, and addresses on the rights, duties, privileges, and responsibilities of labor and industry, but also for an active participation in reconciling divergent views and in establishing cordial relationships between management and labor. They feel that the church must not be separated from the daily, common life of the people (pages 189,190)." "Problems of labor and management can be dealt with after study and discussion in smaller church groups of men and women. There the thinking of workers and employers can be guided and directed. But too often we have presented merely the ends, aims, and goals of the Christian life, justice and holiness, honesty and charity, without providing the plan, methods, and means for solid accomplishment"(p.190).

How far should we go, as a Christian Church, or as a Christian individual, in applying the slave/master pericopes to the contemporary employee/employer relationship? Should we be satisfied in reiterating the basic principles the Holy Spirit had Paul lay down? Or should we be alarmed by what Pastor Daniel in the preface to his book called "the dearth of materials on the subject of the churches relation to groups and individuals in industry and labor"? Or put it this way: Is this dearth of materials a good thing or is it a bad thing?

Bibliography

1. Walther., Dr. C. F. W. (translated by Rev. D. Simon). *Communism and Socialism*, Hope Publicity Bureau, Inc., 1964.
2. Essay by P .F. Wambsganss. Eastern District, Missouri Synod, Report, 1886, p. 14-43.
3. Essay by Rev. H. Katt. Central District, Missouri Synod, Report, 1900, p. 12-43, & 1901, p. 9-77.
4. Daniel, John. *Labor, Industry, and the Church*. Concordia, 1957.
5. Hodge, Charles. A Commentary on the Epistle to the Ephesians.