

Living into the Kin-dom

Tyler Schwaller

Iowa Methodist Federation for Social Action Awards Banquet

10 June 2018

Friends, it is good to be here with you this evening. When I first came to Annual Conference ten years ago, I found my people with MFSA. In the midst of heartache, your solidarity has been a salve. Your commitment and witness matters. Your tireless persistence matters. And your kinship matters. Thank you, for who you are and for all you do. It is truly an immense honor to have been invited to share with you tonight.

Would you please join me in prayer through song? It will be familiar to many of you, but if not, I trust you will catch on quickly.

We are gentle, angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

We are gentle, angry people, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

We are queer and straight together, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

We are queer and straight together, and we are singing, singing for our lives.

Thank you.

Before I dive into the primary subject of my talk, there is something I need to say. Please stop with the language of unity and oneness. It is everywhere, and it is as suffocating as it is duplicitous. The theme of this year's Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference was "We are One Beneath the Cross." At this year's Baltimore-Washington Annual Conference, the bishop, a self-avowed ally, disallowed a vote on two faithful queer siblings who had been recommended for commissioning and ordination by the Board of Ordained Ministry. She was not obligated to take such action. We are *not* one.

Remember these words of Jesus: "Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword" (Matt 10:34). Or, if you prefer less violent

imagery but language every bit as clear, take Luke's version: "Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!" (Luke 12:51). The goal of church unity is bullshit. That is my paraphrase, but the sentiment is Jesus's. Perhaps Jesus could be so brazen because he wasn't worried about pensions and properties, and I certainly understand that the division of church assets is no light matter. There are material consequences at stake for us. We are literally invested in the status quo. And that's real. That's hard. But harder is the call of Jesus, which is not unity but justice. It is to bring good news to the poor, and that should be every bit as material as the pensions and properties we're so worried about. The harder call is not unity but proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and letting the oppressed go free" (Luke 4:18).

All right, I wasn't asked to preach but to give a talk, so let's talk. Tonight, I want to share with you some of my work on slavery in the history of Christianity. I contend that there are critical, urgent lessons from seeing the entanglement of slavery and Christianity, both for our church today as we gesture toward the idea of a way forward, as well as for our society as we continue to destroy families and decimate whole communities, especially of color, through our dehumanizing collective obsession with incarceration, nationalism, and deportation. In such moments of intense division and debate, one favorite rhetorical move is to turn back to the beginning of our sacred traditions and claim a more authentic understanding of their origins. We can see this very clearly in our debates over sexuality. "The Bible says this. It's clear. End of debate." Or "Jesus calls us to this. It's clear. End of debate." I did it just now: *You want to talk about unity from a Christian perspective? Well listen to these words attributed to Jesus! Our origin story, or rather, our particular understanding and articulation of the origin story, is*

supposed to be the trump card. And it makes some sense. If our goal as Christians is to be Christ-like, then we win when we line up our perspectives and actions with Christ.

But our histories are fraught. And we know this. We know about misogynist, racist, homophobic, colonialist, xenophobic, violent aspects of Christian history. But how often do we try to disentangle these realities from what we understand to be purer, better origins? We look at the KKK, who have explicitly identified their vile manifestations of white supremacy as Christian, as an authentic expression of God's love—it's not just progressives who know this rhetoric of love—and we say about them, "They're not *real* Christians." This move functions to say, "They're not like us. We don't have to take responsibility for them."

But what if I told you that Jesus was obsessed with slavery? I'm being provocative in my claim, but also, read through the parables. Notice all of the slaves. Depending on your translation, you might find the word "servants," but in most cases, this is a deliberate mistranslation of the Greek and you should read "slaves" instead. Jesus was born into and adapted to a slave culture, and we should be troubled when we read "the kingdom of God is like..." and find Jesus telling of God's reign as an empire that runs on slave labor. Sit with that for a moment. Jesus, or at least the followers who interpreted, shared, and later recorded his teachings, could not imagine human relations beyond enslavement. Now, there are any number of explanations we might proffer to lessen the blow. But, if you find these to be troubling waters, I encourage you to dwell here for a while, to resist moving quickly to make everything okay, to recognize that sometimes things simply are not okay.

Here's what you need to know about slavery in the Roman Empire, that is, in the world of Jesus, Paul, and most early Christians. You may have heard the idea that Roman slavery

wasn't all that bad, especially not in comparison with slavery in the Americas. That is patently false. I cannot stress this enough. Slavery in any context is reprehensible, and it was not any less a cruel institution in the Roman world. According to Roman law, slaves were categorized as *res*, literally things. They had no legal standing, and one significant consequence of this was that the enslaved did not have legally recognized family members. Their relationships—between lovers, spouses, children, extended family, and friends—could be broken up at any moment and frequently were. Slaves were exploited for their labors, and they were often used sexually, by their masters and mistresses and pimped out as prostitutes. This is the reality of enslavement that neither Jesus, nor Paul, nor the biblical writers, nor early episcopal leaders condemned.

But what about the fact that Colossians 4:1, for instance, entreats masters to act justly and fairly toward their slaves? To use the language of Matthew's Jesus, "Do not even the Gentiles do the same?" (Matt 5:47). Calling upon masters to refrain from anger and ill treatment of slaves was not unique to Christianity. This was not a response to a gospel of love. You will find any number of Greek and Roman philosophers saying the very same things, never translating "just" and "fair" treatment into freedom. There is no way to make the fact of Christian complicity in slavery better. It is the case that there were some pockets of resistance in those first few centuries, but they were a small minority, and the prevailing voices and teachings of early Christianity were suffused with the logic of enslavement.

Disturbed? I am being so strident in my lesson on slavery and Christianity because we do not have much time, and I do not want to mince words. We cannot simply say, "Well, that is not *real* Christianity." It simply is Christianity. Now, there *are* alternative visions to name and to seek to live into, but we ought not skip to feel-good stories without being troubled enough to

examine not only our fraught histories but ourselves. Because here's the thing: we are inclined to make excuses for the ancient people we revere, but I worry that we're really making excuses for ourselves. Many scholars will say that early Christians could not have imagined a world without slavery because it was so deeply entrenched in Roman social structures and discourses. As New Testament scholar Bert Harrill puts it:

We must avoid a kind of ethnocentrism that does not recognize the diversity of forms, attitudes, and circumstances surrounding human chattel bondage in ancient and modern times. It is both methodologically anachronistic and intellectually inappropriate to hold ancient people to modern standards of morality, although the modern person can and should reject certain features of ancient morality, including slavery.¹

Note the move Harrill makes. *We* may reject slavery, but we have become more enlightened on the matter. We cannot expect ancient people to have taken issue with something so essential to their culture that it would have been impossible to imagine a world without it.

Do you know what I worry about? That the same might be said of us centuries from now. “They lived in a nation with more wealth than the world had ever known, but they could not imagine law and order without locking people in cages and deporting those who infringed upon the borders of their nation, which turned out to be the borders of their imagination.” What are we missing? What are the hard truths we are unwilling to ask of ourselves? Whose voices are we covering up and denying? It is not just about telling more stories and inviting more people to the proverbial table. If the table has been built in such a way as to exclude, we need to radically restructure our forms of relationality. Maybe, just maybe, we don't even need the table. The question ought not be how we include those who have been excluded but how we take seriously,

¹ J. Albert Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1995), 3.

learn from, and respond to the experiences of those whom we have harmed in such ways that we transform ourselves and do no further harm.

So what can we learn from the circumstances of enslavement in early Christianity? First, we should recognize the ways Christianity has been shaped by the ideology and practices of slavery. Then, contrary to what Bert Harrill argues, I say that we make moral judgments, not for the sake of rectifying the past—we can't, what's done is done—but for the sake of sharpening our critical perspectives on the present and demanding ever more just visions of the future. Let's not assume we are more enlightened than Jesus and Paul. They got slavery wrong, but we keep proclaiming the same words as if their generic force can be abstracted from the specific social and material conditions of life, then or now. What are we getting wrong? What do we need not just to say differently but to *do* differently?

There is a question of whether slaves could even have counted as fully Christian, a critical insight brought by the scholar Jennifer Glancy,² and on this matter we see the entanglement of slavery with sex and sexuality. We know that slaves were frequently exploited sexually, including through forced prostitution. They did not have control over their bodies. But Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 6:

Do you not know that your bodies are members of Christ? Should I therefore take the members of Christ and make them members of a prostitute? Never! Do you not know that whoever is united to a prostitute becomes one body with her? For it is said, "The two shall be one flesh." But anyone united to the Lord becomes one spirit with him. Shun fornication! ... For you were bought with a price; therefore glorify God in your body (1 Cor 6:15–18, 20, NRSV).

A slave could not shun fornication. And yet, Paul constructs the bounds of community on the basis of a notion of sexual purity impossible for the enslaved. Worse yet, Paul concludes with a

² Jennifer A. Glancy, "Obstacles to Slaves' Participation in the Corinthian Church," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 117 (1998): 481–501.

rhetorical flourish taken directly from the experiences of slavery: you were bought with a price. Especially in a port city such as Corinth, people were literally being brought with a price with frequency. The power of the image is that God is the ultimate buyer, but what does freedom look like for the enslaved, for whom it is impossible to glorify God in their bodies, at least according to the terms set forth by Paul?

We might say, “Paul was giving a general command, and he certainly would have said something different to slaves themselves. Surely he would have recognized their constraints and acknowledged God’s grace for them too.” Eh. That’s fine. But there are consequences of Paul’s failure to account specifically for the circumstances of the enslaved. The tradition of sexual purity that many early Christians took directly from Paul, and that has informed Christian sexual ethics and politics into the present, could actually be deadly for slaves. Take, for instance, this account from the *Acts of Andrew*, a text probably written 100–200 years after the life of Paul. Such apocryphal acts of the apostles were popular and circulated as a witness to particular values exemplified by the featured apostle and followers.

In this case, Maximilla, the wife of a Roman governor, was so taken by Andrew’s preaching and specifically his message of chastity, based on Paul’s model of preferred celibacy, that she refused to have sex with her husband, Aegeates. He, who had not converted to Christianity, was understandably unhappy. But Maximilla came up with a solution: her slave, Euclia, whose body was not her own, could stand in for her. The text describes the setup in this way:

Just as a woman customarily adorns herself to look like her rival, Maximilla groomed Euclia in just such finery and put her forward to sleep with Aegeates in her stead. Having used her as his lover, he let her get up and go to her own bedroom, just as Maximilla used to. By so doing, Maximilla escaped detection for some time, and thereby got relief, rejoiced in the Lord, and never left Andrew (*Acts Andr.* 17).

Euclia used her abuse as an occasion to demand her freedom and procure money from her mistress. But, as was typical for freed slaves, who often continued to have obligations to their former masters in a patron-client relationship, Euclia remained and continued the ruse. Some of her fellow slaves began to resent the benefits she accrued. They eventually brought the matter to Aegeates, who was enraged, not with Maximilla but with Euclia:

The proconsul, furious at [Euclia] for boasting to her fellow slaves and for saying these things in order to defame her mistress—he wanted the matter hushed up since he was still affectionate for his spouse—cut out Euclia’s tongue, mutilated her, and ordered her thrown outside. She stayed there without food for several days before she became food for the dogs. The rest of the slaves who had told their story to him—there were three of them—he crucified (*Acts Andr. 22*).

Do you see the connections? Paul says to shun fornication. Maximilla, in turn, desires to commit to and preserve her own sexual purity, refraining from further sexual relations, even with her husband. And then she does precisely the thing that Paul did not account for: she pimps out her slave. Ultimately, her slave is killed for the sake of her own purity. *Generic ideals are never enough*. We cannot say that we value justice or love or sexual purity or any ideal we name as essential to the Christian tradition and ignore the ways these ideas intersect with people’s flesh and blood. Christian ideals of sexual morality are premised from the start on the logic of enslavement, an ideology that insists upon the inviolability of some bodies at the expense of others. The so-called sexual ethics of Christianity, from Paul forward, do not account for the utter violation and dehumanization of certain bodies and lives to the benefit of a favored few. It is simply accepted that some whole categories of persons are expendable. We are not one church. We never have been.

So where do we go from here? Honestly, as a queer person in the United Methodist Church, I'm at the point of saying: you all figure it out. Because we whose lives and loves have been subject to scrutiny and persecution, some even more than others, have been doing what those on the margins have been doing forever: living out a different way, cherishing bonds of relationality that have been denied through legal and social structures aimed at benefiting the already privileged, insisting upon the sort of love that knows no bounds. You want to know how to build a church of love, justice, and deep connection? Follow our lead.

Returning once more to the enslaved of antiquity, it may have been the case that the disavowal of slaves' kinship ties functioned as one of the primary mechanisms of dehumanization and control, and yet, the enslaved insisted upon life-giving bonds of kinship regardless. They cultivated alternative forms of relationality despite their severe constraints. We find evidence for this especially in funerary inscriptions, where at the occasion of death, the enslaved celebrated those relationships that had given them life.

Here we have an example of a freedman, a former slave, honoring life-long friendship with another freedman. While there is no claim to a familial tie, the epitaph from Rome evinces a strong emotional bond between the two. A. Memmius Urbanus set up the following commemoration of A. Memmius Clarus:

I cannot remember, my most beloved fellow-freedman [*conliberto idem consorti / carissimo sibi*], that there was ever any quarrel between you and me. By this epitaph I invoke the gods of heaven and of the underworld as witnesses that we first met on the slave-dealer's platform, that we were granted our freedom together in the same household, and that nothing ever parted us from one another except the day of your death (*CIL* 6.22355a = *ILS* 8432).

We see in the last line a claim to victory over enslavement's alienating forces. Despite the myriad ways slaves' lives and relationships were beyond their control, only death could separate

these two dear friends. They did not become most beloved companions only through their freedom, but in fact already at the slave market. Nor did the dearness of their relationship depend on recognition as such by freepersons, but they simply were beloved in relationship to one another. If the kingdom of God is marked by slavery, *this* is surely a foretaste of God's *kin-dom*.

These bonds evince the vitality of enslaved lives and relationships beyond the ideologies and practices by which slaves were regarded as mere things, as not fully human. We do not have to prioritize what Paul, or other church leaders then and now, have said or not said about sex and kinship. The enslaved call us to a deeper relationality, a more thoroughgoing justice.

When we set Paul, for one, apart as a man of his time, we ignore that others of his day were imagining and inhabiting the world otherwise. We also cast ourselves as more enlightened, as having progressed beyond the acceptance of slavery to a notion of shared humanity. But slavery's legacies persist. In the United States, we have criminalized blackness without accounting for the circumstances of horror that continue to degrade and disrupt black families and communities. Black feminists and womanists especially have called us to look for freedom not in the history of white men who professed a liberty marked by inequality and exploitation but to those black and brown women who have been progenitors of vitality and creativity even under constraint. Likewise, when we are inclined to think about Paul, Jesus, and early Christian leaders as people of their time, may we remember the ancient slaves who enacted transgressive forms of kinship, professing their humanity against the forces of dehumanization. May we become people in our time who honor these legacies alongside the voices of those calling for freedom now.

And in that spirit, I leave you with these words of Anna Blaedel, whose queer kinship has given me life amidst the forces of death and despair that prevail in the United Methodist Church:

I am deeply grateful for the wonder-full webs of queer kinship and beloved community that make life livable, in and through it all. ... Remember that justice is always intersectional, and there can be no sexual justice without racial justice without gender justice without economic justice without ecological justice without disability justice without immigration justice. The healing salve of salvation calls us to the collective work of repair, of reparation, of tikkun olam, of caring for each other tenderly and fiercely, of enfleshing liberation from delight, of resisting evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves.³

For further reading on these topics, I recommend the following:

Bernadette J. Brooten, ed., [*Beyond Slavery: Overcoming Its Religious and Sexual Legacies*](#) (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Gay L. Byron and Vanessa Lovelace, eds., [*Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse*](#) (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

Jennifer A. Glancy, [*Slavery in Early Christianity*](#) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

Jennifer Harvey, [*Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*](#) (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014).

Emerson B. Powery and Rodney S. Sadler Jr., [*The Genesis of Liberation: Biblical Interpretation in the Antebellum Narratives of the Enslaved*](#) (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2016).

Alexander G. Weheliye, [*Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*](#) (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

³ Anna Blaedel, "Formal complaints filed against Rev. Anna Blaedel...again," *Reconciling Ministries Network* (blog), April 12, 2018, <https://rmnetwork.org/blaedelthirdcomplaint/>.