

**GOSPEL** of *Grace*  
FELLOWSHIP

**Colossians**

**Jesus Christ, Our Life**

by Dana Burkinshaw

December 23, 2020

**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**F** – The apostle Paul is identified as the author of Colossians (1:1). The word apostle means “to send.” When Paul used the term apostle to refer to himself in Colossians 1:1, he was saying that he was sent as a messenger – in his case, on behalf of Jesus. What a wonderful thought, considering that Paul was once a persecutor of Christians before his Damascus road experience around AD 34 (Acts 9).

Colossians is one of Paul’s four prison letters. He wrote these letters while imprisoned in Rome between AD 60 and 62.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**L** – The young church at Colossae had quickly become the target of heretical attacks. The so-called Colossian heresy included belief in ceremonialism, asceticism (severe self-discipline), angel worship, the depreciation of Christ (lessening or cheapening his identity as fully God and fully man), secret knowledge, and reliance on human wisdom and tradition. It’s likely that the Colossian heresy was a mix of an extreme form of Jewish legalism and an early stage of Gnosticism. As an old saying puts it, “A lie can travel halfway around the world while truth is still putting on its shoes.”

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**L** – Paul’s main purpose in this letter was to refute the Colossian heresy. To accomplish this goal, he exalted Christ as the very image of God, the Creator, the pre-existent Sustainer of all things, the head of the church, the first to be resurrected, the fullness of deity in bodily form, and the reconciler. Thus, he concluded, Christ in and of himself is completely adequate, and we have been given the fullness of salvation through him. The Colossian heresy, on the other hand, was altogether inadequate. As a mere human philosophy, it was empty, hollow, and deceptive, lacking the ability to empower the believer for new life in Christ.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**I** –

- Personal Issues: The Wisdom of Christ (1:1-14)
- Doctrinal Information: The Preeminence of Christ (1:15-2:23)
- Practical Instruction: The Application of Christ (3:1-4:6)
- Relational Interaction: The Hidden Saints of Christ (4:7-18)

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**G** – The book of Colossians contains the Bible’s strongest written defense of Christ’s preeminence - his position of unmatched superiority and his role as the most important person ever to exist. Both the Gnostics and the Judaizers denied this aspect of who Jesus is, and the blend of both parties’ philosophies in Colossae confused the church there.

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F-L-I-G-H-T

**G** – Paul began his defense of Christ’s preeminence by stating that Jesus “*is the image of the invisible God*” (1:15). Paul understood that his audience was aware of two coexisting realities: the visible world that we live in and can detect with our five senses and the invisible world inhabited by unseen spiritual beings – i.e., God and his angels, and Satan and his fallen angels.

F-L-I-G-H-T

**G** – Where does Jesus fit in this hierarchy of things we can and can’t see? Right at the top. He is “*the firstborn over all creation. For by him all things were created*” (1:15-16) – in heaven and on earth, both the seen and the unseen. As the **firstborn**, which is the Greek word *prōtotokos*, meaning first in importance or priority – Jesus made everything that exists and holds it all together, sustaining the material universe in perfect balance.

F-L-I-G-H-T

**G** – What’s the ultimate reason for all of this? So “*that in all things [Jesus] may have the preeminence*” (1:18). If Jesus is the preexisting one, the Creator and Sustainer of all that we can and cannot see, the incarnation and image of God himself, and the founder of the church, it makes sense that he should occupy the preeminent, or most important, place in peoples’ lives. God the Father assigned him that preeminent position, and so should we. That’s the full message of the gospel.

F-L-I-G-H-T

**H** – The ancient city of Colossae was located in modern-day Turkey along the Lycus River near the cities of Laodicea and Hierapolis. Laodicea (whose church Jesus called out for its lukewarm spirituality in Revelation 3) was the financial center of the area, while Hierapolis was known for its spas and supposedly healing waters.

F-L-I-G-H-T

**H** – In Paul’s time, Colossae had already fallen in prestige and prominence in the Roman Empire. Earlier in its history, especially around the fifth century BC, it had been a thriving city, known for its trade and clothing business. The church at Colossae was founded during Paul’s three-year stay in Ephesus during his third missionary journey (AD 52-57). Paul’s friend Epaphras may have helped with getting the church started.

F-L-I-G-H-T

**H** – In the years after Christ’s death and resurrection, a belief system that became known as Gnosticism began to take shape and work its way into religious circles, the church at Colossae not excluded. It was likely a blend of Gnosticism and the Judaizing influence that had taken root in the Colossian church. Simply put, the Gnostics believed that God is good, but everything in the material world is evil. Because of that, Jesus could not have had a physical body; he must have had what Gnostics called an emanation, or aeon – some part of God’s essence that emanated out from him.

**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**H** – Because God is perfect, he would have nothing to do with an evil material creation, so from time past, they posited, various emanations simply came forth from him and accomplished various deeds. One of these emanations created the world, for example, and another one came to earth as Jesus. Gnostics also held that in order to become enlightened and saved, one must attain to a secret higher knowledge (*gnosis*) above that of Scripture. That's Gnosticism in a nutshell, and while it's certainly one weird nut, it had a lot of traction in Paul's day. It needed to be refuted.

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**Colossae Region**

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**Colossae**

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**Colossae and Cities**

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**T** – **Know who Jesus is.** One of Satan's chief tactics is to hijack what God has done or said and twist it to his own advantage. In the midst of Gnosticism and Judaizers that plagued Colossae, Satan's false teachers took sound biblical terms like wisdom, knowledge, and spiritual understanding and refined them so that they pulled people away from what the Scriptures really taught.

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**T** – When you talk to nonbelievers, especially ones who claim to have a connection to Christianity, know how to define your terms. You'll find that the Jesus whom Paul described in Colossians, for example, is quite different than the Jesus of the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses. In your conversations with others, always start with a clear definition of who Jesus is and what he has done.

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**T** – **Keep first things first.** As believers, we all want to grow; we all want more than we’ve already experienced; we all want a deeper relationship with God. But growth in these areas does not come from any system that preaches that in order to be saved, you must have Jesus **plus something else** – Jesus plus baptism, Jesus plus a mystical experience, Jesus plus combating climate change, Jesus plus striving for social justice.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**T** – You can’t add to Christ. Who he is and what he did at the cross are complete. Putting those things at the same level of importance as Jesus makes you ineffective in your faith and unproductive as his agent in the world. Working for your own salvation is a sickness, and Jesus is the only one who can cure you of that seemingly inexhaustible addiction. You must trust that Christ alone is enough.

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**T** – **Keep your eyes on Jesus every day.** If he is first in importance in the universe, he must be first in your everyday life. If Jesus doesn’t have first place in your marriage, your family, your work, your relationships, your hobbies, or your entertainment can you truly say he is lord of your life?

When you hammer a nail, what do you look at? The nail – not the hammer or your thumb, because you hit what you’re aiming for; you hit your target. In the same way, when you make Jesus your focus, you’ll hit your target.

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**Contrast with Ephesians**

Ephesians	Colossians
emphasis on the body	emphasis on the head
about unity	about heresy
Christ over the church	Christ over the cosmos
irenic	polemical

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**Contrast with Philipians**

Philipians	Colossians
<i>kenoō</i> (2:7) – “empty”	<i>plerōma</i> (2:9) – “fullness”
Christian living	Christian knowing

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**Christ’s Headship**

**1 Corinthians 11:3** – Christ is the head of the individual.

**Ephesians 1:22** – Christ is the head of the church.

**Colossians 2:10** – Christ is the head of the cosmos.

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### To Whom Written?

Paul was writing to the church in Colossae. Epaphras had founded the church (1:7; 4:12-13), not Paul (2:1). The church was made up mostly of Gentiles (1:27; 2:13) who were influenced by a “vain” philosophy (2:8), composed of an incipient form of Gnosticism (vv. 8-10), legalism (vv. 11-17), mysticism (vv. 18-19), and asceticism (vv. 20-23). In brief, the heresy was a form of Judeo-philosophical and mystical asceticism, a forerunner of second-century Gnosticism.

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### Purposes of Colossians

The various purposes for which the letter was written can be inferred from the text.

- Paul desired to show the Colossians their completeness in Christ (chap. 1).
- He wanted to lead believers into spiritual maturity (2:1-17).
- His design was to counter the Gnostic-like, legalistic, mystical heresy in the church (2:18-23).
- He desired to teach about our new life in Christ (3:1-4:6).
- He wanted to inform them about his state of affairs (4:7-18).

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### Theme of Colossians

Completion in Christ

The emphasis is on the eminence and sufficiency of Christ as the believer’s completeness in Christ.

#### Key Verse

*“that we may present every man perfect [complete] in Christ Jesus” (1:28).*

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### Firstborn in Creation?

**Colossians 1:18** – If Christ is only the firstborn in creation, how can he be God?

John declared Christ to be eternal and equal with God (John 1:1; 8:58; 20:28), but here Paul seems to say that Christ was only a creature, the first one born (created) in the universe.

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### Firstborn in Creation?

Clearly Paul declares Christ to be God in this very letter by saying he “created all things” (1:16) and has “the fullness of the Godhead” (2:9). The reference to “firstborn” does not mean he is the firstborn in creation but the firstborn over creation (v. 15), since “he is before all things” (v. 17). “Firstborn” in this context does not mean the first one to be born but the heir of all, the Creator and owner of all things. It refers to his priority over creation, not his temporality in it. As Creator of “all things,” he could not have been a created thing.

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### Will All Be Saved?

**Colossians 1:20** – Does this verse teach that all will be saved (universalism)?

The apostle Paul wrote to the Colossians, “For it was the Father’s good pleasure...through him [Christ] to reconcile all things to Himself, whether things on earth or things in heaven, having made peace through the blood of His cross” (1:19-20). If Paul says that all things are reconciled to Christ by his death and resurrection, this seems to imply that all people are saved. But other Scriptures declare that many will be lost (Matt. 7:13-14; 25:41; Rev. 20:11-15).

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### Will All Be Saved?

First of all, Paul is not speaking about universal salvation here but simply the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ. In other words, all authority has been given to Jesus Christ in heaven and on earth (Matt. 28:18). By virtue of his death and resurrection, Christ, as the last Adam, is Lord over all that was lost by the first Adam (1 Cor. 15:45-49).

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### Will All Be Saved?

Eph./Col.	Philippians
All are in Christ	All bow before Christ
All in:	All in:
heaven	heaven
earth	earth
-	under the earth
All in salvation	All in subjection

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### Will All Be Saved?

When Paul speaks in Colossians of being “*in Christ*” (being saved), he does not include “*those under the earth*” (the lost). However, all persons, saved and unsaved, will one day bow before Christ and acknowledge his universal lordship. But nowhere do the Scriptures teach that all people will be saved. Jesus will say to many, “*Depart from me, you cursed, into the everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels*” (Matt. 25:41).

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### Will All Be Saved?

John spoke of the devil, the beast, and the false prophet and all whose names are not written in the Book of Life being cast into the lake of fire forever (Rev. 20:10-15). Paul speaks of punishment of the wicked as “*everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord*” (2 Thess. 1:9). It is evident from all these passages that not everyone will be saved.

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### Sufferings of Christ Lacking?

**Colossians 1:24** – How can Christ’s death on the cross be sufficient for salvation when Paul speaks of what is lacking in the sufferings of Christ?

The Bible declares that Jesus’ death on the cross was both sufficient and final for our salvation (John 19:30; Heb. 1:3). Yet Paul states that he is filling up “*what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ.*” But if the cross is all-sufficient, how can anything be lacking in Christ’s suffering for us?

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### Sufferings of Christ Lacking?

Christ’s death on the cross is sufficient for our salvation. The Bible makes this emphatically clear. Anticipating the cross, Jesus said to his Father, “*I have finished the work which you have given me to do*” (John 17:4). On the cross he cried out, “*It is finished!*” (19:30). The book of Hebrews declares unequivocally that “*by one offering [on the cross] he has perfected forever those who are being sanctified*” (Heb. 10:14). And this he did “*by himself*” (1:3) with no help from anyone else.

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### Sufferings of Christ Lacking?

Nevertheless, there is a sense in which Christ still suffers after his death. Jesus said to Paul, “*Why are you persecuting me?*” (Acts 9:4). In this sense, we too can suffer for him, since “*it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for His sake*” (Phil. 1:29). But in no sense is our suffering for Christ a means of atoning for sin. Only Jesus suffered *for* sin. We suffer *because* of sin (ours and others), but never for sin.

### Sufferings of Christ Lacking?

Each of us must bear the guilt of our own sin (Ezek. 18:20) and accept the fact that Christ suffered for our sin (2 Cor. 5:21; 1 Pet. 2:21; 3:18). When we suffer for Christ, we are undergoing pain as part of his spiritual body, the church, but only what Christ suffered in his physical body on the cross is efficacious for our sins. Our suffering then is in *service* not for *salvation*.



### Philemon

Jesus Christ, Our Lord & Master

by Dana Burkinshaw

December 23, 2020

### F - L - I - G - H - T

**F** – “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (v. 1) is identified as the author of the book of Philemon. This is the last of Paul’s prison letters – those he wrote while incarcerated in Rome. Sometimes called the Polite Epistle, Philemon is one of the few writings of the NT whose scriptural canonicity has not been challenged. Philemon was written at the same time as Paul’s other prison letters, during his first imprisonment in Rome, between AD 60 and 62.

### F - L - I - G - H - T

**L** – Philemon is a personal letter. It differs from all of Paul’s epistles in that it is neither doctrinal or intended for general church instruction. Paul focused on applying the principles of brotherly love and forgiveness to personal life. He wrote to Philemon, an active Christian in the church at Colossae and one of his converts, on behalf of Onesimus, Philemon’s runaway slave who had come to Christ after fleeing to Rome and had been instructed by Paul during Paul’s first Roman imprisonment.

### F - L - I - G - H - T

**L** – This is the only private letter of Paul’s that has been preserved, and the only letter of its type in the NT besides 3 John. In keeping with his ongoing emphasis that believers ought to be responsible citizens, Paul felt that Onesimus should return to his master in fulfillment of his Christian duty. We don’t know exactly how Onesimus had wronged Philemon – only that Paul urged Philemon to forgive and accept Onesimus as a new brother in Christ.

**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**I** -

- Ethics in Christ (1-9)
- Equality in Christ (10-13)
- Exoneration in Christ (14-21)

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**G** - Paul's letter to Philemon shows the love and mercy of Jesus Christ in action. Paul expressed his love for Philemon and Onesimus – both owner and slave – but recognized that a bill still had to be paid on Onesimus' behalf (v. 18). His offer to pay the debts Onesimus owed is a beautiful picture of what Jesus has done for us. On the cross, Jesus took our debt on himself and paid what we owed God – the cost of sin's wages, which is death. "He made him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (2 Cor. 5:21). We were slaves of sin, and he paid to set us free.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**H** - One of the biggest historical themes of Philemon is slavery. Slaves in the Roman Empire were typically treated as a commodity – that is, worth only what they could be sold for. In some places, up to one-third of the population was enslaved. Slavery wasn't based on race; it included prisoners of war and foreigners, as well as those who owed debts they could not pay. Some families were forced to sell their children into slavery in order to survive.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**H** - But slaves could find freedom, and many did; sometimes owners would set a slave free, and sometimes a slave would formally purchase freedom through labor. A formally freed male slave could become a Roman citizen with full rights, so there was incentive to work hard and be obedient to one's master.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**H** - While some Roman slaves performed menial tasks, many were well-educated in philosophy, science, and medicine. Slaves were used in most every aspect of life except public office. When the gospel came to town and a church was born, slaves and owners mingled together in the new Christian community to worship and learn God's Word.

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**F - L - I - G - H - T**

**T** - **Your ministry starts at home.** When Paul referred to "*the church in [Philemon's] house*" (v. 2), he may have meant Philemon's ministry to those who lived in his home – that is, his family. The home is a place where husbands are to minister to their wives, husbands and wives to their children, and older siblings to younger siblings by setting a godly example and by cultivating, shepherding, and guiding one another closer to Jesus.

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### F - L - I - G - H - T

**T – Freedom in Christ surpasses earthly labels.**  
Unless Jesus is your master, you are enslaved to something that will never fully satisfy and will certainly never give you the freedom to be who God intended you to be. But when you belong to Jesus, you become free – free to, like Paul, the apostle, relate to any fellow Christian as your brother or sister, regardless of their status, wealth, gender, ethnicity, or anything else that formerly would have divided you from them.

### F - L - I - G - H - T

**T – God loves to restore broken people.** Paul echoed this truth when he wrote to restore the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon (vv. 15-16). Think of all the people and circumstances that led to your salvation – how God orchestrated so many details to bring you into a right relationship with him. If he was in control of all that, you can trust that he'll also work everything in your life – the good, the bad, and the ugly – together for your good.

### Purposes of Philemon

The reasons for writing Philemon are evident in the text.

- Paul wished to entreat Philemon to reinstate Onesimus (v. 12).
- He wanted to suggest his possible release from prison (v. 22).
- He sought to persuade Philemon to request the services of Onesimus in the gospel (vv. 10-13).
- He wanted to state the Christian view on slavery.

### Theme of Philemon

Benefaction in Christ

#### Key Verse

*“That the sharing of your faith may become effective by the acknowledgment of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus” (v. 6).*

### Value of Philemon

*Although small, this book is significant in many ways:*

- **Personally:** It shows the character of God and names ten other people.
- **Ethically:** It reveals his balanced sensitivity to rights.
- **Providentially:** It manifests the providential hand of God behind events.
- **Evangelistically:** It encourages winning the lost to Christ.
- **Socially:** It shows the relation of Christianity to slavery.
- **Spiritually:** It is a beautiful picture of the gospel – intercession (v. 10), substitution (vv. 18-19), restoration (v. 15), and elevation (v. 16).

### Institution of Slavery

**Philemon 16** – Does Paul approve of the institution of slavery?

The apostle Paul seems to favor the institution of human slavery by sending a runaway slave, Onesimus, back to his owner. Paul makes no outright condemnation of slavery. But slavery is unethical, a violation of the principles of human freedom and dignity.

### Institution of Slavery

Slavery is unethical and unbiblical, and neither Paul's actions nor his writings approve of this debasing form of treatment. In fact it was the application of biblical principles that ultimately led to the overthrow of slavery. Here Paul neither commends nor condones it; rather he undermines it and condemns it implicitly. Several important factors should be noted in this connection.

- From the very beginning, God declared that all humans bear the image of God (Gen. 1:27). Paul reaffirmed this, declaring, "We are the offspring of God" (Acts 17:29) and "He has made from one blood every nation of men to dwell on all the face of the earth" (v. 26).

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### Institution of Slavery

- In spite of the fact that slavery was countenanced in the Semitic cultures of the ancient world, the law demanded that slaves eventually be set free (Exod. 21:2; Lev. 25:40-41). Likewise, servants had to be treated with respect (Exod. 21:20,26).
- God reminded Israel constantly that they had been slaves in Egypt (Deut. 5:15), and their emancipation became the model for the liberation of all slaves (Lev. 25:40-41).
- In the NT Paul declared that in Christianity "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is **neither slave nor free**, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (Gal. 3:28). All social classes are broken down in Christ; we are all equal before God.

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### Institution of Slavery

- The NT explicitly forbids the evil system of this world that traded the "bodies and souls of men" (Rev. 18:9-13). Slave trade is so repugnant to God that he pronounces his final judgment on the evil system that perpetuated it (Rev. 17-18).

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### Institution of Slavery

- When Paul urges: "Servants, be obedient to those who are your masters" (Eph. 6:5; Col. 3:22), he is not thereby approving of the institution of slavery, but simply alluding to the *de facto* situation in his day. His purpose is to instruct servants or slaves to be good employees, just as believers should be today, but he was not thereby commending slavery. Slaves were commanded to obey their masters, but nowhere does the Bible command anyone to have slaves, nor does it even encourage us to do so.

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### Institution of Slavery

- A closer look at Philemon reveals that Paul did not perpetuate slavery but actually undermined it, for he urged Philemon, Onesimus' owner, to treat him as "a beloved brother" (v. 16). So by emphasizing the inherent equality of all human beings, both by creation and redemption, the Bible laid down the very moral principles that were used to overthrow slavery and help restore the dignity and freedom of all persons of whatever color or ethnic group.
- It was futile in a monarchy to try to overthrow politically the institution of slavery (half the Roman Empire were slaves). It was better to undermine it spiritually, which eventually happened, by applying Christian principles.

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