

Slaves and Masters

Colossians 3:18–4:1 presents a *Haustafel* (table of household responsibilities) similar to the one in Ephesians 5:21–6:9. This one emphasizes the duties of slaves, perhaps because of a recent issue in the congregation in which Onesimus, the slave of Philemon, had run away from his master, only to be sent back to him by Paul (Philem. 8–18; cf. Col. 4:9). As in Paul's approach to that situation, the attitude toward slavery here is ambiguous.

On the one hand, slaves are instructed to obey their masters in everything (3:22; on this, cf. Eph. 6:5; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; Titus 2:9–10; 1 Pet. 2:18–21). On the other hand, masters are instructed to treat their slaves justly and fairly and to do so in recognition of their equality before God (Col. 4:1). For those whom Christ has clothed with a new way of being human (3:10), the distinction between “slave and free” has become ultimately meaningless (3:11).