Appendix A
1 Peter 2:13–25

When we hear the word *slave*, or even *servant*, we have very specific images that come to mind, most of which come from the history of slavery in our own country. But Scottish theologian William Barclay describes the nature of “slavery” in the Roman world, to give us an idea of the kind of people Peter was addressing in his letter:

“It was by no means only menial tasks which were performed by slaves. Doctors, teachers, musicians, actors, secretaries, and stewards were slaves. In fact, all the work in Rome was done by slaves. The Roman attitude was that there was no point in being rulers of the world and doing one’s own work. Let the slaves do that, and let the citizens live in pampered idleness.... Many slaves were loved and trusted members of the family, but one great inescapable fact dominated the whole situation. In Roman law, a slave was not a person but a thing and had absolutely no legal rights whatsoever. For that reason, there could be no such thing as justice where a slave was concerned.... Even if they were well treated, they were still only things.... Into this situation came Christianity with its message that everyone was precious in the sight of God.”

In the Church, social norms were flipped upside down. In a church, it was quite possible that a slave could be an elder in a congregation and his master just a member of it. Within the church, all people were equal, but in the economic structure of Rome, there were still slaves and servants and masters.

As modern readers, many of us are surprised that Peter, Paul, and the other church leaders don’t ever try to abolish slavery in their culture. They don’t sanction slavery as a God-ordained institution. And yet, they seem to just accept slavery as part of the socioeconomic fabric of the time.

In their writings, both Paul and Peter encouraged Christian slaves to serve their masters obediently, whether or not the master was a Christian (Eph. 6:5–8; Col. 3:22–25; 1 Tim. 6:1–2; 1 Pet. 2:18–25). Paul commanded believers to remain in whatever condition they were in when they were called to follow Jesus. Regarding slavery, he said, if you have an opportunity to be free, take it, but don’t worry if you have to stay a bondservant. You are still free in Christ, even if you are a slave (1 Cor. 7:21–22). Just as God told the Israelites who were in exile in Babylon, their call wasn’t to try to escape, but to learn how to live faithfully in exile.

Paul and Peter don’t appeal to a Christian political movement to topple the Roman slave laws and criminalize the enterprise. Instead, they tell believers to *live differently* within the broken institution. The New Testament writers don’t openly condemn slavery as a practice, even though it is contrary to the kingdom of God. The New Testament writers don’t try to fight slavery as an institution because they are teaching Christians how to live as citizens of the kingdom *in the reality of this world*. So, if Christian masters and slaves treat each other as
brothers, if they live together in community and serve beside each other in the church, they will be a model for the rest of the world. Instead of overtly attacking the institution, the Gospel would change the world by changing the hearts of believers in the world.