Bonded labour is one of the social issues which need immediate attention of academicians, politicians and religious believers. As a lecturer in the department of Human Development I have been brought into close contact with many social issues and one of the most striking ones which need to be studied is the issue of bonded labour. According to the latest statistics half of the slaves in the world today live in India. The extent and magnitude of the problem is such that no serious citizen and much less a believer can be indifferent to the plight of millions of our countrymen degraded to the status of slave. I as a believer in a religion which teaches human dignity and equality have added motive to defend and promote the dignity of those deprived of it. It is for this reason that I have chosen this topic for my doctoral dissertation. I want to derive inspiration from my Christian faith to combat slavery in its manifold forms. More precisely, I examine the letter of St. Paul to Philemon which specifically deals with the issue of slavery from the Christian perspective and apply the suggestions and inspiration that come from it to the situation of bonded labour in India. It is my hope that it will enable me to understand better the agony of the bonded labourers and to work with greater commitment for their cause. It is an irony that even sixty after sixty years of independence, many of our countrymen are still living in virtual slavery. The system of bonded labour, in spite of legislative enactments and struggles by social activists, continue to exist in Indian society.

This paper examines the system of bonded labour from the biblical perspective. More precisely, it looks at the system from the perspective of Pauline theology, with particular reference to the letter of Paul to Philemon where he almost exclusively deals with the issue of master-slave relationship. Paul, while handing over the run-away slave Onesimus to his master Philemon, lays down norms for Christians, and indeed for all others, to deal with their subordinates in a manner that benefits human dignity and Christian brotherhood.

Subject

Bonded labour is the continual labour of an individual forced to work by mental or physical threat. Bonded labourers, and often their families are indebted to an employer from whom they have borrowed money. The individuals or family borrow money from a landlord or a money lender, due to personal or family
emergency and the individual or family is forced to work for very little pay or no pay in exchange for a small loan. When a person works as a bonded labourer he/she gets a low wage, as a result, they require a long period to pay back their debts. The money lenders or landlords impose unjust interests on the money borrowed. Because of these factors the debt increases rapidly and a bonded labourer is trapped for the rest of his life without the hope of paying off the original debt.

Bonded labourers are forced to work long hours, often seven days a week, for meager wages, attempting to pay back a debt that increases at exorbitant interest rates. In reality, there is no way to repay the debt and the labourer becomes essentially a slave for life. Many bonded labourers are children who are beaten and abused by the owner if they do not fulfill the owner’s extreme expectations.

While it is widely accepted that debt bondage exists in India, there continues to be considerable controversy regarding the number of people held in bondage. It should be noted here that most official statistics include male bonded labourers only. However, it is commonly found – in agriculture, brick kilns and quarried, that other family members, including women and children, are also working to pay off loans taken from landlords and employers. These, unfortunately are not included in the statistics.

Article 23 of the Indian Constitution forbids the use of forced labour, and bonded labour is specifically outlawed under both the 1976 Bonded Labour System (Abolition) Act and the 1989 Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act. Administrative mechanism for the identification, release and rehabilitation of bonded labourers exist throughout the country in the form of “Vigilance Committees”. In reality, the absence of political will to take a firm position on debt bondage at national and state levels means that these Committees exist mostly on paper only. India has ratified the International Labour Organization (ILO) Convention 29 on forced labour.

Debt bondage is prohibited under the United Nations Supplementary Convention on Slavery, the Slave Trade and Institution and Practices Similar to Slavery (1956). It is also forbidden under the International Labour Organization’s Convention 29 (1930) on Forced Labour.
Statement of the Problem

The letter to Philemon is only twenty-five verses long. It is the shortest of all the letters in the New Testament. The church in general has accepted the Pauline authorship of Philemon and has adopted a positive attitude toward this briefest of all Paul’s letters. Unlike Corinthians, Hebrews, Thessalonians, and Acts, which have enjoyed enormous research and scholarship, Philemon has much room for interpretation, exegetical research, and scholarly contribution.

In this sense, it is not so much a problem, but an opportunity to raise a contemporary socio-political issue which has deep roots in ancient history. A serious study of the letter can throw much light on this vexed issue and suggest ways to eradicate it. Moreover, it is my hope, dream, and aspiration to add my insight, expertise, research, and inspiration to the letter to Philemon in terms of biblical exegetical research and hermeneutical insights.

As far as my knowledge goes, there is only one person who wrote a commentary on Philemon in direct relation to the issue of slavery. This person is none other than Dr. John G. Nordling. In his commentary on the letter to Philemon he examines the issue of slavery in the Roman world, Roman attitudes concerning race and skin color, and means by which the earliest Christian missionaries (specifically, the apostles) went about establishing and overseeing churches. Within the context of Roman slavery, Nordling shows how the book of Philemon contributes to the Christian understanding of vocation and service. Through Paul’s promise to pay all of Onesimus’ debts, Nordling shows how Paul is a “type-of-Christ” in his letter. In it all, Nordling shows that this brief letter overflows with care, gentleness, pastoral concern, and a desire to teach the Christian reader about reconciliation with each other because of our reconciliation to Jesus Christ.

Research Objectives

The research objectives have four underlying elements namely (1) literary criticism, (2) historical criticism, (3) theological criticism, and (4) hermeneutics. These four underlying elements will be applied when analyzing the letter of St. Paul to Philemon in its historical context. It will help us to better understand the issue of slavery (or bonded labour which is a form of modern slavery) in the contemporary Indian situation. This is our main objective.
Throughout the research, we will go through a series of questions that will help us unravel as well as discover new insights and ideas: What are the hermeneutics of the letter of St. Paul to Philemon? What happens when we view the concept of modern slavery in the context through the biblical lenses? How will this contribute to biblical scholarship?

We first need to study the person of Paul in order to understand his theological vision. Who is this person? Why is he writing this letter? And for whom is he writing this letter? These are some of the questions we need to look into in order to understand the context and background against which Paul wrote this letter.

We then will go into the letter to Philemon and thoroughly-research and investigate the letter using three of the four elements mentioned above, saving the hermeneutics element for the last. We need to investigate its historical context. We need to get behind the text to see what is really intended by the author. Once this is done, then we may proceed to analyzing the theological ramifications of the letter to the people of that time, that is to say, what was the theological significance of the letter in the past?

In the following section, we will attempt to trace the historical context of the issue of slavery. What happened to slaves during the ancient Roman era? What were the issues related to slaves? We need to know as much as humanly possible about the issue of slavery of the past and into the present.

This will be followed by a study of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). CST is important because it is the social teaching of the universal church. Here we attempt to understand the teaching of the church on the morality of human dignity and rights.

Finally, taking all this into consideration, we will blend and synthesize all our findings into what we call the “hermeneutics of the letter St. Paul to Philemon” in the Indian context. It is in the Indian context that we live and work. And slavery is an Indian reality. And it is this perspective that will contribute to our work and research on Philemon.

**Purpose of the Research**

The purpose of this research, simply put, is to shed new light on the hermeneutics of the letter to Philemon in regard to the issue of modern slavery specifically the bonded labourers in India. How do we better understand the letter of Paul to Philemon in the Indian context? Hermeneutics of the letter of Paul to
Philemon are the key words in this research. The letter to Philemon contributes to the Christian understanding of vocation and service. It is in this context, that we want to contribute to further research into the letter of St. Paul to Philemon. Moreover, it is in the context of the bonded labour that we analyze and examine its hermeneutical implications.

**Significance of the Research**

The significance is manifold. First and foremost, it is scholarship from and Indian perspective. It is very important and significant that the letter to Philemon speaks to the Indian people from the Indian perspective. This is to say, the letter should be viewed from the Indian culture and tradition. This research is important because it will add to further development or interpretation of the letter to Philemon from a hermeneutical perspective and from Indian point of view.

**Research Methodology**

First and foremost, we need to know about St. Paul. This is done through library research. There are ample resources dealing with Paul. Much has been written on Paul. And much has been published in international scholarly journals.

Secondly, we examined the letter to Philemon from all angles namely (1) literary criticism, (2) historical criticism, (3) theological criticism, (4) hermeneutical implication. Literary criticism is not literal translation. We tried to look at the text very carefully word for word to try to get behind the text to get the intended biblical message of the text.

Historical criticism is not about studying history. Here it is the historical significance of the text that concerns us. The study of historical context where the letter to Philemon was written helped us to understand the hidden meaning of the text.

The theological criticism deals with the theological implications of the text during the time when the text was written. In the case of the letter to Philemon we tried to understand the theological relevance of the letter in the Greco-Roman context.

Hermeneutical implications imply the significance of the letter of Paul to Philemon to today’s world. How does it apply to us today? The hermeneutical implication of the letter to Philemon is an instrument to analyze the issue of bonded labour in India.
Third, we investigated and examined the issue of slavery. We examined the issue of slavery in the biblical and ancient Roman world to understand what ancient slavery was like.

Fourth, we made an elaborate study on the CST on the issue of human dignity and rights of a person. This is done by examining various church documents.

**Scope and Limitation**

This research and investigation deal mainly with St. Paul’s letter to Philemon. We used this letter as our lenses to view the concept of modern slavery in the Indian context, especially the issue of bonded labour. In the research we have identified various forms of modern slavery, but we did not go into the details of each type. Our focus is squarely on the issue of bonded labour only.

We are here only to add to the dimension of biblical scholarship or hermeneutical implications from an Indian perspective in analyzing the dignity of the bonded labourers through the lenses of St. Paul’s letter to Philemon. Through this research we do not intend to advocate any civil rights movement or to challenge any socio-political or religious system. We merely want to contribute our findings to the larger world of biblical scholarship in terms of contextualizing our theological understanding.

**Outline of the Research**

The first chapter introduces Paul and his letters and his overall his theological vision, so as to situate his letter to Philemon. He wrote his letters to communities on different occasions to resolve different problems that existed in those communities. Therefore we must interpret Paul’s letters, especially the letter to Philemon in the light of its historical and social context, identifying the major themes and theological contributions of the Apostle.

The second chapter analyzes the letter in a detailed manner and identifies the values and principles contained therein. We use the method of ‘historical’ and ‘theological criticism’ to understand in a better way the significance and the theology behind the letter, and the ‘biblical hermeneutics’ method will be used to analyze the content and the structure of the letter, with special reference to the issue of slavery.

Chapter Three deals with the issue of slavery in its manifold forms. The study reveals that slavery is not a thing of a bygone past but a present reality. The extent and
magnitude of the problem challenge human conscience. It is inevitable, that religious leaders, politicians and voluntary organizations together must work to tackle this social evil and usher in the liberation of millions of bonded labourers.

The Christian participation in this liberation movement is inspired by the biblical message of human dignity and brotherhood. The CST, is especially in favor of the poor and marginalized. These doctrines starting mainly with *Rerum Novarum* (1891), by Pope Leo XIII, passionately defends rights of the poor and condemns all structures and systems that are oppressive and create situations of un-freedom and inhumanity.

Finally the fifth chapter studies the hermeneutical implications of the letter of St. Paul to Philemon. The question that arises is: What does the letter to Philemon mean for us today? What message has it to offer to the people who are in bondage under the system of bonded labour? Certainly the letter is a challenge and has a strong message both for the master and slave. It is a recommendation and appeal to human conscience and challenge to everyone, to consider the other as one’s own brother and sister.

Nevertheless one must add that these, however noble and sublime they may be, are not sufficient to eradicate the system of bonded labour. It has to be attacked on various fronts. Legislative enactment must be backed up stringent enforcement of laws. This must be backed up by conscientization of both slave and master through education to human dignity.