

An Appeal to Love

Philemon 1; Coast Community Church Pastor's Class; Earl Miles; January 5, 2014

Short, Unique, and Mysterious

Philemon, as books of the Bible go, is short and unique and mysterious. It is a personal letter from Paul to Philemon about a slave named Onesimus with an appeal to Philemon to treat Onesimus in light of Onesimus's new faith in Jesus. The big question is, *'What are the implications of this letter for slavery?'*

The Characters

The writer of this short letter (only 2 and 3 John are shorter) is Paul the apostle, who is a prisoner (vv. 1, 9, 13) in Rome at the time of writing (first Roman imprisonment in the early 60's AD; see Acts 28:11-31). Timothy, a faithful assistant to Paul and co-laborer in the gospel ministry, is with Paul in Rome. Philemon is the primary recipient of this 'private' letter (although others are mentioned in the greeting and it was to be read to the church at large) and is a member of the church in Colossae (based on the fact that his slave, Onesimus, is evidently from Colossae – Colossians 4:9). In fact, the church (or a portion of the church in Colossae) meets in his house. Apphia and Archippus are also mentioned as fellow believers and as involved in the gospel ministry. It is possible that Apphia is the wife of Philemon and Archippus is the son of Philemon. It is also possible that Archippus is pasturing the church in Colossae in Epaphras' absence.

The Storyline

This is what makes Philemon somewhat mysterious. Paul does not give us much background information on what prompted the letter. It is clear: Paul is a prisoner (vv. 1, 9, 13). Paul is appealing to Philemon about Onesimus (v. 10). Onesimus has become a Christian through Paul's ministry while in prison (v. 10). Onesimus (whose name means 'useful') has become dear to Paul and useful to him while in prison (vv. 10-13, 16) Paul is sending Onesimus back to Philemon (v. 12). Paul would like to keep Onesimus (v. 13). Onesimus has been separated from Philemon in some way (v. 15). Onesimus is Philemon's slave but is now more than simply a slave to him (v. 16). Paul explicitly requests that Philemon 'welcome' Onesimus like he would Paul himself (v. 17). What Paul does say has given rise to a number of different storylines.

1. Philemon and Onesimus are physical brothers who have quarreled. (v. 16)
2. Philemon, and his house church, have sent Onesimus, his slave, to Paul as their representative (v. 13).
3. Philemon and Onesimus are in a dispute and Onesimus has sought out Paul to be a mediator between them (v. 9 – 'aged' or 'ambassador').
4. Onesimus is a runaway slave who 'happens' to encounter Paul and is saved (v. 10).

The Issue of Slavery

Many have wondered about the way the Bible addresses (or does not address) the issue of slavery. We need to see the complexity of the slavery issue in light of first century realities in the world and in the church.

1. Slavery was an integral part of the social and economic world of the 1st century (one third of the people in Colossae may have been slaves; at all levels of society, working in mines or fields to household slaves who ran businesses and raised children).
2. Freedom wasn't the obvious good in the 1st century world that it is to us (many were voluntary slaves and those set free often found it difficult to make a living).
3. The idea of social action by a tiny minority in an authoritarian empire would not have crossed their minds.
4. Up to this point, Christians were not commanded to liberate their slaves, but to love them in a Christlike way.

The Approach of Appeal

The purpose of the letter is so that Paul can appeal to Philemon concerning Onesimus (v. 10). Paul makes it clear that he is not commanding Philemon to do anything in regard to Onesimus but appealing on the basis of love (vv. 8-9). There are various conclusions regarding what exactly Paul is asking Philemon to do.

1. Paul is asking Philemon to treat Onesimus like a brother in Christ and forgive him for any wrongs. (vv. 17-20).
2. Paul is asking Philemon to send Onesimus back to him so that Onesimus can take care of Paul's needs in prison (vv. 12-14).
3. Paul is asking Philemon to set Onesimus free from his slavery to Philemon (vv. 15-16).
4. Paul is clearly asking for 1 and implying 2 (v. 21).
5. Paul is clearly asking for 1 and implying 3 (v. 21).

The Flow of the Letter

1. Greeting (1-3)
2. Commendation (4-7)
3. Appeal to Treat Onesimus as a Brother (8-17)
4. Appeal to Forgive Onesimus (18-21)
5. Appeal for Future Lodging (22)
6. Closing Greetings (23-24)
7. Benediction (25)

Implications

1. How we live is not simply a private matter, but a community matter. (vv. 1-3)
2. Every believer, even the 'lowest' in the eyes of the world, is to be treated as we would the Apostle Paul. (vv. 4-20)
3. God allows/ordains all sin (including slavery) for the greater good He purposes through it; some sin He legislates directly against (through clear commands) and some sin He legislates indirectly against (as the outworking of broader principles), according to His wisdom. (vv. 21-25)

Note: Much of the background information and the various scholarly interpretations have been gleaned from *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon* by Douglas Moo.

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