

Philemon: Short Book, Long Implications

The Form: Philemon begins with Paul's standard opening, identifying himself and his audience and offering the composite greeting "Grace to you and peace" (Greek letters opened with a peace blessing and Jewish with a grace blessing). The letter closes with a list of greetings to people Paul knows. In between the letter moves freely between personal requests and instruction for the sake of the community, an important thing to note when one considers how Philemon might have received the letter.

The Situation: In the Roman Empire, slavery was both legal and acceptable in large. Roman law held that slaves were living tools of their masters, their property to buy, sell, and dispose of as they saw fit. Although some prominent men were known to write clauses into their wills that their slaves would be set free upon the master's death, far more stories from the period tell of brutality and abuse. When Paul tells the slave Onesimus to return to his master Philemon, he is pushing him towards what the ancient world would likely consider a sure death sentence.

The Plea: Verses four through seven set up an expectation that what follows will derive its meaning not from Roman virtue nor from commercial gain and loss but from the redemption that is in Jesus the Messiah. In verse eight the letter takes a threatening turn, and Paul makes immediately obvious that he is not going to ask Philemon twice. In verse twenty-two the request to prepare a place for Paul to stay has more than a little bit of menace in it.

In the Resurrection, Paul argues, the difference between master and slave, one of the cornerstones of Roman civilization, no longer holds any sway. Instead, when Onesimus returns, Philemon should greet him not as an inferior, much less as property, but as a brother. Such a welcoming home, Paul insists, is better for Philemon than never to have lost a slave at all, for not only has Onesimus been a help to Paul, but by the redemption of Jesus the Messiah, Onesimus has entered a new reality, one in which he is a great help both to Paul and to Philemon. (Onesimus in Greek means "most useful.")

The Implications: Not a few studies have accused Paul of ignoring the institution of slavery in this letter, but a bit of careful reading should indicate otherwise: for one, Paul was not a Senator but a frequently-jailed traveling preacher; his word would have held little sway in the grand scheme of things. More importantly, Paul seems to assume that the Church itself is a community whose rules God, not Caesar, decides.

By making the question one of Church politics rather than imperial, Paul actually makes a move more radical than a change in policy, a radicalism that the latter-day radical Henry David Thoreau seemed to grasp when writing about slavery hundreds of years later:

A wise man will not leave the right to the mercy of chance, nor wish it to prevail through the power of the majority. There is but little virtue in the action of masses of men. When the majority shall at length vote for the abolition of slavery, it will be because they are indifferent to slavery, or because there is but little slavery left to be abolished by their vote.

Likewise, Paul does not even entertain the option of attempting an empire-wide abolition; instead he does something about it in his own sphere of influence, knowing that among those around him who claim Christ, brotherhood and not slavery will be the norm.