

Philemon

Paul's letter to Philemon is probably the most situation-specific letter in the New Testament, containing as it does Paul's plea for wealthy Philemon to receive back his runaway-slave Onesimus who has in the meantime ran into Paul and been converted to the gospel. What can be the point of such a particular letter in the New Testament canon? No doubt to teach important principles of fellowship, conversion, reconciliation and fellowship – not to mention a lesson as to how to request someone in a spiritually productive way to do something we wish to be done.

The structure of Philemon is not difficult to discern. It has three parts. In the first, v1-7, Paul greets Philemon and the church in his house, as well as singling out Apphia and Archippus for special greeting. He gives thanks for them, praises them for the faith and example, and prays for their continued spiritual growth. In the second and main part of the letter, v8-21, Paul gets down to the business of his letter – to encourage Philemon to receive Onesimus back into his household, both as a servant, but now much more importantly, as a brother. Finally, in v22-25 Paul signs off and presents his closing prayers, greetings, and farewell.

It's evident that Paul holds a lot of affection for Philemon, acknowledging him as a 'fellow-worker' and one who is 'dearly beloved'. From v19 it also appears that he was probably a direct convert of Paul's. Philemon is known for his hospitality and welfare work, as well as for hosting the local ecclesial meetings in his home (v2,7). Paul also asks him to reserve him a room

(v22), for he hopes to visit when released from prison (this imprisonment is likely Paul's first captivity in Rome of Acts 28 when Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians are thought to have been written).

Paul's Plea

It appears that Philemon's runaway servant Onesimus has found his way to Rome and there met the apostle Paul. He too has now been converted to Christianity by Paul (this is presumably what Paul means when he says in v10 that he has 'begotten Onesimus in his bonds'), and told Paul his life story. Since Onesimus still legally belongs to Philemon, Paul tells him that he should make

Paul's techniques of persuasion

Some of the techniques Paul uses to persuade Philemon:

He 'beseeches' and 'pleads' with Philemon, putting him in the driving seat as the decision-maker (v9,10,14,20)..

He uses emotional leverage by seeking to arouse sympathy as he refers to himself as 'Paul the aged' and a 'prisoner', and by asking Philemon to act 'for love's sake' (v9) towards one who has born a son in his old age (v10,12).

He also levers their relationship (the one between Paul and Philemon) as he asks that Philemon should act for Paul's sake ('if thou count me a partner', v17,21). He is prepared to put his own relationship with Philemon on the line for this reconciliation. When we think of Jesus' words about first being reconciled to our brother in Mt 5 this starts to become less surprising.

But at the same time as all this he toys with his potential authority as the apostle to the gentiles to command Philemon. He chooses not to use this authority, but he reminds Philemon that it is his (v8,21 – note the use of the term 'obedience!').

He points out the practical and spiritual value of Onesimus' service to himself, and, potentially, to Philemon once more (v11,13).

He offers to underwrite whatever loss Philemon may have suffered (v18-19). This shows a level of commitment behind Onesimus' new-found honesty and sense of duty.

He suggests that there may be a purpose behind the sequence of events which have hitherto appeared nothing but negative for Philemon. Think of the new level of service that Onesimus will give now he is a brother, and think of the trust and closeness of relationship that this can enable (v16). Most interesting is v15: 'for perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him for ever'. The spiritual model behind such a concept is the prodigal son who strays and returns, it is Israel who forsakes her Maker but will ultimately brought to know Him again, and, wider still, it is mankind going astray from God and being reconciled in the kingdom. Because of these circumstances, Philemon has been invited to play the part of God in a wonderful re-enacted parable of reconciliation and fellowship restored.

restoration and go back to his master, if he is prepared to receive him, and offers to write to Philemon to encourage him to do so. Tradition asserts that Paul dictates this letter to Onesimus, and that it is Onesimus himself who carries it back and knocks on his former master's door to deliver it – it would have been quite a moment! Though Paul would have liked to have kept Onesimus near at hand to minister to his own needs (v13), he recognizes that Philemon should have first right of refusal and should take this natural opportunity manifest the principle of Christlike reconciliation and forgiveness of his new brother, even as Onesimus should himself be reconciled to the duties and responsibilities from which he had once sought escape.

Paul's technique for arguing these points and asking Philemon to receive back his servant are fascinating to examine. He uses a number of

methods as indicated in the panel on the previous page.

With a barrage of points like this, it appears that there is little Philemon can do other than willingly receive Onesimus back into his household once more – but now not just his domestic household, but the ecclesial household as well. The letter bears a significant message about unity, forgiveness, suffering wrong, being prepared to show up and change things after having wronged someone, and, perhaps the word that best sums up all of this – reconciliation.

Forthcoming:

The relationship between Col and Phm. The relationship between personnel, ecclesias, and the forged letter to the Laodiceans