

St. Andrew's Episcopal Church
Early Church Writings
Book of Philemon
June 3, 2020

1. Context/Uniqueness of Letter

- a. Same typical format: opening greeting, thanksgiving, body, closing greetings, farewell.
- b. One of the shortest letters of Paul's.
- c. Only letter addressed to a person, not a community (was personal, not private; would have been read aloud to the community)
- d. Unique among NT writings in naming a slave in a Christian household; also unique in that it does not concern itself with issues around the relationship of the Jesus Movement to the other forms of Judaism.
- e. Elegant puns in the letter:
 - i. Onesimus – means useful. Paul says Onesimus before (his faith) was useless to him, but now had become useful. Before his conversion, Onesimus was useless because he was without Christ, but now he is useful because he is a “good Christian”.

2. Main point/conviction: all members of the church should be treated by one another with forgiveness and love.

3. Authorship

- a. Undisputedly written by Paul. Co-sponsored by Timothy
- b. Written while Paul is in Roman prison; some assume Rome, others Ephesus
- c. Written in mid-50's or early 60's (depending upon the location of prison)

4. Main characters in letter:

- a. Philemon- member of a Christ-community, maybe even leader, for community met in his house
- b. Onesimus- Philemon's slave who had fled from him (we don't know why)
 - i. To be a runaway slave was a very serious matter in that world.
- c. Onesimus went to Paul, become a convert, a Christ-follower.
- d. Now Paul has sent Onesimus back to Philemon with this letter.

5. Situation the letter is addressing:

- a. Philemon's slave, Onesimus, encountered Paul in prison.
- b. Paul converted Onesimus and is now sending Onesimus back to Philemon.
- c. Most scholars believe Onesimus was a runaway slave, but not certain.
- d. Onesimus, may have sought out Paul, who was a friend of Philemon to be the arbitrator – or it could have been that Philemon sent Onesimus to Paul to help him.
- e. Not sure what Paul's intent is in the writing of this letter
 - i. Is he seeking Onesimus' continued service for himself?
 - ii. Is he seeking to ensure that Philemon receive his returned slave with welcome and forgiveness?
 - iii. Is he suggesting Philemon release Onesimus from slavery since he is now a “beloved brother” to both Paul, Philemon and the church?
- f. What is awkward about the situation:
 - i. Paul is the reason for Onesimus' defection, so Paul is technically to blame.
 - ii. Philemon, the slave owner, has Roman law on his side.

- iii. Paul also convinced that Onesimus – now that he is a Christian and a “brother” can no longer be considered simply property. He’s an equal before the Lord.
- iv. By accepting Onesimus among his followers – has brought financial harm to Philemon, which he promises to repay.
- v. AND Paul is Philemon’s benefactor: through the Pauline mission, Philemon has been given life, so Paul can say “Philemon owes him”
- vi. AND Paul doesn’t want to lose Onesimus, so he wants Philemon to send him back to Paul
- vii. Paul states that “in Christ” he can demand Philemon’s compliance—won’t demand it, but will appeal to him on the “basis of love”
- viii. Paul’s power – Paul has authority over all households as the “head”, overruling the Greco-Roman social hierarchy of obligation. Paul is looking for a way for Philemon to comply, but still feel honored and honorable.

6. What we learn about the Christian mission at this time (around Paul)

- a. There is a close network of fellow workers (vv 2, 23-24)
- b. Importance of benefaction (v. 7)
- c. Importance of hospitality (v. 22)
- d. Leadership role of women (v. 2)
- e. Understanding of community as “the holy ones” (vv. , 4, 7)
- f. Prominence of the households as a place of Christian meeting (v. 2)
- g. The fellowship of faith “in Christ” transcends natural kinship relationships and social stratification.
 - i. Paul is a “father” to Onesimus because he converted him to the Good News (v 10), and that new status makes the slave now also a beloved brother to his master.
- h. This is the beginning – when the new sort of fellowship in the Christian household will strain ever more urgently against the framework of ancient social structures**

7. How the letter has been used in United States- argument for/against slavery

- a. Proslavery advocates – argues that Paul had indeed returned the slave Onesimus to Philemon and that Philemon himself was both a Christian and a slaveholder.
- b. Abolitionists – argued that Paul, as a Jew, could not possibly have returned a fugitive slave to his owner. Citing Deut. 23:15 – with its injunction that “slaves who have escaped to you from their owners shall not be given back to them”

8. Slavery in the Roman Empire-

- a. Chattel slavery (slave owner had absolute or nearly absolute control over the slave) was widespread in the Roman Empire.
- b. No one rejected the institution of slavery, although some did speak of the fundamental humanity of slaves and advocated they be treated humanely.
- c. Roman slavery was not race based: individuals were enslaved primarily through captivity in war or birth to a slave mother.
- d. Slaves could be freed and become Roman citizens.
- e. Roman slaves lived with the possibility of losing their families and with physical violence or the threat of it.

9. Slavery in Jewish communities.

- a. Not much information.

- b. Writings of Philo and Josephus as well as early rabbinic literature take slavery for granted, even as they advocate for humane treatment and posit common humanity.
 - c. Philo claims that the Essenes do not practice slavery; and they believe the ownership of slaves contributes to injustice
 - d. Jews were themselves enslaved in the Roman-Jewish wars.
 - e. Distinction between Israelite and non-Israelite slave
 - i. Israelite slave – fixed period of 6 years of enslavement (more like indentured servant)
 - ii. Foreign slave – more like chattel slave.
 - f. Rabbinic law had greater restraints on the power of the slave-owner over the slave than did Roman law.
- 10. Paul's view of slaves:**
- a. Envisioned them as free and equal in the church, while not seeking the abolition of slavery.
 - b. Gospels assume slaves are part of the social order.
 - i. Jesus heals the Centurion's slave
 - ii. Slaves in some of the parables, echoing Roman stereotypes of the good and bad slave
- 11. Underlying Issue – what life in Christ (this new creation) is like: is slavery acceptable (can a Christian have a slave who has become a Christian?)**
- a. Issue addressed in letter is larger than resolving a conflict between Philemon and Onesimus.
 - b. Question was whether slavery was acceptable within life “in Christ”
 - c. Philemon is a Christ-follower who has slaves – problem here.
 - d. Onesimus has become a Christ-follower – he has become “in Christ”
 - e. Paul answers “no” to question of slavery—a Christian master may not have a Christian slave.
 - i. Receive Onesimus back as a beloved brother – this is **new family language**
 - ii. The two are to be brothers, “both in the flesh and in the Lord” – indicating not just spiritual equality, but equality “in the flesh”
 - f. This letter is a concrete application of what Paul wrote about life in Christ in Galatians –
 - i. If you have been “baptized into Christ” ... there is no longer Jew or Gentile, slave or free, male or female—for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.
 - g. Life in Christ abolishes the hierarchical relations of conventional culture.
 - i. Equality is not just spiritual – but also “in the flesh”.

Questions/Topics to Explore

1. Does anyone (besides me) find it odd that it appears Paul speaks against owning a Christian slave, but seems not to object to owning a non-Christian slave? Paul doesn't say no human should own another human being, but only that once someone converts they can no longer be owned by another. In contrast, our Presiding Bishop Michael Curry is speaking a lot these days about the human family, about how we each are children of God. He doesn't put any parameters around that, as to whether people are also Christ-followers, to be a part of the human family and worthy of respect and love.

- a. What are the factors, do you think that have enlarged some person's view from those "of us" having special privilege to all people having an inherent birthright to dignity and respect?
 - b. Do any of you have stories of your transformation, or the expansiveness of your view, (not only around the issue of race) but around basic human respect? What has made a difference in your life? Have you moved there through your heart or your mind? (think Spirituality type).
 - c. Can you reflect upon your pathway to a more expansive or inclusive mindset or heart-set? How has God been a part of that? What have you done to be open to God in the process?
 - d. When Paul spoke of the gifts of the Holy Spirit (faith, hope, love) – and named love as the most important one – how does love change our hearts?
 - e. What wisdom can be gleaned from this passage that relates to our current civil unrest in our country regarding race relations? What might you need to learn?
 - f. How do you pray about our current national situation?
2. Paul continues his use of new family language in this letter. We so often hear the phrase "brothers and sisters in Christ".
 - a. What comes to mind when you hear this statement?
 - b. Lots of human families don't get along at all and there can be violence and abuse as the thread through the relationships – so what's the difference here?
 - c. How does putting Christ as the head of the household change things for you?
 - d. Bishop Curry spoke of making the decision to love, which is not an emotion, but rather an action and a way of being. Do you consider "deciding to disagree" to be an act of love? What do you think must accompany this decision? What oftentimes gets forgotten?
 - e. Where in our liturgy (service of Holy Communion) do you find this sense of being someone's brother or sister in Christ? Does the act of communion shift anything in you around your awareness of this affiliation?
 3. Some people consider Paul's letter to Philemon an example of superb and loving persuasion. Others see it as manipulative, as Paul backs Philemon into a corner he can't get out without looking really bad. What do you do to invite people into their "best self", to grow in their compassion and understanding? When has someone done this for you?
 4. Paul often speaks of spiritual slavery to Christ as a good thing. What does that mean to you? In what ways do you want the power of love to have a hold over you? How does your prayer life support this release into something bigger and more expansive than your own thinking?