

INTRODUCTION

This shortest of Paul's letters is similar to private correspondence of the day, but takes on a broader importance because of its skillful application of Christian principles and its inclusion in the canon. The correspondences with Colossians prompt the conclusion that it was sent at the same time as that letter, by the hand of Tychicus, who was accompanied by Onesimus. Both of these messengers were part of the church at Colosse (Col 4:9,17), so it is assumed that Philemon was also.

Onesimus, a slave, had run away from Philemon, his master, and fled to Rome (assuming that was the place of Paul's imprisonment – see the introduction to Colossians). There he somehow came into contact with the apostle, and became a follower of Jesus. Paul now faced a dilemma with both legal and Christian implications. In the latter instance he was bound to inform Philemon, his friend and Christian brother, of the situation, and to send Onesimus home. But suppose Philemon would not receive his returned slave charitably? It seems Onesimus had done wrong and thus was under obligation to Philemon (v. 18). It is also possible that Paul wished Philemon to send Onesimus back to him so he could offer further service to the aging apostle.

Out of that dilemma comes this little masterpiece – a classic example of skill in motivation. As the comments show, Paul weaves his argument with great expertise, as he persuades Philemon to treat his returned slave with Christian love. He does not hurry his argument, but carefully lays each piece in place so that the actual request (v. 17) rests upon a solid foundation. Even then he goes further in giving Philemon a

“promissory note” (v. 19), guaranteeing that any loss, should Philemon insist, would be repaid.

It is assumed Philemon respected Paul’s wishes, and this is a reason the letter has been preserved. In the letter from Ignatius of Antioch to the church in Ephesus (early second century) he speaks of an Onesimus who was bishop of that church. Some suppose this was the former slave, and the conjecture, though not provable, is not impossible. If it is true the influence of Onesimus may have played an important part in the preservation of the letter.

Readers of Acts and of Paul’s other letters know the apostle could be quite forthright when necessary. This trait may have been responsible for the opposition aroused against him, both from without and within the church. But he was also a man of sensitivity and tact, as this letter shows. Thus the epistle is a much needed instruction in ways Christians might act in their relations with one another. It gives us a case study of just what love should do in a specific instance.

Though the influence of Christianity penetrated Mediterranean culture in powerful ways (see Acts 19:26f), the New Testament does not show us Christian efforts to create large scale social change by legal and other means. Since the return of Christ was prominent in their minds, and expected by many to occur soon, that event would be the time for the rectification of injustices. But the principles taught by Jesus powerfully altered relationships. Thus though Paul does not denounce slavery generally, he sets forth standards of conduct which would eliminate cruelty and unkind domination. They also enhance the recognition that all men are before all else under God, and thus no man has complete ownership of another. If allowed a fuller influence in society, these principles would be truly transforming. But this would be by consent, not by coercion. One wonders how even today’s world would be changed were the leaven of Christianity allowed to have its full impact?

OUTLINE

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II. THE REQUEST – 18-20

A. Paul's Appeal of Love – 8-11

B. Onesimus Sent Back – 12-16

C. Welcome Him as You Would Me – 17-20

CONCLUSION – 21-25