Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: a Case of Persuasion

by

Maureen Elizabeth McCullough

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College and the Graduate Centre for Theological Studies of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology awarded by Regis College and the University of Toronto

© Copyright by Maureen Elizabeth McCullough 2018
Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: a Case of Persuasion

Maureen Elizabeth McCullough

Master of Theology

Regis College and the University of Toronto

2018

Abstract

In this letter Paul engages the reader with passion and rhetoric. He commends Onesimus, his new son, who is a slave to his owner, Philemon, a house church leader. Paul persuades Philemon to give brotherly love to Onesimus and to give meaning and authenticity to himself and the Christian identity in the early Church.

The thesis outlines the men’s probable background and speculates regarding the motivation for Onesimus’ absence from Philemon’s household.

Paul, a humble servant of Christ, employs various emotionally intense rhetorical strategies to persuade. His aim is to implement the theological truths of justification and the mystical body of Christ incorporating all baptized believers as children of God as the form to shape lives and relationships. Paul desires truth, obedience and authenticity. Onesimus had become a new person in Christ. Philemon, with discernment, would give authentic meaning to living the gospel by welcoming his beloved brother.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .................................................................................................................................1

**Chapter 1: Background** .................................................................................................................3  
  1.1 Paul’s Situation at the time of writing the letter ......................................................................3  
  1.2 Philemon’s Situation at the time and the Background of other Addressees ..........................12  
  1.3 Paul’s authority over Philemon and the church .................................................................16  
  1.4 Other Addresses .......................................................................................................................17  
  1.5 Onesimus’ Situation at the time of writing the letter .......................................................20  
  1.6 Reception of the letter in the Early Christian Community ..................................................29

**Chapter 2: The Rhetoric of the letter** ........................................................................................32  
  2.1 Make Connections ...................................................................................................................32  
  2.2 Address Emotions First ..........................................................................................................34  
  2.3 Employ Humour ....................................................................................................................34  
  2.4 Employ Relational Language ...............................................................................................35  
  2.5 Give the Addressee a Reputation to live up to ....................................................................38  
  2.6 Employ Strong Emotional Language ....................................................................................39  
  2.7 Convey Passion Employing Strong Symbolic Images .........................................................40  
  2.8 Employ Opposites and Augmentation in Argument .........................................................40  
  2.9 Employ Discretion and Tact ..................................................................................................42  
  2.10 Use a Familiar Mode of Communication ..........................................................................44

**Chapter 3: The Form of Paul’s letter to Philemon** .........................................................................46  
  3.1 Opening Greeting .....................................................................................................................47  
  3.1.1 The Sender Formula ........................................................................................................47  
  3.1.2 The Recipient Formula ....................................................................................................49  
  3.1.3 The Greeting Formula ......................................................................................................49  
  3.2 Thanksgiving and Prayer Report .........................................................................................51  
  3.2.1 The Pastoral Function ....................................................................................................57  
  3.2.2 The Exhortative Function ...............................................................................................58  
  3.2.3 The Foreshadowing Function .......................................................................................58  
  3.3 The Body of the Letter ..........................................................................................................59  
  3.4 The Final Greeting ................................................................................................................72
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>The Grace Benediction</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>The Contrast of the letter to Philemon with Ephesians, Colossian, 1 Timothy and Titus</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Employing Lonergan’s Cognitional Structure</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>The Theological Message of the Letter to Philemon</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Authenticity in the New Man</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Charts, Tables and Diagrams

Chart 1 Rhetoric: Contrast of Opposites ................................................................. 41
Chart 2 Rhetoric: Augmentation ............................................................................. 42
Table 3 Form: Opening Greeting: The Sender Formula ............................................. 47
Table 4 Form: Opening Greeting: The Recipient Formula ........................................ 49
Table 5 Form: Opening Greeting: The Greeting Formula .......................................... 50
Table 6 Form: Thanksgiving and Prayer Report ......................................................... 51-54
Diagram 7 Form: The Body of the Letter: Chiastic Structure of Relationship ............ 71
Diagram 8 Employing Lonergan’s Cognitional Structure:
The order of Operations in the Heuristic Cognitional Structure ............................. 80
Table 9 Employing Lonergan’s Cognitional Structure:
Contrast of Letter to Philemon with Letter from C. Pliny ......................................... 81-82
List of Appendices

Appendix I: Letter from C Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62?–A.C. 113) to Sabinianus.....................97
Appendix II: The Letter to Philemon in Greek .................................................................99
Introduction

In its essence the letter to Philemon is a forward looking passionate appeal by Paul. He engages the heart of the reader/listener to affirm that all are brothers and sisters in Christ and to live that understanding. It is a case study in Paul’s passionate commitment to the gospel in the face of pending martyrdom. In the letter Paul demonstrates the priority of love, the equality of all, slave or free in Christ Jesus, and the good and authenticity realized in living the gospel. In this thesis how Paul petitions Philemon, the slave owner, for Onesimus, his slave, who is Philemon’s newly baptized brother and spiritual son of Paul in a letter of commendation, is presented. Paul petitions for the services of Onesimus in the advancement of the gospel employing persuasive rhetoric under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

First, one must paint a picture of the principle participants, Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. The reasons are several. It is to present the threats and dangers Paul endured and the living conditions, at the estimated time when and probable place where Paul was incarcerated while writing the letter. It is to provide some observations regarding Paul’s goals in light of his age and pending martyrdom. It is also to debate the location of Philemon’s house, his previous interaction with Paul and his possible actions to advance the gospel. Of course, a thesis on the letter to Philemon must outline the debate about Onesimus, the millennial underdog, from the interpretation of the patristic fathers that he was a runaway slave who stole from his master to the recently developed theories that Onesimus was sent by Philemon to serve Paul during his incarceration. There, Paul converts Onesimus, who, through baptism becomes a new man, desiring to live and to be in the service of the gospel.

In painting the background it would be appropriate to consider some of the context, namely the acceptance of slavery in the ancient society and the structure of the early Christian Community organized as a “house church”.

It is a fascinating exercise, pealing through the layers of rhetoric Paul employs in his letter to persuade, petition, commend and command the slave owner Philemon and leader of a house church. A necessary component of such interpretative effort is an analysis of the form of the letter.
After observing the form and rhetoric contained in this letter of commendation, by employing concepts developed by Professor Lonergan, clarification of the object of the letter becomes apparent. Paul’s hope for Philemon and his methods to achieve that hope become evident. For example, the reader is amazed that Paul employs the language of common sense throughout the letter. The suitability of this mode of communication is explained by Professor Lonergan. The reader can develop further insight into the situation using Professor Lonergan’s approach to cognitional theory. By observing the level of conscious intentionality, one notices what Paul is addressing and identifies both what information Paul provides and does not provide which indicate the unstated expectations.

Professor Lonergan’s work on horizons from a spiritual perspective help to explain how Paul is moving Philemon to authenticate his horizontal horizon and increase the height of his vertical horizon. Both Philemon and Onesimus had experienced conversions from their encounters with Paul. They became “new men” in Christ. These conversions were ongoing processes. This thesis explores the decisions of:

- Onesimus to obey Paul and return to Philemon, and
- Philemon to allow his slave to work for the gospel through the missionary activity of Paul.

These decisions result in the authenticity of both. These decisions are in part conversions to a greater authenticity as new men understanding truth through the effective persuasion by Paul. Such is Paul’s feat of rhetoric.
Chapter 1

Background

I would like to suggest that Paul was in Rome under house arrest at the time of writing the letter to Philemon. Philemon was the master of a household and leader of a house church either in Colossae or in a nearby city in Asia Minor, a Roman province. Philemon’s slave Onesimus, on the balance of probabilities, absconded from his master’s household. He perhaps secured funding at his master’s expense to facilitate his journey. Alternatively, he took what he “owned” if he was a slave able to work with assigned property he was at liberty to sell. Onesimus likely made for Rome. Through undocumented feats of his own doing Onesimus arrived in Rome, likely penniless, without home or community. In Rome, Onesimus likely sought out Paul having heard of Paul from Philemon after Philemon’s conversion to Christianity.

1.1 Paul’s Situation at the time of writing the letter

It is commonly accepted that Paul was incarcerated as he begins the letter to Philemon “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1). Paul was imprisoned often – Rome, Ephesus, Philippi and Caesarea are only four of numerous locations.

Why Rome and why not Ephesus? Paul was incarcerated in Rome for an extended period but Ephesus is geographically closer to Colossae. The reason to prefer Rome is primarily the timing of writing the letter. It is late in Paul’s life for Paul describes himself as an “old man”, i.e., elder, “and I Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” (Philemon 1:9) While there are other reasons for Paul describing himself as an old man, this statement is likely indicative of his age at the time of writing. Paul was a younger man when he was in Ephesus during his second and third missionary journeys. He was not in Ephesus the final journey to Rome (See Acts chapter 20). There was no discussion of an extended imprisonment in Ephesus. Further, Demas is mentioned in the Final Greetings and Benediction in Philemon 1:24 and again

---

1 Keith Bradley writes of the first century philosopher, Epictetus, who was born a slave in Hierapolis spent a considerable portion of his life in Rome. Bradley notes that “The long journey from Hierapolis to Rome was typical of the compulsory mobility to which Roman slaves were routinely subjected, the deleterious consequences of which have been seen.” Keith Bradley. Slavery and Society at Rome, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 64.

2 It could also be to encourage respect for an elder, as later discussed.
in Colossians 4:14 and 2 Timothy 4:10. Demas appears to be a fellow worker of Paul at the time of writing the letter to Philemon who later deserted Paul having fallen in love with the present world (2 Timothy 4:10). Given the mention of this individual in 2 Timothy 4:10, and given that the letters to Timothy are deutero-Pauline, the preferred assumption is that the letter to Philemon was written very late in Paul’s life, likely between 61 and 63 A.D.³

Regarding the time of writing the letter Uno Schnell explains “The letter to Philemon is to be placed in immediate proximity to Philippians for Paul is in prison (Philemon 1, 9, 13) and as with the composition of Philippians, Timothy and other coworkers are with him (Philemon 23-24). The mild situation of his custody is also comparable, for Paul can still gather his coworkers about him and continue his missionary activity (Philemon 10, 23-24).⁴

The argument for the Ephesus being Paul’s location at the time of meeting Onesimus and writing the letter to Philemon is its geographic proximity to Colossae and for this reason Fitzmyer⁵ and N.T. Wright prefer Ephesus. James Dunn compared the travel time and hazards from Colossae to Rome, being at least several weeks, to the travel time from Colossae to Ephesus, being one week⁶.

Wayne Meeks⁷ raises the possibility of Corinth being the location from where Paul wrote.

What did the patristic father’s think? Origen was the first to comment on the letter to Philemon but his commentary is lost; known only partially through the commentary of Jerome.⁸ Jerome writes that he believes Paul wrote Philemon, Philippians, Colossians and Ephesians about the same time.⁹ Jerome notes that Paul is imprisoned with Timothy and writes both the Philemon and Philippians letters from himself and Timothy. However, Jerome’s reason for believing that

---
all four letters were written at approximately the same time is that Philemon and Colossians are written to the same people. Jerome’s reasons for Ephesians being written at the same time again are the imprisonment and he sees the commands in Colossians and Ephesians being the same. John Chrysostom gave homilies on the letter and Theodore of Mopsuestia wrote a commentary on it. John Chrysostom prefers Rome noting that Rome was a considerable distance from Phrygia yet Paul had heard of Philemon’s love and faith being so wonderful that the saints were refreshed (and that Philemon was (“is”) obedient and complying in all things). Thus, he too held Rome to be Paul’s probable location when writing the letter. It also indicates that there were well-established lines of travel and communication between Phrygia and Rome. Such well-established routes would have facilitated Onesimus’ travel to Rome.

If Onesimus did travel from Colossae to Rome in approximately five weeks or so, one wonders what providential actions were undertaken to ensure that Onesimus encountered Paul. There is no right answer given the lack of information for the date and place of composition. Fortunately, the preference for Rome only marginally impacts the exposition of the letter. The location cannot be confirmed.

Under what conditions was Paul living while converting Onesimus? Craig Wansink disputes the likelihood of house arrest suggesting that, “the author of Acts 28 would have had good reason to want to portray the apostle as the sort of person who would have experienced a house arrest” and that house arrest in antiquity was reserved for persons of high status or great connections.

Whether Paul was under house arrest in Rome but in chains or whether he was actually in prison, raises interpretative questions. These questions are primarily concerned with Paul’s state

---

12 Ibid, 11.
13 As Craig Wansink wittily observed, “Speculating about where Paul may have been imprisoned when he wrote Philippians and Philemon, although enjoyable and intriguing, leaves us with little more than enjoyable and intriguing speculation.” Craig S Wansink. Chained in Christ: the experience and rhetoric of Paul’s imprisonments (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 17.
14 Ibid, 23.
15 “When we came into Rome, Paul was allowed to live by himself, with the soldier who was guarding him….they came to him at his lodgings in great numbers. From morning until evening he explained the matter to them, testifying to the kingdom of God and
of mind and emotional strength and Paul’s ability to continue missionary activity using Rome as the central location for direction of activity and education of missionaries. It impinges on Paul’s request of Philemon to make Onesimus “useful both to you and to me.” (Philemon 11) By the time of writing the letter Paul had rejected the option of keeping Onesimus with him without Philemon’s consent. But what kind of service did Paul have in mind for Onesimus? Rather than Onesimus returning to Paul to provide service, Onesimus’ role may well have been that of a missionary to Colossae and the Christian churches in the surrounding area. Such a role would be very much in keeping with a school of teaching as described in Acts 28:16-30. It would also be in keeping with Paul’s objectives to assist his churches in progressing their faith. He describes these objectives along with his mental attitude toward his mending martyrdom in the letter to the Philippians;

“For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain. 22 If I am to live in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which I prefer. 23 I am hard pressed between the two: my desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; 24 but to remain in the flesh is more necessary for you. 25 Since I am convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with all of you for your progress and joy in faith,“ (Philippians 1: 21-25)”

So how great was the contrast between house arrest and Roman imprisonment? There was no “typical Roman prison” and plenty of evidence that any prison in antiquity could be horrible. Perpetua described her imprisonment prior to her martyrdom:

“After a few days we are taken into the dungeon, and I was very much afraid, because I had never felt such darkness. O terrible day! O the fierce heat of the shock of the soldiery, because of the crowds!”

Similarly, Cicero described the Roman prison:

trying to convince them about Jesus both from the Law of Moses and from the prophets. 24 Some were convinced by what he had said, while others refused to believe….He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance.” Acts 28:16-30

“There is the darkness – the chains – the prison – the tortures of being shut up, of being shut off from the sight of parent and child, nay, from drawing free breath and looking upon the common light of day: from such evils escape may well be bought with life itself…”\(^\text{17}\)

The foul commingling of the prisoners’ food with everything pertaining to their other needs, the stench of the prison, the number of prisoners and the lack of ventilation meant that many prisoners fell ill. Those characteristics appeared to be part of the standard portrayal of prisons. In addition, the Roman prisons were frequently described as having “outer and inner” rooms; with the inner room being darker, more terrible and more secure.\(^\text{18}\)

So how could Paul have carried on his ministry meeting numbers of Jewish leaders? It would seem that house arrest would be a more suitable venue for such activity. Perhaps the answer is that Paul was able to live under house arrest, not because of status, which Paul did not have, but because of the influence of people he knew. After all, in any organization, be it a prison, a business, a church or a government, individuals who undertake the relevant activities, influence or make the decisions, are key and of the utmost importance when weighing factors.\(^\text{19}\) Paul may have developed a relationship with the centurion who saved his life when being shipwrecked in Malta as well as developing a relationship with the members of the emperor’s household both of whom may have been able to influence the Roman authorities’ decision regarding the condition of Paul’s incarceration. In addition, Paul’s Roman citizenship would have aided in his treatment because he had yet to be tried by the emperor. (Acts 16:37)\(^\text{20}\) Also, one can well imagine Paul as well praying to the Holy Spirit and to the angel of God who accompanied Paul during the journey at sea (Acts 27:23) for a favourable decision.

Regarding the psychological tension Paul must have been experiencing in 61-63 A.D., one cannot forget that Paul, formerly Saul, would have been familiar with executions in antiquity being a public event. Paul, a person of considerable insight, would have observed the lack of justice (1

\(^\text{19}\) All the saints greet you, especially those of the emperor’s household. “*Emphasis added.*” Philippians 4:22.
Cor 6:1) and the use of torture and execution as public entertainment. Both the beheading of John the Baptist and the crucifixion of Christ had an aspect of public entertainment. It was not a “one-time event” when Herodias’ daughter requested the head of the imprisoned John on a platter, and the king sent a soldier of the guard to accomplish the task. (Mt 14:3-12, Mk 6:17-29) Both Herod and the soldiers mocked Christ during his passion (Luke 23:11 and 23:32). About a century later, Tertullian wrote, “We have seen at one time or another Atys, that god from Pessinus, being castrated; and a man, who was being burned alive, had been rigged out as Hercules”. These were convicted criminals who were forced to dress up as a particular character and in the course of acting in tragedies, were killed as part of the show.  

Paul knew of this vicious aspect of Roman society while conducting his ministry under house arrest in Rome. His underlying tension speaks to his deep love for Christ, his depth of faith, his presence of mind and his emotional resilience and maturity. Thus, he began his letter to Philemon “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus” (Philemon 1). Paul does not see himself as a prisoner of the Roman State. Rather, Paul sees himself as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. Tertullian articulates a comparable position, when he writes, 

“The Christian outside the prison has renounced the world, but in the prison he has renounced a prison too. It is of no consequence where you are in the world – you who are not of it…Let us drop the name of prison; let us call it a place of retirement.”

From another viewpoint, it is only with the consent of, the will of, Christ Jesus, the Holy Spirit and God the Father that Paul was in prison. Paul after his conversion was informed by the Lord how much he was to suffer. (Acts 9:16) Further, the Holy Spirit forewarned and directed Paul throughout his missionary journeys:

---

21 When any of you has a grievance against another, do you dare to take it to court before the unrighteous, instead of taking it before the saints? (1 Cor 6:1)
24 *Ibid*, 75 See footnote 159.
25 Paul was following in the footsteps of Christ Jesus was subjected to his passion only by the will of God the Father. “Jesus answered him, “You would have no power over me unless it had been given you from above’;” (John 19:11)
26 “I myself will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name.” “Emphasis added” (Acts 9:16)
“22 And now, as a captive to the Spirit, I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me. 23 But I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God’s grace.” (Acts 20:22-24)

Paul does not describe himself as being in chains in Philemon. Rather Paul describes himself as being a “prisoner of Jesus Christ”. This is in contrast to references to chains of incarceration. The metaphorical meaning of “prisoner of Christ Jesus,” a genitive phrase in Greek, is twofold; not only is Paul in a Roman prison for Christ’s sake, he is also Christ’s prisoner. “I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Phil 3:12).

More specifically, in the original Greek, Paul writes, “Δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ” (Philemon 1) translated “a chained one” or “a bound one” or “a prisoner” of Christ Jesus. In Greek, Paul uses a genitive case to connect his incarceration with Christ Jesus. The genitive construction could be:

- a genitive of cause – a prisoner because of Paul’s dedication to Jesus Christ,
- a genitive of purpose – “for the sake of Christ Jesus” likewise “in chains for the sake of the gospel” or
- a genitive of possession – a prisoner of Christ Jesus.

Jerome notes that the letter to Philemon is the only letter where Paul describes himself as “a prisoner of Christ Jesus”. It has been suggested that the purpose of this phrase is to impress upon Philemon that he perceive Paul’s situation and relations with Christ Jesus as comparable to Onesimus’ situation and relation with Philemon. Most importantly, theologically, the suffering is for Jesus Christ, the one Lord, in whom all baptized faithful are members of his body. This would be the genitive of cause and of purpose.

---


Another reason would be to reinforce that there is honour in this suffering since it is for the resurrected Lord Jesus, the Christ. Paul writes of his imprisonments here and elsewhere. They were a necessary “boast” as invoking “status” within the Christian community. After all, Christianity was a persecuted religion. To give witness to the gospel as a leader of the Christian community, suffering, at the hands of the Jewish religious leaders of the Temple and the Roman authorities, would have been necessary. Suffering was accreditation in the eyes of the community and merit before the Lord God. Jerome quotes Acts 5:41 in this regard, “As they left the council, they rejoiced that they were considered worthy to suffer dishonor for the sake of the name.”

Apostolic suffering was a necessary means of the apostolic ministry of revealing God’s glory. NT Wright explains:

“When he [Paul] says that all the powers in heaven and earth were created in, through and for Christ, defeated on his cross, and then reconciled to him, he knows perfectly well that this stands in obvious and bitter tension with his [Paul’s] own present situation. More, all this is, for Paul, something which is only visible in the light of the cross itself, both the cross of Jesus himself and the cross which Jesus’ followers are called to bear. This then is not an “add on”. It is woven tightly into its very structure.”

The sufferings of incarceration were merit to Paul. He employed the merit of his sufferings to establish connections to those mentioned in the letter as well as his unnamed addressees, the readers of generations to come; including Jerome.

---

31 Ibid, 387.
32 In 2 Cor 11: 23-29 Paul describes his sufferings in comparison to other itinerant preachers who would hold themselves to be ministers of Christ “Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labors, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death. Five times I have received from the Jews the forty lashes minus one. Three times I was beaten with rods. Once I received a stoning. Three times I was shipwrecked; for a night and a day I was adrift at sea; on frequent journeys, in danger from rivers, danger from bandits, danger from my own people, danger from Gentiles, danger in the city, danger in the wilderness, danger at sea, danger from false brothers and sisters; in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, hungry and thirsty, often without food, cold and naked. And, besides other things, I am under daily pressure because of my anxiety for all the churches. Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to stumble, and I am not indignant?”
Jerome in his commentary on Philemon explains why he is so awestruck of the soul and mind of Paul. Jerome suggests that Paul is in chains in Rome, in physical squalor, separated from dear ones, plunged into prison darkness and rather than being self-pitying he is on fire for the gospel. Onesimus is useful to Paul because Paul was able to minister to Onesimus. This is a great comfort to Paul because he is able to continue ministering. Further, at the time of writing the letter, Paul has developed a minister whom he is, sending on mission.

John Chrysostom in a homily on the letter to Philemon explains the purpose for the title in Paul’s salutation in relational terms:

“Immediately at the outset Paul reduces his status to that of a prisoner or slave. He is a prisoner or slave of Christ. The status of prisoner or slave presents a similarity in relationship between Onesimus and Philemon and Paul and Christ from the aspect of servitude. “For if a chain for Christ’s sake is not a shame but a boast, much more is slavery not to be considered a reproach.”

This is humility deconstructing the hierarchical relationships so natural to human society. Paul in his relationship with Christ Jesus is a representation or personification of Onesimus in his relationship with Philemon. The parallel between Onesimus and Paul would collapse the hierarchical structure where Philemon “looked up” to Paul and “looked down” to Onesimus. Now Philemon “looks down” to both and with charity and humility recognize his brothers (and will refresh them both).

How would the early Christian community view Paul’s incarceration? Unlike the Corinthians, taking note of Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, where it is clear that the early Christian communities did not always understand Paul, where they could be ashamed of Paul and accordingly shame him, Paul’s incarceration for Philemon, his house church, Archippus and other Colossians has the colour of military honour. To be a prisoner of war meant that one had

---

35 Paul wrote, “So I made up my mind not to make you another painful visit. For if I cause you pain, who is there to make me glad but the one whom I have pained?” (2 Cor 1-2)
held one’s ground and had not retreated.\textsuperscript{36} The Colossian community may have made the connection that in prison Paul was surrounded by soldiers and had not retreated, i.e., had not given up Christ.

Military metaphors were frequently employed in Greco-Roman philosophy and rhetoric, with such language often stressing the need for each person, as a “soldier” to be totally obedient to his general.\textsuperscript{37} Loyalty, perseverance and steadfastness were and are virtues of the ideal soldier. Thus, Paul uses this title “prisoner of Christ Jesus” to:

- place Christ in the foreground of the mind of the reader,
- establish that everyone is subject to Christ,
- establish Paul’s own social solidarity with Onesimus, and
- appeal to Philemon and Philemon’s community.\textsuperscript{38}

The title could also induce a sense of obligation in the reader to either visit or at least support Paul. After all, the early Christians saw prison visitation as particularly important. Tradition even has the admonition to visit the imprisoned extending back as far as Jesus himself. (Mt 25:36-44)\textsuperscript{39}

1.2 Philemon’s Situation at the time and the background of other addressees

The letter is primarily addressed to Philemon, the slave owner and church house leader. It is reasonable to assert that the letter is addressed to Philemon rather than Archippus as Philemon is the first recipient to be listed and two ephilets “beloved” and “fellow worker” modify his name\textsuperscript{40} whereas the other addressees have only one ephilet “fellow soldier” or “our sister” modifying their names.

So what of Philemon himself? How did he perceive Paul and his relationship with Paul? Of course, we have no direct knowledge. We know that Paul had converted Philemon, so it is likely

\textsuperscript{37} Ibid, 166.
\textsuperscript{38} Ibid, 149-150.
\textsuperscript{39} Ibid, 79.
\textsuperscript{40} John G. Nordling. \textit{Philemon} (St Louis, MO: Concordia Pub. House, 2004), 152.
that Paul was held in esteem and perceived as an authority. John Chrysostom gives a potential perspective of such esteem:

“…but I wish that it were possible to meet with one who could deliver to us the history of the Apostles, not only all they wrote and spoke of, but of the rest of their conversation, even what they ate, and when they ate, when they walked, and where they sat, what they did every day, in what parts they were, into what house they entered, and where they lodged—to relate everything with minute exactness, so replete with advantage is all that was done by them….For if only seeing those places where they sat or where they were imprisoned, mere lifeless spots, we often transport our minds thither, and imagine their virtue, and are excited by it, and become more zealous, much more would this be the case, if we heard their words and their other actions.”41

Chrysostom is not unique in this sentiment. Theodore of Mopsuestia expressed similar regard for Paul.

“…who is so difficult to persuade or so hard-hearted that he would not marvel when he sees Paul, standing out so great and illustrious in all respects and excelling almost all people in the virtues of true religion, writing to his own disciple with such great entreaty so that he would bestow pardon on a slave?”42

And who was this disciple, Philemon? A faithful man and one adorned with virtuous habits, living in Colossae or thereabouts, possibly with a family, leading a house church as can be gathered from what Paul wrote to him. Chrysostom describes him with high praise “Philemon was a man of admirable and noble character.”43

Fitzmyer holds that Philemon was a young well-to-do, and respected Christian of a small Phrygian town in the Lycus Valley of Asia Minor. Being a Phrygian Philemon was probably not

---

42 Theodore of Mopsuestia. The commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul translation and introd. by Rowan A. Greer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 783.
a Roman citizen, but was governed indirectly by Roman law, seeing that Romans controlled most of the towns of Asia Minor in the first century A.D.\textsuperscript{44} Philemon had met Paul somewhere, probably in Ephesus, where Paul exercised a considerable ministry (roughly 54-57 A.D.\textsuperscript{45}) Alternatively, Paul could have met Philemon at Antioch by Pisidia. It is very close to Colossae, Laodicea and Hierapolis. Antioch is on every one of his missionary journeys except, of course, the last journey from Caesarea to Rome as a prisoner.\textsuperscript{46}

If Paul met Philemon in Antioch, their acquaintance could have extended over many years. They might have met through Paul’s evangelization possibly by the City’s gates or through mutual occupation. Wayne Meeks explains,

> “When a stranger arrived in a city, then, it is taken for granted that he knew, or could easily learn, where to find immigrants and temporary residents from his own country or ethnos and practitioners of his own trade. …fellow artisans and their customers often provided the first contacts in the city…. [that] The workshop itself may have been a locus of much of Paul’s missionary preaching and teaching is not implausible.”\textsuperscript{47}

It is plausible that Philemon would have hosted Paul at one time.\textsuperscript{48} After all, Paul requests that a lodging be made available to him. (Philemon 22) Either Paul knew this by experience or it is possible that Onesimus described the house in which Philemon’s house church was located to Paul or both. Indeed Philemon may have been in the business of providing hospitality.

How important would the household have been to the establishment of the Christian church? “Below the level of the ethnic quarter and the neighborhood of similar trades came the individual

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid, 13.
\textsuperscript{46} For the map of Paul’s journeys see \url{http://inthefootstepsofstpaul.mcp.weebly.com/map.html} (accessed on October 8, 2017).
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid, 27.
household. ....it was the basic unit in the establishment of Christianity in the city, as it was, indeed, the basic unit of the city itself.”

One can speculate about what Philemon’s house might have been like. “From excavated houses in Pompeii or on Delos the physical layout of the house diagramed the relationships therein: private rooms and offices for the head of the house, a section of the house for women and children, apartment for slaves, rented rooms; on the street side a shop, tavern or hotel sometime connecting with an atrium; and centrally located a dining room in which the paterfamilias might enjoy the company of his equals and friends from other households or entertain his clientele.”

In sum, Philemon appeared to have some wealth. He had a house large enough to accommodate a meeting of Christians (Philemon. 2) and guests (22) and had been a patron of Christians in other ways as well (Philemon 5-7). He owned at least one slave, and more likely a number of them, in light of Paul’s strongly implied request to permit the slave Onesimus to work with him (Philemon 8-14) so possibly surrendering the use of one was not expected to be a great hardship for Philemon or the household.

The adaptation of the Christian groups to the household had the organizational needs of the Christian group superimposed upon an existing network of relationships within a household structure, including the master slave relationship. As a meeting place, the house afforded some privacy, a degree of intimacy and stability of place. But the household context could also set the stage for some conflicts in the allocation of power and in the understanding of roles in the community. The head of the household would assume some authority over the Christian group and would have some legal responsibility for it – a hierarchical structure. The structure of superior and inferior roles which was and is basic to society was superimposed on the Christian group with the fundamental belief that all are brothers and sisters in Christ and members of his...

49 Ibid, 29.
50 Ibid, 30.
51 This is not a point universally accepted. Professor Horrell hold that there is no evidence that Philemon had a number of slaves or wealth. Further, he quotes one statistic that in Roman Egypt approximately sixty percent of slave owners had no more than one to two slaves. Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in La Lettre À Philémon et L’Écclésiologie Paulinienne Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum Vol. 22 Édité par Daniel Marguerat (Leuven : Peeters, 2016), 13.
52 Professor Horrell finds the most plausible explanation is that Philemon lived in a modest urban location possibly renting rooms in an insula and worked as an artisan. Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in La Lettre À Philémon et L’Écclésiologie Paulinienne Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum Vol. 22 Édité par Daniel Marguerat (Leuven : Peeters, 2016), 13.
mystical body.\textsuperscript{54} Thus, there is a tension between the head of the household also being a brother or sister in Christ. Paul overcomes this tension with love and prioritizes the brotherhood of all through and in Christ by persuading the reader/listener of the letter that he and Onesimus are related as father and son and equals in experiencing limitation of personal freedom. Even further, in self-sacrificing love, Paul presents Onesimus as the personified Paul, his “very heart”.

1.3 Paul’s Authority over Philemon and the house church

How did Paul have authority over Philemon? To explain the source of power and leadership of Paul, one must turn to the authority of Paul himself, (being an itinerant apostle, without permanent social standing in Colossae), to angelic authority and to divine authority. After all, Philemon’s household church was a church.

Paul’s source of power was the cooperation of the communities\textsuperscript{55} he either founded or communicated with. It was within those communities that his power resided. The communities had delegated authority to Paul. John Chrysostom explains Paul’s authority. It is the veneration of an apostle, an eyewitness to the living Christ. Paul had an awareness of his own authority as an apostle for he presents Onesimus as his personified self and expects obedience from Philemon.

Beyond that, as Paul points out, there are the angels of each church. (1 Cor 11:10-11) “For this reason a woman ought to have a symbol of authority on her head, because of the angels.\textsuperscript{11}” To explain the pericope we turn to Walter Wink The Powers that Be, who notes in his introduction that the message to the churches in Revelations were to their angels. Each congregation had an angel.

“The angel seemed to be the corporate personality of the church, its ethos or spirit or essence. Looking back over my own experiences of churches, I realized that

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, 77.
each did indeed have a unique personality. Furthermore, that personality was real.”

The concept of angelic guardians is not new. In the Old Testament, cherubims are guardians of sacred places such as:

- the mercy seat, (Exod 25:18, 37.9; Num 7:89, 8:7)
- the doorway to the inner sanctuary of the temple, (1 Kgs 6:23-28; 2 Chr 3:10-13, 5:7-8)
- the curtains of the tabernacle, (Exod 26:1) and
- the walls of the temple, (1 Kgs 6:29).

Not only would there have been angelic authority, but more especially, there was also Christ’s presence in Philemon’s household church. “For where two or three gather together in my name, there am I with them.” “Emphasis added” (Matthew 18:20 NRSV) Paul knew and understood that Christ was and is supreme and the head of the church. It is reasonable to conclude that any head of a household church would affirm that to Christ all are answerable.

Also to be considered are the actions of the Holy Spirit. Such actions are not identified or specified in the letter to Philemon. However, the Holy Spirit was obviously present in the hearts of Paul, Philemon and Onesimus and moving their wills to write and act with charity, humility and fortitude. Further, employing the word “begotten” can be indicative of divine intent. (Phil 10) Jerome, likely following Origen, wrote that there is “Power and Wisdom underlying all the words in the Letter to Philemon”.

1.4 Other Addressees

Paul also wrote this letter to Apphia, our sister, to Archippus, the fellow soldier and to the church in “your house”, i.e., Philemon’s house alone, due to the singular form of the genitive masculine

---

personal possessive pronoun, you in the original Greek τῇ κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ. Clearly the household church leader was male; the most likely candidate being Philemon, the slave owner.

The household assembly in Philemon’s house was apparently not the whole of the Colossian church for there are no greetings to Philemon and Apphia in the letter to the Colossians. Also, there is some debate as to whether Archippus, a “fellow soldier” of Paul had some separate clerical role in Colossae for the letter to Colossians closes with instructions from the letter writer to Archippus (Col 4:9).

This makes the greeting to Apphia, our sister, in the letter to Philemon quite interesting. Wayne Meeks notes that Apphia is usually taken to be Philemon’s wife, but she is mentioned in her own right as “the sister,” while Philemon is “beloved” and Timothy “the brother”. Elsewhere, Paul employs you plural when referring to the house church of Priscilla and Aquila (Romans 16:4; see also 1 Cor 16:19). Further, Apphia is not mentioned again in the letter. The closing greeting is also singular. Therefore, it is possible that Apphia was not the wife of Philemon, if Philemon was the owner of the house and the slave and leader of the church.

The insertion of Apphia between Philemon and Archippus could establish an independence in the relationship between Apphia, Philemon and Archippus. Apphia could well be a house church leader in her own household, not unlike Lydia the vendor of purple cloth in Acts of the Apostles. Archippus is a “fellow soldier” whereas Philemon is a “fellow worker”. Their functions in the Christian community would be distinctly different with Archippus possibly having broader responsibilities than a leader of a house church and the insertion of Apphia between them would reinforce that. With a military metaphor, Paul is highlighting Archippus’ role in advancing the gospel, singling him out because of his particular contribution.

Could Paul be distinguishing the extent of the sacrifice he, Archippus, and later Epaphras are making for Jesus Christ? Could they have sacrificed immediate family life, stayed single – due to the depth of spiritual love of Jesus Christ?62

What was Philemon’s role within the Pauline Christian community? Meeks describes or defines the “fellow workers” as leaders who work closely with Paul or are associated closely with Paul and are more or less dependent on him. They could loosely be called staff as the Pauline mission was a collective enterprise. This arrangement was designed for planning, nurturing and connecting the Christian household communities. Paul may have learned this at Antioch.63 These communities would look to Paul for common experiences of Christian communities, common or complementary ways of understanding their faith in the risen Lord and common judgments regarding salvation, the law and other spiritual matters. Thus, Paul was delegated his authority from these communities.64

In verse 1 Paul greets Philemon as “our dear friend” and “co-worker”. In verse 17, Paul suggests that Philemon considers Paul his “partner”. In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, Paul commends Titus as “my partner and co-worker”. Titus travelled throughout Asia Minor with Paul and up to Jerusalem (Gal 2:1). Thus, Paul in the letter to Philemon was praising the work of Philemon for the church by attributing the same relationship between Paul and Titus to the relationship between Paul and Philemon. It is possible that Philemon travelled to bring the gospel of Christ Jesus to various parts of Asia Minor. The import of “co-worker” is that Philemon was part of a “select and important band whom Paul designates as fellow workers”. The co-workers included Prisca and Aquilla, Urbanus, Timothy, Apollos, Silvanus, Titus, Epaphroditus, Euodia, Syntyche, Clement, Aristarchus, Mark, and Jesus Justus, Demas and Luke.65

So why was Philemon’s household a church? Based on the Acts of the Apostles, the conversion of someone was typically “with all his/her household.” Lydia the seller of purple cloth in Acts is

62 How many priests and nuns have said in response to voiced admiration of their vocation and marital state, “I had no choice. There is a charisma to Jesus Christ that allows for only one decision.”
65 These individuals were named in the letters to the Romans, the Philippians, 1 Thessalonians, Colossians, Corinthians and Philemon. See James G. D. Dunn. The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 311.
an excellent example.\footnote{On the sabbath day we went outside the gate by the river, where we supposed there was a place of prayer; and we sat down and spoke to the women who had gathered there. \footnote{A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.} 14 A certain woman named Lydia, a worshiper of God, was listening to us; she was from the city of Thyatira and a dealer in purple cloth. The Lord opened her heart to listen eagerly to what was said by Paul.} The typical household was broader than the nuclear family and defined by a relationship of dependence and subordination with an element of kinship.

“The head of a substantial household was thus responsible for – and expected a degree of obedience from - not only his immediate family but also his slaves, former slaves who became clients, hired labourers, and sometime business associates or tenants…. To be part of a household was to be part of a larger network of relations. Within the household, a vertical but not quite uni-linear chain connected unequal roles from slave to paterfamilias, and less formal relations of protection and subordination between client and patron.”\footnote{Wayne Meeks. \textit{The First Urban Christians}. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 30.}

Thus, a difference in religion could disrupt this chain and impede relationships - which brings us to Onesimus.

1.5 Onesimus’ Situation at the time of writing the letter

Onesimus was not a Christian at the time he left Philemon’s house. This difference of religion could provide an explanation for Onesimus running to Paul. Since Onesimus had not converted, Onesimus may have experienced alienation in the household of Philemon, once Philemon and the rest or most of his household had converted. The tension in Onesimus’ internal affect could have been where Onesimus’ desire to imitate the leader of his household and owner conflicted with his rational thinking process. He may have made the same statements as St Thomas, “Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands, and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe.” (John 20:25) He might have desired some form of sensory verification and realized that Paul, being an eyewitness would be able to offer some form of third party verification. He also might have become a scandal in the Christian household of Philemon and so become an unwelcome individual perceived to be un-co-operative and consequently useless. So, if he ran to Paul, Onesimus’ motivation may have been a desire to
know\textsuperscript{68} and solve his alienation. If he ran all the way to Rome, Onesimus may have been a person of considerable passion and commitment in his desire to know. He may also have been a very capable person – a very beneficial attribute. He thus would have possessed a key attribute of a missionary – an ability to manage the perils of traveling long distances while being unprotected. This attribute would be of considerable interest to Paul. Wayne Meeks observes,

“There is no indication what his [Onesimus’] particular task had been in Philemon’s service, but Paul’s eagerness to have him help in the mission suggests, despite the pun on his former uselessness (Philemon 11) that he may have had some education or special skills.”\textsuperscript{69}

Chrysostom however, was as unflattering in his appraisal of Onesimus as he was complimentary in his portrayal of Philemon describing Onesimus as a runaway, a thief and a robber.\textsuperscript{70} Chrysostom could be forgiven for using polarization when preaching on Philemon. Polarization is an effective rhetorical strategy, in that it serves to highlight the point of the argument through the interplay of extreme opposites, and the Letter to Philemon lends itself quite conveniently to this rhetorical polarization; especially when preaching to a society where there was rule and oppression and where fugitive slaves were vilified for posing such resistance.\textsuperscript{71} Chris De Wet observes,

“Chrysostom’s homilies on Philemon are an excellent example of the biased nature of writing about slavery in the ancient world. Onesimus is the former antagonist, while Paul and Philemon are protagonists.”\textsuperscript{72}

To be fair to Chrysostom, he was no proponent of slavery, preaching:

\textsuperscript{68} As Aristotle observes in Metaphysics Book I “ALL men by nature desire to know.” Aristotle. \textit{Metaphysics} translated by W.D. Ross \url{http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html} (accessed on October 9, 2017).
\textsuperscript{70} John Chrysostom wrote his homilies on Philemon approximately 300 years or more after the letter was written by Paul. He lived in a society where slavery was sanctioned and practiced. Given that Roman society had a stereotyped portrait of the slave an unscrupulous, lazy and criminal being, the society to which John Chrysostom preached may have had the same stereotype.
"If someone were to ask, where does slavery come from, and why has it come to humanity? – and I know that many are asking these questions and desire to have them answered – I will tell you. Slavery is the result of greed, of degradation, of brutality since Noah, we know had no slave, nor Abel, nor Seth, nor those who came after them. The institution was the fruit of sin."73

All of the primary source information on Onesimus comes from the letter to Philemon74. There is only one other possible source - in the letter to the Colossians 4:9 a person of the name Onesimus is identified as a Christian accompanying Tychicus to visit the Christians in Colossae; nothing else is stated about him. He may well be the freed Onesimus from the Epistle to Philemon – the happy outcome of Paul’s letter and Philemon’s decision.

In endeavouring to fill in the incomplete picture of the situation, a number of theories have arisen, (more in recent centuries) as to the reasons for Onesimus’ separation from Philemon. They include:

1. A Fugitive – Onesimus ran away from Philemon’s household and stole from Philemon as well. This is a very old theory that dates from the patristic period. Under Roman law fugitives did not have the right to return to their masters and could be severely punished.75

2. An Absconder – Onesimus had carried out an escape but had the option to return to the former slave owner, Philemon because he had run to a friend of the slave owner to explain the situation.

3. A Messenger – Onesimus, the slave was sent by Philemon with a message for Paul.


74 There was a Bishop Onesimus of Ephesus about whom Ignatius of Antioch wrote. He was martyred in 95CE. Onesimus was such a common name for slaves in the first century that it is not possible to conclude that the first century Bishop Onesimus is the same person as the slave in the letter to Philemon despite popular theory that because the bishop and the slave had the same name, it is the same person.

4. A provider of Support – Onesimus, the slave was sent by Philemon to support Paul in prison.

The support theory aligns with the obligation of the early Christian community to support members of their community in prison. However, the problem with both the support and sent theories is that one does not send a “useless” individual to perform unsupervised tasks. Paul employs a very strong word “useless” in describing Onesimus’ former state. It is rather too strong a word to be simply a “pun”. Both theories require Onesimus’ co-operation and utilization. If Onesimus was alienated from the rest of Philemon’s household, such co-operation may not have been available. In other words, Onesimus was useless because he was unwilling to co-operate and not incapable. Another inconsistency with both the sender and support theories is the oblique suggestion that the separation of Onesimus from Philemon was involuntary on Philemon’s part when Paul employs a passive voice in verse 15 “Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while”. Paul uses the aorist tense with the passive voice in the indicative mood when writing this verb “was separated” ἐχωρίσθη in Greek. In English, it is translated into the passive voice. Thus, Paul avoids identifying who or what did or caused the separation. If Philemon had caused the separation by sending Onesimus to Paul for any purpose, would Paul have been inclined to avoid the topic of what the cause of the separation had been?

As a fugitive cannot return to a master, an absconder appears most probable. It allows for a reparation in a difficult master slave relationship with a formerly useless now converted and capable Onesimus. A person with the “desire to know” can fit within the absconder theory.

While, once again, nothing theologically or spiritually significant to the current reader of the letter turns on Onesimus’ motivation, his motivation does speak to the depth and strength of Paul’s ability to convert and it provides context from which to interpret the rhetoric Paul employs in the letter.

Under Paul’s direction and the interior actions of the Holy Spirit within the heart of Onesimus, Onesimus likely experienced a religious and moral conversion. Philemon had evidently been unable to achieve this conversion, if Philemon had made the effort to do so. As a fugitive or an absconder, Onesimus’ moral conversion would have been more profound than as a sent slave.
Furthermore, Paul converted the fugitive slave Onesimus and ordered Onesimus to return as part of the reconciliation process. The other part of the reconciliation process would be Philemon accepting Onesimus back into his household, affirming Onesimus as a member of the Christian community of Colossae and supporting a role for Onesimus designed by Paul and communicated to Archippus, possibly through the messenger carrying the letter to Philemon and the letter to the Colossians.

Alternatively, if Onesimus had absconded because he simply could not believe that a Jewish prophet had risen from the dead after being crucified by the Roman authorities no matter how insistent Philemon had been in his apology for the gospel and if Onesimus had decided that only an eyewitness such as Paul was could possibly convince himself, then absconding to Paul would have put Paul in a position of having to convert, return and explain the conversion to Philemon. This is could be the reason for Paul to write such a rhetorical masterpiece under the influence of the Holy Spirit.

There is evidence of the Holy Spirit’s direct and conscious intervention in the life of Paul and the other apostles. For example, Paul is sent by the Holy Spirit to Cyprus (Acts 13:4) but forbidden to go to Asia (Acts 16:6). So one wonders what other actions the Holy Spirit would have woven into the tapestry of the lives of Philemon and Onesimus so that they were converted by Paul. Such may be the case for Onesimus when Paul writes “he was separated from you for a little while....” using a passive voice where the unspoken agent of the action is assumed to be God.76 Further, it is possible that the Holy Spirit provided the information Paul obtained regarding the actions of Philemon “to refresh the hearts of the saints” so that Paul would be sufficiently confident to risk returning an absconded slave to his master.77

Several observations on slavery in ancient society are in order to round out the background of the situation. They concern Onesimus’ place in the household of Philemon and his potential to become a freedman. Again, of course, we will never know and can only outline possibilities.

76 See also Jeffrey A.D. Weima. *Paul the ancient letter writer: an introduction to epistolary analysis.* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 225.
First of all, slavery was an accepted part of ancient society, a kind of social death, an extreme form of power exercised by human beings over other human beings. Slaves could have diverse origins: through birth to a slave, through being “exposed” after birth by a poor family or through massive military conquest.\(^78\) Onesimus would have been unmarried because slaves could not marry. Onesimus would not have any children because a master had the right to dispose of a child if he so chose. Onesimus may have held a relatively secure position within Philemon’s household but it was entirely dependent on the character of the master. In general, Romans slaves held and maintained a secure position in the Roman “family”\(^79\) and Phrygia was a Roman province. However, that still allows for Onesimus to have suffered beatings as a disciplinary measure. Under Roman law the male household leader had complete control over all slaves owned in his family. Punishment by whipping, or by confinement or even execution was a right of the slave owner.\(^80\) Except in the case of revolt which endangered the government, the Roman state left the problem of the discipline and punishment of slaves to their owners.\(^81\) Fitzmyer recounts a horrific story of slave abuse by a friend of the Roman emperor, Caesar Augustus who intervened to save a slave from a death, commanded by his owner, of lamprey’s eating him alive.\(^82\) However, this right was curtailed by the Emperor Claudius.\(^83\) But there is some evidence that good treatment of slaves was thought to be good management in ancient societies. For example, Socrates asks:

“What if I show you [that]… in some households slaves are nearly all chained and run away again and again, while in other [households] they are unchained and


\(^{80}\) *Ibid*, 75.

\(^{81}\) *Ibid*, 74-75.


\(^{83}\) « Le maître pourvoit à l’entretien de l’esclave qui représente une force de travail; le droit de vie de mort exercé par le pater familias a été limité sous le règne de Claude. » Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in *La Lettre À Philémon et L’Ecclesiologie Paulinienne* Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum Vol. 22 Édité par Daniel Marguerat (Leuven : Peeters, 2016), 14.
want to stay and work? Wouldn’t you think that in this too I’d be demonstrating … a principle of estate management worth examining?984

Thus, it was in the master’s best interests to treat slaves well. Bradley notes that brutality and terror “could be” “basic components of the institution” … but only if the master-slave relationship had degenerated into something it was never intended to be – due to the extreme recalcitrance of slaves, on the one hand, or the unusual rapacity, inhumanity; or neglect by masters, on the other.”985

There are frequent examples of loyalty of slaves to their masters that indicates that slaves often received and responded to kindly treatment. Further, under the ordinary conditions of Roman life the close relations of the slaves with the rest of the Roman family and their participation in the household rites warrants the assumption of considerate treatment in the household setting.86

Slaves were permitted to have an affiliation with an authorized religious movement.87

Regarding Philemon and his likely treatment of slaves in his household, not only is Paul complimentary of Philemon’s character, (Philemon 4-7), Paul’s knowledge of Philemon’s character and actions with “all the saints” further indicates that Paul has made an informed decision to return a slave to his master. The probability of kindly treatment is good based on the information Paul received. Theodore of Mopsuestia sees an allusion to divine intervention in verses 4b and 5a:

---

84 The Romans regarded slavery as an institution common to all peoples without that necessity of explanation of its genesis. The ancient Greek society had a different social concept of slavery than the Romans. Aristotle describes a slave as a kind of possession with a soul. There was fluidity in the status of slave and freeman. Westermann notes, “The approach to the slave system of the Hellenic polities should be conditioned upon the understanding of the fluidity of its status. The ascent into freedom by the several methods of manumission then available was as easy and as prevalent as the descent from freedom into servitude.” William L. Westermann. The Slave Systems of Greek and Roman Antiquity, (Philadelphia: The American Philosophical Society, 1955), 74 and 27.


“When I remember you[sing] in my prayers, I always thank my God because I hear of your [sing] love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.”

To establish the reason for which he (Paul) is giving thanks Theodore of Mopsuestia poses the question “And how did you find this out? The reason seems to be unclear, unless the Lord gave him knowledge, because love and faith are held in the purpose of the soul.”

This is quite plausible when one considers how uncertain one can be regarding information obtained from a single source from a vast distance away. As alluded to above, revelation from the all-knowing, all seeing God, the Holy Spirit, would increase Paul’s confidence in Philemon.

Further, Onesimus returns to Philemon at Paul’s command rather than becoming a fugitive; such an act is indicative that Onesimus also thought that he would likely receive just and kind treatment.

What role could Onesimus have had in the household? He could have performed a function that would have brought him in close daily contact with other Christian members of the household, including Philemon himself. Onesimus could have been a skilled artisan working in a shop attached to the house as an architect, surgeon or secretary or worked in the domestic sphere as a servant in charge of domestic functions or have been a doer of domestic functions such as a barber. Would it have allowed him to have funds of his own with which he could have funded the trip to Rome? Otherwise, it must have been at someone else’s expense. Roman society during the time of the Empire did permit an arrangement whereby a master assigned to a slave a peculium and with it the right to add to this property whatever accrued, i.e., a “peculium”, even without knowledge of the owner, by way of investment, earnings, gift, interest, produce or wages. This property was de facto the slave’s own property although subject to total or partial recall. If the slave was given this right of property (in order that the master obtain some

---

88 Theodore of Mopsuestia. The commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul translation and introd. by Rowan A. Greer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 791.
90 No occupation in Roman society was closed to slaves, except a military one. See Keith Bradley. Slavery and Society at Rome, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 65.
advantage) and if the slave also obtained a right to dispose of the property, i.e., “libera administratio”, the slave might be able to generate a sufficient fortune to purchase his freedom with permission.\textsuperscript{92} Thus, it was legally possible that Onesimus and Philemon could have had an arrangement through which Onesimus had acquired property sufficient to fund his travel to the city where Paul was held in prison. However, a person who performs a function so well that he is rewarded with property is not “useless”.

Granting freedom, (\textit{manumissio}) was a considerable change in social status for the former slave even when the former slave remained with the former master and was indebted to him and still did not have the right to marry or to inherit.\textsuperscript{93}

In sum, in light of the incomplete facts, the background to Onesimus’ travel to Rome (or elsewhere) can range from a fugitive thief who stole from his master to fund his own desires, to a slave who with funds of own, absconded to Rome to solve the potential alienation he was experiencing and fulfill a desire to know truth.

How would the household of Philemon have received this letter? Theodore of Mopsuestia suggests:

“For if communion in faith furnished them with such great confidence that they were joined together with their masters, it would have been right, further, to look with affection upon Onesimus, who had undertaken to follow careful obedience to his masters by sharing in their purpose.”\textsuperscript{94}

Theodore of Mopsuestia insightfully identifies the benefit Paul intended by including the church in the household. It is twofold for it reinforces the truth that all the faithful are of one body and drink of one Spirit in Christ: a) acceptance by Philemon of Onesimus and b) Onesimus’

\textsuperscript{92} \textit{Ibid}, 83.
\textsuperscript{94} Theodore of Mopsuestia. \textit{The commentaries on the Minor Epistles of Paul} translation and introd. by Rowan A. Greer (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010), 791.
obedience to Philemon ensured more than acceptance of Onesimus by the household but affection as well – a warm welcome.

This is no manumission – this is subjecting the master slave social structure to the priority of the brotherhood of faith. Daniel Marguerat suggests that Paul expected more than manumission, rather he asked Philemon to renounce his position as master (or patron in a client patron relationship) of Onesimus in favour of endorsing him as brother.95

1.6 Reception of the letter in the Early Christian Community

Given that this is a letter about one slave to his master in a civilization accustomed to slavery, how would the early Christian Community receive the letter to Philemon? Theodore of Mopsuestia suggests with a view to learning what it is to be humble:

“And so those who at the beginning appointed the letters to be read in the church just as the rest, because they paid special heed to it, since more than the other letters this letter was able to teach those who heard it humility. For it is not the same thing for Paul to humble himself when he is writing to an entire church about such important matters, but it must be admired that he does so when he is writing to this disciple – not a distinguished one – and about so unimportant a matter. He is seen to have done this with such great humility because he is unwilling to give Philemon orders about matters over which he plainly had authority and control.”96

This letter would move the hearts of the early Christian Community as it does now, infused with Power and Wisdom. *Apriori* to the virtue of humility displayed so well are the infused virtues

---

95 « Paul s’adresse à Philémon en tant que *pater familias* au sujet de son esclave; il respecte parfaitement les usages et le droit légal et évidente dans l’Empire, partie intégrante de la vie familiale, l’esclavage n’est pas remis en cause au sein du NT…Néanmoins, si Onésime est appelé δούλος, le titre κυριος n’est jamais affecté à Philémon et réservé au Christ. À ce stade, l’usage des métaphores familiales doit retenir notre attention. Dans la mesure où l’esclave est entièrement la possession de son maître ou de sa maîtresse, et qu’il ne jouit juridiquement d’aucune parentèle, l’appel à Philémon de reconnaître Onésime comme ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν ἐν σαρκὶ prend tout son poids. Paul requiert de Philémon plus qu’une mesure juridique d’affranchissement ; il lui demande de renoncer à son statut de maître pour endosser celui de frère. » Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in *La Lettre À Philémon et L’Ecclesiologie Paulinienne* Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum Vol. 22 Édité par Daniel Marguerat (Leuven: Peeters, 2016), 14.

96 *Ibid*, 783.
which are at the heart of this letter; namely faith, explicitly expressed in verses 3, 5 and 6 and implicit throughout, hope explicitly expressed in verse 7 and 21 and love explicitly expressed in verses 4, 7, 8 and 16 and implicit throughout.

No one expresses the spiritual value of the letter to Philemon more eloquently that Martin Luther,

“This letter gives us a masterful and tender example of Christian love. For we see here how Paul takes the part of poor Onesimus and, as best he can, pleads his cause with his master. He presents himself not otherwise than if he were himself Onesimus, who has done wrong; yet he does this not with force or compulsion, as he had a right to do, but he emptied himself of his right to get Philemon too to waive his right. Just as Christ did for us with God the Father, so Paul does for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his right and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his anger and rights and bring us into favour for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly pleads our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimi, just as we believe. (“Prologue to the Letter of Paul to Philemon” D. Martin Luthers Werke Kritische Gesamtausgabe: Die Deutsche Bibel 7 [Weimar: Bohlaus Nachfolger, 1931] 292-93, cf. LW, 35. 390.)”

Understanding the letter to Philemon’s significance is best done through the lense of our personal relationship with God and the immanence of our God. To rephrase, God is a personal God as Jesus informs us.

“Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one of them is forgotten in God’s sight. 7 But even the hairs of your head are all counted. Do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.” (Luke 12:6-7)

Each of Onesimus and Philemon is more than a sparrow. The matter of how a person in authority such as:

• a master treating a runaway slave returning to his master, or
• an employer treating an absent employee returning to work after taking unauthorized
time off,
would be of significance to God. The return of Onesimus could serve as a model of Christian
behavior for any kind of hierarchical relationship.98

So how does one proceed to persuade without giving orders?

---

98 « St Thomas d’Aquin lit notre épître comme un modèle de comportement des maîtres envers leurs esclaves et des esclaves
envers leur maîtres. » Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in La Lettre À Philémon et L’Ecclésiologie Paulinienne Colloquium
Chapter 2

The Rhetoric of the letter

The rhetorical methods Paul employs are of enduring relevance.

2.1 Make Connections:

Persuasion is about making connections. Whether it is in ancient society or present day, whether it is evangelization, business or arts, making a connection or “establishing a relationship” facilitates achieving one’s objective. John Chrysostom provides a masterful analysis of all of the connections Paul makes in just the Greeting section of the letter99:

1. Himself with Onesimus – the person on whose behalf Paul will make the request by portraying himself as a prisoner rather like a slave not free to do their own will.
2. Himself with Christ – the Lord of all and particularly Philemon, Archippus, Apphia, Paul and Onesimus.
3. Himself with Philemon – a beloved friend; it is not boldness but affection that binds Philemon to Paul. This is a personal Christian love.
4. Himself with Philemon and Archippus – co-workers with Paul. In the greeting Chrysostom explains that Paul by denoting Philemon as a “co-worker” gives them a mutual ambition to do the work of the Lord and to co-operate with any request that achieves the Lord’s command to make converts of all nations and to concern himself with the welfare of strangers, the poor, the disenfranchised and the destitute.
5. Himself within the family of Christ – brothers and sisters in Christ; a brother to Timothy, obviously known to Philemon, Apphia and Archippus. Chrysostom explains that with the mention of Timothy as a “fellow greeter” the request for Onesimus now comes from two in the community of saints, not one alone. Paul also established a familial relationship by calling Apphia “his sister”. (Chrysostom thought that it was possible that Apphia was the wife of Philemon.) By calling Apphia his sister Paul establishes a familial bond with the

person who may well have been in charge of the domestic affairs of the household and thus may have had authority over Onesimus as well as Philemon.

6. Himself with the slaves and other members of Philemon’s household through Paul’s greeting to Philemon’s household Church - “And to the Church in thy house”. This is the entire household which includes slaves. Chrysostom knew well the relationships and the “checks and balances” within a “household” which includes slaves. Chrysostom like Paul knew that the “Church” the bride of Christ knows no distinction between master and servant. To buttress the point Chrysostom quotes “28 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) In addition, Chrysostom understood and appreciated the “delicate balance” Paul was maintaining in his greeting to the household in its entirety for John Chrysostom states in his homily, “often even the words of slaves have the power to overthrow their master.”

In the society in which John Chrysostom lived slaves were a part of the social system. Chrysostom would have been well familiar with the influence a slave could have.100

Indeed Paul takes pains to establish a relationship with the entire household by mentioning the household in the greeting. He is thus endearing himself, his Lord whom he serves and Onesimus by way of his own relationships.

With the connections which Paul establishes, he builds a base of “cooperation” with his appeals rather than taking the approach of commanding an act from his position within the Pauline Christian community. Paul understood that community through its cooperation exercises the power within it.101

---

100 During Chrysostom’s lifetime it was possible for slaves to move upward in society based on opportunity, skills, personality and timing. A slave named Eutropius in Constantinople, not only became free but a minister and consul in the Imperial government. He abused his influence. He also was an adversary of the Church and thus an adversary of St JC for he attempted to abolish the immunity of the ecclesiastical asylums not long before his fall into disgrace with the Imperial court. When Eutropius fled to the Church, Chrysostom intervened, delivering his famous sermon on Eutropius, and the fallen minister was temporarily spared. Eutropius later fled and eventually was put to death.

2.2 Address Emotions First

Paul knows that he is advocating in a situation fraught with emotion. It is possible that Paul did not know all the circumstances that led to the separation of Onesimus from Philemon. Paul probably had not seen Philemon for several years. Without divine intervention, he could not be sure of Philemon’s reception of Onesimus. If Philemon had underlying anger, hurt or resentment, Paul wanted to address that first. He did so through his title, not ‘I, Paul the apostle’, but rather “Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus”. (Philemon 1)

There is a significant risk in the return of Onesimus to Philemon regarding how he will be treated by Philemon. After Philemon sets the tone of his treatment, how he will be treated by other members of the church in Philemon’s house? What is at stake can be understood from the homilies of Saint John Chrysostom who lived in a Christian society that sanctioned slavery.

Chrysostom preached to slaveholders. To bridle their rage towards their slaves, Chrysostom referred to Paul’s disposition toward Onesimus and cites Paul as the best example of a person who managed his anger. Chrysostom asks:

“Have you ordered your slave to be put in bonds, and were you angry, and exasperated?” … in one of his most eloquent admonitions, Chrysostom tells slaveholders: “Remember Paul’s bonds, and you will immediately stay your fury.” He then beautifully reminds them of the central Christian value of suffering and pacifism: “Remember that we are of the bound, not the binders, of the bruised in heart, not the bruisers.”

2.3 Employ Humour

Paul employs a play on words, a pun, to capture the attention of the reader and engage the reader’s empathy. In verse 11 Paul deliberately uses the Greek word for useless ἄχρηστος, which can be translated as useless, unprofitable, and detrimental to contrast in a humorous

---

manner the present orientation of Onesimus whose name means useful, advantageous or profitable.

Quintilian explains how it is common to human nature to view in a more positive light those who make them smile or laugh.

“Rhetorical ornament contributes not a little to the furtherance of our case. For when our audience finds it a pleasure to listen, their attention and their readiness to believe what they hear are both alike increased, while they are generally filled with delight and sometimes even transported by admiration.” (Institutio oratoria 8.3.5.)

2.4 Employ Relational Language

Employ relational language to convey the relationships which have developed or can be developed.

Relational language is woven throughout the letter - beloved, our brother, our sister, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, an old man, son, father, a partner, and a prisoner of war.

We are all familiar with the concept of “family” and how it can be used to identify relationships or to map close connections between persons sharing mutual interests. The closest relationship of course is the indwelling of Christ in a person. Thus, all are brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus and all baptized belong to the mystical body of Christ. For this reason, in a warm tone, Paul uses the vocative case in Greek addressing Philemon directly as Brother! ἀδελφέ in verse 7 which is immediately before Paul begins his petition for Onesimus.

Apart from the divine love that unites us all, there is parental love. Paul writes, “I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.”

---


This relationship developed between Paul and Onesimus in course of Onesimus’ conversion. Although Paul writes to his spiritual children in various letters, Paul calls only one other person a son and that is Timothy, the co-writer of the letter, “the adopted brother” of Onesimus, figuratively speaking. The father son relationship between Paul and Onesimus becomes visible:

- in the explicit acknowledgment of the spiritual paternity of Paul – “begotten in my chains” is the expression used by Paul in older translations of the Vulgate, (Philemon 10)
- in requesting the acceptance back into the community in a new manner, a brother both in the spirit and in the flesh, (Philemon 16)
- in the offer to make good for the child, Onesimus, (Philemon 18) and
- in a father’s request for lodging so that he can follow the son to see how he is doing in Colossae. (Philemon 22)

Paul’s greatness of mind is apparent by establishing a connection between himself and Onesimus that Philemon will respect – sonship. This is an adopted sonship. There is a parallel between Christ establishing the adoption by God of human beings. Paul adopts the slave and pleads for forgiveness, mercy and acceptance. He sends the slave (formerly a slave to sin) on the path of goodness, humility, and faithfulness. Paul sends Onesimus on a path that is faithfilled and given his confidence in Philemon, one most likely to succeed.

Further, as Paul was recognized as an apostle by the Colossian community, Onesimus’ proximity to Paul during his imprisonment would have been significant to the community. The fact that he was now an adopted son of Paul gave him a new position within the Christian community – that of co-worker for the gospel – no longer a slave and no longer a slave to sin for he has access to grace.

Titles rarely used by Paul are old man or ambassador, fellow soldier, fellow prisoner or captive. Already discussed is Paul’s title of prisoner. With respect to “fellow soldier”, one assumption would be that the inference Paul is making is that of a missionary. A fellow soldier or fellow worker would prioritize function. The military connotation that the person “fights for the gospel”

105 Ibid, 328.
and “expands the kingdom of Jesus Christ” emphasizes the demands a missionary. If one reads Philemon 11 in conjunction with Philemon 13 and the implicit request for Onesimus’ service of the gospel, one can conclude that such service can take place in a multitude of locations. Thus, there is a multitude of possibilities, not only service to Paul to fulfill Philemon’s obligation to serve Paul thereby allowing Philemon to continue leading the church in his house.

Paul also emphasizes the brotherly connection with Philemon. In verse 7, Paul calls Philemon “brother” ἀδελφός - not my brother – but brother. In contrast, in the greeting Paul calls Philemon the beloved and fellow worker of Paul and Timothy. Timothy is given the relationship “our brother” ὁ ἀδελφὸς. Thus, Timothy is both the brother of Paul and of Philemon. Implicit in the use of “our” is that Philemon is also a brother of Paul and Timothy. This is a further implicit reference to the mystical body of Christ where all are one and all are equal.

Paul uses the title of brother in respect of Philemon after describing the love of Philemon towards the saints; their hearts i.e., their inward affections and the will of the soul, are refreshed.

There is much debate about whether Paul meant “old man” or ambassador when writing in Greek; πρεσβύτης is usually translated “old man” and occasionally “ambassador”.

“For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.” (Philemon 8)

Paul is a skilled rhetorician. He knows that there can be more than one understanding for the word πρεσβύτης. Both interpretations, “old man” and “ambassador,” are understandable within the context of the verse. Paul, thinking of his audience would know that appealing to Philemon on the basis of love would trigger empathy. A person with empathy would be moved at the thought of an “old man,” an “elder of the community,” suffering in chains in prison. “Pathos” may not be the right word for what emotion Paul, as a leader, wished to engage. Paul certainly wanted the reader to appreciate with an informed understanding his circumstances. However, revered empathy and emulation may well have been the emotion and act Paul wished to ignite in his reader/hearer. “Old man” understood as an elder statesman has this meaning. “Old man” also works with the priority of love.
The understanding of the word as ambassador aligns with a fellow soldier or a fellow worker as all such ephilets prioritize function. That an “ambassador of the gospel” is in chains emphasizes the efforts Paul has made and is making for the gospel of Christ Jesus.

In short, what the listener may hear or the reader may interpret may depend on their spiritual orientation and maturity. Ambassador and prisoner are functions or positions within society while old man refers to age and station as a wise elder requiring respect and love. In sum, “old man” prioritizes love. The more mature in faith the member of the Christian household which hears the message may be, the more the priority of love; because the greater the love of God and neighbor.

2.5 Give the Addressee a Reputation to live up to

Paul both acknowledges Philemon’s reputation and also gives him his own reputation as a guide to live up to.

“4 When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God 5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. 7 I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.” (Philemon 4-7)

Paul at a minimum gives Philemon a reputation to live up to – one of love and faith in Lord Jesus. He continues to establish Philemon as a leader is his community of saints where, through Philemon’s love and faith, members, including Paul, are refreshed, i.e., reinvigorated through love of neighbour.

Verse 5 in particular is where Paul may be leading Philemon from the great reputation Philemon had earned through his love of neighbour “your love for all the saints…” and his Christian faith to an act that employs the virtues of forgiveness, generosity, respect and humility in the acceptance of Onesimus back into Philemon’s household as a ministry partner.
2.6 Employ strong emotional language

Paul uses strong language for important words establishing connections. Paul does not use the Greek word for heart - καρδία. Rather, Paul uses the word σπλάγχνα – “splanchna” meaning, the inward affections, the bowels, the guts, and the hearts. As Jerome describes this, it is the full will of the soul and the heart – the inward affections.106 Think of (visceral feelings); the capacity to feel deep emotions as the approximate translation in English.

Jerome, in discussing Paul’s use of the word “σπλάγχνα”, explains that the internal affections of the heart and the full will of the soul refers to the entirety of what is in us. These internal affections and full will of the soul are received from Christ Jesus, the Son of God, second person in the Trinity. It is also indicative of the operation of both Christ and the Holy Spirit in fulfilling God’s mission to convert hearts into flesh from stone. (Ezekiel 36:26).

The priority of love over commanding or ordering a person deserves in-depth consideration for love is God’s substance and humans are made in God’s image. At this point, Paul’s technical rhetoric skill is masterful as he wraps Onesimus’ name in love. Paul constructs an argument using the expression “refresh heart” or the word “heart” portraying deep emotions.

1. Verse 7 – hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother – Philemon – [Paul could be referring to himself and to the house church in Philemon’s house collectively]
2. Verse 12 – Onesimus, who I have sent back to you in person, he who is my very heart
3. Verse 20 – Yes, brother, I may have profit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ

This is a circular structure with both a temporal and personal element. Temporally, Philemon acts to refresh hearts both in the past and continuing in the future. In the present, when the letter is read, Onesimus is the identified “heart”. Personally, Paul acts, in his communication to Philemon of the refreshment Philemon has and can provided to him, to position Onesimus, as the

---

immanent presence of Paul. In Philemon’s acceptance of Onesimus back, Philemon will at that
point of time in the future again refresh Paul’s own heart.

2.7 Convey Passion Employing Strong Symbolic Images

Through the genitive construction of Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ Paul uses the symbolic imagery of
“prisoner of Christ Jesus”. Already discussed is the portrayal of meritorious suffering, resistance
and commitment to the gospel. His military imagery “fellow soldier” connects a world or
cosmic view to the missionary activity undertaken by Archippus and possibly proposed for
Onesimus.

The most vivid imagery belongs to “begotten in my chains”, verse 10. Anyone, but particularly
a parent and probably more so a female can relate to the intense physical labour that is involved
in giving birth with its emotional reward. Paul, through intense physical effort “gave birth” to a
new man in Onesimus whom he could love as a father and whom Philemon should love as a
“beloved brother.”

Paul engages visceral feelings with the use of “heart” – the symbolism of the heart being the
core of a person’s being where intellect and will engage the emotions and act accordingly.
Strong emotional language is reinforced with word play when Paul writes “refresh my heart” for he can
both refer to his own will, desires and emotion, soul and mind and as well refer to Onesimus who has
already been identified by Paul in verse 12 as “my very heart” “τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα”.

2.8 Employ Opposites and Augmentation in Arguments

Paul’s rhetoric is a study in comparison through contrasts combined with augmentation.107 Paul
also uses example. Literary comparison, spoken or written, was a living feature of Greco-Roman
culture, and a common element of any formal education.108 In the text Rhetoric ad Herennium,
the unknown author writes:

108 In the work of Aelius Theon, the definition of comparison is provided:
“…In the comparison of people, one firstly juxtaposes their status, education, offspring, positions held prestige and physique; if there is any other physical matter, or external merit, it should be stated beforehand in the material for the encomia.” Next one
“Comparison is a manner of speech that carries over an element of likeness from one thing to a different thing. This is used to embellish or prove or clarify or vivify. Furthermore, corresponding to these four aims, it has four forms of presentation: contrast, negation, detailed parallel, abridged comparison. To each single aim in the use of comparison we shall adapt the corresponding form of presentation.” (4.45.59)\(^\text{109}\)

The chart below summarizes the contrast of opposites employed in the letter to Philemon.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V8-9</th>
<th>Bold enough to command</th>
<th>I prefer for love’s sake to appeal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V 11</td>
<td>Formerly useless – to one</td>
<td>Now useful – to both</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 12-13</td>
<td>Whom I am sending to you</td>
<td>Whom I wanted to keep with me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 14</td>
<td>Not by necessity</td>
<td>By free will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 15</td>
<td>He was parted from you for a while</td>
<td>That you might have him Forever</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 16a</td>
<td>Not as a slave</td>
<td>As a beloved brother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 16c</td>
<td>In the flesh</td>
<td>In the Lord</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of opposites or negative exclusions with positive inclusions clarify and reinforce the message to be conveyed to the reader or listener. Paul uses such rhetoric in verses 8, 14 and 16 in particular. The polar opposition is conveyed through adversative conjunctions “now indeed” or “now moreover rather” in Greek, νυνὶ δὲ, καὶ.

The writings of the rhetorician Quintilian, from the end of the first century gives comparison a central role in amplification of argument: “I consider…that there are four principal methods of compares actions, preferring the finer ones and those responsible for more numerous and greater benefit...” Christopher Forbes.


amplification: augmentation, comparison, reasoning and accumulation…”110 The use of comparison can amplify the argument in the direction of a climax. In the letter Paul augments the state of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus from “useless” in verse 11 to “beloved brother” in verse 16. Paul is at pains to compare the former state of Onesimus to his present state as a “son” and “beloved brother”.

This chart summarizes verses where the concepts are augmented.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>V 9b</th>
<th>presbutes an old man, an ambassador</th>
<th>A prisoner of Christ Jesus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>V 10</td>
<td>My son</td>
<td>Whom I fathered</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V 16b</td>
<td>Especially to me</td>
<td>So much more to you</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The augmentation is conveyed through conjunctions such as “now also” or “now moreover also” in Greek νυνὶ δὲ, καὶ.

Paul is also mentoring Philemon in this letter by encouraging imitation through example. If Onesimus has become a son to Paul, Philemon should imitate Paul by adopting Onesimus as a brother, both “in the flesh and in the Lord”. (Philemon 16)

2.9 Employ Discretion and Tact

Employ Discretion and tact; sincerely compliment or praise then provide the bad news. Paul is deliberate in providing an incomplete picture of Onesimus because of Onesimus’ earlier state of mind. Rather, Paul approaches the matter by justly praising Philemon first in verses 4 to 7. It is not flattery. Theodore of Mopsuestia observed:

110 Ibid, 144.
“Indeed, from this letter it can be learned how great a good it is to show care toward the saints; this could be obvious to you, even if we were not saying so. For this very reason, let praise be strongly given to Philemon.”

Then Paul discusses the changed state before identifying who he is writing about. This is a subtle point lost with the modern translations to English. Verse 10 in the original Greek can be translated as follows:

“I exhort you for my child whom I have begotten in my chains, Onesimus”

(Philemon 10)

παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον,

Theodore of Mopsuestia has a version of the text which places Onesimus’ name at the end of the sentence and explained that:

“He [Paul] rightly spoke first of Onesimus’ change of purpose and then put down his name, because he knows that Philemon did not have a good opinion about him because of the previous perversity of his purpose. And at once he links his change with the mention of his name,…”

Then in verse 11 Paul reinforces the change, i.e., the conversion of Onesimus by acknowledging his former state, useless, and then immediately declares that he is now useful to both Philemon and Paul.

Theodore of Mopsuestia also interprets the usefulness of Onesimus differently between Philemon and Paul. “[useful] to you according to service, to me according to the improvement of his manner of life.”

Further per Theodore of Mopsuestia, Paul is acknowledging that everything was done for Philemon’s profit.

---

“It is worth admiring that he first said to you and then put down and to me so that he might not seem to be dragging the slave away as not belonging to his master.”114

A modern reader would likely not consider this point given the wrongfulness of human trafficking.

Paul is at pains to avoid the comparison of Onesimus’ past actions with the actions of Philemon. Paul tactfully directs Philemon not to delve into past hurts. “If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything” (Philemon 18) is not an invitation to explain the past, only to correct a wrong justly.

2.10 Use a Familiar Mode of Communication

Use a mode of communication with which the reader or listener is familiar. A familiar mode would include both the language and the form of the letter. The language Paul employs is the language of common sense. Such language is non-technical and suitable to the particular patterns of experience of Paul, Onesimus and Philemon and how each relate to each other.115 For example, Paul uses the phrase “refresh the hearts of the saints”; he does not write “perform an act of charity.” Another example where non-technical language makes the letter more personal is the use of the phrase “begotten in my chains” or “whom I have begotten” rather than “whom I converted and baptized and who is now justified by the Holy Spirit”.

Professor Lonergan explains the procedure of employing common sense language is not to generalize nor to argue from analogy. Observe that Paul does not write to Philemon stating, “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you [Philemon and Onesimus] are one in Christ Jesus.” (Gal 3:28) Paul does write, “… I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. 6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may

114 Ibid, 797.
do for Christ.” (Philemon 5-6) Paul drew on his insight into Philemon’s character, faith and actions with members of the early Christian community that Philemon’s love of his brethren and faith in Christ Jesus could be the basis of collaboration between Philemon and Paul in admitting Onesimus peacefully and with love back into the Colossian community. Paul is building in Philemon a core of habitual understanding that all are brothers and sisters in Christ. Professor Lonergan explains, “…the collaboration of common sense aims, not at establishing general truths, but at building up a core of habitual understanding that is to be adjusted by further learning in each new situation that arises.”^116 Philemon may practice the understanding he gains in accepting Onesimus back into his household and employ that understanding again and again in his subsequent interactions with Onesimus or other individuals with similar characters or circumstances.

The Form of Paul’s letter to Philemon

Chapter 3

The form of the letter is similar to that of a Greco-Roman letter of petition and commendation. Philemon would be familiar with the standard form.

Cicero asserts the importance of the writer having influence with those in power in order for a commendation to benefit its subject.\textsuperscript{117} Furthermore, the individual commended would owe a debt of gratitude to the writer in light of which the writer could expect benefits. This is the client – patron relationship in act. Both Cicero and Pliny left a significant number of commendation letters.\textsuperscript{118} There is a fairly standard structure:

1. An opening greeting where most letters identify the person being commended and cite his credentials which includes family and household relationships. It may include the reason for writing the letter. The purpose of the opening greeting is to develop goodwill and provide testimonials regarding the character of the one being petitioned.\textsuperscript{119}
2. The heart or body of the commendation letter indicates the favour the writer is requesting. Usually this involves some kind of general assistance.
3. A concluding appreciation statement.
4. A final greeting which usually includes a statement of gratitude.

The letter to Philemon of course, is a complete commendation letter written by Paul to commend Onesimus to Philemon. He is, (as outlined above) a person of influence, being the slave owner as well as being the leader of the household church.

Using the above structure, the form of Paul’s letter to Philemon can be compared to his other letters which addressed other communities with other concerns be they theological, pastoral or spiritual and with other letters of commendation.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 102.
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, 102-103.
3.1 Opening Greeting

3.1.1 The Sender Formula

As stated above, ancient letters generally begin with the identification of the author(s), in the form of the sender formula.\textsuperscript{120} There are four elements to the sender formula which are summarized in the chart below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Descriptive Phrase</th>
<th>Co-sender</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philemon 1</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>A prisoner</td>
<td>of Christ Jesus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Paul makes several decisions in writing the sender formula. Paul decides on his title, prisoner of Christ Jesus. He does not state that he is an apostle and therefore a leader of the Church. Thus, rather than “lead” in the conventional sense where the led are directed and obediently compile, Paul joins in this community of one in Christ where all are offspring of Abraham and heirs to the promise. (“Galatians 3:29”). Saint Paul by giving himself the title “prisoner of Christ Jesus” equates himself with Onesimus in a genuine acknowledgement that all are equal in Christ. Further, it imitates Christ who emptied himself taking on the form of a slave. (Phil 2:7)

Although Paul does not use this title in any other letter,\textsuperscript{121} Paul does use the phrase “In chains for the confession” (Phil 1:7, 14, Eph 3:1 and Col 4:3), elsewhere. However, the word “chains” in Greek is the same as “prisoner” with only the nominative versus dative case changed. The overall significant is the same – suffering imprisonment for Christ Jesus and his gospel.

Paul may have also been motivated with the need to promote and justify his ministry. In the second letter to the Corinthians he writes of the suffering and hardships endured in the service of Christ and in defense of the gospel.\textsuperscript{122} Indeed, Christ himself spoke of such merit in the beatitudes.\textsuperscript{123}

\textsuperscript{120} Jeffery A.D. Weima. \textit{Paul the ancient letter writer: an introduction to epistolary analysis}. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 12.

\textsuperscript{121} Jerome. Jerome’s \textit{commentaries on Galatians, Titus, and Philemon} translated by Thomas P. Scheck. (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 354.

\textsuperscript{122} “…as servants of God we have commended ourselves in every way: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, \textsuperscript{5} beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; \textsuperscript{6} by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness
Further, in the psalms the word “prisoner” has been used in the context of prisoners of the Lord. Paul may have wished to trigger the association in the mind of Philemon and any listener when hearing the phrase.  

In the greeting, Paul decides that Timothy is a co-sender but only identifies himself as the prisoner of Christ Jesus. No evidence is available that Timothy co-authored the letter. Paul includes Timothy as a co-sender in other letters, including 2 Corinthians, Philippians, Colossians and 1 Thessalonians where Titus is also mentioned. A co-sender was not a common practice during the first century. The most likely reason for including a co-sender was that the named individual enjoyed a special relationship with the addressees of the letter. The presence of the named individual with Paul enhanced the letter’s overall persuasive force. Timothy likely had an impressive reputation with the Colossian congregation as he had served as Paul’s emissary in “delicate negotiations”, (1 Cor 4:17, 16:10, Phil 2:19, 1 Thes 3:2, 6) and as Luke mentions him in Acts of the Apostles (17:14-15; 19:22). However, there is no evidence of any immediate interaction with the Colossian congregation. Lastly, Paul decides that no-one else is a co-sender despite others being mentioned in the final greeting. There is no evidence that not being a co-sender caused offense to the individuals mentioned in the final greeting. It is unclear whether these others were with Paul. 

There is a recipient formula. The recipient formula followed the sender formula in conventional letter writing with one exception. “…occasionally, in letters of petition where the sender is

of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything….”(2 Cor 6:4-10) Yet again, “Are they ministers of Christ? I am talking like a madman—I am a better one: with far greater labours, far more imprisonments, with countless floggings, and often near death.”(2 Cor 11:23)“Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. “Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.” (Matthew 5:10-12) “God gives the desolate a home to live in; he leads out the prisoners to prosperity, but the rebellious live in a parched land.”

A possible explanation may be the requirement for a witness to support Paul’s testimony in the letter. “...the named individual [cosender] could fulfill the legal requirement of Deut 19:15 that any testimony would be considered valid only if it was supported by two or more witnesses. See Jeffery A.D. Weima. Paul the ancient letter writer: an introduction to epistolary analysis. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2016), 30.


appealing for help to a person of a higher rank … the letter writer honors the recipient by putting that person’s name first.”¹²⁸ This does not occur in Philemon so that Paul is not honouring a person of higher rank. Rather, Paul, is consciously subjecting the hierarchical structure so common to humankind to the divine principle that all are equal members of the body of Christ. As previously asserted, it is Paul’s objective that Philemon perceive both Onesimus and Paul as his beloved brothers.

3.1.2 The Recipient Formula

There are two formal elements in the recipient formula – the name or the identity of the recipient and a descriptive phrase¹²⁹ as outlined in the chart below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Addressee</th>
<th>Epithet</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Philemon 1-2</td>
<td>To Philemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Apphia</td>
<td>our beloved fellow worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and Archippus</td>
<td>our sister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>and the church in</td>
<td>our fellow soldier</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>your house (sing)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The double epithet attached to Philemon’s greeting evidences the virtue of love at the very beginning of the letter. The rhetorical elements of building connections through mutual functions and relationships is evident as here, Paul positions himself as a “co-worker, fellow soldier and brother.”

3.1.3 The Greeting Formula

Paul’s letters always include a greeting formula. In this letter,

---

¹²⁸ Ibid, 32.
¹²⁹ Ibid, 33.
Jerome defines grace as that by which a human creature is saved. Jerome suggests the peace of God is that by which a human creature is reconciled to God.  

Paul’s greeting formula uniquely adapts a secular Hellenistic greeting *chairein* which means “hail greeting” or more literally “rejoice”. Paul used the Greek word for grace which was *charis*. “Emphasis added” Paul thus Christianized the greeting with a similar sounding Greek word. In addition, Paul added the conventional Jewish greeting “shalom” translated into Greek as *eirēnē* meaning peace as observed by Tertullian. Thus, the greeting is inclusive of both Gentile and Jewish Christians.

This is the second explicit reference to the divine and the greeting messages the relationship of both God the Father and Jesus Christ in lives of the addressees of the letter. Grace is the dynamic outreaching generosity of God experienced through the gospel and the Spirit. James Dunn elaborates:

“Grace evokes the crucial role of the divine in the reader’s salvation. Grace is the supreme gift of God’s undeserved favour given to the readers by virtue of their relationship with Christ. The Jewish greeting “Peace” similarly evokes the work of God in the readers’ lives. Peace here involves not the Greek sense of the absence of conflict but the Jewish notion of wholeness- a restoration of the fellowship and harmony that before the fall characterized humankind’s relationship with God, with one another, and with the creation….Paul’s gifted revision of the traditional greeting formula results in “as rich a greeting as can be

---

131 Ibid, 42.
132 Ibid, 42.
imagined: a prayer which recognizes God as the source of the enabling (grace) to live in mutually productive and beneficial harmony (peace).”¹³⁴

This peace is the social wholeness of harmonious relationships¹³⁵ - the core aim in the letter. The greeting was written no later than 64 AD. That, 31 years after Jesus’s death, Christ is conjoined with God the Father speaks to the high Christology present in the Pauline communities. With the one nature of the Son and the Father, the Son can bestow what the Father can.¹³⁶

3.2 Thanksgiving and Prayer Report

Paul introduced a thanksgiving and prayer report¹³⁷ into his letters with a standard format. He expresses thanks to God, assurance of frequent remembrance in prayer to the addressees and commendation of their faith and love, only in Philemon the order is reversed.¹³⁸ The five distinct units¹³⁹ are presented in the chart for the three letters written in a close sequence of time, namely, Philemon, Philippians and Colossians.¹⁴⁰

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Unit</th>
<th>Philemon</th>
<th>Philippians</th>
<th>Colossians</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Statement of Thanksgiving – the main verb is always giving thanks and subject is usually Paul or Paul and his co-senders.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Manner of Thanksgiving - Paul’s preferred manner of expressing thanks is through prayer.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Cause of Thanksgiving – the Verbs are usually “hearing” or “learning” of the praise-worthy actions of the readers.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Explanation – the apostle is usually publically acknowledging the positive way his readers are living out their faith.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Prayer report – Paul informs the reader of the specific things Paul is praying will happen in their lives.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹³⁷ Paul’s thanksgivings are unconventional in three ways:
1. The thanksgivings deal with the spiritual rather than physical well-being of his recipients.
2. The thanksgivings are long and complex.
3. The thanksgivings are included in all of Paul’s letters
   I Thessalonians has a thanksgiving that is the closest to the thanksgiving in Philemon per James Dunn.
¹³⁹ The five distinct units can be generally described as:
1. Statement of Thanksgiving – the main verb is always giving thanks and subject is usually Paul or Paul and his co-senders.
2. Manner of Thanksgiving - Paul’s preferred manner of expressing thanks is through prayer.
3. Cause of Thanksgiving – the Verbs are usually “hearing” or “learning” of the praise-worthy actions of the readers.
4. Explanation – the apostle is usually publically acknowledging the positive way his readers are living out their faith.
5. Prayer report – Paul informs the reader of the specific things Paul is praying will happen in their lives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement of thanksgiving</th>
<th>I always thank my God</th>
<th>I thank my God</th>
<th>we always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Manner of thanksgiving</td>
<td>When I remember you in my prayers</td>
<td>every time I remember you, 4 constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you</td>
<td>In our prayers for you</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cause of thanksgiving</td>
<td>5 because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.</td>
<td>5 because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. 6 I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ</td>
<td>for we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love that you have for all the saints,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Explanation</td>
<td>I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.</td>
<td>It is right for me to think this way about all of you, because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God’s grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. 8 For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the</td>
<td>because of the hope laid up for you in heaven. You have heard of this hope before in the word of the truth, the gospel 6 that has come to you. Just as it is bearing fruit and growing in the whole world, so it has been bearing fruit among yourselves from the day you heard it and truly comprehended the grace of God. 7 This you learned from Epaphras, our beloved fellow servant. He is a faithful minister</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prayer Report</td>
<td>compassion of Christ Jesus.</td>
<td>of Christ on your behalf, and he has made known to us your love in the Spirit.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
<td>--------------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ.</td>
<td>And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that on the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.</td>
<td>For this reason, since the day we heard it, we have not ceased praying for you and asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of God’s will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, so that you may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God. May you be made strong with all the strength that comes from his glorious power, and may you be prepared to endure everything with patience, while joyfully...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
That Paul is the author of the letter to Philemon and Philippians is clear from the singular “I thank” and “I pray.”

The thanksgiving indicates that Paul had an extensive intercessory prayer life where he prayed for the churches and their members, either individually and/or collectively within the Pauline network whether he initiated them or not in keeping with his core belief and orientation for shared faith.

In verse 5, the cause of thanksgiving, Paul speaks of communication. The mode is not revealed. Possibly, the communication is by an extensive network used within the Pauline churches with Paul as a “central pivot” point in Rome\textsuperscript{141} receiving and sending information of pastoral concern. Alternatively, the communication is by a divine source. Per Theodore of Mopsuestia the Holy Spirit has communicated Philemon’s love and faith to Paul. Perhaps both modes of communication were received by Paul giving him the confidence necessary to not only appeal to Philemon, but also to take the risk of commanding Onesimus to return to Philemon. It is clear in verse 5 that Paul is being attentive to the spiritual maturity of Philemon and being responsible to Onesimus as he is putting Onesimus at risk by returning him.

Paul in the thanksgivings begins to indicate the core Christian principles he will use to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus as a brother. These words are presented here and again in the body of the letter\textsuperscript{142}:

- love and beloved (verses 5, 7, 9, 16)
- the good (verses 6, 14)

\textsuperscript{142} \textit{Ibid}, 316.
Another key Christian concept is “sharing” in verse 6.

Indeed, Paul prioritizes love since this love is presented first and faith second, toward Jesus Christ first and all the saints second. In Galatians 5:13-14 Paul writes “through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” This is the commandment which Paul is fulfilling in writing the letter to Philemon for Onesimus. Paul knows Philemon’s love and faith in Jesus Christ and all the saints are the key ingredients in Philemon making the grace filled decision that Onesimus is a beloved brother. Love is the commitment to treat your neighbour as yourself and see Christ within the neighbour with the eyes of faith. Faith is the act and attitude of trust toward God and Christ Jesus.

Jerome wondered about the phrase expressing Philemon’s love and faith in the Lord Jesus and all his saints. The surprise for Jerome was that the faith would be equivalent in the saints as in the Lord Jesus. Jerome found an answer in the Old Testament faith of the Israelites in Moses Exodus 14:31 “The people believed God and his servant Moses.” The equivalent application is to the saints of the early Church. Jerome states, “…for love and faith in God are not perfect, when they are weakened by ill will and unbelief in his servants.” All the saints are also the mystical body of Christ, which is the reason Paul refers to the saints as “his saints.” Jerome outlines how significant this assertion is quoting Hebrews 2:11:

“11 For the one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters, saying, “I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters in the midst of the congregation I will praise you.”

---

The saints are “holy” as described by Paul. Jerome quotes Leviticus 11:44 to explain:

“For I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves therefore, and be holy, for I am holy.”

In verse 6 Paul prays for the sharing of Philemon’s faith. He wants Philemon’s faith to become effective, active or powerful in all the good that we may do for Christ.

Paul’s praying for the “sharing of Philemon’s faith” could mean the sharing of:

- the Lord’s supper with the congregation,
- the participation in the collection for the community or for Jerusalem,
- the experience of the same Spirit,
- the promulgation of the gospel, and
- Christ’s suffering (through prayer and fasting).147

Sharing in verse 6 recalls Paul’s core understanding of corporate expression of faith. Paul intended that these religious expressions would build relationship in the community and invigorate the religious value of love and add meaning to the lives of individuals within that community.148 Sharing could also mean the sharing of Philemon’s new self-giving love towards Onesimus as a beloved brother with all the members of the community so that they too adapt this new principle in their relations with Onesimus and all slaves.

While verse 7 is not formally part of the thanksgiving it closes the thanksgiving section of the letter. Paul becomes personally warm in this sentence (before he begins his appeal in the body of the letter). He calls, (i.e., declares in the vocative case in Greek) Philemon “brother”. Paul is sincere in his joy, encouragement and comfort from Philemon’s efforts regarding the gospel of

---


148 For a more fulsome discussion of the development of Lonergan’s scale of values and a comparison to those developed by von Hildebrand and Scheler see Patrick H. Byrne (Boston College), “Which Scale of Value Preference? Lonergan, Scheler, von Hildebrand, and Doran” Dadosky (ed.) *Meaning and History in Systematic Theology* (Doran Festschrift) (Milwaukee: MU Press, 2009), 19-49.
Christ and actions in the lives of the saints despite Paul’s dreary prison environment, whether house arrest or not.  

With respect to the form of the letter, the Pauline thanksgiving serves three functions in support of Paul’s broader persuasive strategy. They are a pastoral, an exhortative and a foreshadowing function.

3.2.1 The Pastoral function

The thanksgiving has a pastoral function in that it re-establishes Paul’s relationships with his readers by means of a positive expression of gratitude to God for their faith, hope and love. It informs the reader/recipient/audience of how Paul values them, acknowledges their spiritual strengths and most of all Paul’s mediating presentation of them to God. The thanksgiving allows Paul the pastor powerfully to convey to his readers his deep gratitude to God for them as well as his genuine care and concern for them.

Establishing the connection through pastoral concern removes any abruptness or potential to offend by addressing only the deficiency, concern, issue or problem. Jeffrey Weima provides the context for Paul acting as pastor to Philemon and his church congregation.

“He [Paul] is currently under house arrest in Rome, physically separated from Philemon by over a thousand miles – a great distance given the traveling difficulties of the ancient world. Paul also has no legal authority to compel the slave owner to do anything, let alone compel him to commit a shame-inducing act like forgiving a runaway slave who may also have stolen from him. The situation is not helped by the likelihood that it is now at least three years since Paul has had any face-to-face contact with Philemon. In such a context, it would be inappropriate, offensive, and almost certainly futile for the apostle to move directly from the letter’s opening to the request. The pastoral function of


thanksgiving plays a crucial role in re-establishing Paul’s relationship with Philemon and creating a context in which the slave owner will be open to hearing and heeding the difficult entreaty from Pastor Paul…”

Jerome notes that Paul, with pastoral concern, strives towards “deeper things” by employing the word “effective” i.e., active or powerful; the quest for perfection in whatever can be improved, be it impartial sharing, appreciation or understanding of good works that are performed and a balance between justice, gentleness and enthusiasm.

3.2.2 The Exhortative function

There is an implicit or explicit challenge for the letter recipients to live up to the praise that the apostle gives them in his words of gratitude. In the letter to Philemon Paul wants Philemon to continue to demonstrate love for fellow believers – including his runaway slave - …and faith in the Lord Jesus.

“All the good that we may do for Christ”, is primarily human good under the direction of the will of the Holy Spirit to promulgate the gospel of Christ. Here, Paul is asking Philemon to reflect, judge, decide and act in a manner that fulfills the highest good, the will of God. This will be living that faith in the Lord Jesus by overcoming or resolving previous conflicts with Onesimus and to forgive and accept, the new man, Onesimus, the brother. This requires living Christian values so that human social values are transcended and a full transparent and authentic response is given. All values, feelings and actions align to realize Philemon’s and Onesimus’ own personal good and also the good of the congregation. All repented omissions of Onesimus are forgiven and he is truly, sincerely and warmly held as a member of the community.

3.2.3 The Foreshadowing Function

The apostle is an extremely skilled letter writer who carefully introduces the topics in the thanksgiving that will be addressed in the body of the letter. Paul also knows that Philemon’s
feeling must align with his religious values in order to make the judgment of value that Onesimus is his brother in Christ and to live completely the decision to accept Onesimus as his brother. This is moral self-transcendence. He begins with providing Philemon the experience of brotherhood in the mystical body of Christ by expressing his love for Philemon, his joy at Philemon’s work and his relation to Philemon as his brother.

The foreshadowing function is particularly accomplished through the use of key words, i.e., love and hearts, as discussed above.

3.3 The body of the letter

It is in the body of the letter that Paul makes his appeal to Philemon to accept and love Onesimus as a “beloved brother” both in the flesh and in the Lord.

“For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus.”

The persuasion is through love, the rejection of unauthentic authority which impedes free will. In the wisdom of an elder or an elder statesman it establishes the self-sacrificing principle of love. This principle of love causes redemption which, in this particular case, pertains to Onesimus.

Διό, translated “Therefore”, begins the sentence in Greek, and the body of the letter and the appeal. Paul is referring back to the two previous verses where Philemon is praised, encouraged and challenged. Paul basis his appeal on his understanding of Philemon’s love and faith for Christ Jesus and all the saints. Now, the challenge is presented, to test “all the good” Philemon can effect.

Paul uses a double appeal; in verse 9 he appeals because of love, in verse 10 he appeals for his child. Paul also uses contrast rejecting the use of his own personal authority or the authority of obedience of a higher ranking person and appeals to Philemon’s free will moved by love.

This rejection to command, ἐπιτάσσειν, is an implicit reminder of Paul’s apostolic authority. To command is the use of a strong verb; obviously a higher-ranking person has to command someone of a lower position. As explained above, this apostolic authority is derived from divine and angelic authority.

However, on a purely human social level, ordering a wealthy and strong leader, a “strong arm tactic” would be inappropriate and unwise.

By refusing to use commands, Paul refuses a one on one model of interaction where the participants are the most important factors and naked power/authority is the means of operation. Paul knows his apostolic authority is influential in the Christian community in Colossae but refuses to use “status” as a means of operation. Rather, Paul is relying on authenticity as the means of operation.

So instead, Paul appeals to love, both the virtue and the substance of the divine. This statement, in Philemon 8-9, is Paul choosing to employ the greatest spiritual gift, love, for love “bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.” (1 Cor 13:13)

Further, God is love. Here Paul is using a triangular model of interaction where the Trinity are engaged as both participants with the greatest importance as well as being the means of operation. Paul, the prisoner of Christ Jesus, is calling into operation the words of his Lord written in the Law,

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.”

(Luke 10:27)

---


157 “Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.” (1 John 4:8)
Further, Paul is engaging the Holy Spirit within Philemon to move him.

“If you love me, you will keep my commandments. 16 And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. 17 This is the Spirit of truth,… You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you.” (John 14:15-17)

Paul, the prisoner of Jesus Christ is well aware of Christ dwelling within him

“I have been crucified with Christ; 20 and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, [or by the faith of the Son of God]” (Gal 2:19-20)

and because of this Paul knows that the best method of obtaining his request is through the Christ Jesus.

“Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. … 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (John 15:5-7)

Fitzmyer observes that Paul appeals to love realizing that Christian faith must “work itself out in love” i.e., love in the general Christian sense. Such love involves a freedom from self-regard or selfishness and an outgoing affection for others (Phil 2:4) it characterizes the kind of faith by which a Christian must live. So Paul avoids trying to elicit obedience by an order.158

The meaning of the word πρεσβύτης or “old man” was discussed above in its rhetorical context.

“10 I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment.”

Here Paul intensifies the appeal to the emotions, with the addition of a familial relationship between himself and his “own son, begotten in chains” and Paul specifies who the appeal is in

respect of, Onesimus, the new son. The new son is a new man in Christ through faith and baptism whose past has been cancelled.

Paul has portrayed himself as a spiritual father in various letters where he has baptized converts but not with the same emotional intensity, (see 1 Cor 4:14, 17, Gal 4:19, Phil 2:22, 1 Thess 2:11, 1 Tim 1:2, 2 Tim 1:2 and Tit 1:4)\textsuperscript{159}.

This spiritual Fatherhood is an image used in the Jewish religion as well. The same image of Fatherhood is found in Essene texts: the Teacher of Righteousness says in a hymn to God, “You have made me a father for the children of kindness.” In later rabbinic literature, a teacher who instructs other in Torah is called a father (b. Sahedrin 19b; cf Str-B 3. 339) and a convert to Judaism is compared to a “child just born”.\textsuperscript{160}

\textit{“Formerly, he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me.”}

It is clear that Paul has a purpose separate from returning Onesimus which he alludes to with his statement of Onesimus’ new found usefulness. It is not clear what that purpose is.

Now the play on words, sounds and concepts becomes more obvious. Onesimus means beneficial, profitable or useful. Onesimus, the slave, portrayed as formerly useless, had probably heard the pun Paul used many times. In the original Greek, it can also be a play on the sound of the word “useless” ἄχρηστον [achrēston] for it is very similar to “non-Christian” [a-christianos].\textsuperscript{161}

The contrast between the useless and useful state of Onesimus strengthens both the explicit and implicit requests of the letter. By reminding Philemon of his slave’s former uselessness, Paul minimizes the loss that Philemon, the slave owner has suffered and thus facilitates forgiveness for Onesimus, his slave. Philemon is now able to welcome the forgiven Onesimus back, sincerely, as a “beloved brother” (Explicit request). Further, by highlighting to Philemon the

\textsuperscript{161} \textit{Ibid}, 109.
contrast between his slave’s former and current value, Paul also minimizes the cost to Philemon to accede to Paul his request to allow Onesimus to help the apostle in his prison ministry (implicit request).\textsuperscript{162} Philemon is giving up a person whose skills he never had successfully employed. There is an implicit understanding that Philemon’s current household and business operations were not reliant on Onesimus’ services.

\begin{quote}
“\textit{I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you.}”
\end{quote}

Paul appeals with heightened emotional intensity. Paul is sending Onesimus back. It was hard for him to take this step. The heart Paul refers to is his all – his mind, his will, his emotions and his “gut” were all viscerally committed to returning Onesimus to Philemon as a beloved brother.\textsuperscript{163}

Paul was in a better position to judge the appropriateness of it (verses the modern reader) given that he knew Philemon personally and would know how Philemon was likely to react to such sentiments being read in public in the church community of which he was a member and leader.\textsuperscript{164}

\begin{quote}
“\textit{I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced.}”
\end{quote}

Dunn observes that the διάκονς “service” Onesimus provided was likely a non-ministry helping role. He suggests that Onesimus was a helper in the work of mission through service to Paul.\textsuperscript{165}

A primary point here is not that Paul is minimizing the cost of Onesimus’ absence to Philemon, but rather, within the early Christian community, supporting members in need and particularly ones suffering for the gospel was an obligation. Onesimus was “sharing all good things with the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[163] How many of us have said on the passing of our parents, our loved ones that they live on in our hearts?
\item[165] \textit{Ibid}, 331.
\end{footnotes}
teacher”. (Gal 6:6) Paul was in the very difficult circumstance of incarceration with very real limitations on what he could and could not do to support himself. Philemon, if a well-to-do Christian convert was likely in a position to offer the services of Onesimus, if he had been asked to or chosen to.

Regarding Paul’s decision to use the imperfect tense “I was wanting,” indicates that Paul spent a period of time considering the appropriate action.\textsuperscript{166} Thus, Paul’s initial inclination was not to send Onesimus back, for Paul was completely dependent upon Philemon’s goodwill to agree to Paul’s request. However, Paul understood the theological principle at issue; that the good that humans do must come from their own free will, spontaneously and not be forced or constrained.\textsuperscript{167}

Further, Paul weighed the information he had obtained regarding Philemon in particular and considered the state of Onesimus’ heart from his own interaction with the converted Onesimus. This is Paul being attentive to the risks of the situation, intelligent and rational in his understanding of both men. He then reasonably evaluated the risk and determined that the consequence of the act of returning Onesimus would be that Philemon would treat Onesimus in a kindly manner.

In coming to this decision Paul acknowledged the master’s legal right to the slave, Onesimus may have repented but he still has to make restitution.\textsuperscript{168} This is Paul and Onesimus being responsible.

Paul hints that he would like to have Onesimus sufficiently free to work with him.

Jerome notes that nothing can truly be called “good” unless it is done voluntarily. He observes that if humankind is made in the image of God and where God is immutably good by choice and not by compulsion, so should humankind perform good acts by choice, i.e., freewill.\textsuperscript{169}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[166] \textit{Ibid.}, 330.
\item[168] \textit{Ibid.}, 111.
\item[169] « je n’ai rien voulu faire sans ton accord, afin que ton bienfait ne soit pas comme forcé, mais volontaire ». « Certainement, dit Jérôme, rien ne peut être vraiment appelé bon sauf s’il est volontaire ». En effet, poursuit-il, puisque nous avons été créés à l’image de Dieu, notre liberté de choix est indispensable: car Dieu est bon par choix, non par contrainte. Être comme Dieu est
“Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever.”

“Perhaps” indicates a particularly cautious estimation by Paul. Paul uses the Greek verb ἐχωρίσθη echoriste, which is to be understood as a theological passive, signaling divine intervention. This suggestion is immediately followed by the purpose clause; i.e., Onesimus was separated by God to fulfill God’s hidden purpose, now Philemon can have Onesimus back forever, after God’s providence has turned a bad act into an act of divine providence.

The persuasive force of the suggestion that Onesimus’ separation is part of God’s providential plan is great. It infers that any rejection by Philemon of the apostle’s requests would involve a rejection not merely of Paul but also of God and God’s sovereign purpose. As Paul has stated “13 What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us?” (Romans 8:31) If God is for the return of Onesimus as a beloved brother and in an arrangement that is sufficiently free for Onesimus to work for the gospel, Philemon will not oppose.

John Chrysostom linked this particular suggestion of divine instigation between Onesimus, Philemon and St. Paul with Joseph and his brothers in Genesis 45,

“…also Joseph says, in making excuse for his brethren, For God did send me hither, that is, He made use of their wickedness for a good end. Therefore, he says, he departed for a season. Thus he contracts the time, acknowledges the offence, and turns it all to a providence…”

“no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.”

170 Ibid, 112.
Paul arrives at the summit of his request, acceptance of Onesimus as a beloved brother. In light of the likely unauthorized absence of Onesimus, Paul is asking Philemon to put aside power, in the form of legal authority, rein in his emotions, and move to a higher viewpoint, that of Christ, who has made Onesimus into a “new man” and with the indwelling of the Spirit of God, an adopted brother. Paul is asking Philemon to affirm to himself and to the community of the church in his house and in Colossae that the new man, the newly baptized Onesimus, is welcome at the Eucharistic table. Paul is asking Philemon to ensure that Onesimus is accepted as a full member of the Christian community in Colossae and elsewhere. Given that Paul has addressed Philemon as my brother (Philemon 7) and connected Timothy as “our brother” (Philemon 1) Paul is accepting and recommending that Philemon accept Onesimus on the same level and in the same manner.

“No longer as a slave” is the first time in the letter where Paul explicitly acknowledges that Onesimus is Philemon’s slave by using the term “slave” itself.\footnote{In the interests of completeness, it should be observed that some theologians have suggested that Onesimus was a brother of Philemon rather than a slave. This theory is not considered in this paper. The theological importance that all are brothers and sisters in Christ is more clearly stated and of greater importance in a non-blood relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.} Paul is employing a double contrast in the state of the relationship and point in time. In the past, Onesimus was a slave, in the present and future, Onesimus is to be a beloved brother.\footnote{Joseph A. Fitzmyer, S.J. \textit{The Letter to Philemon: a new translation with introduction and commentary.} (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 114.} In the Old Testament a slave who is a Hebrew is called “brother” (Lev 25:39 Deut 15:12). Thus, calling a “slave” brother is consistent with Paul’s Jewish heritage, but now Christ has expanded that relationship beyond blood.\footnote{\textit{Ibid}, 114.}

Paul uses the term “beloved brothers” in 1 Cor 15:58 and Phil 4:1 my beloved. However, the term is used collectively after instructing the church in both locations towards the end of the letter. While the same spiritual reality is presented in all three letters, the intensity is greater, the circumstance far more personal and intimate in the letter to Philemon.

Fitzmyer notes that the phrase “he is such to me” is elative but not superlative in that Paul admits what Onesimus has meant to him since his conversion but at the same time states “but how much...”
more to you” where Paul recognizes the priority of the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. He advocates that Onesimus should indeed be beloved by Philemon to a degree that surpasses his own.176

The phrase “in the flesh” ἐν σαρκί, denotes that human life is bound by earth-oriented interests. A human is limited in capacities and affected by appetites, ambitions and proneness to sin.177

When Philemon reaches this place in the letter, Philemon is faced with three choices:

1. Take Onesimus back as a slave and punish him for absconding,
2. Take Onesimus back as a slave, restore him to the familia and allow Onesimus to work and do his job in faithfulness and loyalty, or
3. Emancipate Onesimus and let Onesimus work in evangelization or for Paul in some capacity.178

Only in alternatives 2 and 3 does Philemon accept, acknowledge, affirm, and live in the transcendent spiritual reality that Onesimus, through baptism, is a new creature (2 Cor 5:17) and an adopted child of God (Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15).

This is the fundamental appeal Paul is making to Philemon, that Philemon welcome Onesimus back as a “brother” a fellow Christian in both Onesimus’ ordinary condition as a human being in the world and now as a Christian because he now exists en Kyrios in union with the risen Lord. Paul finds the good in Onesimus and asks Philemon to find it as well.179

Here is an intensification of Paul’s argument in that he is implying strongly that Philemon should forgo punishing Onesimus.180 At this point in the letter, Paul understood that Philemon would choose either option 2 or 3 and would continue reading. Philemon would discard option 1 as being unauthentic.

176 Ibid, 115.
177 Ibid, 116.
179 Ibid, 115.
180 Ibid, 114.
“17 So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.”

Since Philemon has made his decision, Paul begins to command. He uses the imperative tense \(^{181}\) for the “welcome”. Here Paul also uses his apostolic influence to Onesimus’ benefit by reinforcing the image of the “present Onesimus” as the “presence” of the absent Paul.

There has been some debate as to whether the word “partner” had a commercial context. In light of some of the subsequent vocabulary, the use of verb “repay” (apotinō) like the verb “charge” (ellogeō) which are technical terms used in the commercial and legal documents of the day, \(^{182}\) the word partner could have a commercial connotation. It could have been that Paul and Philemon met through commercial activities and became partners.

However, the word partner was also used by Paul regarding Titus’ role in the early Church (2 Cor 8:23). To place Philemon in the same position within the church as Titus is indicative of the compliment Paul was making to Philemon at the same time as commanding Philemon to welcome Onesimus as Paul. The word “partner” more likely connotes the mutual interests of fellow workers in evangelization.

“18 If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.”

In order to be tactful, Paul describes the previous wrongs done by Onesimus to Philemon as hypothetical. \(^{183}\) Since it takes money to travel and since Onesimus was not with Paul at Philemon’s direction, Onesimus had very likely absconded with property belonging to Philemon to support himself. Further, as slave he would not have had the liberty to decide when and where he should be. In light of these probabilities, restitution was necessary, especially as the letter was going to be read in front of other slaves in household. This is not advocating slavery. It is however an understanding that the Christian way works within the existing culture and hearts of

\(^{181}\) Ibid, 116.


human beings to change them; not to break them or disrupt them in a manner counter to the free will. Such an approach is consistent with the rules for Christian Households proclaimed in the letter to the Colossians. (Col 3:18-4:1)

If Onesimus’ debt to Philemon is financial in nature, (or financial as well) it is not clear how Paul would be able to make such restitution being incarcerated. However, as noted in Acts 28:30, Paul lived in Rome at his own expense, so somehow, Paul may have had the financial means.

However, Paul may have meant another wrong entirely, a spiritual wrong where Philemon’s efforts to convert Onesimus were rejected by Onesimus. If Paul thought that there was a spiritual debt owing to Philemon by Onesimus due to the rejection, Paul from his abundance, would be in a position to make restitution within the early Christian Community. Alternatively, if Paul thought that there was a spiritual debt owing to Philemon by Onesimus due to some wrongdoing, i.e., Paul in his abundance would be in a position to make restitution with Philemon and possibly with God.

The interpretation of the sentence as meaning a spiritual wrong aligns with the debt of Philemon in the following sentences.

“19 I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.”

Paul gives a personal guarantee of repayment emphasizing his commitment by writing either the entire letter or this portion of the letter himself. Paul uses a paraleipsis, a rhetorical device in which a speaker or writer declares that they will not say something, thereby saying it after all. With this paraleipsis Paul reminds Philemon of the spiritual debt owed to Paul by Philemon for Philemon’s conversion by Paul, thus turning Philemon into a debtor and Paul into the creditor. If Onesimus’ wrong to Philemon was spiritual in nature, Paul is now in a position to cancel both debts. The symmetry of this interpretation and its consistency with the life mission of Paul is persuasive.

Similarly, it is an obligation of Christians as debtors to Christ to be humble before God just as Philemon should obey Paul to cancel the spiritual debt.\(^{185}\)

\[20\] Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ\(^{186}\)

In this hortatory section, Paul again commands using the imperative tense for the third time\(^{186}\) exhorting Philemon to refresh Paul’s heart. Once again, Paul uses the word σπλάγχνα – “splanchna” meaning, the bowels, the guts, the heart, the full will of the soul – the entire inward affections.

Further, Paul uses word play to communicate his commands thereby endearing his commands to the reader/listener through amusement and wit. “This benefit” is a play on the meaning of Onesimus’ name, beneficial and “my heart” is representative of both Onesimus and Paul as Paul has identified as Onesimus in verse 12 as “my heart”.

Further, Paul repeats the vocative “brother” reinforcing the comparison between Philemon as brother to Paul with Onesimus as brother to Philemon.

Paul is concerned for both; i.e., for Onesimus and for his own work of evangelization for he is asking Philemon, his convert and leader of a house church, to show his authentic, i.e., true self.

This is the climax or completion of the spiritual request for the refreshing of hearts has come full circle both in time and in people. The refreshment has gone from Philemon to his house church in the past, to Paul in the present with this information, to Onesimus in the near future upon his return and to Paul again in the more distant future when he learns of the welcome return of Onesimus. This spiritual request of beloved brotherhood has a chiastic structure for Philemon, who received acknowledgment of the elevated status of brotherhood from Paul is now in a position to confer the elevated status of brotherhood on Onesimus the son of and heart of Paul.

---


Augustine pondered the phrase “let me have this benefit from you in the Lord” and approached the question of love of neighbour or the “other”. Augustine concluded the Paul placed his hope for the good benefit in the Lord Jesus Christ and not in Philemon himself for his hope is placed in the supreme and immutable goodness.  

“21 Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.”

Paul becomes very clear that Philemon is to obey. This is the obligation of a fully committed leader in the Christian community. Paul is really leaving only one satisfactory outcome for Philemon and that is option 3. Paul want Philemon to accede voluntarily to his request for Onesimus to work in the ministry as Paul has a use for Onesimus. Paul’s suggestion that Philemon will do even beyond the things Paul is saying refers back to Paul’s implicit request to send the forgiven Onesimus either back to Paul or in the mission Paul has in mind for Onesimus.

The confidence formula is an expression of hope.

---

187 « Augustin se penche sur la tournure du verset 20 ἐγώ σου ὀναίμην ἐν Κυρίῳ. « moi, j’aimerais me réjouir de toi dans le Seigneur. » let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Il aborde à ce sujet la « grande question de savoir si les hommes doivent jouir des autres (frui) ou en user (uti) ou l’un et l’autre. » L’autre ne doit pas être aimé pour lui-même, affirme Augustin, mais « pour autre chose » (uti) C’est pourquoi Paul ajoute qu’il se rejoigna de Philémon « dans le Seigneur ». Ce n’est pas en Philémon qu’il place « l’espoir de son bonheur » ; il ne le confond pas avec « ce qu’on ne doit rechercher que dans la Trinité, c’est-à-dire dans le bien suprême et immuable. C’est donc une spéculation sur la nature de l’amour d’autrui qui se déploie à l’occasion de la lecture de la lettre. » Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in La Lettre À Philémon et L’Ecclésiologie Paulinienne Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum Vol. 22 Édité par Daniel Marguerat (Leuven : Peeters, 2016), 4.
“22 One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.”

This is the apostolic parousia. Paul makes his presence felt by the suggestion of a future visit. There are three themes: – the presence of apostolic authority and power, verification of obedience and the father visiting his son to ensure that the son is flourishing in his environment.

In the Greek text the possessive pronoun “your” and the pronoun “you” are plural indicating that the letter is a public letter for the church and the request is a public matter. The manner in which Onesimus is welcomed back into the Colossian community by Philemon has a public impact on the whole church in Philemon’s house in Colossae. The final greeting with the mention of five other people confirms the public nature of the matter for five “brothers” are aware of Onesimus’ immanent return.

3.4 Final Greeting

From the number of individuals in the final greeting it appears that Paul has begun to operate a school in Rome, a “hub” from which men trained by Paul were sent to proclaim the gospel. Of the six companions of Paul who send greetings in Colossians, five of the six (only Jesus/Justus is missing) send greetings in Philemon. The final greeting are sent from:

- the fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, Epaphras, who was the pastor of the Colossian church and thus the spiritual leader over Philemon. In the letter to the Colossians Epaphras is identified as a fellow Colossian and a slave or servant of Christ Jesus. The phrase “fellow prisoner” brings to Philemon’s attention again the imprisoned state of Paul and the sacrifice he and Epaphras are making for the gospel of Jesus Christ.
- the fellow workers Aristarchus, Mark, Demas and Luke. The identification of fellow workers emphasizes the solidarity and common mission that exists between the slave

---

189 Ibid., 231.
owner and the rest of the apostle’s co-missionaries. There is no consensus as to whether the fellow workers were with Saint Paul when he wrote the letter.

In Colossians, it is Aristarchus who is identified as the fellow prisoner. Therefore, there appears to be a very skillful selection as to who is going to be the fellow prisoner – it is the one who has the closest relationship with the target audience/reader/listener.

3.5 The Grace Benediction

The grace benediction is intended for more than Philemon as indicated with the “you” plural. The grace benediction is always for God’s intervention and action in the life of the listener. The closing grace benediction ends the letter.

Having closely examined the form of the letter, one can contrast its message with other deutro-Pauline letters.

---

192 Ibid, 232.
Chapter 4
The Contrast of the letter to Philemon with Ephesians, Colossian, 1 Timothy and Titus

For the slave Onesimus, in the letter to Philemon, Paul is requesting that Philemon and the community under the authority of Philemon welcome Onesimus as a beloved brother. In a contrast of priorities, Ephesians and Colossians contain instructions to slaves to work in communion with their slave owners, i.e., masters, doing the will of God with enthusiasm. Masters are instructed to do the same and to stop threatening slaves. There is consistency in that Paul does not demand or request manumission for Onesimus in the letter to Philemon.

The fundamental contrast is the priority of the body of Christ in Philemon in which all are one and through which all are equal. In Philemon, Onesimus is a beloved brother both in the flesh and in the Lord. In Ephesians, the relationship between Christ and the members of his body is portrayed as master and slave. Slaves are not characterized as beloved brothers in the flesh. However, there is the belief stated that all are equal before God in heaven.

“Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality.”

(Ephesians 6:5-9)

Colossians 3:11, 22 and 4:1 succinctly disseminates the same instructions regarding the slave master relationship.
“In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all!.... Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord.... Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven....” (Colossians 3:11, 22 and 4:1)

1 Timothy has similar instructions as Colossians but even articulates a household concern that Paul expressly did not have in Philemon. This instruction clearly prioritizes the human hierarchical structure of authority over the unity of the one body of Christ with Christ Jesus as the head rather than prioritizing the unity in Christ.

“Those [slaves] who have believing masters must not be disrespectful to them on the ground that they are members of the church; rather they must serve them all the more, since those who benefit by their service are believers and beloved.” (1 Timothy 6:2)

Titus has instruction alone for slaves and none for masters.

“Tell slaves to be submissive to their masters and to give satisfaction in every respect; they are not to talk back,…” (Titus 2:9)

In sum, there is a difference between the priority of the body of Christ shaping the relationship between master and slave as beloved brothers in the flesh in the present age in the letter to Philemon, with these other epistles where the submission of slaves to their masters is endorsed in “a code of conduct”.

Paul is known for differing statements, for example regarding the law, to address specific pastoral concerns. Consequently the differences in context may account for the priority of the body of Christ in Philemon. Paul knew or knew well of Philemon. Paul appears to have make the judgment that Philemon was ready for greater authenticity in bringing the spiritual reality to fruition in the flesh. Paul does not appear to have made the same judgment in respect of the addressees in the letters to Colossians or to the Ephesians. Professor Lonergan observes,
“What is authentic for a lesser differentiation of consciousness will be found unauthentic by the standards of a greater differentiation. There is a sin of backwardness, of the cultures, authorities, individuals that fail to live on the level of their times.”

Paul had identified Philemon as a person who with the help of selected individuals such as Apphia and Archippus could advance the spiritual truth that all are brothers and sisters in Christ in the flesh in the present day. Paul determined that a similar differentiation of consciousness did not exist in the greater communities of Ephesians, Colossians, or the other pastoral epistles.

Alternatively, these pastoral epistles, especially Titus may have had a different author without the same spiritual horizon as Paul. For greater clarity regarding authenticity and spiritual horizons, we turn to Professor Lonergan. Of benefit is first understanding the cognitional structure explained by Prof Lonergan so as to appreciate how an authentic decision to act is made.

---

Chapter 5

Employing Lonergan’s Cognitional Structure

We turn to Professor Lonergan’s Cognitional Structure to identify what Paul does not write. Professor Lonergan’s development of the heuristic cognitional structure is very useful in identifying what Paul does not say. The structure is useful in explaining how truth and obedience are implicit in the letter.

There is much information regarding the conversion of Onesimus and Onesimus’ present state of mind that Paul does not provide. Rather, Paul presents Onesimus as the personified Paul. Paul can do this because Paul statements are TRUE. Philemon understands that, because of truth, Paul does not have to justify his conclusion with data, i.e., evidence Philemon can ponder or evaluate.

Professor Lonergan’s cognitional structure is the process of thinking. It begins from observing the data of experience, then inquiring about the data to gain an understanding of it, then to weigh or evaluate the understanding, to judge whether it is correct and if so, to decide on a course of action.

Philemon, before reading Paul’s letter, was likely in a position of ignorance as to Onesimus’ present state of mind and his conversion to Christianity, nor would he have known about the relationship which had developed between Paul and Onesimus (although some historians and theologians assert that Philemon was aware that Onesimus was with Paul). So Philemon was without data.

First then, Philemon was seeking knowledge. Seeking knowledge is seeking an unknown. Professor Lonergan explains,

“When you want knowledge you cannot know what you want. In seeking knowledge you do so consciously, intelligently and critically – we examine the given, and wonder if it is right, consequently we test it and control it. Furthermore, we can seek knowledge quite deliberately. So seeking knowledge
can be conscious, intelligent and rational and also deliberate, i.e., methodically.\textsuperscript{194}

Such is the nature of humanity to consciously pursue knowledge. Aristotle’s Metaphysics begins with the statement, “All men, by nature, desire to know.”\textsuperscript{195} So the human mind moves from observing the data, to understanding through conception and testing, from weighing the evidence to affirmation of the judgment to willing the reality in action.

Even the Trinity is explained by a similar psychological analogy.\textsuperscript{196} Augustine explained the processions of Christ and the Holy Spirit as something like the movement in the mind of God from understanding to conception, from judgment to willing.

Per Father Bernard Lonergan, what does exist in humanity by nature is the fundamental tendency to ask intelligible questions requiring intelligible answers; in other words, there is a definitive account of the cognitional ideal.\textsuperscript{197}

Paul understood words have meaning. There are concepts in the mind, which spring from words. These are acts of meaning. If one holds that the words mean something that is true, then there is judgment. It is in judgments, concepts and words that one makes one’s goal in knowledge explicit.\textsuperscript{198} This was Paul’s goal or object in writing to Philemon. To provide Philemon with the


\textsuperscript{195} Ibid, 25.

\textsuperscript{196} Professor Lonergan states, “There is nothing in the New Testament about persons or nature; these technical terms do not occur. Since the three persons are distinct, we find in the Cappadocian fathers the treatment of the properties of the distinct persons. Each person must have something proper to himself/herself, otherwise he/she would be the same as the others. Further, both the Cappadocian fathers and Augustine had the idea that these properties must be relative. They cannot be something absolute, because God is simple; if these properties are to be reconciled with the simplicity of God, they have to be relative. Where do the relations come from? They come from the processions. Augustine explained the processions by a psychological analogy. He said they were something like the movement in the mind from understanding to conception, from judgment to willing. So first we have missions, then persons and nature, the properties, relations and procession. What do we find in St Thomas’ Summa Theologiae, part 1 questions 27-43? Thomas does not start out from the missions: missions come at the end, in question 43. He is making the other movement, from causes to things, synthesis. He begins from a psychological analogy and moves to the processions, to the relations to the persons, to the missions. The order of discovery is just the opposite of the order of doctrine. In doctrines, you start from principles and draw all the conclusions, but in discovery you discover one conclusion after another and gradually you move on to your principles.” Bernard Lonergan. Understanding and Being Collected Works of Bernard J.F. Lonergan., vol. 5, edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Elizabeth Morelli. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 30.

\textsuperscript{197} Ibid, 35.

\textsuperscript{198} Ibid, 35.
truth about Philemon himself, Onesimus, the new man and the new relationship which existed spiritually and should come to fruition in the flesh.

Combined with the heuristic cognitional structure is self-appropriation which is the sense of presence to one’s self. Professor Lonergan provides the following example of self-appropriation:

“For example, chairs are inanimate objects which are present in a room. This is the first sense of presence. We are both in the same room so I am present to you and you are present to me. Ordinarily we would express this as I am aware of or conscious of you and you of me. This is the second sense of presence. I am present to myself to be aware of you and of the chairs. That I am present to myself is self-appropriation. i.e., I am the looker not the looked-at, even when I am looking at myself. [This is the third sense of presence.]”

To repeat, self-appropriation requires that one be present to oneself. Through self-appropriation one can be conscious of the cognitional operations within oneself. Professor Lonergan describes self-appropriation as “moving one step backwards, to move into the subject as intelligent – asking questions; as having insights – being able to form concepts; as weighing the evidence – being able to judge.”

The value of self-appropriations is advertence – advertence to oneself as experiencing, understanding and judging.

When Philemon read the letter from Paul, it is possible that at verse 17 Philemon appropriated the truth of Paul’s assertions regarding Onesimus and continued to read to understand the action Paul was now going to command.

The above explanation of the order of the operations in the heuristic cognitional structure is diagrammed below.

199 Ibid, 36.
200 Ibid, 36.
201 Ibid, 53.
Rational self-consciousness
Rational consciousness
INTELLECTUAL consciousness
Intelligent consciousness

empirical consciousness

Experience or Observation
Conception and Understanding
Reflection Judgment Action

empirical consciousness
Intelligent consciousness

INTELLECTUAL consciousness
Rational Consciousness
Rational self-consciousness
The order of cognative operations is experiencing, inquiry, understanding, conception, reflecting, reflective insight and judging.

How is this relevant to the letter to Philemon? To demonstrate how truth and authority is presented when it is a given acknowledge operative principle in both the writer and the addressee, the letter to Philemon is contrasted with the letter written by Letter from C Pliny to Sabinianus, in the table below.\textsuperscript{202}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Letter to Philemon</th>
<th>Letter from C Pliny</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Empirical Data/Observation</strong></td>
<td>Regarding Philemon</td>
<td>YOUR freedman, whom you lately</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus.</td>
<td>mentioned to me with displeasure, has been with me, and threw himself at</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>[No data on Onesimus is provided by Paul]</td>
<td>my feet with as much submission as he could have fallen at yours. He earnestly requested me with many</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>tears, and even with all the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short, he convinced me by his whole behaviour that he sincerely repents of his fault.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Understanding</strong></td>
<td>Regarding Onesimus</td>
<td>You once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful\textsuperscript{[1]} both to you and to me.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I preferred to do nothing without your consent</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reflection</strong></td>
<td>I am persuaded he is thoroughly reformed, because he seems deeply sensible of his guilt. I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason;</td>
<td>but clemency can never exert itself more laudably than when there is the</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\textsuperscript{202} The entire letter and the subsequent letter describing the happy outcome is presented in Appendix II.
Paul does not provide Philemon with empirical data on Onesimus, yet Paul obtains or is given empirical data on Philemon in coming to the decision to send Onesimus back. This contrasts with Pliny’s letter to Sabinianus where Sabinianus is provided with sufficient empirical data to arrive at an understanding of the situation. Paul instead informs Philemon of the understanding...
of Onesimus’ present state. “The new Onesimus, the real Onesimus is Onesimus the « beloved brother », just as the new Philemon, the real Philemon is the “self” that he owes to Paul.” Paul can do so because Philemon and Paul both know that the statements are true.

Paul was working on several levels – a human cognitional level employing the transcendental principles – be attentive, be intelligent, be reasonable, be rational. He expected Philemon to be attentive to his assertion regarding Onesimus. He expected Philemon to intelligently interpret the information that Onesimus was a “son” of Paul. As previously noted, only Timothy has been identified as such a relation on an individual level. The reasonable judgment was the Onesimus as now a beloved brother and useful to both Philemon and to Paul. The rational act would be to accept Onesimus back as a beloved brother, in the familia in Philemon’s house and in the Colossian Christian community. Even more, Philemon could accept Paul’s implicit request to employ Onesimus in a manner identified as suitable by Paul.

Paul was also working on the mystical level. It appears that Christ, dwelling in Paul, acted on the conscious level and the Holy Spirit acted in Paul’s will on the conscious level directing Paul as to what action to take and how to communicate in successfully accomplishing the action.

Paul understood that Grace and Peace grounded the addressees. It triggered the initial movement of the hearts of the addressee by the Word and Spirit; appealing to love did the same but especially in the will. Paul called on the Holy Spirit and Christ dwelling within Philemon to move Philemon’s will to a greater depth of understanding how all the saints including slaves are brothers and sisters in the Lord and to act accordingly in the flesh, i.e., subjecting the flesh to the spirit.

---


204 “and it is no longer I who live, but it is Christ who lives in me.” (Gal 2:20)
Chapter 6

The Theological Message of the Letter to Philemon

The underlying theological message at the heart of the situation is the begetting/becoming of a new human being, “a new man” on religious conversion culminating in the sacrament of baptism. It is ironic that the sacrament of baptism is not mentioned in the letter. However, Paul is/was employing “common sense” language that focused on the status of the new person, Onesimus, rather than the act that caused his spiritual rebirth. There is only an implicit presentation of baptism when Paul states that he has become Onesimus’ spiritual father. In this brief letter Paul was not engaged in explaining to Philemon the theological principle of justification but rather he is drawing Philemon through a discernment process using rhetoric so that Philemon could put into action that spiritual truth.205

What is this “new man” or New Person?

At the time the letter to Philemon was written, there would have been few individuals with an appreciation of the spiritual condition of a “new man” as Paul. He was a spiritually astute individual who lived in both ages, the age that preceded Christ, without the kingdom of God at hand, and the new age created by the new Adam (Rom 5:12-18) with Christ indwelling, with the free gift of abundant grace and with justification and with the free gift of righteousness.206

The indwelling of Christ brings to the New Person encouragement, consolation from love, sharing in the Spirit, and the compassion and sympathy of God in a closer relationship. The New People of the Lord are expected to be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full

206 12 Therefore, just as sin came into the world through one man, and death came through sin, and so death spread to all because all have sinned—13 sin was indeed in the world before the law, but sin is not reckoned when there is no law. 14 Yet death exercised dominion through Adam and Moses, even over those whose sins were not like the transgression of Adam, who is a type of the one who was to come.
15 But the free gift is not like the trespass. For if the many died through the one man’s trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. 16 And the free gift is not like the effect of the one man’s sin. For the judgment following one trespass brought condemnation, but the free gift following many trespasses brings justification. 17 If, because of the one man’s trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the abundance of grace and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Romans 5:12-18
accord and of one mind” (Phil 2:2) acting in humility to the point of taking on the role of a slave of Christ Jesus (Phil 2:7), i.e., his prisoner (Philemon 1), obedient in all respects doing whatever he tells a New Person to do (John 2:5).

The earliest scriptural revelation is in Isaiah 40:5: “the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken it.” N.T. Wright explains:

“But it is not only the glory of the Lord himself that is to be restored in the coming new age when God brings his judgment and mercy to bear on the world afresh. It is also the glory of humankind. In a theme particularly noticeable in the Dead Sea Scrolls, we find promises that “all the glory of Adam” shall belong to the penitent and/or the righteous, within Israel. This belongs of course to the ancient Jewish notion of humankind made in the image of God, made to reflect God not only back to God but also out into God’s world.”

N.T. Wright notes that Paul reworked this Jewish Eschatology around Jesus and the Spirit. Paul proclaimed Jesus, the resurrected Messiah who has won the victory over the forces of evil and inaugurated the new age. The “day of the Lord” became the “day of the Lord Jesus”. For Paul the great promise of glory had come to pass since God now dwells in human beings. Christ is the temple and Christ dwells in each baptized human being. The light of Christ and the Holy Spirit now shines in each baptized human being’s heart in fullness, to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 4:4-6) Through baptism each human being is filled with divine life and now shares in the divine glory of Christ and the human glory of the New Adam. There is one new humanity (Eph 2:15) a New Human Being in Christ. Paul taught,

“He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, [Israel and other nations,

---

208 Ibid, 383.
209 “…he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven ...” (Col 1:18-19)
circumcised and uncircumcised[,] thus making peace, and might reconcile both
groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility
through it.” (Eph 2:15-16)

Paul, writing Colossians, Philemon, Philippians from prison was aware of the disobedience,
willfulness, pride and sin of Christian believers and humankind, in general. He understood that
the eschatology of glory was and is certainly inaugurated, but it was and is emphatically not yet
completed, and stands in enormous tension with the continuing realities of present existence.
Thus, the need for his imprisonment. “Here is the inaugurated eschatology of glory: God works
his grace through the strange process of apostolic suffering, so that his glory may abound…: the
weakness through which God’s power is revealed.”

With this new humanity the virtues of truth and justice are reflected into the present age. Truth
is contrasted with the deceit of the old human in the formerly useless now useful Onesimus.
Justice: the new human is ontologically and necessarily oriented towards the image-bearing task
of putting the world to rights. Hence, Paul uses the word “begotten” for there is transited a
likeness to God in Onesimus and a commitment to the mission of the Holy Spirit in Onesimus’
conversion.

Paul understood that “…what is done though friends is our own doing.” Thus, Philemon is
called upon by Paul to forgive the absence of Onesimus and acknowledge the reality of
Onesimus’ conversion to a new man. When Philemon accomplished that, Paul accomplished his
eschatological mission of bringing the New Age to fruition in this place, Philemon’s house
church.

211 Ibid, 388.
212 Ibid, 469.
213 Quote from Aristotle, Nichomachean Ethics. Brian J. Braman, Meaning and Authenticity: Bernard Lonergan and Charles
Taylor on the Drama of Authentic Human Existence. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), vi.
Chapter 7

Authenticity in the New Man

How might Philemon have changed through this process of reconciliation? Could it have been possible that Philemon would have become a more authentic person with an expanded horizon? With such a horizon, would it have enabled Philemon to become a true partner of Paul in the proclamation of the gospel?

This was the challenge from Paul to Philemon in verses 18 to 20.

The idea of human authenticity shapes not only institutions such as the church in Philemon’s house, it also shapes the solutions to the problems encountered in that church and more broadly, any church, or any society. The importance in clarifying what authenticity rightly means in terms of human living, then, lies in humanity’s common destiny.214

According to Professor Lonergan authentic human existence is authentic self-transcendence expressed in a three-fold form of conversion that is intellectual, moral and religious.

The importance of intellectual conversion is that it dispels the notion that human knowing is a matter of taking a good look. It is the dynamic unity of consciousness as experiencing, understanding and judging that constitutes human knowing in its fullest and truest sense. It is Philemon understanding that seeing Onesimus again for the first time upon his return to Colossae is not seeing the same person. It is interacting with a person who has been with Paul and persuaded by Paul to reform. To do this is to self-affirm as a knower. Philemon understands Onesimus is a new person. This knowing distinguishes between the world mediated by meaning and the world of immediacy.215

With moral conversion one moves out of the darkness of self-deception and seeks truth behind one’s actions. In moral conversion one moves from merely to truly – the truly worthwhile, the

---

214 Ibid, 6.
truly good and the truly valuable. In moral transcendence one moves from self-regarding norms, [this would be the master Philemon punishing Onesimus the slave upon his return] and make oneself a moral being – able to articulate transcendental value [this would be forgiving Onesimus, welcoming him and accepting Paul’s offer to make payment, if necessary].

To be truly in love with God is to be religiously converted. Our love of God is without conditions, qualifications or reservations – it is being-in-love without restrictions. Being-in-love with God is the basic fulfillment of our conscious intentionality. Our love reveals to us values we had not appreciated, values of prayer and worship, or repentance and belief. This is Philemon interacting with Onesimus as a beloved brother, a member of Christ’s mystical body. It is seeing Onesimus with the eyes of faith, seeing him as a beloved brother.

Conversion is not a single and definitive achievement. Conversion combined with authenticity are lifelong commitments, both individually and culturally, to the imperatives to be attentive, reasonable, intelligent and responsible. In short, authenticity is a life that is intelligent, moral, and religious; it is properly a human way of life. Thus, the person and the question of authenticity are concrete and specific. The person is a concrete reality, “a being in the luminousness of being.” The question is about the truth of human existence.

The starting point for authenticity will be the person, (whom Professor Lonergan calls the subject) as he/she exists in the here and now: the over-all context of human living, the person as being-in-the-world and subject to the limits of his or her own horizon. Professor Lonergan likens one’s being-in-the-world, i.e., human existence, to a drama. Human living is a drama. A human wants more than merely getting things accomplished. A person wants a sense of direction to one’s living and meaning to one’s actions.

---

216 Ibid, 64.
217 Ibid, 104, 105 and 122.
218 Ibid, 243.
220 Ibid, 49.
Human existence is a dramatic enterprise that embraces all aspects of human living - personal, communal, ethical and religious – and it unfolds in time;….the drama that a person lives out is always contextualized; one’s being-in-the-world.221 It is very clear that all three, Philemon, the converted Onesimus and Paul were motivated to create a “work of art” with their own living by achieving a direction, meaning and goodness in their lives which had the outcome of living truth. In other words, to live authentic meaningful lives. It is obvious that Paul lived under the direction of Christ, found meaning and goodness to the point where he was “… a person in Christ who fourteen years ago was caught up to the third heaven”. (2 Cor 12:2)

This is in part Paul’s motivation in writing to Philemon. Paul desired both Philemon and Onesimus to realize truth in their living to the same extent. Philemon had aesthetic liberation and artistic creativity. Onesimus needed such aesthetic liberation and artistic creativity within the context of the slave-master relationship. Paul wanted Philemon to provide greater liberation to Onesimus in order that Onesimus could realize his own artistic creativity. This might have been missionary work in Colossae.

Philemon was likely striving to be authentic. Philemon probably knew that he alone was responsible for constituting himself as authentic through his choices and decisions. While reading Paul’s letter he knew he had three choices facing him as outlined above. But only 2 and 3 were authentic options. The first option was the denial of the spiritual reality that all are brothers and sisters in Christ.

The second option might have been an alternative that would have been well within his existing horizons. The third option may well have stretch Philemon’s horizons so that he could, in self-sacrificing love, free Onesimus to work in the proclamation of the gospel.

What is quite possible and even probable is that Philemon’s horizontal horizon, prior to receiving the letter, did not include the spiritual understanding that all are brothers and sisters in Christ, whether slave or free. Otherwise, Paul would not have had to employ the range of rhetorical

---

arguments presented in the letter. Further, where “one’s horizons are not broad enough words do not have meaning.” Professor Lonergan calls this the existential gap. Paul would have understood that Philemon’s spiritual horizon had to be expanded.

Philemon may have followed Aristotle’s concept of friendship while a pagan and still retained that concept after being baptized. Aristotle questioned the capacity of unequal persons of status to be friends and thereby sets up an understanding of friendship and social status that became influential upon other thinkers and entrenched a static conception of human relationships. By the Aristotelian account human beings are locked into relationships and manners of interaction that utterly depend on social status.222

Through Philemon’s decisions, choices and risk taken with Onesimus, Philemon would reveal himself to his church and to others in Colossae. He would reveal the ideal that informed his way of living and what he considered to be worthwhile, true, real and valuable in terms of human living.223

It is clear that Paul’s friends did include slaves as brothers. After all, his life experience regarding “who was his neighbor” was broad, ranging from slaves and prisoners, to members of the Emperor’s household (Philippians 4:22) and from Jerusalem to Asia to Cyprus, Malta and Rome. His friends included saints, angels and Christ (Rom 8:39). Thus in the letter to Philemon, Paul set about to demonstrate that, in the church, the reconciliation and forgiveness modeled by the Lord is manifested in a spirit of agapeic servanthood.224

Rhetoric was the tool to impart this understanding to Philemon to effect a conversion to a religious understanding of great depth, and from that, reshape Philemon’s “horizontal horizon” to include in the brotherhood of all the saints, the newly baptized Onesimus through reconciliation and forgiveness.

Professor Lonergan explains that:

“To move beyond one’s horizon in any significant fashion involves reorganizing oneself. This is a reorganization of modes of living, feeling, thinking, judging, desiring, fearing, willing, deliberating, choosing. Against such reorganization there come into play all the conservative forces that gives one’s life its continuity and coherence. One’s fundamental anxiety, his deep distress, is over the collapse of himself and his world; tampering with the organization of himself gives rise to dread.”

It is quite imaginable that Philemon, upon receiving the letter in private would have paced back and forth in a private room thinking about the organization of his household and how “authentic brotherhood in Christ” would change its relations and whether it would also change its structure. Thus begins the process of discernment.

Thus, one goes beyond the limits of one’s existing horizon, expand interests and concerns to coincide with the exigency of authenticity. To go beyond existing limits is achieved through conversion - a conversion that is personal, communal, and historical, and a conversion that subsumes prior horizons without abolishing them. It is a radical change in one’s orientation to the world, and this new orientation can reveal ever-greater depth, breadth, and wealth to the human drama.

One can imagine how radical a change of intellectual, moral and religious understanding for Philemon this would be. It is understanding that there is no “underling”; there is only a brother in less affluent circumstances. There is only a fellow human being with whom it is appropriate

---


226 The process of discernment can be modelled as:
- IDENTIFY the decision that faces us or the issue we need to resolve
- EXAMINE the underlying values (human, Christian, spiritual) and personal concerns involved
- STRIVE for Ignatian indifference
- TAKE time to pray over the matter, paying attention to how we are being drawn or led
- MAKE a choice based on both the results of our "head work" and our "heart work"
- DISCUSS the matter with a spiritual companion
- DIALOGUE with those who will be intimately affected by the decision being made
- LIVE out our decision with courage, hope, and trust

Ryan Rallanka SJ *Ignation Discernment: Connecting the Interior Life to Decision Making* [https://www.jesuitschoolsnetwork.org/sites/default/files/resources/attachment](https://www.jesuitschoolsnetwork.org/sites/default/files/resources/attachment) (accessed on October 31, 2016)

and obligatory to share the spiritual meal with – the Eucharist. There is a person who must be accepted and welcomed with respect for all are brothers and sisters of Christ. This is Christ’s point of view and it is a higher one.
Chapter 8
Conclusion

It is very clear from the words Paul employs that this letter is full of love for Christ and faith in Christ. It is full of love for neighbour in an expression of brotherly love. It is also full of hope – the hope of Paul for the Christian identity of brothers and sisters in Christ, and their equality; the hope of Onesimus for acceptance as a brother and possibly the hope of Philemon for resolution to the disruption of his life, his missing slave, for his authenticity and for the new mission in his life, his house church. At its core it is a letter about discerning the will of God and making God’s will a form to shape the living structures of this world.228

The happy conclusion to this story is that there was a complete transformation in Onesimus and an authentic achievement of deep joy and profound peace in Philemon for Onesimus became “… the faithful and beloved brother, who [was] one of [the Colossian community].229” (Col 4:9) Paul’s letter to the Philemon had the desired outcome, the gospel of Christ was lived in Philemon’s acceptance and reconciliation with Onesimus a fellow brother in Christ albeit a slave in the present age. Philemon gained greater authenticity in living his faith. There would have been increased harmony in the life of the church in Philemon’s house. Paul achieved his objective of promulgating the gospel of Christ.

---

228 « Au final, la lettre à Philémon s’avère être un exemple de discernement. L’apôtre appelle au discernement en évaluant critiquement les attitudes induites par la structure hiérarchique de la maison, afin que ces rapports sociaux n’éliminent pas la nouveauté de l’Évangile. Le modèle se lit en Roman 12, 1-2, qui engage à ne pas se conformer à l’éon présent, mais à discerner (δοκιμάζειν) ce qui est la volonté de Dieu. Paul ne prêche pas le rejet de la société, mais l’insertion des croyants dans les structures vitales du monde. Face à Philémon, Paul « évangélise la structure domestique et son leader » appelant à sa responsabilité et l’exhortant à inventer les modalités par lesquelles il concrétisera la nouveauté chrétienne dans ce contexte. » Daniel Marguerat. Introduction in La Lettre À Philémon et L’Ecclésiologie Paulinienne Colloquium Oecumenicum Paulinum Vol. 22 Édité par Daniel Marguerat (Leuven : Peeters, 2016), 20.

229 This assumes Jerome’s assessment was accurate and that the Onesimus of the letter to Philemon is the same Onesimus in the letter to the Colossians.
Bibliography

Primary Sources:

Aristotle. *Metaphysics* translated by W.D. Ross
http://classics.mit.edu/Aristotle/metaphysics.1.i.html (accessed on October 9, 2017).


Pliny, C. *Letter from C Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62? –A.C. 113) to Sabinianus*

The Passion of the Holy Martyrs Perpetua and Felicity,


Secondary Sources:


Appendix I

Letter from C Pliny the Younger (A.D. 62? –A.C. 113) to Sabinianus,230

Greetings

YOUR freedman, whom you lately mentioned to me with displeasure, has been with me, and threw himself at my feet with as much submission as he could have fallen at yours. He earnestly requested me with many tears, and even with all the eloquence of silent sorrow, to intercede for him; in short, he convinced me by his whole behaviour that he sincerely repents of his fault. I am persuaded he is thoroughly reformed, because he seems deeply sensible of his guilt. I know you are angry with him, and I know, too, it is not without reason; but clemency can never exert itself more laudably than when there is the most cause for resentment. You once had an affection for this man, and, I hope, will have again; meanwhile, let me only prevail with you to pardon him. If he should incur your displeasure hereafter, you will have so much the stronger plea in excuse for your anger as you shew yourself more merciful to him now. Concede something to his youth, to his tears, and to your own natural mildness of temper: do not make him uneasy any longer, and I will add, too, do not make yourself so; for a man of your kindness of heart cannot be angry without feeling great uneasiness. I am afraid, were I to join my entreaties with his, I should seem rather to compel than request you to forgive him. Yet I will not scruple even to write mine with his; and in so much the stronger terms as I have very sharply and severely reproved him, positively threatening never to interpose again in his behalf. But though it was proper to say this to him, in order to make him more fearful of offending, I do not say so to you. I may perhaps, again have occasion to entreat you upon his account, and again obtain your forgiveness;

supposing, I mean, his fault should be such as may become me to intercede for, and you to pardon. Farewell.

CV. To Sabinianus\textsuperscript{231}

I GREATLY approve of your having, in compliance with my letter, received again into your favour and family a discarded freedman, whom you once admitted into a share of your affection. This will afford you, I doubt not, great satisfaction. It certainly has me, both as a proof that your passion can be controlled, and as an instance of your paying so much regard to me as either to yield to my authority or to comply with my request. Let me, therefore, at once both praise and thank you. At the same time I must advise you to be disposed for the future to pardon the faults of your people, though there should be none to intercede in their behalf. Farewell.

\textsuperscript{231}\url{http://www.bartleby.com/9/4/1105.html#note4.105.151} (accessed on November 6, 2017)
Appendix II

The Letter to Philemon

1 Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφὸς Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν
2 καὶ Ἀπφίᾳ τῇ ἀδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ’ οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ·
3 χάρις ὑμῖν καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ Θεοῦ Πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.
4 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ Θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνείαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου,
5 ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν Κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἅγιους,
6 ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεως σου ἐνεργηθῇ ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν ἡμῖν εἰς Χριστόν·
7 χαρὰ γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπαυται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

8Διό, πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρακλησίαν ἐχὼν ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνῆκον,
9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ,
10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον,
11 τὸν ποτὲ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ καὶ σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον,
12 ὅν ἀνέπεμψα σοι αὐτόν, τούτῳ ἐστὶν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα·
13 ὅν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἐμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου,
14 χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σής γνώμης οὐδὲν ἡθέλησα σοι ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ἢ ἅλλα κατὰ ἐκούσιον.
15 τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐξωρίσθη πρὸς ὅραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς,
16 οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἄλλα ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητὸν, μάλιστα ἐμοὶ, πόσῳ δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν Κυρίῳ.
17 εἰ οὖν με ἄχρησιν κοινωνόν, προσλαβέω αὐτὸν ὡς ὑμᾶς.
18 εἰ δὲ τί ἡδίκησέν σε ἡ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα·
19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρί, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω· ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτόν μοι προσοφείλεις.
20 ναὶ, ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν Κυρίῳ· ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.
21 Πεποιθώς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.
22 ἀμα δὲ καὶ ἑτοίμαζέ μοι ξενίαν· ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν.
23 Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ,
24 Μάρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου.
25 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ Κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος ὑμῶν.