

Faith Mennonite Church  
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Seek Peace and Pursue It  
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## **Risky Reconciliation** *Philemon*

The letter from Paul to Philemon is one of the four single-chapter letters of the New Testament; the others are 2nd John, 3rd John, and Jude. Of the four, this is the most personal, although it is jointly addressed to Philemon and his house church. While the other three letters concern themselves with questions of faithful teaching, this letter is about a very practical matter: reconciliation.

As modern readers we often get tripped up in reading this letter and want, as a starting point, to question or criticize Paul for not challenging the whole institution of slavery. When we think of slavery, we think in terms of the experience that has been closest at hand in our history: the enslavement of Africans by Europeans and Americans, which was a ruthless, brutal system of exploitation that ripped apart families and dehumanized the slaves, often treating them like animals.

Slavery in the Roman Empire in the first century was quite different. According to a commentary<sup>1</sup> that Hermann Weinlick is editing, and has shared with me, it is estimated that 25-50% of the population were slaves, and in some parts of the empire, slaves were the majority. Because they were the property of another, slaves “could be bought and sold, rented, and given to others as gifts.” On the one hand “[s]laves had no social status and few legal rights.” But on the other, “many slaves were well educated and constituted a significant element of the managerial class (as, for example, in the stories of Jesus in Matthew 18:23-35; 24:45-51 and Luke 16:1-13; some translations soften the picture by rendering the word as ‘servant’ rather than the more accurate ‘slave’). It was to the owner’s advantage to provide education for his or her slaves since this enhanced both their usefulness and their value.”

“Most slaves in the first century had been born as slaves and had a well-defined place in the household and social structure. [...] Slaves had some limited legal rights; for example, if their master treated them too harshly, they could demand to be sold to another master. Some slaves were paid wages, with which they purchased their freedom; some even owned their own slaves.”

In Paul’s day slavery “was not a matter of race; slaves could not be recognized as such on the street. [...] There was not always a wide gap in the New Testament world between slaves and free. Most slaves were humanely treated by their owners [...] and there were no protests against the institution as such in the Hellenistic world.”

This letter indicates that when people who owned slaves, such as Philemon, became Christians it didn’t naturally occur to them to free their slaves. Yet, we also see a transformation taking place. A run-away slave, Onesimus, becomes a Christian and a trusted helper/companion for Paul, one whom Paul comes to love as a son. Although Paul does not view him as a slave, he realizes that he legally belongs to another Christian, Philemon, who Paul also considers a brother and co-worker.

There are several layers of relationships that need reconciling in this story. First, is the relationship between Onesimus and Philemon. We don’t know what prompted Onesimus to run away, but since Paul speaks of the possibility of a debt, we can wonder whether Onesimus accidentally broke something or made an error in accounts, for which he fled in fear. It’s also possible that he did something in anger or spite. Whatever the case, according to the status quo, reconciliation would have meant returning to his former position as a slave.

Second, is the relationship between Paul and Philemon. It is clear that they knew and held each other in high regard as fellow church leaders. We do not know exactly how long Onesimus served Paul before this reconciliation was initiated--clearly long enough for Onesimus to become extremely useful

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Boring, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, forthcoming 2012

and deeply appreciated by Paul. But, according to the status quo, Paul has been "borrowing" the services of Onesimus without notification or the permission of his legal owner and Paul's friend, Philemon.

So Paul takes a bold step: he sends Onesimus back with a letter, which is addressed not just to Philemon but to others in the household & church. The letter in effect states that the first layer of reconciliation, between Onesimus and Philemon has already happened vicariously since Paul has forgiven him and accepted him as a Christian brother. Paul, in effect, is taking the rap for Onesimus; he agrees to pay anything that Onesimus owes.

The second relationship, between Paul and Philemon, is really the one that is at stake. Will Philemon accept Paul's invitation to accept Onesimus as a brother, forgive whatever debt he owed, and, perhaps send him back to Paul? Paul frames the letter in a way to suggest he might have expected some resistance; he builds a case that can on the one hand feel a little passive-aggressive, and on the other, quite masterful.

As with all of Paul's letters, we only read one side—we don't have the advantage of knowing how Philemon responded. Did he accept the invitation for reconciliation? Church of the Brethren theologian Robert Bowman reports that about 50 years after this letter was written, another recognized early church leader, Ignatius of Antioch, "wrote a letter to the Christians at Ephesus, mentioning their bishop Onesimus, 'a man of love beyond recounting.'" Bowman references another scholar who speculates that Bishop Onesimus is the same person befriended by Paul and that once he became a bishop he began collecting Paul's letters, which was the beginning of our New Testament collection. This would explain why a seemingly obscure, personal letter survived in that collection.<sup>2</sup>

Two things stand out for me about this letter. First is the way Paul's love for Onesimus helped transform a run-away slave into a future church leader. None of us would want to have our life determined by the worst mistake we ever made. Whatever Onesimus' error, Paul believed that God could shape him anew and use him. And he was willing to risk a relationship with a trusted coworker and leader to convey his confidence in Onesimus.

This reminds me of the story I once heard about a young man who was about to be released from prison. He happened to see the chaplain in the hallway and, telling him the news of his release, went on to say, "Thanks for changing my life!" The chaplain was perplexed because he had had little contact with this man and didn't remember any interactions that he would have considered life-changing. But before saying anything he decided he should go back to his office and check his files; perhaps he was forgetting something. When he did, he found record of just one conversation, when the man first arrived. He had made no special notes about the visit.

So he went back and looked the young man up and said, "I'm wondering if you have me confused with someone else who you should be thanking. I can't remember anything I did to change your life." But the man replied, "Oh no, you're the one. The time we talked in your office, just after I got here, you looked at my high school record and said, 'You must have worked very hard in school; you have a good record.' That was the first time anyone ever said that to me and I knew I could become someone." The chaplain was humbled by the power of affirmation.

The second thing that stands out is Paul's creativity in seeking reconciliation in a complicated situation in which a personal relationship and a transforming relationship with Jesus collided with the status quo in society and in the church. Paul responded on a personal level, making a case based on collaboration and shared values rather than opposition or condemnation.

A little letter...lots to chew on! Rich Deming and Matthew Hendricks have each agreed to do just that and provide responses and further thoughts.

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<sup>2</sup> Robert Bowman, *Gather 'Round Summer 2012, Seek Peace & Pursue It*. Mennomedia, 2012.