

Paul Applies Maximum Social Pressure for Philemon to Free Onesimus

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Paul's letter to Philemon uses all the social pressure and personal influence he can muster to make Philemon receive a runaway slave named Onesimus "no longer (οὐκέτι) as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (16). Meyer is correct to say regarding "no longer": "we have to leave οὐκέτι absolute, and not to weaken it by μόνον [no longer only] to be mentally supplied."¹ The fact that Philemon must receive Onesimus back "forever" (αἰώνιον 15) in this new relationship excludes slavery,² which would be limited to this life, and stresses that Philemon must receive Onesimus back in the new status of "brother." Some, trying to avoid the negation of the status of slave inherent in "no longer as a slave," have proposed a dichotomy in which slavery as social status might continue for Onesimus modified only by the addition of equality in spiritual relations. Paul, however, strips away this dichotomy in this same sentence by

¹ Heinrich August Wilhelm Meyer, *Critical and Exegetical Hand-book to the Epistles to the Philippians and Colossians, and to Philemon* (6th ed.; trans. John C. Moore and William P. Dickson; NY: Funk & Wagnells, 1884), 410 n. 1.

² Meyer, *Philemon*, 409-10, acknowledges that eternity embraces the expiring age and the coming age "but not, that the Christian brotherly union reaches into eternity." This self-contradictory interpretation is crucial to his conclusion that "not a hint of *manumission*" is implied by Paul. Cf. also the critique in Frederic Louis Godet, *Commentary on First Corinthians* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1889; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Kregel, 1977), 357-61.

stating that Onesimus is a beloved brother to Philemon both in the material (ἐν σαρκί) and spiritual (ἐν κυρίῳ) realms. Meyer correctly insists, “The two domains of life designated by ἐν σαρκί and ἐν κυρίῳ—which, connected by καί... καί, exclude the conception of ethical contrast—are to be left in all their comprehensiveness.”³ It is precisely because of the pervasive unifying influence of Christ that both fleshly and spiritual relations are transformed. Paul commands Philemon, “if you consider me a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything, charge it to me. ... I will pay it back—not to mention that you owe me your very self” (17-19). Paul makes it clear that “I would have liked to keep him with me so that he could take your place in helping me while I am in chains for the gospel” (14). With this in mind he concludes, “refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I ask” (20-21). “Obedience” here most naturally refers to Philemon receiving Onesimus back for eternity no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother. It would trivialize it to limit it to a welcome for Onesimus back into slavery or some refreshment to be provided for Paul. Nor is the “obedience” Paul expects an invoice for damages. Paul makes it clear that he intends Philemon to free Onesimus and accept a new relationship to Onesimus not as slave⁴ but as brother. Paul’s confidence that Philemon will do even more is a hint to underwrite Onesimus’s return to help Paul in prison. To bring to bear the maximum community pressure Paul addresses the letter not just to Philemon but also to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier and to the church that meets in your home” (2). He even commands, “Prepare a guest room for me, because I hope to be restored to you.” If

³ Meyer, *Philemon*, 410.

⁴ Cf. Godet, *1 Corinthians*, 361.

Philemon does not emancipate Onesimus, he can look forward to an embarrassing visit. Paul then lists five highly-respected church leaders who send greetings and so presumably know about this request (23-24). This is a clear case in which Paul is willing to risk all his “capital” with an influential church leader to pressure him to free a slave. Godet writes, “This passage may certainly be called the first petition in favour of the abolition of slavery.” It is, of course, directly addressed at one particular slave’s manumission and is not a call for a social revolution. The way in which Paul contrasts the status of slavery (“no longer as a slave”) to the status of beloved brother in the Lord, however, points to the tension between these two that tends to undermine slavery in general. The oneness in Christ in which “there is no slave or free” had serious practical consequences for Paul. To interpret Gal 3:28 as though it means simply that slaves like free people, can be saved, but that their social barriers are unaffected is to trivialize the social implications of Gal 3:28 for slaves and free persons in Christ. In the fellowship of Christ’s body, ones socio-economic status as a slave or free person is irrelevant.

Slaves who became church leaders exemplify the equal standing of slaves in the church. Within a half century of Paul’s writing the letter of Philemon,⁵ Ign. *Eph.* 1:3 speaks highly of “Onesimus, a man of inexpressible love and your bishop.” Onesimus was a common slave’s name and so exemplifies this, whether or not this bishop of Ephesus was formerly Philemon’s slave. The Muratorian Canon, lines 73-77 identifies Pius I, Bishop of Rome, either as a slave or the brother of the slave Hermas, the author of the *Shepherd*. Similarly, Hippolytus, *Haer.* 9.11f. says that Callixtus, bishop of Rome AD 217-222, was an ex-slave. All of these factors, contextual, parallel passages, and historical application, make an extraordinarily strong case that

⁵ Philemon was written about AD 61 or 62. Eusebius’s *chronicon* dates the martyrdom of Ignatius in AD 108.

Paul intended Gal 3:28's "there is no slave or free" to be practically implemented in the church and, correspondingly, that he did intend to call Philemon to free Onesimus from slavery.