

Philemon Outline

Introduction: Philemon, though Paul's shortest letter, is easily Paul's contested letter. The reason? Paul's brief note to Philemon, an elder in the Colossian church, commends him to receive back into his house the runaway slave Onesimus.

Now on the one hand the letter is a deeply compassionate one. Paul takes time out of his work to write a personal letter on behalf of a runaway slave. And in this letter he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back into his home, and not merely as a slave but as a brother. Unfortunately, it would be over reaching to read this as Paul actually calling Philemon to manumit Onesimus. Rather, scholarly consensus agrees that Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus back into servitude, but basically to treat him with care and to receive him as a brother in Christ. This is consistent with Paul's words in many of his other letters regarding slaves and slave masters- namely that slaves should be obedient and slave masters should be kind.

The letter of Philemon along with Paul's other words about slavery was widely cited during the 19th century as a clear Biblical mandate for slavery. The church has since changed her mind about this. Noting the differences between Roman slavery and modern slavery, one major difference is that Roman slaves composed a social class not a racial class and could purchase their own freedom, and acknowledging that sometimes writers were bound by limited human institutions, the church today tends to view these slavery texts as being more 'descriptive' than 'prescriptive'. That is, we tend to see these texts as being more historical and helping us understand the ancient world, not as texts that give us positive guidance on how to live today.

Chapter 1:1-7: Paul flatters Philemon

Chapter 1:8-21: Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus back as a brother

Chapter 1:22-23: Paul says he's coming to visit

Stories/texts to know: Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus back