

Read the New Testament in a Year

Supporting Notes & Questions

Bangor & Holyhead Circuit

Paul's letter to Philemon – for Monday 14 June 2021

Prepared by Ian Russell

Paul's letter to Philemon follows his 3 'Pastoral Letters' – 2 to Timothy and that to Titus. Nevertheless it is usually classified as one of 4 the 'Prison Letters' including Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians – letters in which Paul mentions that he is writing from prison. Theologian Tom Wright, previously Bishop of Durham and Research Professor of Theology at the University of St Andrew's, judges that Paul wrote these 4 from Ephesus about 55 AD, perhaps 7 years before the Pastoral Letters [Wright NT. *Paul: a biography*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge; 2018: ISBN 9780 281 078 776]. Verses 7 to 9 of Colossians 4 tell us Paul's colleague Tychicus and the slave Onesimus travelled together (probably from Ephesus) with Tychicus bearing Paul's letter to the Church at Colossae, and Onesimus bearing the more personal letter to Philemon his master – and the leader of that Church.

As we have seen, Paul's 1st Letter to Timothy addresses 3 issues regarded as controversial at some stage of the intervening 2000 years – homosexuality (1:8-11), the role of women in the Church (2:8-15) and slavery (6:1-2). These issues epitomise the crucial distinction that confronts modern theologians and practising Christians: what did this mean in the 1st Century? What does it mean for the 21st Century? As the letter to Philemon focuses on slavery, it accentuates this distinction. So it is crucial to recognise that in the Roman Empire virtually all middle-class people owned slaves, in the same way that almost all middle-class people in the 21st Century own cars and fridges.

vv1-7: Paul's customary loving greeting is unusual in referring to their partnership (often translated as 'fellowship'). Is this the natural fellowship between the founders of 2 adjacent Churches – Paul, who had founded the Church at Ephesus, and Philemon, who had founded the Church at Colossae, apparently in his own home after travelling the 100 miles to Ephesus to hear Paul preach? Paul is highlighting this partnership because Philemon's slave Onesimus has escaped, apparently after performing badly and stealing money from Philemon. Onesimus went to Ephesus, where he became an enthusiastic Christian under Paul's guidance, and cared for him in prison (essential in the 1st Century, when prisons did not feed inmates). So verse 6 expresses the hope that their fellowship will enable them to work together in Christ (for the benefit of Onesimus, as we shall soon discover). Do we invoke our Christian faith in analogous dilemmas? How does our secular society view collaboration between Christians?

vv8-14: Paul builds on the foundation of his partnership with Philemon, and reminds him of the love between them – the love of preacher and convert. But he explicitly eschews any form of command. Instead he seeks to persuade Philemon to do his best for Paul's 'child' Onesimus, despite his wrongdoing in running off and more. But he never questions the validity of the Roman law that permits Philemon to execute Onesimus if he chooses. Thus Paul engages in gentle Christian persuasion, setting out the case for forgiving the reformed Onesimus, and encouraging Philemon to seek reconciliation. He finishes by assuring Philemon that the final decision is his. Do we regard Paul's negotiating style as undue pressure that crossed the boundary into manipulation? Or as subtle diplomacy? If the latter, how should 21st Century Christians seek to emulate Paul?

vv15-25: Paul invites Philemon, not only to forgive Onesimus, but also to receive him as if he were Paul himself. He promises to repay Philemon for any loss he has suffered, and expresses confidence that Philemon will do even more, which can only mean freeing Onesimus completely. Though we have seen Paul more forceful than this, we have rarely seen him more committed to the practical application of the Gospel. Tucked away in his peroration is verse 15, in which Paul wonders whether Onesimus's defection was the result of divine intervention that benefitted all 3 of them, their 2 Churches and much more. In 2021 should we treat Covid as a divine intervention that offers us the opportunity to show our communities what the Gospel of Jesus Christ means in practice; and, even more important, to refresh, indeed revive, the Christian Church?