

**Literary Analysis of Paul's Letter to Philemon**  
**An Analysis of Paul's Use of Poetic Devices**  
**to Appeal to Philemon's Conscience**

**By Scott Redd**

The letter to Philemon tackles the personal issue of the rift between the slave Onesimus and his master Philemon, with the hope that latter will receive back his runaway slave not only as a member of his household but as a Christian brother. Despite its personal subject matter, the letter exhibits the characteristics of a typical public letter: the introductory and concluding greetings contain multiple addressees, and the introductory greeting makes a point to establish the letter's apostolic nature. These elements would appear awkward if the letter were meant for Philemon's eyes only, suggesting that Paul intended it for a public audience. This impression is strengthened by Paul's handling of the subject of slavery in the early Christian church, which seems tailored to address broad questions about how social and professional relationships were to be undergirded, and perhaps undermined, by the community of mutual love that was found in the church.

This letter is an appeal not only for reconciliation between slave and master, but for a new relationship between brothers in fellowship of the gospel. Paul recognizes that for such a new relationship to be possible, there must be more than a change in the current state of affairs; there must be a change of heart. As an apostle, Paul could "order" Philemon to do this or that, but he opts for a more diplomatically nuanced "appeal" to Philemon's own capacity for love and to the caring work that Philemon has done in the past for the saints, including for Paul.

Some scholars have noted the high level of indeterminacy inherent in Paul's argumentation, since Paul never comes out and explicitly states how Philemon should proceed. Though Paul hints at what a favorable response from Philemon would look like, he tends to speak in terms of Christian perspective, saying, "Think of it like this" or "See him like that," and "Do that thing that you know will refresh (or encourage) me," thus leaving the practical application up to Philemon's own discernment. Christians today, from parents to spouses, business managers to church leaders, would do well to imitate the firm yet respectful and caring tone of Paul's letter.

We should also note at the outset the circumstances of Paul's writing. By his own words we learn that he is in prison as a result of service to Christ (9) and that Onesimus ministered to him there before being sent back to Philemon in Colossae (10). On the face of it, we read about a criminal beseeching a wealthy man on behalf of a slave. Yet Paul's argumentation in the letter reveals a much different hierarchy: Paul, the spiritual father of both Philemon (19) and Onesimus (10), appeals to the one to receive the other, not as a slave but as a brother (16).

## Outline of Philemon

- I. Greetings and Salutations (1-3)
- II. Thanksgiving (4-7)
- III. Body – Appeal and Request for Onesimus (8-20)
  - A. Disclaimer (8-9)
  - B. Appeal for Onesimus (10-16)
    - 1. From Paul’s Interests (10-13)
    - 2. From Philemon’s Interests (14-16)
  - C. Three Requests (17-20)
    - 1. First Request: “Accept him as you would me.” (17)
    - 2. Second Request: “Charge that to my account.” (18-19)
    - 3. Third Request: “Refresh my heart in Christ.” (20)
- IV. Conclusion – Final Remarks and Greetings (21-25)
  - A. Final Remarks (21-22)
  - B. Short list of Greetings (23-24)
  - C. Benediction (25)

### I. Greetings and Salutations

---

**1** Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved *brother* and fellow worker,<sup>1</sup>

---

With “prisoner of Christ,” Paul makes immediate reference to the circumstances of his writing. In the greeting, he does not use the customary “apostle” or “servant of Christ” as was used in other letters. In doing so he highlights for his readers the humbled state to which the gospel ministry has brought him, perhaps bringing to mind that faith in Christ makes claims on the lives of the faithful. Philemon would do well to remember the claims of faith on his life when deciding how to respond to this letter.<sup>2</sup>

Lohse’s opinion that this introduction carries with it the nuance of apostolic authority supports the view that this is a public letter even though it regards a personal matter. Mention of Timothy, an associate at Paul’s side, supports this assertion.<sup>3</sup> One should also note that the multiple addressees in v.2 further support Lohse’s opinion.

---

<sup>1</sup> All Scripture quotes are from the New American Standard Bible (updated edition, 1995) except where otherwise indicated.

<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of proposed locations of Paul’s imprisonment, see Peter T. O’Brien. *Colossians, Philemon*. World Biblical Commentary. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982) 269, and xlix-liv.

<sup>3</sup> Eduard Lohse. *Colossians and Philemon*. The New Century Bible Commentary (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986) 189.

Philemon is “our beloved *brother* and fellow worker.” “Beloved” introduces the *leitwort*<sup>4</sup> of “love/beloved” (vv. 5,7,9,16) as a reminder that Philemon belongs to a “community of mutual love”<sup>5</sup> and has already shown the character of love. Acknowledgment of this community and character should influence the decision that Paul is asking him to make regarding Onesimus. Besides this, Philemon is an active “fellow worker” in the gospel.

---

**2** and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house

---

Mention of others in Philemon’s community also signifies this as a public letter (See notes on v. 1). Some scholars have posited that Apphia must have been a close relation to Philemon since she is mentioned directly after he is,<sup>6</sup> but this position cannot be adopted dogmatically. John Knox has argued that Archippus is the actual master to whom Onesimus is to be reconciled (see Col. 4:16-17), and that Philemon was most likely a community leader through whom the letter was sent, but this position is not evidenced in the letter to Philemon itself. Rather, the additional names and house church that Paul mentions in his greeting are witness to Paul’s appeal for Onesimus. In this context, Philemon is accountable to the community in how he responds to Paul’s appeal.

---

**3** Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

---

“Grace to you and peace.” This is a signature salutation for Paul, meaning “may grace and peace be yours” or “may you be blessed with grace and peace.” The “you” is plural.

## II. Thanksgiving

---

**4** I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers,  
**5** because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints;  
**6** *and I pray* that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in [us] for Christ's sake.

---

Paul gives thanks for Philemon’s faith. In v. 6, I agree with Metzger (contra the NASB) that the first-person plural “in us” (*en hemin*) is preferable to the second person plural “in you” (*en humin*), though the latter is better attested. The variant “in you” can be explained as a harmonization of second-person pronouns found in this sentence. Further, the first-person reading draws attention to the sharing/fellowship that Paul and his addressees have in common. The thanksgiving leads necessarily to petition in Paul’s

---

<sup>4</sup> Or “lead word,” which is the repeated use of a word or its cognates to emphasize a certain thematic point.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, 189.

<sup>6</sup> Peter T. O’Brien. *Colossians, Philemon*. World Biblical Commentary. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1982) 273.

prayers. It is his hope that this sharing of faith will affect Philemon as “faith working through love” (Gal. 5:6).<sup>7</sup>

---

7 For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

---

In this passage Paul introduces what will be an instructive theme throughout the rest of the letter. Referring to a particular instance, he explains that the “hearts of the saints” have been given relief or refreshment because of how Philemon has demonstrated his love. The term “hearts” is a synecdoche representing whole of a person, and will be revisited two more times over the course of Paul’s appeal. For now we should note that Philemon has shown love in a way that is a blessing to Christian community of saints of which Paul is a member.

### III. Body – Appeal and Request for Onesimus (8-20)

#### A. Disclaimer – this is an “appeal,” not an “order”(8-9)

---

8 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper, 9 yet for love’s sake I rather appeal *to you*—since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus—

---

Here Paul explains the tone of his appeal to Philemon. His gentle approach to the matter at hand is foreshadowed in his reference to himself in the greeting (and again in this verse) as “prisoner” and not “apostle.” He does not intend to force Philemon to obey even though this would be his apostolic prerogative. Instead, he makes clear from the outset that his aim is to “appeal,” that is, to “make a strong request” or “implore, entreat.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, this appeal is based on mutual love, not on ecclesiastical authority. Paul’s use of the *leitwort* “love” establishes this basis for his appeal. Philemon is “beloved” of Paul (v. 1), and his own demonstration of love has been reported to Paul, for which Paul is thankful to God (v. 5). Not only this, but because Philemon has demonstrated love, the saints have been “refreshed” (v. 7). It is on the basis of this mutual love that Paul entreats Philemon now.

---

<sup>7</sup> Lohse, 194.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Bauer, ed. Frederick W. Danker. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2000) 765.

## B. Appeal for Onesimus (10-16)

### 1. From Paul's Interests (10-13)

---

**10a** I appeal to you for my child Onesimus,

---

With the first mention of Onesimus by name, Paul gets to the main issue of the letter.

---

**10b** whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,

**11** who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

---

With the relative pronoun “whom,” Paul begins a string of relative clauses that continues until v. 13. Each clause refers back to Onesimus, and in doing so builds a catalogue of Paul’s own interests in the matter at hand. This entire section (vv. 10-13) is held together by these relative clauses. The fact that Onesimus was “begotten” of Paul indicates that the slave was converted through Paul’s ministry, making Paul his spiritual father. We will see that Philemon bears a similar relationship to Paul (v. 19).

In v. 11 the pronominal movement (you, you, me) emphasizes the intertwined relationships between Philemon and Onesimus as well as between Paul and Onesimus. The parallel structure of the verse (“was formerly useless” // “now is useful to me and to you,” supplemented by the pun on the words “useless” (*achreston*) and “useful” (*euchreston*) draws attention to the assertion that Onesimus’ value is not what it used to be.<sup>9</sup> This is actually a double pun since the Greek terms for “useless” and “useful” also suggest that whereas Onesimus was once “without Christ” (*a-christos*), he is now a “good Christian” (*eu-christos*).<sup>10</sup> Paul himself has witnessed the very real change that Onesimus has undergone.

---

**12a** [whom] I have sent back to you in person,

**12b** that is, *sending* my very heart,

---

The relative clauses referring back to Onesimus continue with this escalation from one who is merely converted to one who is useful in ministry to one who is now synonymous with Paul’s own heart. Paul previously invoked the term “heart” in reference to Philemon’s demonstration of love and its “refreshing” effect on the saints (v. 7). Here the synecdoche<sup>11</sup> “hearts” becomes a metaphor to describe the intimate relationship that Paul has with Onesimus. In sending him back to Philemon, Paul is risking no small part of himself. Perhaps Paul is also signaling that he is resolved to their

---

<sup>9</sup> O’Brien. 291, 292.

<sup>10</sup> Luke T. Johnson. *The Writings of the New Testament: an Interpretation*. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999) 388.

<sup>11</sup> A figure of speech in which a part stands for the whole.

separation if his appeal fails,<sup>12</sup> but even in such a case, the separation would be heart-breaking to Paul.

The pronominal movement of v. 12 (you, me) parallels the movement in v. 11 again stressing the interrelatedness of these three men's fates. Philemon cannot respond to Onesimus in a vacuum; his response will have a significant effect on Paul, as well as on those who hear this letter read.

---

**13a** whom I wished to keep with me,

**13b** so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;

---

Here Paul makes clear that the best-case scenario from his perspective is for Onesimus to be reconciled to Philemon and returned to Paul so that Onesimus can minister to the apostle. Again Paul keeps the fact of his imprisonment front and center in his appeal. He is not making this request from a place of wealth or leisure, but from a place of suffering for the gospel.

V. 13 is a *janus*<sup>13</sup> between the string of relative clauses (13a) that have come before it and the string of purpose clauses (13b) that will continue until v. 15. If the previous section makes its appeal from Paul's interests in the matter of Onesimus, then the forth-coming section appeals to Philemon's interests.

## 2. From Philemon's Interests (14-16)

---

**14a** but without your consent I did not want to do anything,

**14b** so that your goodness would not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will.

---

Having explained his own interest in Onesimus' reconciliation with Philemon, culminating in his desire to have Onesimus return to minister to him, Paul now makes a perspectival switch from his own interests to Philemon's interests in receiving Onesimus with grace.

The string of purpose clauses continues in v. 14, emphasizing Paul's decision not to force Philemon's hand but instead to let him choose the response that best reflects his loving character. Paul also amplifies what he has just said in v. 13. Paul's inactivity ("I did not want to do anything") in v. 14a parallels his desire to keep Onesimus with him in v. 13a; the "goodness" in v. 14b refers to Philemon making the state of affairs possible so that Onesimus would again be able to minister to Paul in prison (13b). Paul is apparently expressing two reasons for sending Onesimus back. First, he wishes to have Onesimus returned to him in prison. Second, he wants Philemon freely to choose to be reconciled to Onesimus. However, these two reasons for Paul's actions are not so easily

---

<sup>12</sup> Ralph P. Martin. *Colossians and Philemon*. The New Century Bible Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985) 165.

<sup>13</sup> A textual element that looks backward and forward at the same time.

distinguished from one another. Onesimus' ministry to Paul goes hand in hand with Philemon's willingness to respond freely with a good conscience.

---

**15a** For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while,  
**15b** that you would have him back forever,

---

Here Paul offers a summary reason for reconciliation. "This" is a cataphoric reference to Philemon "hav[ing] [Onesimus] back forever." At this point, Paul begins to show that he is talking about a reconciliation that goes beyond the social/professional relationship of master and slave. His gesture toward the eternal ("forever") expands the theater of his appeal beyond the slave-master relationship to the spiritual, everlasting communion of saints.

V. 15 is the last purpose clause of the string that began in v. 13. Onesimus' separation from Philemon (v. 15a) parallels Paul's release of Onesimus (v.13b) and Paul's not doing anything (14b). Paul also uses the passive verb "was...separated" in order to emphasize God's sovereign work in course of these events. This culmination of Paul's poetic *tour de force* effectively raises the stakes of his appeal: Philemon has the opportunity here to receive back not just a slave but a brother in Christ.

---

**16** 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.

---

Paul applies Onesimus' conversion to the matter of reconciliation, amplifying what he meant by "hav[ing] him back forever." Because of Onesimus' conversion, all three men relate to one another (note the pronominal progression: me-you) as members of a family of faith. Onesimus' status is escalated from "more than a slave" to "a beloved brother," (cf. with v. 1 where Philemon is called "beloved"), and his relationship to Paul and Philemon is also escalated: "to me" ("especially"), and "to you" ("much more"!)." As a result he is to be regarded as a changed person, both in the ordinary sense ("in the flesh") and in the spiritual sense ("in the Lord").

In v. 16 Paul completes the section of appeal to Philemon's interests that began in v. 14 (v. 13 being the janus verse). The series of short, staccato statements in v. 16 caps the section and gives it the quality of a gradation: purpose clause (v. 13) + purpose clause (v. 14) + purpose clause (v. 15) + escalation (v. 16).

### C. Three Requests

#### 1. First Request ("Accept him as you would me.")

---

**17** If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would* me.

---

Paul, having appealed to both his interests and Philemon's, now cuts short his appeal and states outright what Philemon should do. He has already said that he considers sending Onesimus the same as sending his own heart (v. 12), and here he

applies this to Philemon who is to accept Onesimus as if he were Paul himself. Paul maintains his humble posturing, referring to himself as a “partner” of Philemon, since what is to follow is not to be understood as an apostolic command but an appeal of an equal.

The three purpose clauses of the previous section are replaced by three imperatival clauses, of which this is the first. Paul clarifies his appeal to Philemon, but even his clarification falls short of telling Philemon exactly what he is supposed to do. In this way, the indeterminacy of the appeal reminds Philemon that Paul is calling for a change of heart that should result in an acquisition of the right Christian perspective on the matter. Paul’s union with Onesimus alludes to the union with Christ through which all Christians are reconciled to the Father. If Philemon has enjoyed the blessings of union with Christ, then it should come naturally to him to extend the same blessings to his Christian brother, Onesimus.

Luther’s point is well put:

“He acts exactly as if he were himself Onesimus, who had done wrong. Yet he does this not with force or compulsion, as lay within his rights; but he empties himself of his rights in order to compel Philemon also to waive his rights. What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights (Phil. 2:7) and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ.”<sup>14</sup>

## 2. Second Request (“Charge that to my account.”)

---

**18** But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account;

**19** I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well).

---

Paul follows with another if-then statement. In addition to the imperatival clause, Paul also relates this request to the previous one via parallel structure. The protasis “If you regard me a partner” (v. 17) parallels “if he has wronged you”(v. 18); and the apodosis “accept him” (v. 17) parallels “charge it to me”(v. 18). Onesimus’ identification with Paul is not to be taken lightly, but extends even to retribution for whatever wrongs Onesimus has committed. There is a play with the words “owe” (*opheilei*) and “repay” (*prosopheileis*), further stressing that whatever debt Onesimus owes to Philemon should be transferred to Paul who now “owes” the debt instead.

---

<sup>14</sup> Martin Luther. E. Theodore Bachmann, ed. “Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon, 1546 (1522)” *Luther’s Works*, American Edition vol. 35, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960) 390.

The mention of Paul as Onesimus' guarantor hints that the wrongdoing that caused the rift in his relationship with Philemon might have been financial. However, whether his debt is financial or of another sort cannot be argued from the letter alone.

### 3. Third Request (“Refresh my heart in Christ.”)

---

**20** Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

---

Paul's rare use of the term “benefit” (*onaimen* – used only here in the New Testament)<sup>15</sup> reminds us of Onesimus' name because of the consonance and assonance (similar consonantal and vowel sounds) between the two words. The benefit that Paul seeks from Philemon has to do with the forgiveness of Onesimus, as well as with Onesimus' reconciliation to his master. Besides this, it can be inferred that Paul is requesting yet again that Onesimus be allowed to return to him.<sup>16</sup>

The third and final request completes the motif of “heart” that Paul has used to frame his appeal. Here is Paul's argumentation: Philemon's love has refreshed the hearts of the saints, of whom Paul is one (v. 7), Onesimus is Paul's own heart (v. 12), and so Philemon's love should “refresh” Onesimus as well (v. 20).

There is a clear parallel between these two parts of Paul's request, with “let me benefit...in the Lord”// “refresh my heart in Christ.” The two separate requests are actually one and the same.

However, even at this rhetorical highpoint, Paul leaves the practical application of the letter somewhat vague. The indeterminacy of Paul's appeal again supports his own assertion that he approaches Philemon not with authoritative command (v. 8) but with a request from an equal, “for love's sake” (v. 9). By invoking Philemon's loving character, Paul allows Philemon to work out the details of his response on his own. Should Onesimus be freed from service to Philemon? Should he be sent back to Paul immediately or at a later date? How should Onesimus' debt be charged to Paul's account, if it should be charged at all? These matters are left to Philemon's conscience and judgment.

---

<sup>15</sup> Bauer, 711.

<sup>16</sup> I owe the discovery of the correspondence between “benefit” and the name “Onesimus” to Reggie Kidd's class discussion of the letter to Philemon in the Acts-Paul Course that he offered at Reformed Theological Seminary in Orlando, FL. Spring, 2003. Patzia notes a similar significance of the name: “Onesimus, whose name means “useful,” can only be of value to his master if he returns, and to Paul if he stays. In spite of Paul's tact in approaching Philemon, it is obvious that he wants Philemon to release Onesimus so that he can retain him for his own service.” A. Patzia. “Letter to Philemon.” Hawthorne, Gerald F.; Martin, Ralph P.; and Reid, Daniel G.; eds., *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*, (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998) cd-rom version.

## IV. Conclusion- Final Remarks and Greetings

### A. Final Remarks

---

**21** Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.

**22** At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.

---

Having made his case for Onesimus, Paul assures Philemon that he trusts Philemon's discernment on the matter. That Paul asks that "lodging" be prepared for him has lead some to suggest that the place of Paul's imprisonment was somewhere close to Colossae, perhaps in Ephesus, but the evidence supports that the location was probably Rome.<sup>17</sup>

### B. Short list of Greetings (23,24)

---

**23** Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,

**24** *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.

---

These concluding greetings are an abbreviation of the ones found in Colossians, with the exception that the names Tychichus and Jesus Justus found in the letter to the Colossians are not mentioned here.<sup>18</sup> If this letter did accompany the longer letter to the Colossians, little would have been gained by repeating in full the information found there.

### C. Benediction (25)

---

**25** The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

---

The benediction is a longer form than the one that closes the letter to the Colossians. Paul's blessing on "your spirit" is plural in the Greek. It does not refer to Philemon alone, but goes out to the community for whom this letter is to be read publicly. It is assumed that the second-person plural has the same referent as the second-person plural of v. 3.

---

<sup>17</sup> See footnote 1.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, 383.