

## CHAPTER 8

### INTRODUCTION TO PHILEMON

#### Authorship

The book claims to be by Paul (vv. 1, 9, 19). Furthermore, it has close ties with Colossians, where Onesimus is mentioned as “one of you” (Col 4:9).

There is little debate that the author of Philemon is the Apostle Paul. Even A. Q. Morton, who submitted the Pauline corpus to statistical analysis by computer, added Philemon to the four chief epistles, which he recognized as Pauline, noting that the book was too short to be certain.

#### Paul’s Circumstances

Since Philemon is so closely linked to Colossians (see notes on Introduction to Colossians, “Relation to other Prison Epistles”), it is apparent that it was written at the same time. The place of Paul’s imprisonment is argued by some to be Ephesus, since that was a closer place for Onesimus to flee to, and since Paul wanted to visit Colossae after his release (Phlm 22, a more likely plan writing from Ephesus, only 100 miles away). On the other hand, the bulk of evidence still favors Rome, especially when the evidence for the other Prison Epistles is taken into consideration (see Introduction to Colossians, “Paul’s situation”). Paul then probably wrote Philemon from Rome, ca. A.D. 58.

For an interesting discussion of the “Chicago school” concerning the origin of the Pauline epistles, see Bruce, pp. 198-202. John Knox maintains that Onesimus was the same as the later Onesimus, bishop of Ephesus, mentioned by Ignatius in A.D. 110, and that he wrote Ephesians as a cover letter for the Pauline corpus which he published.

#### Occasion and Purpose of Writing

Onesimus, a slave of Philemon, had escaped from his master and apparently had stolen from him in the process (Phlm 11, 18). Onesimus made his way to Rome, where he met Paul. It is not stated whether this meeting was intended or “accidental.” Paul won him to the Lord (v. 10); and Onesimus served Paul during his imprisonment (v. 11). Onesimus has now repented of his sin, and desires to return to his master. Normally harsh punishments awaited runaway slaves. So Paul writes this letter to ask Philemon to receive him graciously and to forgive his offense (vv. 17-18).

Some suggest that Paul even is hinting that Philemon send Onesimus back to help Paul (vv. 13-14). Since Paul was already sending Tychicus with the letter to the Colossians, it was an appropriate time to send Onesimus with him (Col 4:7-9).

In addition, Paul plans to visit Colossae when he is released, perhaps because of his concern about the Colossian heresy and about his own reputation in Asia (cf. 2 Tim 1:15). This letter asks Philemon to prepare lodging for Paul (v. 22).

## **Paul and Slavery**

Paul in his epistles does not seek to overthrow the institution of slavery, rather to “Christianize” it. He tells slaves to remain and serve God in that office, and masters to treat slaves with consideration (1 Cor 7:20-24; Eph 6:5-9; Col 3:22 - 4:1). Thus he sends Onesimus back (Phlm 12), yet at the same time elevates his standing with Philemon as “not only a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother” (v. 16). Onesimus is to be loved and respected because he is a man, and a Christian brother (v. 16).

General Christian principles worked themselves out in society, as it became more apparent that the institution of slavery, as practiced in most nations, denied the image of God in man and the equality of believers before the Lord. Thus the book of Philemon, while promoting the duties of slaves who found themselves to be slaves, at the same time provided the moral ground for the eventual elimination of slavery in nations influenced by Christianity.

For an excellent study on slavery conditions in NT times, see K. R. Bradley, *Slaves and Masters in the Roman Empire* (1984). An extensive article is J. Duncan M. Derrett, “The Functions of the Epistle to Philemon, *ZNTW* 77 (1988), 63-91.