

Article of the Month – August 2012

Missiological Observations in the NT (12) – Philemon

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Paul wrote the letter to Philemon during his 1st Roman imprisonment,¹ from where he also authored Ephesians, Philippians and Colossians. Timothy was with him during that time² except when Paul committed the Ephesians to paper. Paul expected to be released.

Philemon lived in Colossae,³ where he probably led a house church.⁴ Epaphras had ministered there⁵ during Paul's time in Ephesus.⁶ It seems that Philemon came to know the Lord through Paul's ministry,⁷ possibly in the hall of Tyrannus.⁸ This may explain Paul's intercession for him.⁹ Whether Apphia was Philemon's wife and/or Archippus his son cannot be said with certainty.

The epistles to the Colossians and the one to Philemon are related: both were written from Rome, addressed to the same church, delivered by Tychicus,¹⁰ mentioning similar circumstances about Paul's time in jail¹¹ and have almost identical personal greetings.¹²

This letter deals mainly with Philemon's slave Onesimus,¹³ who had ran away to Rome and visited Paul, under whose ministry he came to know Christ.¹⁴ Paul does not only seek to restore the relationship between master and servant¹⁵ but also to recruit Onesimus into missionary service by motivating Philemon to become his sender.¹⁶

This writing is the shortest of the *Corpus Paulinum* and the most personal one, although it is also addressed to the church.¹⁷ We find no doctrinal issues or heresies addressed; that was done in the letter to the Colossians.

¹ 60-62 AD; Philemon:22

² Philip. 1:1; Col. 1:1; Philemon:1 as in contrast to Eph. 1:1

³ As implied in Col. 4:9

⁴ Philemon:2

⁵ Col. 1:7,8; 4:12,13

⁶ 52-55 AD

⁷ Philemon:19b

⁸ Acts 19:9

⁹ Philemon:4-6

¹⁰ Col. 4:8,9

¹¹ 4:3; Philemon:1,13

¹² Patzia, in Hawthorne, Martin & Reid, 1993:704

¹³ His name means 'useful'

¹⁴ Philemon:10-18

¹⁵ :17,18

¹⁶ :13,14,20,21

¹⁷ :2

Paul encourages Philemon to share his faith¹⁸ through local evangelism – not only to win people for Christ but also because it stimulates growth in spiritual understanding.¹⁹

With this request, Paul chose not to use apostolic authority – although he had the right to do so.²⁰ He opted for a loving, diplomatic approach,²¹ naughtily throwing age²² and imprisonment into the game. Kind requests are harder to refuse than apostolic orders.

It was obvious and logical that Onesimus could not stay with Paul because Philemon owned him and therefore Paul had to send him back.²³ Yet Paul would love to recruit this new brother as co-worker and makes this clear by requesting Philemon, the church leader, to now become a missionary *sender*.²⁴ Such a thing cannot be forced:²⁵ there must be willingness in a sending church to let its missionaries go.

Paul talks about a partnership between sender and sent one, between church and missionary, one that should have practical and logistical implications,²⁶ where the sender facilitates the sent one, or where the settled one helps the traveler.²⁷ Itinerant missionaries cannot function well without facilitation.

Future missionaries should be treated as veterans are treated²⁸ and there should be no favoring of persons. The once-a-slave newcomer should be treated with equal respect as the ones that have been around for a long time.

¹⁸ :6a

¹⁹ :6b (*notes 18 & 19: Dutch NBV gives another meaning; check and possibly use HSV*)

²⁰ :8,19b

²¹ :7a,9

²² He was probably approaching the age of 70 at that time

²³ Philemon:12,14

²⁴ :13,20,21

²⁵ :14

²⁶ :17,22

²⁷ See e.g. Titus 3:13

²⁸ Philemon:17b