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Cover Page Footnote

"Ernest Bursey, Ph.D., is a religion professor at adventist University of health Sciences, where he has been teaching since 2001. he received his doctorate degree in New testament Studies from Yale University. Dr. Bursey currently chairs the World Religions and Missiology section of the adventist Society for Religious Studies."

ERNEST BURSELEY

THE PUZZLING PLURALS IN PHILEMON

The tiny epistle of Paul to Philemon has been fodder for many a great sermon. The background story of a runaway slave's encounter with Paul in chains seems ready made for catching an audience's interest. But the treasures to be mined from the tiny book of Philemon by the attentive reader go beyond a single lesson on forgiveness or the transforming power of the Gospel. Most of Paul's words in this miniature epistle are directed to a single person, Philemon, who Paul addresses as "brother" (vv. 7 and 20) and "partner" (v. 17). Throughout the body of the letter, Paul speaks one on one to Philemon about his slave, Onesimus. A glance at the Greek original reveals that even the final greetings in verses 23-24 from Paul's five companions—Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke—are directed to that same one person—Philemon ("thee" in KJV; *se* in Greek).

Why Involve the Whole Church?

Yet upon closer examination, we see that the letter is more than a private letter from one Christian brother to another. Paul sends greetings to Aphia and Archippus, perhaps the rest of Philemon's family unit. Paul also greets the church that meets for worship and fellowship in Philemon's house (v. 2). These unnamed believers are included in the apostle's blessing, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 3, KJV). Modern readers unfamiliar with the Greek original should know that every use of the pronouns "you" and "your" in the 1611 King James Version of the Bible faithfully translates a plural pronoun referring to a plural audience. Near the end of the letter, where Paul directs Philemon to prepare a guest room for him, he acknowledges to the whole church his trust "that through your [plural] prayers I shall be given unto you [plural]" (v. 22, KJV). Clearly Paul expects that the whole church will hear these words. Finally, all are explicitly included in Paul's final blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit" (v. 25, KJV).

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Paul didn't mince words or waste them on mere civilities. So Paul deemed it necessary to include "the church that meets in your house" if he was to fully achieve his aims in writing the letter. It is also reasonable to assume that the members of the house church understood why they were being included.

So why would Paul choose to include the house church in this matter between himself, Onesimus, and Philemon? What did Paul want from Philemon that involved the entire group of believers that met in his home?

Beyond Christian Forgiveness

Several reasons for Paul's writing the letter that are often offered need to be set aside. First, Paul is not writing to spare Onesimus' life. Nor does the letter include an appeal for Philemon to extend Christian forgiveness. Paul makes no mention of Onesimus' repentance, though based on Paul's promise to pay for damages that Onesimus had caused, Philemon had grounds to expect words of repentance. I have suggested that expressions of repentance and forgiveness are absent from this letter because repentance in the Roman culture was the appropriate attitude of slaves, and forgiveness was characteristic of a generous slave owner (Burse, 1998; see also Pliny, *Epistles* 9.21).

Nor is Paul intent on establishing a model for slave-owning believers to follow in upholding Roman laws then or later, as 19th-century slave owners claimed in their defense of antebellum laws requiring the return of runaway slaves to their legal owners. At least one literate African American slave went on record that he wouldn't mind that application so long as his master considered him a beloved brother.

Pleading for a Runaway

There are more likely reasons for sending the letter. First, Paul's wish that his "son" Onesimus could have stayed on to serve his needs in the place of Philemon (v. 13) looks like a polite request for Onesimus' return to Paul. This is especially apparent as Paul continues: "But I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that any favor you do will be spontaneous and not forced" (v. 14, NIV). We can hope Onesimus was able to return to assist the aging apostle still in chains. Second, the order to prepare a guest room in view of Paul's expected release and arrival at Philemon's home would allow Philemon the time needed to make the proper arrangements for a hospitable reception. But neither of these reasons for writing the letter could explain why Paul included the whole congregation.

That leaves the third reason for writing the letter with the whole house church listening in—Paul's direct and impassioned appeal for Philemon to

welcome Onesimus as a brother in the Lord, as if he were Paul himself (vv. 16, 17). Paul presents Onesimus as his own spiritual child, whom he fathered while in chains (v. 10). In the most dramatic terms Paul speaks of Onesimus as his very “heart” (v. 12; the KJV translation “bowels” is a literal rendering of the Greek original).

What did Paul have in mind when he declared his confidence that Philemon would do even more than Paul asked (v. 21)? The eventual manumission of Onesimus? Is that what he means by invoking God’s providence in returning Onesimus “no longer a slave” (v. 16; Greek, *οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον*)? Or was he simply referring to his thinly veiled request for Philemon to send Onesimus back to him?

This passionate appeal for Philemon to welcome his slave as a brother in the Lord explains Paul’s intention to include the members of the house church in the reading of the letter. If Paul’s efforts are successful in helping Philemon to embrace Onesimus as a brother in the Lord, that welcome will also need to be extended to him by the other brothers and sisters in the Lord in the little house church that met in Philemon’s house.

Prior to his return, Onesimus would have been known to them as part of Philemon’s household but clearly not as a part of the church that met in Philemon’s house. Paul’s characterization of Onesimus as admittedly “formerly useless” (v. 11) would also be common knowledge to the other members of the household and most likely to the church meeting in the house. Paul’s choice of the Greek word translated as “if” (*εἰ*) in his crisp challenge, “If you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me,” presumes a positive answer as likely; yes, Philemon did indeed consider Paul his partner in Christian service. The same Greek word for “if” lies behind the directive that immediately follows: “If he has wronged you or owes you anything, charge it to my account.” Based on the parallel construction of the two sentences as well as Paul’s promise written in his own hand to cover the costs, it is highly likely that Paul was aware that Onesimus’ integrity and conduct in the past were known to the believers as less than honorable.

Introducing a Born-Again Brother

But Paul was confident that a different person was standing before them, both in identity and attitude. We could rightly say that Paul wrote a letter of introduction for a new member of the church family—composed of brothers and sisters in Christ, the house church—starting with its likely leader, Philemon, one of Paul’s fellow workers. Paul longed for Philemon and the church that met in his home to see Onesimus as if for the first time, re-born,

with a new identity. As such, Onesimus stands before them as Paul's own spiritual son (v. 10), as Philemon's beloved brother in the flesh and in the Lord (v. 16), and thereby also as a brother in Christ to each of the circle of believers who regularly assemble in Philemon's home. This is the critical moment shared by Philemon and the church that meets in his house. Paul employs every rhetorical skill at his disposal towards securing a favorable reception, even claiming payment on the sacred debt Philemon owes him for saving his life.

Paul's expressions of warm affection for both Onesimus and his slave master, Philemon, and his mention of Philemon's indebtedness, don't escape even the casual reader. Some modern readers have entertained the suspicion that Paul's desire for personal benefit led him to manipulate a lesser associate into a position of compliance. But to do so is to miss the heart of the letter and overlook Paul's own memories.

Extending True Welcome

Years earlier, Paul—then the murderous Saul intent on arresting believers—met the Lord in a blinding encounter. Led to the house of Justus, he sat waiting in the darkness for days, hoping for acceptance if not his sight. Finally Ananias arrived, directed by the same Lord. Placing his hands on the repentant murderer, Ananias spoke: “Brother Saul . . . the Lord Jesus has sent me” (Acts 9:17). Imagine the utter relief and joy when he heard that word—“Brother”!

Years later, Paul—the Lord's Apostle—pled for the same word to be spoken to Onesimus, his spiritual child, his very heart. Imagine those moments when the letter was read aloud to the assembled church family. So much depended on whether Onesimus would be received as a beloved brother, already accepted and forgiven by the Lord, or merely as Philemon's runaway slave, flawed and irresponsible. Apologies, confession, forgiveness, restitution—all these important matters waited until that little circle of believers decided whether or not to open their hearts.

The survival of copies of the letter is the surest witness that, on the day the letter was read, the believers “did church” and embraced “Brother” Onesimus. On that day Paul's prayers were answered. On that day the Gospel flourished! On that day Heaven watched and rejoiced!

Reference

Burse, E. (1998). *Paul's letter to Philemon: Challenging the culture or changing the Gospel?* Presented at the First International Bible Conference, Biblical Research Institute, Jerusalem, Israel.