



CAPITOL COMMISSION

Radical Fellowship (Book of Philemon)

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This short book is actually a personal letter from Paul to his dear friend Philemon. The purpose of this letter was to provide a means for Onesimus, who was a slave, to return to Philemon his master. During Paul's imprisonment, he developed a relationship with Onesimus, as a result, this fugitive became a Christian. Paul's desire as expressed in this letter was for Philemon to receive his slave, not as property, but as a fellow brother in Christ. Paul's appeal in this letter lays the groundwork for a richer understanding of Christian fellowship. It also reveals that theology must not be theoretical in nature, but as Paul says, a faith that expresses itself in love.

HISTORIC CONTEXT

As we seek to uncover the details surrounding this letter we find Onesimus, slave of Philemon a wealthy Christian from the church of Colossae, had runaway from his master. After fleeing Colossae, Onesimus came into contact with Paul and became a Christian during the apostle's imprisonment in Rome. At this time, Onesimus proved useful to Paul's ministry, but decided to return to Philemon to put his past life in order.

PHILEMON WAS ALSO CONVERTED TO CHRIST BY PAUL, PRESUMABLY WHILE PAUL WAS IN EPHESUS SINCE PAUL HAD NOT PERSONALLY EVANGELIZED IN THE LYCUS VALLEY .¹

As is evident from this letter, Philemon had a strong relationship with Paul. Through their relationship, Paul encourages Philemon to continue this pattern of "refreshing the hearts of the saints (V7)." His desire for Philemon was to receive this new brother Onesimus in love. Onesimus travelled to Colossae with Tychicus, in their possession they carried Paul's letter to Philemon. Tychicus was also delivering several other letters from Paul. One of the letters was to the church in Colossae of which Philemon was a member. The others included the churches in Laodicea and Ephesus.

It is clear from the text, Paul wrote his letter to Philemon while in prison (V1,9, 13, 23). As with the other prison epistles, which include Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon, these letters are written during the same time and from the same location. This enables us to determine the date of this letter based on the location of its writing; these locations include Rome, Caesarea, or Ephesus. The traditional view is Paul wrote this letter during his first imprisonment in Rome. This would date the writing of this letter between 61 and 63 AD. Those that suggest Caesarea and Ephesus, support their view, by making two similar observations. Both observations

deal with the physical distance between Rome and Colossae. First, Paul asks for a place of lodging because he plans to visit

Philemon when released from jail (V22). This raises the question, Would Paul travel over 1000 miles to visit Philemon, especially since he was planning a missionary trip to Spain that was in the opposite direction? Second, since the distance between Rome and Colossae is so great, one might conclude it is more likely that Onesimus fled to a closer location. The major problem with the Ephesus view, however, is, Why would Paul write a letter to the Ephesian church, while he was in prison in the same city? Regarding the Caesarea view, one could ask, Why would Onesimus flee to a small city, since he had a significant need for anonymity. It would make more sense for him to hide in one of the larger cities, which exist along the way to Caesarea. As a result of these considerations it is necessary to hold to the traditional view which states that Paul wrote his this letter while imprisoned in Rome.

Obscured by history are several matters of interest. First, what were the circumstances behind Onesimus running away from Philemon? Most scholars believe that Onesimus stole money from Philemon to assist in his escape. Others suggest that Onesimus owed the amount of work that would have been done during his absence. A third view is that Philemon sent Onesimus to Paul to provide help in the ministry. Having overstayed his time, Paul wrote to Philemon and offers to make restitution for any charge laid upon Onesimus.

Next, we have no record of what transpired upon Onesimus arrival back to the household of Philemon. However, the fact this letter exists in the canon is strong evidence that Philemon and Onesimus experienced the bonds of Christian fellowship. After all, the letter was specifically written to Philemon. It is also possible that Onesimus received a copy of this letter for his own records. However, for the letter to become public, someone would have had to distribute it to other churches. Most likely, the letter brought about a transformation in their relationship and became Onesimus' "charter of liberty."²

Finally, what ever became of Onesimus? Did Philemon release him to serve Paul in his ministry? While Paul did not directly command Philemon to do this, it certainly seems implied (V6). History does record a bishop of Ephesus with the name of Onesimus in the second century; some claim this to be the same man. While this may be the case, it needs to be understood that Onesimus was a common name for a slave. It is possible that at least one other Christian in the second century bore the same name. Another thing to consider is the fact that Onesimus would have had to been a young

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man when he initially came into contact with Paul. What is the likelihood that the same man was still active almost sixty years later?

Since we lack substantial evidence in these matters of interest, we should not hold any position too firmly.

CITY OF COLOSSAE

Colossae was an ancient city in Asia Minor, located along the Lycos River on the southwest portion of modern-day Turkey. This city was located in a region known as Phrygia was a trading hub at a crossroad on the great highway from Ephesus to the Euphrates. During the time of Paul, the trade routes had shifted; the city of Laodicea grew in influence while bringing about the gradual decline of Colossae. These two cities were approximately ten miles apart and shared in the wool trade. Thus, the name Colossae was derived from the Latin word *colossinus*, meaning “purple wool.”³

At this time, the city had a small population of Jews, Greeks and Phrygians. During Paul's ministry in Ephesus, he may have taught those who would start the church of Colossae. In this letter, we see Ephaphras named as a fellow prisoner (V23), he is commonly suggested as the founder of the church of Colossae. Having visited Paul in Rome, he updated him about the condition of the church and sought his input (Col 1:7, 4:12).

FIRST CENTURY SLAVERY

The practice of slavery had the acceptance and promotion of the Roman government. Under Roman law, slaves experienced harsh treatment. This stemmed from the view that they were property, and as such, the slave owner had a right to do whatever he wished to a slave. This included the freedom to punish a runaway slave harshly.

THERE WAS NO LOWER STATUS IN THE ROMAN EMPIRE, THERE WAS NO LAW THAT PROTECTED THE RUNAWAY SLAVE, AND SO, THEY WERE SUBJECT TO ALL SORTS OF ABUSE. WHEN CAPTURED THE RUNAWAY SLAVE WAS USUALLY BEATEN HARSHLY, THEN SOLD AS A SLAVE TO ANOTHER OCCUPATION WITH SHORT LIFE EXPECTANCY. THE RETURN OF A RUNAWAY SLAVE WAS AN EXTREMELY DANGEROUS SITUATION FOR THE SLAVE.⁴

Even though this was the situation, many slaves took every opportunity to run from their masters. They usually fled to large cities, eating what they could find and keeping themselves hidden from the authorities who might

recognize them. Thus, freedom brought a worse life than they had with their masters.

The Christian community existed during a time when slavery was part of the fabric of society. The apostolic teachings of Paul in other letters show how a Christian was to function within this current environment. However, in this letter Paul is not addressing the institution of slavery directly, but the requirements of Christian fellowship and its radical nature that should transform all traditional relationships. In sending Onesimus back to his master the apostle is teaching all believers our individual desires are often sacrificed for the exaltation of Christ and the unity of his body.

SUMMARY

The culture is constantly telling us how the world works. It tells us change happens through the power we wield and influence we can exert. It tells us relationships are based on common backgrounds and similar interests. Over time it is easy to believe these lies and start allowing these messages to corrupt what the Bible teaches as Truth.

In this small book we see a completely different message, a message I will call Radical Fellowship. This type of fellowship is the only foundation for true and lasting change in the world. It is so powerful it is able to unite slave and his master. Radical Fellowship takes place by loving other Christians as we love Jesus; it takes place by seeking to unite his body as our top priority. Radical Fellowship holds to Jesus' statement in the gospel of John, all men will know we are Jesus' disciples by our love for one another (John 13:34-35).

Over the next several sessions together, we will flesh out this concept of Radical Fellowship. In the first lesson “A Connected Life” (Phlm 1-2) we will learn our lives are not independent, but interdependent. The situations we face affects not only us personally, but the community as a whole. The next lesson “A Life Prepared to Glorify” (Phlm 4-7) we will learn how the godly patterns we establish today are the stepping stones for a life that glorifies Jesus. The following study “Becoming a Partner” (Phlm 8-16) will show Paul's approach to building and strengthening the church, his methodology was to develop partners of the gospel. And finally “Like Christ: Being a Peacemaker” (17-21) we will see Paul applies the principal of Christ's atoning death on the cross practically when reconciling Philemon and Onesimus. Prayerfully we will see that Radical Fellowship, while radical from a worldly perspective, is simply the living fabric and expectation of Christian community.