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The Forgotten Epistle

By OTTO E. SOHN

The Epistle to Philemon may fitly be called one of the forgotten books of the New Testament. Along with 2 and 3 John it has received but little attention in our synodical literature. And is there anyone among us who has ever preached a sermon on it or on a portion of it?

We can in a measure understand this neglect. Strictly speaking, this epistle is not a historical, doctrinal, hortatory, or prophetic book of general interest, but a private letter to an otherwise unknown individual, in which the writer, the Apostle Paul, reveals himself as a true friend, intercessor, and psychologist as well as a man of sterling character and unimpeachable integrity. And while numerous practical lessons may be drawn from it, none of its twenty-five verses is so constituted as to lend itself readily for use as an independent sermon text; which explains sufficiently the silence that exists in our literature concerning it.

Yet in spite of this peculiar character, it is a book which may be studied with great profit, not only because it is part of the inspired Word of God, which was given to us for our learning, but also because it presents to us such a goodly measure of applied Christianity. C. S. Lewis, in the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, calls it "the most beautiful and intensely human of all St. Paul's epistles, full of charm and beauty." Coleridge, quoted in *Lehre und Wehre* (March, 1923), designates it "the most gentlemanly letter ever written." Bishop Lightfoot (*loc. cit.*) said: "As an expression of simple dignity, of refined courtesy, of large sympathy, and of warm personal affection the Epistle to Philemon stands unrivaled." And the French theologian Sabatier: "We have here only a few familiar lines, but so full of grace, of salt, of serious and trustful affection, that this short epistle gleams like a pearl of the most exquisite purity in the rich treasure of the New Testament," (*loc. cit.*). Dr. L. Fuerbringer, in his well-known *Introduction to the New Testament*, describes it as "a small, tender, and warm writing of inimitable originality which despite brotherly humility and love reveals true apostolic dignity in language and content."

The great Reformer, in his preface to the letter, beautifully summarizes and describes it as follows: "This epistle

reveals a masterful, lovely example of Christian love. For we see there how St. Paul concerns himself about poor Onesimus and sides with him against his master with all that is in him and acts as though he himself were Onesimus, who had sinned. Still he does not do it with force or coercion, as would probably be within his rights, but he waives his right and thereby compels Philemon to forego the use of his right also. Even as Christ did for us over against God the Father, so Paul here does on behalf of Onesimus over against Philemon. For Christ also gave up His rights and conquered the Father with love and humility, so that He had to lay aside His wrath and right and receive us into grace, for Christ's sake, who so earnestly takes our part and is deeply concerned about us. For we are all His Onesimi, if we believe it." (Martin Luther, Holman edition, Vol. VI.)

AUTHOR AND AUTHENTICITY

We need not search long for the identity of the writer, for he begins with his name. It is Paul, the great missionary of the first century, then languishing in prison for the Gospel's sake. He repeats the name in v. 19. Since there are no variant readings in which the name is omitted, every true Bible Christian will concede that the Pauline authorship of the letter is fixed beyond dispute. Whether it belongs into the New Testament canon, inasmuch as it is a private letter, is another question. But it is a question which has been settled long ago.

There have indeed been a few scattered objections to the authenticity of the letter. In the fourth and fifth centuries it was opposed as being unworthy of Paul's mind and as of no value for edification. Later on it was attacked by Baur, who styled it "an embryo of a Christian novel" and who, according to the *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, was inspired by his desire to break down its corroborative value to the other captivity letters (Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians). Holtzmann suggested that it was interpolated, Weizsaecker considered it either allegorical or as being based on the letter of Pliny to Sabianus. But, according to Zahn, these are nothing but interesting examples of the vagaries of their authors and deserve only to be mentioned, nothing more. Not only are style, language, and argument clearly Pauline,

but also Eusebius, III, 25, states that all the letters of Paul were generally accepted as part of the canon at his time. While, to be sure, he does not mention this epistle by name among the *homologoumena*, he does omit it in the catalog of *antilegomena*, which clearly shows that the Christians of his day were agreed on the authenticity of this book.

THE ADDRESSEE

As with respect to the author, so there can be no doubt as to the identity of the recipient of this epistle. Verse 1 reveals him as having been a certain Philemon, whom Paul further characterizes as the beloved and as a co-worker in the Lord's kingdom. True, several other names are mentioned, namely, Apphia and Archippus, also the church that was in Philemon's house, but it is only the apostolic greeting which was meant for them. The letter itself is directed to Philemon personally. From the Apostle's remark in v. 19 that Philemon owed himself to Paul, we conclude that he was an adult convert brought into the Kingdom directly by the Apostle, though not at Colossae, where Philemon was now living. Paul's remarks in Col. 1:4, 7-9, and especially 2:1, seem to indicate that up to this time he had not been in that city. As for Philemon, he was apparently a man of considerable means who owned one or more slaves and was an example of Christian consecration (v. 1, fellow laborer) and kindness (v. 5) and of quite some importance to the church. For he placed his house at the disposal of the Colossian church for public worship, either the entire group of Christians in that area or a section of it in his own immediate neighborhood. Last, but not least, there existed a warm and intimate bond of friendship between Philemon and Paul; else the latter could not have written as he did. Tradition adds that he was the bishop of Colossae, and the Greek martyrology for November 22 tells us that he, together with his wife and son and slave Onesimus, were martyred by stoning before Androcles, the governor, in the days of Nero. With this the Latin martyrology agrees. Tradition also adds that Archippus, whom Paul called his fellow soldier and who must therefore have manifested considerable activity in behalf of the Gospel, was originally one of the 70 disciples and later became the bishop of Laodicea. But we refrain from the attempt to verify these claims.

PLACE AND DATE OF WRITING

Perhaps the majority of commentators leans to the view that St. Paul penned this cordial missive in Rome, about 59 or 60 A. D., at the time of his first imprisonment, from which he hoped soon to be released (v. 22). Others transfer the scene to Caesarea, where he was imprisoned for some time prior to the voyage to Rome. In recent times the view has also been expressed that Paul may have written it in Ephesus, which was about 100 miles west of Colossae, where he had spent considerable time and where he may have suffered imprisonment, as his references to frequent imprisonments, 2 Cor. 6: 5 and 11: 23, and to "fighting with beasts at Ephesus," 1 Cor. 15: 32, seem to indicate. Since the identity of the place has no bearing whatever on the subject matter, we proceed now to the study of the letter itself, and on the basis of the following outline:

- I. The Address and Apostolic Greeting, vv. 1-3
- II. Paul's Joy over Philemon's Exemplary Spiritual State, vv. 4-7
- III. Paul's Plea to Philemon on Behalf of Onesimus, vv. 8-21
- IV. Personal Remarks, Greetings, and Benediction, vv. 22-25

I. Introduction

"Paul, a prisoner of Jesus Christ, and Timothy, our brother, unto Philemon, our dearly beloved and fellow laborer, and to our beloved Apphia and Archippus, our fellow soldier, and to the church in thy house: Grace to you, and peace, from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ," vv. 1-3. The Apostle begins the letter with his own name. This was not a display of vain egoism on his part, but was done in strict conformity with the epistolary usage of the times. Cf. Acts 23: 26: "Claudius Lysias unto the most excellent governor Felix." It is worthy of note that he does not introduce himself with the usual title of Apostle, as in most of his letters, but calls himself a prisoner who lay in bonds, not because of any infraction of Roman law, nor of any other law, but for the Gospel's sake. He was the prisoner of Jesus Christ and was suffering this injustice for righteousness' sake. The very fact that he states this situation so nonchalantly makes it

evident that he is not resentful nor sullen because of this ill fortune, but rather, like Peter, considers it an honor for which he should glorify God, 1 Pet. 4:14-16. As verse 19 indicates, he was hopeful of his early release from this confinement.

Paul's associate at the time of writing was young Timothy; not as co-author, but as faithful companion and spiritual brother. Many years before, the Apostle had found him in the little town of Lystra, in Galatia, and had recognized his abilities, induced him to come with him into the service of the Lord, and by faithful instruction fitted him to become a valiant ambassador of Jesus Christ to a fallen world. At the close of the letter, in verse 23, Paul mentions several others who were with him at that time, namely, Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

Next, the Apostle states the name of the addressee, Philemon, whom he further calls the beloved and the co-worker. There was a firm bond of Christian love that existed between the two, though they must have been separated for quite some time. It is but natural that we pastors are drawn close to those whom by the grace of God we were permitted to bring to the knowledge of the truth, especially if these new converts prove themselves grateful by conscientious devotion to the cause of Christ. That Paul called Philemon his co-worker does not permit us to conclude that he was the bishop at Colossae, as tradition has it, unless the step into the holy ministry came later. This term is much too general and justifies only the assumption that he took an active part in the work of the church. For the same term is applied to Aquila and Priscilla, Rom. 16:3; to Urbanus, Rom. 16:9; to Timothy, Rom. 16:21; and to Epaphroditus, Phil. 2:2, 5. It points to consecrated activity rather than an office. Philemon seems to have been a man of considerable means, well able to own and maintain slaves. It is always a source of Christian satisfaction when one is able to draw into the fold of Christ those who according to human standards are wise and well-to-do and mighty. A true pastor will of course be happy over the accession of even the poorest pauper and treat him just as cordially as he treats those who have been blessed with great bounty. Yet, since Christ Himself refers to the greater difficulty of the rich man so far as the entrance into the Kingdom is concerned, it seems a greater victory when by the

power of God's Holy Spirit we are able to persuade the high and mighty of this world to kneel before the Cross of Christ in sincere repentance and faith.

As far as Apphia, who is also called "the sister," is concerned, it is most natural to assume that she was Philemon's wife and therefore a sister in the faith. Likewise the assumption is justified that Archippus was their son and that he is to be identified with the Archippus mentioned in Col. 4:17, who apparently held some type of church office at Colossae, the nature of which, however, cannot be definitely determined. He may have been an elder, he may have been a deacon or almoner, as the term *diakonos* suggests. Cp. Acts 6:1 f.

We must add a few words concerning the expression "the church that is in thy house." The congregations in those days, as far as we know, did not have their own houses of worship. They generally met in private homes. Philemon, then, was one of those who opened his home to the spiritual needs of his fellow Christians. It is even possible that there were others like him in Colossae who allowed their dwellings to be used for church purposes. The contrast would then be between the group that met in his house and the groups that met elsewhere. Of course, the contrast might also have been between the church in Colossae and the churches that worshiped in private homes in other cities. Certainly there must have been not a few of them. To this day, humanly speaking, the Christian Church owes a great measure of its expansion, under God, to the Christian love and generosity of people like Philemon who, besides giving personal and financial support to the work of the Kingdom, freely grant the use of their homes for divine worship until a suitable chapel or church can be erected. Many of our prosperous churches began in that manner. Such noble work should be recognized by the Church, even as Paul acknowledges the consecrated efforts of Philemon. We must mention, however, that some commentators refer this expression to the so-called *ecclesia domestica*, that is, the family living in a given home. In that case Paul would be including other children of Philemon, if any, as well as the slaves of that household.

To all of these Paul extends his customary greeting, that of wishing them God's grace and peace through Christ Jesus,

grace being the *favor Dei propter Christum* and peace the objective state of reconciliation which exists between God and the world through Christ and from which the personal, or subjective, peace of heart and mind on the ransomed sinner's part flows. Luther writes: 'Und wird in den zwei kleinen kurzen Woertlein, Gnade und Friede, die Summa und Inhalt der ganzen christlichen Lehre begriffen. Die Gnade vergibt die Suende, so hilft der Friede dem Gewissen zur Ruhe. Denn zwei Teufel sind, die uns sehr wohl plagen: die Suende und das Gewissen. . . . Darum so begreifen diese zwei Stuecke, Gnade und Friede, das ganze christliche Wesen in sich. Die Gnade, Vergebung der Suenden; der Friede, ein froehlich und friedsam Gewissen. . . . Darum hat St. Paulus die Weise, dasz er allewege im Gruss seiner Epistel wuenschet Gnade und Friede, damit man gegen der Suende und boesem Gewissen bestehen moege. . . . Und das muss man wahrlich auf das allerbeste lernen. Die Worte sind zwar leichte, aber in der Anfechtung das ins Herz bringen und gewisslich halten, dasz wir Vergebung der Suenden und Friede mit Gott nur allein aus lauter Gnade, ohne aller und allerlei Werk und Mittel Zutun, im Himmel und auf Erden haben sollen, das ist ueber die Massen ein schwer Ding" (*ad Gal.1:13*). Luther, then, does not differentiate sharply between objective and subjective peace, and that probably for the very practical reason that in the Christian's heart the one is so closely bound up with the other. Because the believer cherishes God's peaceful attitude toward him through Christ, his anxious heart becomes tranquil. Franz Pieper, however, in his *Christliche Dogmatik*, draws the line sharply when he says: "Das Wort (Friede) bezeichnet hier, wenn man genau reden will, nicht sowohl das Friedensverhaeltnis, in dem *wir* zu Gott stehen, als das objektive Friedensverhaeltnis, in dem *Gott* durch Christum zu den Menschen steht, und das Menschen genieszen, sofern sie es glauben" (II: 5, 6).

A word or two might be added here with regard to the words "from God, our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ." It goes without saying that Paul is here thinking of God not as the Creator of all men, but as the kind and benevolent Father of those who through faith in His Son have become His spiritual children. As far as the words "and the Lord Jesus Christ" are concerned, the question arises, whether this

genitive is dependent upon the preposition *from* or upon the genitive *Father*, both constructions being possible on the basis of the original. In other words, are grace and peace to come from the Father and the Son, or are they to come from God, who is the Father of us and of Jesus Christ. Both Luther and the A. V. consider them as coming from both, though the A. V. is somewhat inconsistent. Both here and in 1 Cor. 1:3 the greeting is identical in the original, yet the A. V. once adds the preposition *from* in italics, the other time it omits it. 1 Thess. 1:1 strengthens us in the belief that Paul thinks of these blessings as coming from both, Father and Son. For there Paul conceives the Thessalonian church to be *in* God the Father and *in* the Lord Jesus Christ (locatives). Nor is the word *Lord* to be overlooked, that name which is above every name, Phil. 2:5-11, which was given to Him in recognition of His victorious and perfect fulfillment of the mediatorial task entrusted to Him by His and our heavenly Father. Why Paul consistently makes no mention of the Holy Spirit in these apostolic greetings is difficult to say, all the more because he mentions all three persons in the well-known benediction 2 Cor. 13:13.

This, then, is the sum and substance of Paul's apostolic wish to Philemon and to the other Christians at Colossae, that the good work which was begun in them may be performed in them unto the Day of Jesus Christ. And, we might add, it is not only a wish, but a renewed offer of divine grace which, being the quick and powerful Word of God, was calculated and able to work that which it offered, namely, pardon and peace from God, through Jesus Christ, here and hereafter.

II. *Acknowledgment of Philemon's Fine Spiritual State*

"I thank my God, making mention of thee always in my prayers, hearing of thy love and faith, which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints; that the communication of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus. For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." Vv. 4-7.

Paul begins this section with an expression of great joy

and gratitude over Philemon's active Christianity. Continuous, unceasing prayer was one of the chief characteristics of this great missionary to the Gentiles, not only the prayer for help and blessing from above for himself and for his churches, but also ceaseless prayers of thanksgiving for blessings received, especially the blessing of success in his work; not only for the progress of his work *in toto*, but also for individual conquests over the powers of darkness. In spite of many disappointing and bitter experiences he is not discouraged, but has eyes to see good things and appreciation to acknowledge them with gratitude. His experiences with Philemon is a case in point.

Paul himself had evidently been God's instrument to win Philemon for Christ, as the last words of v. 19 show. And as we have already noted in the introduction, this was not one of those conversions which consisted merely in one's alignment with a Christian congregation, but one which became evident to all by a manifestation of splendid character and tireless Christian activity. Philemon's case was so outstanding in Paul's mind that he placed him on his prayer list, mentioning his name constantly (present participle), thanking God for that encouraging experience, and no doubt adding the request that God might cause him to abound yet more and more and preserve him from all bodily and spiritual harm.

The reason for Paul's gratitude is stated in these words: "Hearing of thy love and faith which thou hast toward the Lord Jesus and toward all saints." This is a peculiar construction which must be rightly understood, lest a false impression be gained. For while it is proper to speak of Philemon's *love* toward Christ and all the saints, it would not be proper to speak of his *faith* toward Christ and the saints. We have here the figure of speech called chiasmus, that is, an inverted parallelism, examples of which we have in Matt. 7:6; Phil. 1:15 ff.; 3:10; 1 Thess. 5:6.* What made Paul very

* This figure, as books on rhetoric tell us, derives its name from the Greek letter *Chi* (X) and indicates a crisscross construction. In this particular case we have the four words: love, faith, Jesus, saints. Of these, faith and Jesus belong together, while love crosses over to connect with saints. In Matt. 7:6 we have this: (1) Give not that which is holy to the dogs; (2) neither cast ye your pearls before swine; (3) lest they trample them under their feet; (4) and turn again and rend you. It is quite clear that in this case also 1 and 4, 2 and 3 must be paired.

happy and grateful was Philemon's sincere faith in the Savior and his eager activity in manifesting his faith by works of love toward all the saints. As far as this term *saints* is concerned, Paul is not thinking of perfect people. Such do not exist this side of heaven. He is thinking of those who through the power of God's Holy Spirit have been brought to faith in Jesus Christ and thereby received complete pardon from God for their sins. In God's sight they are indeed holy and blameless, but for Jesus' sake. Might we still add that the participle *hearing* is in the present tense? News of Philemon's faith and love had not reached Paul only once, but had come to his attention again and again, for which reason he included the name of this illustrious church member at Colossae on his prayer list.

And what did Paul ask that Heaven might graciously grant with reference to Philemon? "That the communication (fellowship) of thy faith may become effectual by the acknowledging of every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus." What does Paul mean? Luther translates: ". . . dass dein Glaube, den wir miteinander haben, in dir kraeftig werde durch Erkenntnis alle des Guten, das ihr habt, in Christo Jesu." Much could be said and written, but in the last analysis it was doubtless the Apostle's wish that Philemon's good example might become contagious, that his example might provoke or incite others, might prove an inspiration and incentive to him and others for every good thing, to abound yet more and more, as Paul so frequently urges, especially in 1 Thessalonians.

In verse 7 Paul explains: "For we have great joy and consolation in thy love, because the bowels of the saints are refreshed by thee, brother." The term here used to describe the emotions of the beneficiaries of Philemon's charity is somewhat offensive to our Occidental taste, but among the Orientals of ancient days it was quite common. The Greek poets considered the bowels, that is, the heart, lungs, liver, etc., as the seat of violent passions such as anger or love. The Hebrews employed this term to denote the tenderer affections — kindness, benevolence, compassion. The very innermost thoughts were considered by the Jew to be located in the reins, or kidneys. As a matter of fact, we, too, speak of the heart as the seat of emotions. Here is a typically Greek

expression, for which we have no exact idiom. Perhaps Good-speed comes as close as anyone to the Apostle's thought: "The hearts of God's people have been cheered by you." Note also the term *brother*, an endearing term, assuring Philemon of his fraternal affection, possibly designed to win his heart to grant the request Paul is about to make.

Before considering this request, which is the chief thought and purpose of the letter as contained in the next section, we append a few observations by way of practical application:

1. Like Paul, we do well to have an eye to, and to be grateful for, the good things that are done by our parishioners, rather than to bemoan their sins and shortcomings. Not only that, but to speak words of appreciation and encouragement to people whose example may provoke others to greater sanctification and charity is part of true pastoral wisdom, 2 Cor. 9:1-2.

2. To cultivate the habit of regular prayer, not merely for ourselves, but also on behalf of our parishioners, even to the extent of having a prayer list.

3. To set our standards ever higher and to encourage our members to abound yet more and more for the Lord's sake, not only in faith and knowledge, but also in good works. Our motto, which we should also recommend to, and impress upon, our people, must ever be: "Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect, but I follow after."

III. *Paul's Appeal on Behalf of Onesimus*

"Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ. I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds; which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me; whom I have sent again. Thou, therefore, receive him, that is, mine own bowels; whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel. But without thy mind would I do nothing, that thy benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity, but willingly. For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever; not

now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord! If thou count me therefore a partner, receive him as myself. If he hath wronged thee, or oweth thee ought, put that on mine account. I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it, albeit I do not say to thee how thou owest unto me even thine own self besides. Yea, brother, let me have joy of thee in the Lord; refresh my bowels in the Lord. Having confidence in thy obedience, I wrote unto thee, knowing that thou wilt also do more than I say." Vv. 8-21.

In this main section of the letter we have the Apostle's gracious intercession in behalf of Philemon's reclaimed slave, which for the sake of clarity may again be divided into six brief portions.

To begin with, he presents a very tactful approach to the request. He says: "Wherefore, though I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee that which is convenient, yet for love's sake I rather beseech thee, being such an one as Paul the aged and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ," vv. 8-9. We note first of all that Paul closely connects this request with the foregoing. Having just seen fit to extol Philemon's love in ministering to the needs of the saints, he decides to make his appeal on the basis of that selfsame love. He knows that as an Apostle of Jesus Christ he has the right to make this request in the form of a demand. Even though, as we shall see, he makes no move in the direction of abolishing slavery, he lets it be known, in Ephesians and Colossians for example, that masters were not at liberty to abuse and maltreat their slaves, but were in solemn Christian duty bound to forbear threatening and to give their slaves that which was just and equal. Yet, rather than undertake to command his dear friend and spiritual son, he is content to admonish or entreat him on the basis of love, to which he adds the further plea that Philemon would respect Paul's age. Some commentators indeed, following the example of the LXX in considering *presbytes* the equivalent of *presbeutes*, a term which Paul uses in Eph. 6:20, where he calls himself an ambassador in chains, translate *ambassador* rather than *aged*. That would hardly seem plausible. Paul had just stated that he would not emphasize his authority as an Apostle; would he now in

the same breath assert it nevertheless? It seems so much more in harmony with the context to imagine Paul as saying: "Friend Philemon, as an Apostle of Jesus Christ I really have the right to expect obedience of you in any duty, but I am just appealing to you as your old friend Paul, who is now also languishing in prison." That should suffice to warm the heart of his wealthy friend in Colossae.

Now, what was the request? He goes on: "I beseech thee for my son Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my bonds; which in time past was to thee unprofitable, but now profitable to thee and to me; whom I have sent again. Thou, therefore, receive him, that is, mine own bowels." Vv. 10-12. The situation was this. Philemon had had a slave by the name of Onesimus, meaning useful. Possibly this name had been given to him by his master in recognition of efficient and faithful services rendered. But in the meantime he had become very useless. Seeing an opportunity, he had absconded, presumably with a sizable sum of his master's money, and had successfully made his way to Rome, or Caesarea, or Ephesus, or wherever the Apostle was imprisoned at that time. In some undisclosed manner this runaway slave had come within the sound of Paul's Gospel message, had felt its power in his heart, and had yielded to the saving call. More than that. He had begun at once to manifest an active faith, proving himself extremely useful to the ambassador of Jesus Christ in chains, so much so, that Paul was loath to part with him. For he goes on: "Whom I would have retained with me, that in thy stead he might have ministered unto me in the bonds of the Gospel," v. 13. Yes, Paul could have made good use of him, Onesimus could have rendered him valuable services during his imprisonment for the Gospel's sake, the same Gospel to which Philemon owed his conversion. Well might Paul therefore have reasoned that Philemon should have no objections to his retention of Onesimus, even as few people would have thought the worse of Paul for keeping him. But the Apostle was most scrupulously honest and conscientious. Having learned that Onesimus belonged to Philemon, the thought of the Tenth Commandment would not permit him to retain Onesimus without first obtaining the consent of his lawful owner. Nor was Paul content to send the message through another. He determined to send Onesimus back;

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then Philemon could do as he pleased. If he chose to make this contribution for the cause of the Gospel, well. Then his contribution would be voluntary, not compulsory. Therefore Paul adds: "But without thy mind I would do nothing, that thy benefit should not be, as it were, of necessity, but willingly," v. 14. Thus no suspicion whatever could be fastened upon the great Apostle that he had coveted another man's possessions or used crafty methods to achieve his ends.

But Paul is not yet finished. Having in spirit already discharged his duty in returning Onesimus, he now moves the whole affair into the focus of Divine Providence, of which God's children should at all times be mindful as of a power and goodness that has all things under control and guides and shapes them so that they must serve the best interests of believers. He says: "For perhaps he therefore departed for a season, that thou shouldest receive him forever; not now as a servant, but above a servant, a brother beloved, specially to me, but how much more unto thee, both in the flesh, and in the Lord!" Vv. 15-16. "Perhaps," he says. To the human eye it did not appear thus, just as Joseph of old did not suspect the hand of God when his brothers sold him to the Midianites, yet later on confessed to them: "God meant it unto good." So here. Onesimus' escape seemed perfectly natural, yet the gracious Father in heaven had made use of it to bring him into contact with His saving Gospel and to reclaim him for heaven. Thus Philemon would be getting him back in a two-fold sense; first, as his slave, since by law Onesimus was still Philemon's property; secondly, as a brother, a fellow Christian, a fellow heir of eternal salvation through Jesus Christ.

And as such Paul now begs Philemon to take him back, if indeed he does not wish to relinquish his title and send him back to the Apostle. So he continues, vv. 17-21, saying in effect: "If you count me your comrade and friend, then receive Onesimus as though it were I that is coming to you. Did he wrong you in any way? Did he take any of your money? Charge it to me, I'll pay it. See, I am signing that promise with my own hand. Still, I should like to have you not to forget that you owe yourself to me, for it was I who brought you to Christ through the Gospel. Yes, brother, I am asking this favor of you. Do not refuse me, but give

me another opportunity to rejoice and be thankful over your sincere Christian love. I know that you will not refuse me."

As we ponder this complete section, we cannot fail to admire the superb tact and skill with which Paul presented and pressed his request to Philemon for leniency on Onesimus' behalf. Who could resist such a masterful appeal? If thoughts of anger had clamored for reprisal toward Onesimus in the heart of Philemon, he could hardly do anything but forgive and forget when he read these tender lines. But we have no further information on this, nor is there any hint that Onesimus was returned to St. Paul. Yet the entire affair gives us a most beautiful insight into the heart and mind and character of him who labored and suffered more than any other one man for the spreading of the Gospel and who also at all times upheld the dignity of God's holy Law, lest men should mistake liberty for license and abuse God's grace by willful sinning.

Thus this beautiful little epistle bids us take to heart three all-important Christian principles, namely, to practice strict honesty, to champion the cause of our needy or troubled brethren, and to strive in all phases of life to do the will of God and be an example to others. Luther, in his preface to this letter, emphasizes particularly the second point, as was stated in the introduction.

Before considering the closing words of the Apostle, we ought to inquire briefly into his attitude toward slavery. He neither advocates nor endorses it, neither here nor in other letters; neither does he seek to abolish it. He merely accepts it as an existing institution, sends Onesimus back to his owner, and urges Philemon to receive him with kindness and forbearance. In Ephesians and Colossians he speaks more explicitly, admonishing slaves to obey their masters as they would the Lord, not with eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. As for the masters, they also have their obligations. Remembering that they also have a Master in heaven, they should treat their slaves as fellow human beings, refraining from scowling and abusing, doing for them what is just and equitable. May we not offer this as the sum and substance of proper management-labor relations in our day? We cannot, nor need we, abolish the employer-employee relationship. That is seemingly a permanent and necessary institution. But if employers

will in the fear of God endeavor to do that which is fair and equitable for their working men and women, and if these in turn will comply with just and equitable regulations and do their work as unto the Lord, there could really be lasting labor peace. But this presupposes that which both Philemon and Onesimus had, sincere faith in Jesus Christ. Where faith enters the heart, love, too, will have a dwelling place, love to God and our neighbor, love between employer and employee. And where love rules, envy and strife, discontent and malice, will be subdued. So Paul handled the problem, so we must proceed.

And may we not add a word on pastor-people relationships? Paul makes it prominent here. He reminds Philemon of his debt of gratitude for having been sought and won for the Gospel by him. So even today Christian people must never be permitted to forget what they owe to their pastors and teachers, namely, their very selves. And if pastors and teachers minister spiritual blessings to them, have they not the right to expect material support in return? Yes, Christian people must ever be reminded that they which preach the Gospel should live of the Gospel and that they which are taught in the Word should communicate unto them which teach in all good things. If church members kept mindful of these things and, like Philemon and the other Colossians, prayed for their pastors and teachers, there would not be such carping critics as are frequently found in our churches. Nor would they be so ready to discard an aging servant of the Word for a younger man. Nor would they expect their spiritual leaders to exist on a meager pittance, but they would honor them all the more for their work's sake and do all in their power to give tangible proof of their gratitude for the great blessings received.

IV. *The Conclusion*

"But withal prepare me also a lodging, for I trust that through your prayers I shall be given unto you. There salute thee Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus; Marcus, Aristarchus, Demas, Lucas, my fellow laborers. The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen." Vv. 22-25.

Little need be said on this section. The Apostle expresses his confidence that his wish will be granted. He expects their

prayers for his early release from prison to be answered soon, in which case he hopes to visit Colossae and therefore asks Philemon to have the guest room in readiness. He sends greetings from his collaborators Epaphras, Aristarchus, Mark, Demas, and Luke. Timothy had been mentioned at the outset. Then follows the customary blessing: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit."

We close this little study with the concluding remarks found in the *Altenburger Bibelwerk*: "May the gracious God and heavenly Father grant through His Holy Spirit that masters and servants conduct themselves in a Christian manner with respect to commands and obedience; and govern us that we all manifest due brotherly love toward one another, to our own welfare and to the honor of our Christianity, Amen."

