

## ***Deconstructing and Revolutionary Love - A Case Study***

### *Philemon 1-21*

The context of St Paul's letter to a fellow Christian named Philemon is this. During a period of imprisonment, probably in Rome, Paul has converted a fugitive slave to the Christian movement. The name of the slave is Onesimus. The slave owner is Philemon. Paul is sending the slave Onesimus back to his master. Onesimus carries a letter that Paul has written to Philemon. The letter is a public letter because it is also addressed to the church community in which Philemon worshipped. The letter is, therefore, meant to be read to a congregation that met in Philemon's house. So what is St Paul up to in this letter? Before addressing this question, and in order that we do not prematurely distort Paul's intentions with modern standards, we need to understand the social and economic context of the time.

In the ancient world slavery was a legally and socially established pillar of society. It was an institution that in many ways sustained the daily life of both society and the household. It did this because slaves were the labour force that tilled the fields, worked in the mines, manned the galleys that transported goods, and undertook domestic tasks. Although slavery was an institution central to the economies of the ancient world, and while there is no doubt that in some situations slaves were better off than freemen, there is also no doubt that slaves wanted to become free. The question that Paul's letter raises, in the light of this, is whether he is in favour of slaves being emancipated, or whether he thought that Christian slaves should concentrate on their inner freedom to think as they wished while remaining slaves? This is to ask whether, and this is how Martin Luther interpreted the letter, Paul respected the prevailing legal rights of property and was not interested in the emancipation of slaves.

Before I finally get around to addressing the question I have posed there is another contextual matter that I need to inform you about. According to the Paul's letter to Philemon he has sent a fugitive slave back to the master. In that context the letter although the letter was addressed to Philemon, Paul probably meant it be used as something Onesimus could show the police if he was arrested on the journey. The hope would be that the letter would secure the slave safe passage. Because Paul probably meant the letter to be used in that way in an emergency he might, if he was in favour of emancipation, not state his opposition

openly in the letter because to have done so would have been counter-productive in an encounter with the police.

And now to our question. A number of scholars, with whom I agree, argue that a careful reading of the Letter to Philemon shows that Paul was basically telling the slave's master, Philemon, to set Onesimus free and was, therefore, in favour of emancipation. In support of this view we can note that Paul tells Philemon that he should, henceforth, treat Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a "beloved brother." This is because, according to Paul, the relationship between Christians is based on mutual love and gratitude and not on legal or moral obligations. Philemon was urged by Paul to act in a loving way to a brother for whom Christ Jesus died and, in this case, this meant that Philemon should renounce his legal rights to Onesimus. According to what Paul wrote in his letters to various churches this way of behaving should characterise the Christian movement because Christ has poured out his embracing love upon men and women so that they could be given freedom to participate in the new social order that is and will be God's kingdom. Because Philemon is the recipient of the great love of God he is required to treat his fellow men and women as brothers and sisters because that is how Christ treats them. We should also remember that Paul's letter was also addressed to the congregation that met in Philemon's house. This was probably deliberate because it would have made it difficult for Philemon to ignore what Paul had to say.

Put into our terms we can see that Paul encourages Philemon and the congregation that met in his house to engage in an act of civil disobedience. What justifies this incitement is Paul's claim that Christians owe their prime allegiance to the Christ and his governance of creation. This means that Christians should imitate the love of Christ in their relationships and that doing this will sometimes mean refusing to obey oppressive and inhumane laws. Civil disobedience has, of course, a history in the Christian movement. The civil rights movement in the United States involved Christian groups disobeying segregation laws. In South Africa a number of Christian groups were active in opposing apartheid and the laws associated with that policy. There are those who advocate that churches should house

and support asylum seekers contrary to government policy and regulations. I think that most Christians would agree with St Paul that we should oppose modern forms of slavery.

We can sum up what Paul had to say in this letter to the Christian slave-owner in this way. The activity of God in the world by which he holds it in existence results in the establishment of a movement that acts out the love and grace that has encountered it in Christ Jesus. This grace, according to Paul, bestows the freedom to transform human relations. What Paul said to Philemon shows, in a very concrete way, how such transformations occur. In this way the Christian movement is called to be the leaven in the making of a new order. What can perhaps be best said to the church today is that a reading of the Letter to Philemon shows us that the church needs to find its mojo again.