

Divine Tact: Paul's Epistle to Philemon

by Bryan Gibson

Onesimus was Philemon's slave (v. 16), and not a particularly good one. He was "unprofitable" (v. 11), and may have even stolen from Philemon (v. 18). He "departed" (v. 16) from his master and made his way to Rome, where he was converted by Paul (v. 10). Paul has decided to send Onesimus back, and he wants Philemon to receive him (vv. 12, 15)—not just receive him, but "receive him as you would me" (v. 17). So why doesn't Paul just tell him what to do, and leave it at that? We'll let Paul explain: "Therefore, though I might be very bold in Christ to command you what is fitting, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you..." (vv. 8-9). "But without your consent I wanted to do nothing, that your good deed might not be by compulsion, as it were, but voluntary" (v. 14).

We're not told how Philemon responded, but we can't help but think it was a favorable response—for the following reasons:

Paul's description of himself: "...for love's sake I rather appeal to you, being such as one as Paul the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ" (v. 9). Hard to turn down an appeal from an aging brother, who just happens to be in prison for his faithfulness to Christ.

The praise Paul gives Philemon: "For we have great joy and consolation in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed by you, brother" (v. 7). **And the way he uses that praise in his appeal:** "Yes, brother, let ME have joy from you in the Lord; refresh MY heart in the Lord" (v. 20). Here's an opportunity for Philemon to do for Paul what he had always done for other brethren.

The change in Onesimus (whose name means "profitable"): "who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me" (v. 11); "receive him...no longer as a slave, but more than a slave—a beloved brother" (vv. 15-16). Philemon won't be receiving the same man who left, mainly because Onesimus is now a Christian, a "faithful and beloved" Christian (Colossians 4:9).

The close relationship between Paul and Onesimus, and between Paul and Philemon: "You therefore receive him, that is, my own heart" (v. 12). "If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me" (v. 17). How could Philemon say no, when receiving Onesimus would mean the same as receiving Paul?

The sacrifice made by Paul in sending Onesimus back: "whom I wished to keep with me, that on your behalf he might minister to me in my chains for the gospel" (v. 13). Not surprising that Paul would put what's best for all ahead of what's best for him.

What seems to be a suggestion of God's providence: "For perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose, that you might receive him forever..." (v. 15). Doesn't excuse Onesimus for what he did, but it does shift the focus—from the wrongs done by Onesimus in the past to the wonderful way it all turned out.

Paul's willingness to pay Onesimus' debts: "But if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account...I will repay" (vv. 18-19). Paul was more than happy to remove this potential stumbling block to reconciliation.

The debt Philemon owed Paul: "...not to mention that you owe me even your own self besides" (v. 19). "Not to mention"—but he still mentions it. Seems that Philemon owed Paul what money could never repay.

The confidence Paul expresses in Philemon. "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say" (v. 21). Just can't imagine Philemon betraying the confidence that this beloved brother has placed in him.

This beautifully worded, very tactful appeal is just one of the reasons I love the Bible so much.