

**E. Bursey (2014) “To the church that meets in your home”: Plumbing the Plurals in Philemon.**

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It is fitting that the last formal paper at this session of the Adventist Society for Religious Studies should look at the little letter of Philemon placed last among those explicitly written by Paul. In this paper I note Paul’s inclusion of “the church that meets in your house” as part of the addressees in the opening of the letter along with the presence of second person plural pronouns elsewhere in this letter that is largely addressed to a single person, usually understood to be Philemon, a Christian slave owner regarding his slave, Onesimus. Scholarly attention to this small letter of 335 Greek words continues unabated, including full size commentaries--the commentary by M. Barth and H. Blanke (2000) runs 561 pages! But the presence of the house church in the letter remains largely neglected apart from the plausible role of insuring Philemon’s acceding to Paul’s authority (Frilingos 2000).

I propose that the inclusion of “the church that meets in your house” (v. 2) and the use of plural pronouns at the beginning and ending of the letter (vs. 3, 22, 25) was obligatory if Paul was to achieve his purpose(s) in writing the letter. Conversely one way of adjudicating among the possible reasons for Paul’s strenuous rhetorical efforts in writing the letter will be the required presence of the church in the reading of the letter. Finally, I will offer some reflections on why and when issues between individual believers might rightly become the concern of the local congregation, those brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus. I will suggest that the letter be understood as a letter of introduction of a person already familiar as Philemon’s slave to the believers who met in his home, but who, as Paul insists, has acquired a new identity

Paul directs the bulk of his words in the letter to a single person, Philemon, addressed as “brother” in vs. 7 and 20 , and as Paul’s partner (v. 17). Even the final greetings from the five named companions of Paul--Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas and Luke, are directed solely to that single person [Gk: σε] in vs. 23-24! Yet the letter cannot simply be regarded as a private letter between Paul and Philemon regarding Philemon’s slave, Onesimus. There are three named

recipients of Paul's opening greetings: Philemon, Aphia and Archippus, most likely a family unit of husband, wife and son. But Paul also intends that the rest of the believers who meet for worship and fellowship in Philemon's house be present for an oral reading of the letter and that they be included in the blessing of "grace and peace to you, [Gk, ὑμῖν] from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 3).

A strongly supported textual variant in the difficult sentence of v. 6 reads "in you" [Gk pl, ἐν ὑμῖν], the second person plural pronoun, instead of the first personal plural, "in us" [Gk pl, ἐν ἡμῖν], the selected variant in the UBS largely on the ground that the latter variant more likely accounts for the appearance of the former variant than the other way around (Metzger 1994). But H. Riesenfeld (1982) notes that Paul "consistently uses the second person in the opening thanksgiving and prayers in his letters."

The inability of modern English to signal the number of the second person pronoun masks two other places where Paul directs his remarks to the wider circle around Philemon. The reason for Paul's command for Philemon to prepare a place for him is Paul's confidence that the believers' collective prayers will be answered and that he will be restored to them. The second person pronouns in v. 22b are both plural. [Gk. ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν ὑμῶν χαρισθήσομαι ὑμῖν]. Finally, the letter ends in v. 25 with a blessing of God's grace upon the whole group—again, the second person possessive pronoun, "your," is plural, though one spirit is shared by all. So if Paul addresses the church at the beginning and at the end of the letter, we may reasonably conclude that he intended for those hearers to be present through the reading of the rest of the letter to hear the words he specifically directed to Philemon. This conclusion is reinforced by Paul's hopeful expression of his restoration to the whole group as a direct answer to their prayers in v. 22b.

Why did Paul include the house church in this matter between himself, Onesimus and Philemon? Would not the members of the house church have grasped at the time why they were being included? The way forward in resolving these two questions lies in the pursuit of answering another question--what did Paul want from Philemon? What was the reason that led him to begin the letter? At least three possibilities emerge, none of which have to do with an appeal for sparing Onesimus' life or even an appeal for forgiveness. Both of these possible reasons

are quite absent from the letter. In a previous presentation I have suggested in that expressions of repentance and forgiveness are absent because repentance was the appropriate attitude of slaves and forgiveness was characteristic of a generous slave owner (Burse, 1998, cf. Pliny *Epistles* 9.21). Nor is Paul intent on upholding Roman laws to establish a model for slave owning believers to follow, then or later, as the antebellum advocates of the institution of slavery deduced in their defense of the morality of laws requiring the return of runaway slaves to their legal owners. At least one literate African American slave said he wouldn't mind that application so long as his master considered him a beloved brother. On to more likely reasons. First, the wish that his "son" Onesimus could have stayed on to serve his needs in the place of Philemon (v. 13) looks like a thinly veiled request for Onesimus' return to Paul. 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. Third, there is the direct appeal for Philemon to welcome Paul's "heart" [literally "bowels, Gk, τὰ σπλάγχνα], that is, Onesimus, as if he were Paul and to welcome him as a brother in the Lord. These reasons are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Furthermore, we wonder to what Paul was referring when he declared his confidence that Philemon would do even more than Paul asked (v. 21). Did he have in mind the eventual manumission of Onesimus? Is that what he means by invoking God's providence in returning Onesimus "no longer a slave" [Gk. οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον] (v. 16). Or was he simply referring to his thin veiled request for Philemon to send Onesimus back to him? In any case, Paul's decision to include the wider audience of the house church in the reception of the letter would not seem a relevant necessity for the request for accommodations or even for his desire to enjoy Onesimus' help in facing the privations of imprisonment. Both of those could be done by Philemon on his own in his own time apart from the necessity of requiring the house church members to hear the letter. But the appeal for Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in the Lord would account for the required presence of the house church members in the reading of the letter. In practical terms, Onesimus cannot meet and worship with the church unless he is recognized by his owner, Philemon, as a legitimate member of that group. Likewise if Paul's efforts are successful in helping Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a brother in the Lord, that welcome will need to be extended to him

by the other members of the house church, the other brothers and sisters in the Lord.

Prior to his return Onesimus would have been known 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 be common knowledge to the other members of the household and to the church meeting in the house. The Greek word, "if" [Gk. εἰ] in Paul's crisp challenge, "If you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me," presumes a positive answer as likely; yes, Philemon did consider Paul his partner in service. The same Greek word stands at the head of the directive that immediately follows: "If [Gk. εἰ] he has wronged you or owes you anything, charge it to my account." From 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 knows that Onesimus' integrity and conduct in the past has been less than honorable. But Paul is confident that a different person was standing before them, both in identity and attitude. To borrow from a familiar phrase by Marcus Borg, Paul longed for them to see Onesimus again for the first time, re-born, with a new identity. We could rightly say that Paul is writing a letter of introduction for a new member of the fictive family composed of brothers and sisters in Christ, the house church, starting with its likely leader, Philemon, one of Paul's fellow workers. As such, he stands before them all as Paul's own spiritual son (v. 10), as Philemon's beloved brother in the flesh and in the Lord [Gk, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, ... καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ] (v. 16), and thereby also, a brother in Christ to each of the circle of believers who regularly assemble in Philemon's home. This is the critical moment which Philemon and the church that meets in his house share. Towards this end Paul employs every rhetorical skill at his disposal and claims payment on the sacred debt Philemon owes him for saving his life. That we possess the Greek text of the letter is evidence enough that Paul succeeded.

Did Paul ever get back to that little house church somewhere in the Roman empire? If he did not, it would not be the only time that his plans and hopes were dashed. But the letter remains—a tribute to the open-heartedness of a lay Christian leader and the small circle of Christians who met in his home. The letter's survival is the surest evidence that on the day the letter arrived the

Gospel flourished. On that day the house church “did church” and embraced Onesimus again for the first time. On that day Heaven watched and rejoiced.

Now for a few fleeting reflections on then and now. The warmth of Paul’s affection for both Onesimus and his slave master, Philemon, does not escape the naïve reader. Admittedly one can read the letter with a hermeneutic of suspicion and thereby construct a Paul whose desire for personal benefit led him to manipulate a lesser associate into a position of compliance. But to do so is to miss the core of the letter and Paul’s own memories. Years earlier Paul, then as the murderous Saul, intent on arresting believers but ending up blind in the house of Justus, felt the hands of Ananias and heard that word of acceptance, “Brother Saul...the Lord Jesus has sent me” (Acts 9:17). Now he was asking for the same recognition for his son, Onesimus. Matters of manumission, forgiveness and restitution, even reemployment to whatever prison houses the apostle, all take second place and all are subsequent to the fundamental transaction, that recognition and reception of a new creation, Brother Onesimus, into the eternal family.

Today, we readily see the chasm between Rome and our western world with its claim of a universal humanity and the recognition of human rights among which is individual autonomy. But what of the chasm between Paul’s grasp of the fellowship of brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus as the right crucible for personal growth, and our attenuated view of the church? What would Paul say to us about our naïve belief in spirituality without religion and personal growth apart from community, namely the body of Christ?

## Works Cited

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Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφὸς Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν 2 καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἀδελφῇ καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ, 3 χάρις **ὑμῖν** καὶ εἰρήνη ἀπὸ θεοῦ πατρὸς ἡμῶν καὶ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ.

4 Εὐχαριστῶ τῷ θεῷ μου πάντοτε μνεΐαν σου ποιούμενος ἐπὶ τῶν προσευχῶν μου, 5 ἀκούων σου τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν, ἣν ἔχεις πρὸς τὸν κύριον Ἰησοῦν καὶ εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους, 6 ὅπως ἡ κοινωνία τῆς πίστεώς σου ἐνεργῆς γένηται ἐν ἐπιγνώσει παντὸς ἀγαθοῦ τοῦ ἐν **ἡμῖν** εἰς Χριστόν.

7 χαρὰν γὰρ πολλὴν ἔσχον καὶ παράκλησιν ἐπὶ τῇ ἀγάπῃ σου, ὅτι τὰ σπλάγχνα τῶν ἁγίων ἀναπέπνυται διὰ σοῦ, ἀδελφέ.

8 Διὸ πολλὴν ἐν Χριστῷ παρρησίαν ἔχων ἐπιτάσσειν σοι τὸ ἀνῆκον

9 διὰ τὴν ἀγάπην μᾶλλον παρακαλῶ, τοιοῦτος ὢν ὡς Παῦλος πρεσβύτης νυνὶ δὲ καὶ δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ • 10 παρακαλῶ σε περὶ τοῦ ἐμοῦ τέκνου, ὃν ἐγέννησα ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς, Ὀνήσιμον, 11 τὸν ποτέ σοι ἄχρηστον νυνὶ δὲ [καί] σοὶ καὶ ἐμοὶ εὐχρηστον, 12 ὃν ἀνέπεμψά σοι, αὐτόν, τοῦτ' ἔστιν τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα • 13 Ὅν ἐγὼ ἐβουλόμην πρὸς ἑμαυτὸν κατέχειν, ἵνα ὑπὲρ σοῦ μοι διακονῇ ἐν τοῖς δεσμοῖς τοῦ εὐαγγελίου, 14 χωρὶς δὲ τῆς σῆς γνώμης οὐδὲν ἠθέλησα ποιῆσαι, ἵνα μὴ ὡς κατὰ ἀνάγκην τὸ ἀγαθόν σου ᾗ ἀλλὰ κατὰ ἐκούσιον.

15 Τάχα γὰρ διὰ τοῦτο ἐχωρίσθη πρὸς ὦραν, ἵνα αἰώνιον αὐτὸν ἀπέχης, 16 οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον ἀλλ' ὑπὲρ δοῦλον, ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν, μάλιστα ἐμοί, πόσω δὲ μᾶλλον σοὶ καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ.

17 εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτόν ὡς ἐμέ.

18 εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει, τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα.

19 ἐγὼ Παῦλος ἔγραψα τῇ ἐμῇ χειρὶ, ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω • ἵνα μὴ λέγω σοι ὅτι καὶ σεαυτὸν μοι προσοφείλεις.

20 ναὶ ἀδελφέ, ἐγὼ σου ὀναίμην ἐν κυρίῳ • ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα ἐν Χριστῷ.

21 Πεποιθὼς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου ἔγραψά σοι, εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ἃ λέγω ποιήσεις.

22 ἅμα δὲ καὶ ἐτοιμάζέ μοι ξενίαν • ἐλπίζω γὰρ ὅτι διὰ τῶν προσευχῶν **ὑμῶν** χαρισθήσομαι **ὑμῖν**.

23 Ἀσπάζεται σε Ἐπαφρᾶς ὁ συναιχμάλωτός μου ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ, 24 Μᾶρκος, Ἀρίσταρχος, Δημᾶς, Λουκᾶς, οἱ συνεργοί μου.

25 Ἡ χάρις τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ μετὰ τοῦ πνεύματος **ὑμῶν**. (Phm 1:1-25 BGT)