

PAUL'S ARGUMENTATIVE STRATEGY IN PHILEMON

A Paper

Presented to

Dr. Patrick Schreiner

Western Seminary

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for NTS 515

By

Daniel J. Harrison

July 27, 2017

Table of Contents

Introduction...	3
Omission of Apostolic Authority...	3
Omission of an Explicit Christological Explanation...	8
Omission of a Call for Imitation and Paul's Use of <i>Hapax</i> ...	11
Runaway Slave Theory...	15
Conclusion...	18
Appendix A: Translation of Philemon...	20
Appendix B: Other Works Consulted...	21

Introduction

Philemon is unique among Paul's letters on a variety of levels. Philemon is the only truly private letter retained in Scripture. The letter omits any claim to apostolic authority, an explicit Christological explanation, or an explicit request to imitate anyone. Paul's holistic understanding of the Gospel and the runaway slave theory regarding Onesimus will be critiqued to demonstrate that while Paul does not make an explicit request to imitate him, he is giving Philemon an example to follow implicitly based on what Christ did on the cross. Lastly, we will evaluate Paul's careful word choices scattered at pivotal placements in the letter. By bringing these aforementioned points together, I will demonstrate that Paul intentionally employs a unique argumentative strategy through rhetorical device to set the stage and strengthen his reconciliation-based command for Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as he would welcome Paul.

Omission of Apostolic Authority

Paul's introduction in Philemon as a *δέσμιος* – prisoner is unique to his other letters. Of his other letters, Paul identifies himself as an *ἀπόστολος* – apostle in seven of his letters¹, as a *δοῦλος* – slave in three letters², and as simply *Παῦλος* – Paul in two letters.³ Several key points must be made in regards to these various introductions. First, the title of Apostle was one Paul most frequently claimed. Second, in all three instances when Paul identifies as a slave, he attaches to it an apostolic claim; for example, *Paul, a slave of Christ Jesus, called as an apostle* (Rom. 1:1). Third, in all

¹ Galatians, 1 and 2 Corinthians, Ephesians, Colossians, and 1 and 2 Timothy.

² Romans, Philippians, and Titus.

³ 1 and 2 Thessalonians.

three instances where Paul identifies as a slave, the designation furthers one or more of the primary points in each of the letters. In Romans, one of the major motifs is freedom from the bondage of and to sin; in Philippians, one of the major motifs is to live for Christ even if it takes you to death; and in Titus, one of the major motifs is Godly leadership and Godly submission to leaders. Therefore, to use slavery language in each of these three letters is an intentional rhetorical device to set the stage for one or more of his major points stretching out even to humility and submission. Fourth, that Paul uses “slave” in Philippians in describing his state as a prisoner, instead of “prisoner” is one to note especially with Philemon because it means that the individual state Paul was in was not the determining factor for the designation he used. Several other letters were written during his imprisonment, yet apostle or slave was used. This demonstrates the foundation of Paul’s use of rhetorical device in this letter through his self-designations.

Fifth, 1 and 2 Thessalonians stand apart from the rest by having no designations at all. Paul has a verbatim introduction in both— *Παῦλος καὶ Σιλουανὸς καὶ Τιμόθεος τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ Θεσσαλονικέων ἐν Θεῷ Πατρὶ καὶ Κυρίῳ Ἰησοῦ Χριστῷ* — Paul, Silas, and Timothy: to the church of Thessalonica in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. This introduction, simply referring to himself as Paul without any designation is unique. Nevertheless, 1 Thessalonians follows the trend of the other letters by claiming apostolic authority elsewhere in the letter. 2 Thessalonians contains portions that one could argue are implicit claims to apostolic authority, but none are as explicit as those in the rest of Paul’s letters are. Even so, like with Corinthians and Timothy, 2 Thessalonians should be viewed as a follow up letter to the first. Therefore, that there is no explicit claim to apostolic authority in 2 Thessalonians is not an issue for this

discourse. Further study on 1 and 2 Thessalonians on Paul's rhetorical omission of an apostolic introduction could reap interesting results.

Sixth, that Paul uniquely uses *δέσμιος* to describe himself in Philemon is of particular interest. One might consider it to be in Paul's advantage to use *δοῦλος* considering the subject matter of Philemon's slave Onesimus; however, when considering the ramifications of Paul's conditional command in verse 17: *εἰ οὖν με ἔχεις κοινωνόν, προσλαβοῦ αὐτὸν ὡς ἐμέ* – If, then, you consider me a fellow partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. Had Paul self-identified as a slave, then that would warrant Philemon to continue to see Onesimus as merely a slave; with “prisoner,” Paul counters any such suggestion Philemon may make in this regard. Paul has in mind something much greater—Paul wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus back not just as a slave but also as a brother in Christ; in the flesh *and* in the Lord. That Paul, while imprisoned, refrains from identifying as a “slave” or “apostle” as he has done in other letters written in prison, and instead uses the “prisoner” designation he has not used elsewhere only draws attention to what he is doing in this short letter. His introduction in Philemon, much like his introductions in his other letters, is a rhetorical device setting the stage for his argument in this letter specifically.

Seventh, as has been noted, not only does Paul omit an apostolic introduction in Philemon, he also omits any claim to apostolic authority throughout the rest of the letter. As has been previously stated, every other letter except 2 Thessalonians contains this typically Pauline attribute. The closest references to any authority on any level are in verses 8-9. In verse 8, Paul writes *although I have sufficient freedom in Christ to command you what you ought to do, I instead appeal to you out of love*. Paul comes

about as close as he can to claiming authority but backs off to set up his appeal that is coming later in the letter. In addition, in verse 9, the word *πρεσβύτης* – elderly man, could be a play on word to *πρεσβύτερος* – elder, and/or *πρεσβεύτης* – ambassador. *πρεσβύτης* is used just two other times in Luke 1:18 and Titus 2:2 describing respectively Zechariah’s old age and the expectations for men who are aged, namely to be level headed, worthy of respect, sensible, and sound in faith, love, and endurance. The rarity of *πρεσβύτης* further develops Paul’s intentional use of rhetorical device in this letter to Philemon.

Eighth, Witherington argues that generally throughout Paul’s collection of letters, “Paul’s insistence on his own apostolic authority suggests an authority problem in his audience.”⁴ With this in mind, perhaps Paul did not feel it to be necessary to name drop his apostleship as an *ethos* introduction. This may also explain why Paul is confident Philemon will listen, obey, and do even more than he asks *without* any claim to apostolic authority present. How Paul became familiar with Philemon is unknown, but however he did, it was enough for him to break with his traditional pattern of realigning a wandering or faltering audience back under his authority. Philemon presents no authority issues and in fact, Paul humbles himself beneath the authority of Philemon by opting to refer and send Onesimus back to him and to deal with him as he wills.

Ninth, Moo affirms that while we cannot know definitively where Paul and Onesimus met, it is more likely to have been in Rome, an approximately 1,200-mile distance from Colossae where Philemon’s home church met.⁵ If true, then the most plausible conclusion would be that both letters to Philemon and Colossians were sent

⁴ Witherington, Ben. “Paul’s Letters and Rhetoric (Part 2).” New Testament Introduction. Biblical Training: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/new-testament-introduction/ben-witherington>

⁵ Moo, Douglas. *The Pillar New Testament Commentary: The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008, page 363-364.

simultaneously. A range of scholars dates both letters to the same year⁶, but for Tychicus to travel to and from Rome carrying these letters one at a time is a difficult position to argue. Looking then at Colossians can provide insight into Paul's omission of a claim to apostolic authority, because he certainly does not employ this same strategy in both letters.

Perhaps this is simply Paul recognizing the true right Philemon had as Onesimus' master, explained by Paul's use of ἀνέπεμψά – referring the case back to Philemon, which is itself another example of Paul humbling himself beneath the sufficient freedom he has to command Philemon what he ought to do. Even if that is the case, Paul's omission of apostolic authority both in the introduction and in the remainder of the letter to Philemon is peculiar considering the apostolic introduction to the whole Colossian church and the matching list of companions at the close of both letters, further evidencing a simultaneous writing. This only further demonstrates that the omission of an apostolic introduction or any reference to apostolic authority in Philemon was an intentional use of rhetorical device to guide Philemon to Paul's desired outcome in such a way that Philemon willingly obliged.

If written and sent simultaneously, then that speaks to the truth of Paul's claim that he is in fact Πεποιθώς – confident Philemon will respond as he wishes. That Paul would ask Philemon to welcome Onesimus as a dearly loved brother all the while declaring Onesimus to be a dearly loved brother in Colossians speaks again to Paul's true confidence in Philemon's response. Some may counter that such a persuasive

⁶ Enns, Paul. *The Moody Handbook of Theology*. Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2008, page 107.

attempt and use of rhetorical device would be to manipulate Philemon, but if Paul's confidence in Philemon was true, then his strategy was not manipulative.

If written and sent simultaneously, then it is vital that we recognize the external pressure Paul placed on Philemon. Philemon received a short letter with Paul asking him to welcome Onesimus back as more than just a slave but as a dearly loved brother—to welcome him back both in the flesh and in the Lord—all the while describing Onesimus to the whole Colossian church as a dearly loved brother without pause or question. Paul also adds external pressure by addressing the letter also to Apphia, Archippus, and Philemon's house church. Essentially, Paul is asking Philemon to do what he already expects the entire city to do. Philemon's response to Paul's request would have been a weighty, public decision, even if the Colossian church as a whole were unaware of the private letter.

Omission of an Explicit Christological Explanation

Paul also omits any Christological explanation in his letter to Philemon. In every other letter, Paul defines or explains the Gospel in a similar "Revelation, Response, Results, Response" pattern to the Acts 2 sermon by Peter.⁷ When taken together, Paul's comprehensive understanding of the gospel could be explained as follows. Jesus, a descendent of David, the Son of God, the Lord, Messiah, and enfleshed image of God, gave his own life as a ransom for the sinful and ungodly world, was raised, appeared, and was gloriously exalted to the right hand of God where he currently intercedes for us. Through the blood of Jesus' sin offering, reconciliatory peace was

⁷ Breshears, Gerry. "The Gospel." *Practicing Evangelism and Apologetics*. Western Seminary, 2015.

mediated between us and God—that is, no longer are our sins counted against us, *and* we are declared righteous, thus proving and demonstrating God’s love for us and his will to save us, redeem us, and cleanse us. Therefore, we who believe and have faith in the truth of Jesus Christ’s resurrection have freedom in Christ who lives in us, and are reconciled because of the faith God graciously appointed us to obtain prior to creation, further demonstrating God’s inseparable love. We receive transformation and renewal by the Holy Spirit, mercy, victory, a New Covenant ministry of reconciliation, forgiveness from sins, and relief from the sting of death. One day, we will also be raised and live together with him in an eternal dwelling built by God. Therefore, we are to live for Christ now and reveal his life through our body, stand firm to the teachings of Christ and continue the Lord’s work, putting to death the deeds and wills of the body, putting on the armor of faith, and loving the deeds and will of Christ. We are to let this peace of the Messiah control our hearts so we can eagerly devote ourselves now to doing good works in the name of the Lord that are profitable for everyone, suffering with Christ, and singing songs of thanksgiving and gratitude, so that we would be holy, blameless, and faultless before God, and be worthy of our eternal dwelling.⁸

Having been raised in a Christian family by two parents who were also raised in Christian families, I have been exposed to scripture my whole life. I have always heard about the faith vs. works debate particularly between Paul and James; however, in examining Paul’s Christological commentary as a whole, I have to conclude that the two authors were likely more on the same page than not. Paul, taken as a whole, is not saying belief in the resurrection is the final state for the believer. In fact, he places a lot

⁸ Galatians 2:2-20, 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11, 2 Thessalonians 2:13-17, 1 Corinthians 15:1-19, 50-58, 2 Corinthians 4:1-5:21, Romans 5:6-11, 8:1-17, 31-39, Ephesians 1:18-2:10, Colossians 1:15-23, 3:1-17, Philippians 2:5-11, 1 Timothy 1:12-17, 2:3-7, 3:14-17, Titus 2:11-14, 3:4-8, and 2 Timothy 1:8-12, 2:8-13.

of emphasis on the aftermath of belief, namely the results of sanctification and the duty the sanctified believer has in his or her lifetime now. James does not counter this but supplements it by placing the role of ὄφελος ἔργα – good works as the evidence of belief, as evidence of a sanctified believer. The Gospel is not just Christ dying for our sins, belief in the resurrection, and the reception of the Holy Spirit—although all three are necessary—but there is *also* the empowerment and expectation to act; this is what a transformed worldview entails. It is not just belief or verbal affirmation; it is action.

With all this in mind, it is peculiar that even in this short letter there is not one Christological explanation. The closest thing we have outside the standard introductory “of Christ” statement is in verse 14, where Paul describes Philemon’s potential ἀγαθόν – virtue to be by choice not force. While this is different from James’ use of ὄφελος ἔργα, they connote similar meanings.⁹ If one sees the whole of Philemon running on the assumption that Philemon already understands the gospel to such an extent that an explanation is unnecessary, then Paul frames this letter as a specific example of something Philemon can do to further evidence his τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν – love and faith. This suggestion is not outside the realm of possibility, since Philemon is described in the introduction as hosting a church in his home. This is a way for Paul not just to hear about Philemon’s τὴν ἀγάπην καὶ τὴν πίστιν but also to experience it himself.

The whole letter, then, is a Christological explanation of what reconciliation looks like in a day-to-day setting. First, reconciliation of brothers in Christ takes primacy over worldly status, such as the master-slave relationship. Second, although related to the first, reconciliation breaks down cultural and societal barriers; reconciliation is unusual.

⁹ My translation uses “virtue;” Mounce “helpfulness”; NIV “favor;” NASB “goodness;” HCSB “good deed.”

Third, reconciliation puts other things into the right perspective. Paul seemingly taunts Philemon with his own debt owed to Paul, and brings Onesimus' debt to Philemon into perspective in light of Philemon's debt to Paul. This short letter is a call to apply the gospel—to understand the gospel and its aftermath on a practical level.

Omission of a Call for Imitation and Paul's Use of *Hapax*

The third significant feature omitted from Philemon that is present in nearly all of Paul's other letters is a call to imitate either Christ or Paul as Paul imitates Christ. This feature is not as prominent in Paul's letters as the previous omissions, but is notable, especially on the previous note that the whole point of the letter is gospel-application. If the letter is gospel-application, then one could argue that Paul is calling on Philemon to imitate the reconciliation that Christ did for him and grant that same reconciliation to Onesimus who may have wronged him.

This gets to Paul's call for perspective in verses 18-19. *εἰ δέ τι ἠδίκησέν σε ἢ ὀφείλει* – but if he has wronged you, *ἔλλόγα* – account it to me. I will repay it, not to mention *σεαυτόν μοι προσοφείλεις* – you owe me your very self. Financially speaking, debts need to be paid. In the gospel, we see the debt we rightfully owe to God paid by Christ. In Philemon, Paul alludes to two separate debts, one that Onesimus might owe to Philemon, and a second that Philemon definitely owes to Paul. These two “owe” terms are both in the present, active, indicative forms; however, with two separate verbs used, we have to examine them separately. *Ὁφείλει* —referring to what Onesimus might owe Philemon—is used 35 times in the New Testament and has a simple indebtedness connotation. *Προσοφείλεις* —referring to what Philemon definitely owes Paul is used once

in the New Testament, here in verse 19. These words are similar, with the slight change of the *pros* prefix, which Mounce suggests as an additional level of indebtedness.¹⁰ Moo, citing Harris, disagrees with the idea that the prefix adds any “special force” to the indebtedness.¹¹

As a *hapax legomenon* – something said only once, linguistics would suggest that the uniqueness of *προσοφείλεις* is not in its meaning, but rather in its function in the piece of writing, based on the frequency of the occurrence of other *hapax* contained within the same piece of writing.¹² In other words, that Paul would use *προσοφείλεις* so close (the next verse) to the more frequent *ὀφείλει* to speak of the same thing demonstrates Paul’s attempt to draw attention to this distinction, specifically the latter.

While I agree with Moo and Harris that the *pros* prefix to *ὀφείλει* would not suggest an additional amount of debt, I would go further to affirm that Paul’s use of it follows the rhetorical pattern he has already set up. Other than placing the debt Onesimus owes Philemon in the conditional form, Paul does not refer to the volume of debt in either case; however, by placing the *hapax* so close to the original word, Paul is separating the two debts and drawing particular attention to the latter debt, which Philemon unconditionally owes to Paul. Through this conclusion, I affirm the role the *hapax* plays in this letter linguistically, as a rhetorical device that seeks to magnify its intended meaning qualitatively, not quantitatively. The *hapax* *προσοφείλεις* then further develops a point previously made, that Paul is calling Philemon to bring the debt

¹⁰ Mounce, William, Robert Mounce, ed. *Greek and English Interlinear New Testament (NASB/NIV)*, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011, page 1153.

¹¹ Moo, page 430.

¹² Baker, Paul, Andrew Hardie, and Tony McEnery, *A Glossary of Corpus Linguistics*, Edinburgh University Press, 2006, page 81.

Onesimus might owe him into perspective, and Paul does this through rhetorical means. *Yes, Onesimus very well might owe you something due to a wrong he may have committed, but you owe me—you should be more concerned with your debt to me than his debt to you, because I, Paul, will repay his debt to you on his behalf, but who will pay your debt to me on your behalf?* That aspect of Paul and Philemon’s relationship is unknown.

Another interesting note can be made about *προσοφείλεις* in the textual apparatus of the *Nestle-Aland* Greek text. In some manuscripts, one or more words have been added to describe Philemon’s debt to Paul. The addition “you owe me your very self *in the Lord*” appears in a Western type manuscript collection of just Paul’s letters.¹³ Such an inclusion would clearly demonstrate the argument that Paul was shifting Philemon’s perspective from the worldly debt Onesimus owed him to an eternal debt Philemon owes Paul; however, in light of this addition’s brevity in manuscript history, this leap cannot be made through the textual apparatus only. Shifting Philemon’s perspective is one of Paul’s goals; however, Paul does not do so explicitly but instead does this implicitly through rhetorical device—this is a strategic pattern all through the letter.

Other than Philemon and Apphia’s names, and *προσοφείλεις*, Paul’s letter to Philemon contains three other *hapax*, and a small handful of words only used two or three times in the New Testament. In this discourse we will only evaluate these other three *hapax*, all three of which follow this same pattern of *προσοφείλεις*, in that they do not magnify the volume of the word or content but instead magnify the attention Paul

¹³ Ciampa, Roy. “Reference Charts for New Testament Textual Criticism.” 2002, page 2.

wants given to them. It should come as no surprise either that all three of these words, much like προσοφείλεις, are directly tied to Paul's primary argument of reconciliation.

In verse 14, Paul uses ἐκούσιον, which I have translated "choice." Moo points out that in verse 14 the two prepositional phrases being contrasted are not contrasted anywhere else in scripture; however, both have play-on words that are contrasted in 1 Peter 5:2, distinguishing between a duty to act and a desire to act.¹⁴ The distinction between ἐκούσιος and ἐκουσίως is almost indistinguishable—Mounce even grants both the exact same lexical meaning.¹⁵ Whether Paul intentionally misspelled this word or created his own play-on word cannot be known; however, what we can conclude is that Paul was drawing attention to this willingness to act that he desired Philemon to have.

In verse 19, Paul uses ἀποτίσω, which I have translated "I will pay it back." This is a rhetorical device where Paul repeats what he just said to emphasize his points. *Account his debt to me. I am writing this. I will pay it.* He is attempting to draw particular attention to the great promise he has just made to mediate reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon by paying Onesimus' debt.

Lastly, in verse 20, Paul uses ἀναίμην, which I have translated "I do wish to receive benefit from you." Moo excellently points out that Paul "is strengthening, with a final personal appeal, the request he has made in v. 17... The tone of this final appeal is evident from the fact that Onesimus is not mentioned again: the focus is entirely on the relationship between Philemon and Paul and what the obligations of the former are within that relationship. This emphasis on personal involvement is highlighted again with

¹⁴ Moo, page 416.

¹⁵ Mounce, page 1054.

Paul's use of the (unnecessary) personal pronoun *ego* ("I")."¹⁶ Paul's awkward transition just prior to this when he tells Philemon that he would not mention Philemon's debt (as he does just that) followed by the personal plea to experience Philemon's love for himself demonstrates Moo's point—Paul has shifted the argument back to him and Philemon; other matters have been discussed. Paul brought Philemon to where he needed to be before bringing up his reconciliation with Onesimus, and then once he said what he needed to say, he returned to just the two of them to ensure he covered any loose ends between the two of them. Paul's use of rhetorical device is further demonstrated to be present throughout this letter to Philemon.

Runaway Slave Theory

While Moo and Dunn disagree about where Paul and Onesimus likely met (Rome¹⁷ or Ephesus¹⁸ respectively), they both agree that Onesimus was most likely a runaway slave. Premised on the simultaneous writing and sending theory of the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon, there are some significant points that complicate the runaway slave theory; however, when resolved, this theory plays a key role in distinguishing a major tenet of what otherwise seems to be omitted from Philemon, namely a Christological explanation:

First, Paul, a *torah* observant and learned Jew, ἀνέπεμψά – referred Onesimus, a Gentile, back to Philemon; Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon. This is a direct violation of Deuteronomy 23:15-16 where Israel is instructed not to send back runaway

¹⁶ Moo, page 432.

¹⁷ Moo, page 363-364.

¹⁸ Dunn, James. *The New International Greek Testament Commentary: The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996.

Gentile slaves fleeing their masters, and instead to allow them to find refuge in Israel. For Paul to violate this would be an egregious sin on his part. Moo, Bruce, and Cragie all suggest that this Deuteronomy passage only applies to foreign slaves and is therefore irrelevant in Paul's decision to refer Onesimus by sending him back to Philemon.¹⁹ This is inaccurate, though, for Colossians 4:9 designates Onesimus as one of the Colossians. Paul was a Jew from the tribe of Benjamin and Onesimus was a Gentile, a foreigner to the Jew.

Second, Paul gives Philemon conditional assurance of repayment, *if he owes you...account it to me*. Perhaps this speaks to the overall gentle tone of Paul's letter; however, even in his other letters where he strikes a similarly gentle tone, Paul is not noncommittal about what he will do, with the exception of some travel plans. This could mean that Paul is attempting to reshape Philemon's perspective about whatever clash occurred between him and his slave, especially since in legal matters, the master had the upper hand, or it could suggest that what Philemon claims Onesimus did was false.

Third, in Colossians, Onesimus is "one of you," seeming to indicate that Onesimus was no stranger to the Colossian church, even if he was not yet a believer. Schreiner argues that Paul uses *ἐκκλησία* to describe the Church, but more specifically the assembly of *Gentile* believers.²⁰ Paul's letter to the Colossians also indicates that his courier, Tychicus, was accompanying Onesimus, not Onesimus being escorted by Tychicus as Moo and Dunn both contend²¹. Being in charge of the trip would mean that

¹⁹ Moo, page 411; Bruce, FF. *Paul, Apostle of the Heart Set Free*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977, page 399-400; Cragie, Peter. *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Deuteronomy*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976, page 300.

²⁰ Schreiner, Thomas. *Paul Apostle of God's Glory in Christ: A Pauline Theology*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001, page 84.

²¹ Moo, page 336.

Onesimus was not in fear of imprisonment for abandoning his master and that he was not a chained carry-on bag that Tychicus was stuck with, but instead was one with a useful purpose.

Fourth, in first century Roman society, to aid a runaway slave, also deemed a fugitive, made you equally guilty of their crime, which was punishable by death.²² This further complicates the runaway slave theory for it puts Paul in a position where he put his own life on the line for a useless slave from a town he may never have visited.

I will respond to the aforementioned points to demonstrate the plausibility of the runaway slave theory in such a way that furthers Paul's argument. If Onesimus was a slave to a wealthy Christian and was well known to the Colossian church even before his conversion, his *ἄχρηστον* – uselessness was likely a root cause for the clash, evidenced by Paul's reference to it before even naming Onesimus. With this in mind, for Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a *ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν* – dearly loved brother is not to free him but instead to restore him to his role as *εὐχρηστον* – useful. Since Onesimus is now *useful*, Philemon is to restore his old slave to the useful position that he once had. Since Onesimus is now a *believer*, Philemon is to welcome him not just as a useful slave, but also a beloved brother. Philemon has both of these duties, to have Onesimus' usefulness both *ἐν σαρκί* – in the flesh, but also *καὶ ἐν Κυρίῳ* – in the Lord.²³

The fact that Philemon owes Paul, and that Paul would render Onesimus' probable debt to himself is in a sense settling the ledger between Philemon and Onesimus. Paul is the mediator to their societal reconciliation. In this case, Paul took

²² Bradley, Keith. "Resisting Slavery in Ancient Rome." BBC, Feb. 17, 2011. http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/romans/slavery_01.shtml.

²³ Schreiner, page 142.

the penalty rightfully owed by Onesimus and paid it himself thus canceling the debt Onesimus owed to Philemon. In this sense, Paul is illustrating not just what reconciliation and restoration mean in the abstract, but rather what reconciliation and restoration look like concretely. Moreover, that Paul would risk his very life to mediate reconciliation between two conflicted parties is nothing more than a demonstration of the gospel consistent with his holistic understanding of it, namely the outpouring of the reconciliatory mediation that Christ did between himself and God.

Conclusion

In this brief letter, Paul intentionally employs the argumentative strategy of rhetorical device to strengthen his reconciliatory message to Philemon. Paul chooses his words and the ordering of those words intentionally to raise Philemon's eyebrows and magnify the importance about which he was writing. Unlike Paul's other letters to the assembly of believers in various places or to individuals for the purpose of use in the assembly of believers, his letter to Philemon employs this specific strategy to guide his single audience member²⁴ to his argument and his desired outcome out of willful desire.

Unlike some other letters Paul wrote while imprisoned, Paul refrains from designating himself an apostle or as a slave and instead opts for the unique designation of "prisoner." Paul's designations in the other letters do not speak to his personal circumstances but instead are tied to the content of each letter. Therefore, Paul's use of a unique designation should inform us that this letter as a whole is unique in its content;

²⁴ All the "you/your" pronouns in Philemon are singular until the final clause, *The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirits*. While πνεύματος is singular, the simplest way to convey the pronoun's distributive function is to go against the singularity of πνεύματος by making it plural. Witherington disagrees with calling Philemon a private letter since it was addressed to Philemon's home church; however, even though it is addressed to the home church, literarily, the core of the letter is written to an audience of one.

“prisoner” forces Philemon and the modern reader to pay closer attention. Paul’s restraint from claiming any authority in the case, let alone apostolic authority, but instead refers the case back to Philemon demonstrates Paul’s careful use of words.

Paul’s choice of four words used only once in the entire New Testament, all at pivotal moments in the letter, demonstrate Paul’s intentional word choice to magnify the attention he desires Philemon to give to his letter. Paul does not speak of the volume of Philemon’s debt to Paul, but instead magnifies Philemon’s attention to remember his own indebtedness. Paul emphasizes his own desire for Philemon to act wholly out of a willingness guided by virtue. Paul emphasizes his own promise to pay Onesimus’ debt in full, and Paul draws Philemon’s attention to Paul’s desire to experience Philemon’s love for the saints—the topic of Paul’s thanksgiving early in the letter. All these word choices in pivotal places further demonstrate Paul’s intentional use of rhetorical device to guide Philemon to Paul’s desired outcome in a response that is wholly willful.

Lastly, that Paul would put his own life on the line for the reconciliation of two others speaks to the depth of Paul’s understanding of the Gospel. The Gospel according to Paul is nearly entirely about reconciliation and the aftermath. By speaking of Onesimus’ debt to Philemon before his conversion in the conditional form, Paul calls Philemon to bring worldly issues into the right perspective—an eternal perspective. By speaking of the formerly useless Onesimus’ new usefulness, Paul is not suggesting Philemon set his slave free, but instead to restore his slave leaving whatever issue arose between them in the rear-view mirror. In this way, Paul’s letter to Philemon (although not explicitly) does in fact contain a call to imitation, and is itself a Christological explanation of culturally cognizant application of reconciliation.

Appendix A: Translation of Philemon²⁵

¹⁻³Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy the brother. To Philemon our dearly loved and coworker, to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church that meets in your home. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴⁻⁷I always thank my God as I make mention of you in my prayers, because I hear of your love for all the saints and faith that you have in the Lord Jesus. I pray that your participation in the faith may become effective through knowing every good thing that is in us for the glory of Christ. For I have derived much joy and encouragement from your love, my brother, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you.

⁸⁻¹⁶So, although I have sufficient freedom in Christ to command you what you ought to do, I instead appeal to you out of love. I, Paul, an elderly man, and now even a prisoner for Christ Jesus, appeal to you for my son whom I fathered while in chains. I am speaking of Onesimus.²⁶ Formerly he was of no use to you but now he has become useful to both you and to me. He, the one whom I am referring back to you, is my very heart. I wanted to keep him with me so that he could minister to me on your behalf during my imprisonment for the gospel, but without your consent, I wanted to do nothing so that your virtue might not be by force but by choice. For perhaps he was separated from you for such a time as this so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave, but better than a slave—a dearly loved brother. He is especially so to me, but how much more now to you both in the flesh and in the Lord.

¹⁷⁻²²If, then, you consider me a fellow partner, welcome him as you would welcome me, and if in anything he has wronged you or owes you anything, account it to me—I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand—I will pay it back. I could also mention to you that you also owe me your very self. Yes brother, I do wish to receive benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ. Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than what I ask. And also in the meantime, prepare for me a guest room, for I am hoping that through your prayers, I will be graciously gifted to you.

²³⁻²⁵Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends you greetings, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my coworkers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with all of your spirits.

²⁵ I used the Nestle-Aland Greek text, Mounce's lexicon, and the HCSB translation to verify accuracy. Not all of my variations from standard translations were discussed specifically in this discourse due to their irrelevancy to the subject matter of rhetorical device as argumentative strategy.

²⁶ In the Greek, Paul does not finally say Onesimus' name until after describing the subject of his appeal as his son *and* as one he fathered. Most English translations put Onesimus' name between the two descriptions, and that works in the English; however, I have supplied an "I am speaking of" that honors what I believe to be Paul's desire to refrain from using Onesimus' name for as long as he possibly could.

Appendix B: Other Works Consulted

- Bartchy, Scott. "Slaves and Slavery in the Roman World" from *The World of the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2013.
- Benko, Stephen. *Pagan Rome and the Early Christians*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984.
- Blomberg, Craig. "Colossians and Philemon (part two)" Introduction to the New Testament—Romans to Revelation. Biblical Training: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/introduction-new-testament-2/craig-blomberg>
- Blomberg, Craig. "Colossians and Philemon." Introduction to the New Testament—Romans to Revelation. Biblical Training: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/introduction-new-testament-2/craig-blomberg>
- Frost, Frank. *Greek Society*. Toronto: DC Heath and Company, 1980.
- Godshall, Matthew. "Foundations to Greek Exegesis." Western Seminary, 2016.
- Godshall, Matthew. "Greek Reading and Syntax." Western Seminary, 2017.
- Greek Bible text from: *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 28th revised edition, Edited by Barbara Aland and others, © 2012 Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, Stuttgart.
- Harris, Murray. *Colossians and Philemon: Exegetical Guide to the Greek New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991.
- Harris, Murray. *Slave of Christ: A New Testament Metaphor for Total Devotion to Christ*. Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999.
- Hayes, Richard. *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989.
- Holy Bible: Holman Christian Standard Version*. Nashville: Holman Publishers, 2009.
- Kosterberger, Andreas, Benjamin Merkle, and Robert Plummer. *Going Deeper with the New Testament Greek: An Intermediate Study of the Grammar and Syntax of the New Testament*. Nashville: B&H Academic, 2016.
- Pennington, Jonathan "Tests and History: The Testimony of the Fourfold Witness" from *Reading the Gospels Wisely: A Narrative and Theological Introduction*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2012.
- Schreiner, Patrick. "Principles of Greek Exegesis." Western Seminary, 2017.
- Schreiner, Patrick. "The Road to Reconciliation." Christ Church Sellwood: Portland, Jan. 17, 2006.
- Schreiner, Patrick. "Theological Considerations." Principles of Greek Exegesis. Western Seminary, 2017.
- Stein, Robert. "Philemon." New Testament Survey—Acts to Revelation. Biblical Training: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/new-testament-survey-2/robert-stein>.
- Tingay, GIF, and J Badcock. *These Were the Romans*. Chester Springs: Hulton, 1972.
- Weima, Jeffrey. "Paul's Persuasive Prose: The Case for Philemon." Paul The Letter Writer. Calvin Theological Seminary, 2006.
- Witherington, B. "Principles of Rhetoric." New Testament Introduction. Biblical Training: <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/new-testament-introduction/ben-witherington>
- Witherington, Ben. *Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007.