

A THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATION FOR CHRISTIAN  
RECONCILIATION: PAUL'S LETTER TO THE COLOSSIANS  
AS THE THEOLOGICAL  
SUBSTRUCTURE FOR HIS LETTER  
TO PHILEMON

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“That little s\*\*\*head.” It was a Sunday morning, just minutes before the worship service would begin, and a parishioner insisted on meeting with me privately in my office regarding an issue that could not wait. No sooner had the door closed than the colorful words erupted from his mouth. He proceeded to tell me what he had just learned himself, that another person in the church had been betraying his trust and stealing from him repeatedly, egregiously, and even criminally. He had a legitimate grievance and a right to feel wronged, and he demanded I (as the pastor) act swiftly in retribution to bring down the wrath of God upon this horrible sinner in the church. I countered with a gentle reminder of God’s mercy and a suggestion that forgiveness and reconciliation might be more appropriate goals, but in his present moment of rage, this believer could only scoff at the seemingly impossible notion of reconciliation.

The apostle Paul himself faced a similar situation of intense interpersonal conflict between two believers named Onesimus and Philemon. Their relationship with one another was complicated not only by their grievances against one another, but also by the social and cultural dynamics of first-century slavery. As a runaway slave, Onesimus could only expect harsh treatment from his master, Philemon, who had a social duty to punish Onesimus sufficiently enough to reinstate and to preserve the status quo of household management. Paul, however, envisions a different course of action in light of their shared faith in Christ. He writes a brief letter to Philemon containing a radical appeal for reconciliation whereby Philemon will welcome Onesimus not as a slave but as a beloved brother. Paul, too, charts a seemingly impossible course of reconciliation, yet at the same time, Paul is confident that Philemon will obey and even go beyond what Paul asks (Phile 21). On what grounds could Paul be so confident?

In this paper, we will propose that Paul’s letter to the Colossians provides the “theological substructure” for his letter to Philemon and thereby the grounds for his confidence that Philemon will fully understand and apply

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Paul's request. When Philemon embraces the theology Paul sets forth in Colossians, he will have the framework he needs for properly determining how to manage his conflict with Onesimus. Colossians, therefore, provides the foundational theology we need for establishing a Christian perspective of reconciliation today. In this paper, we will first consider the letter to Philemon, including both the story of conflict that preceded it and also the nature of Paul's appeal within the letter. Second, we will establish the relationship between the letters to the Colossians and to Philemon. Third and finally, we will undertake a reading of Colossians in light of the conflict between Onesimus and Philemon, demonstrating how Colossians provides the theological substructure for Paul's appeal to Philemon.

## II. THE STORY BEHIND THE LETTER TO PHILEMON

Paul's letter to Philemon stands out as the shortest, most personal, and most dramatic of all his letters. The letter contains just enough information to allow us to reconstruct the basic narrative of events behind the letter. A slave named Onesimus has fled from his master, Philemon, and found his way to the imprisoned apostle Paul.<sup>2</sup> The conflict between Onesimus and Philemon may have several layers that developed over time. Philemon may have come to regard Onesimus as "useless" (Phile 11), and whether Onesimus deserved it or not, we can imagine how such a devaluation would strain their relationship. Onesimus may also owe some kind of debt to Philemon (Phile 18), perhaps because he stole from Philemon, or perhaps because his lack of productivity and his unsanctioned departure have deprived Philemon of income. Philemon likely feels angry and deprived, having suffered financial loss because of Onesimus, and Onesimus likely feels hurt and scared, as he now faces the terrifying prospect of returning to his master. Their grievances against one another may be much more than this, but they are in all likelihood not less.

Paul finds himself in the middle of this dispute because of his personal relationship of Christian influence with both Onesimus and Philemon. At some point in the past, Paul played an instrumental role in evangelizing and discipling Philemon (Phile 19), so that Paul now counts Philemon a partner in the gospel (Phile 1, 17). More recently, Paul led Onesimus to faith in Christ (Phile 10), so that Paul now counts Onesimus as dear to himself and a useful partner in ministry (Phile 11–13). Both Onesimus and Philemon are now true and sincere Christians who respect Paul's leadership and will presumably listen to his counsel, and Paul, therefore, has become the mediator in this dispute between them. He has counseled Onesimus in person, and he now counsels Philemon via his letter to him.

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<sup>2</sup> He may have intentionally sought Paul's help as a mediator in the dispute, or by some divine coincidence he may have happened upon Paul in prison. On the whole, it seems less likely that Onesimus would have coincidentally encountered Paul in prison, for if Onesimus had been arrested as a runaway slave, he would not have been held in the same prison cell as a Roman citizen. Therefore, it is more likely that Onesimus intentionally sought Paul's assistance, likely because Onesimus knew of Paul's relationship with Philemon.

We know from other historical sources that masters such as Philemon had basically two options in dealing with a runaway slave such as Onesimus. First, masters could administer strict punishment upon a thieving or runaway slave, perhaps including selling them to less desirable stations of slavery (e.g. working in the mines, where lifespans were short), corporal punishment, or even execution. Because slaves had only utilitarian value as “living property” rather than human value and dignity (Aristotle, *Pol.* 1.2.4–5), traditional moral values and human rights offered them minimal protection from their masters, who could be encouraged to punish them severely enough to effectively dissuade both the guilty slave as well as all other slaves from repeating his transgressions.<sup>3</sup> Or, second, masters could show some measure of mercy toward a slave by sympathizing with their plight, giving to them the benefit of the doubt, and overlooking a wrong rather than reacting in anger. By so doing, masters might actually enhance their own reputation, earn the favor and loyalty of their slaves, and increase the productivity of their households.<sup>4</sup> Over the course of time within the Roman empire, the laws and customs shifted between these two options for masters.<sup>5</sup> But both options share in common an attempt to preserve

<sup>3</sup> Cicero (ca. 106–43BCE) suggests a master should “coerce and break” slaves with the whip (Cicero, *De republica* 3.37; cited by Longenecker in James W. Thompson and Bruce W. Longenecker, *Philippians and Philemon* [Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016], 155). Tacitus records an instance in 61CE where a slave had murdered his master, leading to a debate within the Senate regarding whether or not the entire slave force of that household – numbering 400 slaves – should be executed. A senator named Gaius Cassius convinced the Senate to execute all 400 slaves, including children and women. He argued that surely some of those slaves were aware of the plot, or saw clues, or heard rash words from the murderer, and yet none of the slaves betrayed their fellow slave to protect their master. Cassius further argued that slave owners will only survive if their slaves are afraid enough of their masters to betray their fellow slaves and give up the plot before it can be accomplished. Cassius argued, “You cannot control these dregs of society except through fear,” and further, “Every punishment that is used to provide a negative example contains some element of injustice, but the individual injustices are outweighed by the advantages to the community as a whole” (Tacitus, *Annals*, 14.42.45; cited by Jo-Ann Shelton, ed., *As the Romans Did: A Sourcebook in Roman Social History*, 2nd edition [New York: Oxford University Press, 1998], 146).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Columella (ca. 4–70CE) contended for a master to care for his slaves with generosity and justice, for such treatment “contributes greatly to the increase of his estate” (*De re rustica* 1.8.18; cited by Longenecker in Thompson and Longenecker, *Philippians and Philemon*, 158).

<sup>5</sup> The following two laws (cited by Shelton, *As the Romans Did*, 184–185) represent a benevolent attempt to protect slaves from excessive punishment, and the fact that such laws were deemed necessary reflects the kinds of abuse slaves may have experienced. First, a law established during the reign of Claudius (41–54CE): “Certain slave-owners abandoned their sick and worn-out slaves on the island of Aesculapius [Greco-Roman god of healing] since they were loathe to provide them with medical care. Claudius ordered all slaves so abandoned to be granted their freedom. And if they recovered, they were not to be returned to the control of their master. He also decreed that anyone who chose to kill a slave rather than abandon him should be arrested on a charge of murder” (Suetonius, *The Lives of Caesars: Claudius* 25.2). Second, a law established during the reign of Hadrian (117–138CE): “Hadrian forbade masters to kill their slaves; capital charges against slaves were to be handled through official courts and execution, if necessary, carried out by those courts. He forbade a master to sell a male or female slave to a pimp or to a gladiator trainer without first showing good

the status quo by restoring the relationship between a master and slave to the way it was prior to the slave's offense, where the master rules over the slave and the slave obeys the master in all things. In other words, masters had an obligation to manage an errant slave in a way that would reinforce cultural conventions by reinscribing the relationship of the past, whether through harsh punishment or an act of mercy.<sup>6</sup>

Paul, however, writes to Philemon with a radical appeal, that Philemon must not only receive Onesimus back as a form of restoring their former relationship, but Philemon must welcome Onesimus back in an entirely new way in Christ, no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, as a beloved brother forever, as if Philemon were welcoming Paul himself (Phile 15-17). This represents a sharp departure from anything Philemon would have known from his own social and cultural context. Paul leans upon Philemon not only to forgive Onesimus's crimes and restore their former relationship, but even more importantly, to establish an entirely new and ongoing kind of relationship in light of their mutual membership in the body of Christ, where they are brothers with one another. The absolute uniqueness of this appeal forces us to consider both how Paul derived such a vision for their relationship and also how he could express confidence that Philemon would come to embrace and enact his vision.

Paul's vision for reconciliation can only be understood in light of his theological worldview as reoriented around Christ. N. T. Wright has demonstrated how Paul's letter to Philemon represents the apex of Paul's theology, as Paul draws upon the deep riches of his understanding of Christ and the church to reach an otherwise unimaginable conclusion about how Philemon ought to regard Onesimus. The letter to Philemon, in other words, arises from Paul's worldview, which is itself a Jewish worldview that has been reworked around the central premise of "the unity of the Messiah's people."<sup>7</sup> Further, Paul's worldview centers on the *crucified* Messiah, so that

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cause ... He forbade private prisons ... If a slave-owner was murdered in his own home, not all his slaves were to be tortured for evidence but only those who were close enough to have had some knowledge of the case" (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae* [Aelius Spartianus, *The Life of Hadrian*] 18.7-11).

<sup>6</sup> I am indebted to N. T. Wright for the concept of "reinscribing" a past relationship, which he demonstrates from Pliny's letter to Sabinianus (N. T. Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, [Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013] 3-74; Pliny's letter may be found in *Pliny the Younger Complete Letters*, trans. P. G. Walsh [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006], 9.21). One of Sabinianus's slaves has wronged Sabinianus and fled in fear to Pliny for help. Pliny appeals to Sabinianus to show mercy and to forgive this slave's offense rather than acting in anger, for the slave has shown genuine remorse, and if Sabinianus shows mercy now, he will be all the more justified in showing anger should the slave offend again. Pliny asks Sabinianus to reinscribe their previous relationship, not to effect any kind of new relationship. Wright acutely observes, "Here we see one of the most fundamental differences between Pliny and Paul. Pliny's appeal, we remind ourselves, reinscribed the social dynamics already present. Paul's subverted them" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 15).

<sup>7</sup> "The new symbolic praxis which stood at the heart of his renewed worldview was the unity of the Messiah's people. In letter after letter he spells it out in more detail, but here in Philemon we see it up close: in this case, the unity of slave and free. Paul puts everything he has into making this unity a reality" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 30, *emphasis his*).

the cross itself supplies what Wright calls the “theological substructure” for his pastoral appeal to Philemon.<sup>8</sup> When we see the world in the way Paul saw the world, through the lens of the crucified Messiah now reconciling all people – and indeed all of creation – to himself, then we can see how Paul came to his vision for how Philemon ought to reconcile with Onesimus.

But if Paul’s appeal could only be fully understood and appreciated in light of such an in-depth analysis of his worldview from all of his other letters, then we must marvel at the stark contrast between the enormity of this requisite theological substructure and the brevity of the letter he actually writes to Philemon. We know of Paul’s capacity to write long letters, where he carefully lays a theological foundation before building the practical exhortations upon it (e.g. Romans). But for Philemon, Paul presumes the foundation already to be laid and gives only basic and even cryptic instructions – not even commands (Phile 8–9) – and then expresses confidence that Philemon will act in accordance with Paul’s vision and do “even more” than Paul says (Phile 16), as if Philemon can see farther down the path of reconciliation than Paul articulates in his letter.

Paul’s presumption that Philemon shares his vision for reconciliation can only mean that Paul presumes Philemon already has access to his entire theological substructure.<sup>9</sup> Paul likely expects Philemon to have absorbed this substructure to some degree through their personal relationship and history together, but Paul’s appeal to Philemon regarding Onesimus is radical and pioneering, and the stakes are enormously high – Paul risks the fate of Onesimus upon Philemon’s compliance when he sends Onesimus to Philemon with the letter rather than first sending the letter and waiting for Philemon’s response.<sup>10</sup> Surely Paul would not entrust such a delicate and consequential situation to only a brief and suggestive letter to Philemon, when he desires such a revolutionary kind of Christian reconciliation. In fact, Paul’s confidence rests, at least in part, upon the theological substructure he has set forth in the accompanying letter to the Colossians.

### III. THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COLOSSIANS AND PHILEMON

The letter to the Colossians also arises from within a historical narrative that must be reconstructed from clues within the letter. For Colossians, this narrative centers upon Epaphras as the personal connection between Paul and the church in Colossae, for Paul himself has never been to Colossae (Col 2:1). In the opening thanksgiving (Col 1:3–8), Paul credits Epaphras

<sup>8</sup> Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 20.

<sup>9</sup> Wright also acknowledges Paul’s assumption that Philemon shares his mindset, though Wright does not consider why Paul could make this assumption: “What matters in reading the letter [to Philemon] is of course that Paul could assume that Philemon’s worldview had been turned inside out and upside down by the impact of the messianic announcement about Jesus” (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 32).

<sup>10</sup> Paul’s confidence in Philemon’s obedience was probably a major factor in Onesimus’s decision to voluntarily return to Philemon. We often overlook the risk Onesimus himself took in making such a journey prior to discovering how Philemon would react to his return.

with evangelizing Colossae and establishing the church to whom Paul writes, and Epaphras has now returned to Paul with a report regarding the present state of the church in Colossae. Paul further calls Epaphras both “one of you” (Col 4:12) and “our beloved fellow servant” (Col 1:7), suggesting Epaphras was native to Colossae but had also at some point been trained by the apostle Paul and had become Paul’s coworker. We may therefore speculate that Epaphras was commissioned to Colossae under the auspices of Paul’s mission, so that Paul feels some sense of ownership over the church there. He now writes in response to Epaphras’ report and out of a shared concern with Epaphras that the church grow in maturity (Col 1:9–10, 28–29; 4:12). Paul’s polemic in the letter may also suggest a false teaching in Colossae that needed to be addressed (Col 2:4, 8, 16–23). Thus Colossians, like Philemon, contains an independent narrative that sufficiently accounts for why Paul felt the need to pen the letter in the first place.

However, upon closer inspection, the two letters intersect at several points:

- (1) Onesimus is named in both letters and travels with both letters from Paul to Colossae (Col 4:9; Phile 12).
- (2) In Colossians, Paul describes Onesimus in a way that parallels very closely his instructions in the letter to Philemon. He introduces Onesimus alongside Tychicus, who carries the letter and whom Paul describes as “the beloved brother and faithful servant and fellow slave in the Lord” (*ὁ ἀγαπητὸς ἀδελφὸς καὶ πιστὸς διάκονος καὶ σύνδουλος ἐν κυρίῳ*; Col 4:7). Then, when Paul describes Onesimus, he retains the positive adjectives, but he eliminates the language of servant and slave to call him “our faithful and beloved brother who is one of you” (*τῷ πιστῷ καὶ ἀγαπητῷ ἀδελφῷ, ὅς ἐστιν ἐξ ὑμῶν*; Col 4:9). He thus introduces Onesimus in Colossians in the same way he appeals to Philemon to receive Onesimus, no longer as a “slave” (*δούλος*) but as a “beloved brother” (*ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν*; Phile 16).
- (3) The list of people who were with Paul and send their greetings overlap significantly. Both letters include Epaphras, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, while only Colossians mentions Jesus who is called Justus (Col. 4:10–14; Phile. 23–24).
- (4) Within the greetings, both letters give the most attention to Epaphras, who is from Colossae, has evangelized Colossae, but now remains with Paul at the time both letters were written. Thus, Paul feels it necessary to justify Epaphras’ ongoing absence from Colossae and to pass along Epaphras’ ongoing concern for the Colossian believers (Col 4:12; Phile 23).
- (5) Archippus appears at the end of Colossians and at the beginning of Philemon (Col 4:17; Phile 2), providing a point of transition and continuity between the letters.
- (6) Paul is in prison at the time of writing both letters (Col 4:3, 18; Phile 1, 22).

- (7) Both letters envision being read aloud in a gathering of the entire church in Colossae. Colossians explicitly addresses the church in Colossae (Col 1:2) and anticipates a public reading of the letter to the church (Col 4:16). The letter to Philemon is addressed not only to Philemon but also to Apphia, Archippus, and the entire church that meets in Philemon's house (Phil 1–2).<sup>11</sup> The letter itself contains not only personal instructions written to Philemon in the second person singular (Phile 3–20) but also has instructions for the church written in the second person plural (Phile 21–22). Because Onesimus is from Colossae (Col 4:9), we presume that Philemon's household was in Colossae, and therefore the church in Philemon's house was the church in Colossae. The church in Colossae was to hear both letters read.
- (8) More broadly speaking, Colossians includes various theological themes common to Paul but expressed in a manner particularly relevant to the situation in the letter to Philemon. This can be seen most explicitly in the household code, where Paul offers extended discussion on the relationship of slaves and masters (Col 3:22–4:1) but omits the extended discussion of husbands and wives in the Ephesian household code (Eph 5:22–33).

Taken together, this evidence suggests Paul composed both letters while he was in prison surrounded by the same members of his cohort and as he was preparing to send Onesimus to Colossae. Because we know his coworkers were constantly coming and going from him, we must conclude that both letters were written in close proximity of time; otherwise, his list of greetings would surely have changed to reflect the ongoing travels of his cohort. If so, and unless Onesimus made two trips to Colossae within that close proximity of time, then both letters must have been sent simultaneously to accompany Onesimus on his one trip from Paul to Colossae. The simultaneous occasion of these two letters has often been recognized but rarely fully appreciated.<sup>12</sup>

This reconstruction of the simultaneous occasion for both letters reveals the dramatic scene Paul envisioned unfolding in Colossae upon the arrival of his letters. When Tychicus and Onesimus arrived in Colossae, the news would quickly spread that a message from the apostle Paul himself has arrived. The church would gather in Philemon's house, where they would have immediately recognized Onesimus and realized his precarious situation. (In such a small town, how could a person *not* know what had transpired

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<sup>11</sup> For further discussion and examples of private letters written in anticipation of a public reading, see Adam Copenhaver, *Reconstructing the Historical Background of Paul's Rhetoric in the Letter to the Colossians*, LNTS 585 (London: T&T Clark, 2018), 51–54.

<sup>12</sup> For example, Wright calls Colossians “the companion piece to Philemon” and says, “we have to envisage the actual situation of Onesimus going back to Colossae (in the company of Tychicus, assuming this to be the same journey as that described in Colossians 4:7–9),” but then Wright explores at length the theological underpinnings of Paul's letter to Philemon without ever acknowledging the role the letter to the Colossians might have played in establishing this theology (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 33, 14).

between this runaway slave and the master in whose house they now sit?) Surely the atmosphere was nervous and perhaps even hostile as Tychicus stepped forward to read. First, he would read Colossians, with its theological lessons and guiding exhortations for the church. Second, he would read Philemon, with its pointed and personal appeal to Philemon regarding Onesimus. The first letter would establish the theological substructure, the second letter the pragmatic superstructure. Paul can be confident that Philemon will do even more than he asks, for he presumes Philemon will now be operating not only under the anticipatory gaze of his local church, but also and especially out of the theological vision set forth in Colossians.

#### IV. COLOSSIANS AS THE THEOLOGICAL SUBSTRUCTURE OF PHILEMON

We turn our attention now to the specific question of how Colossians supplies the theological substructure for reconciliation in Philemon. This is not to say that everything in Colossians is written directly toward the situation between Onesimus and Philemon, as if there are no further lessons to be gleaned from Colossians, nor is it to say that Colossians itself contains the entirety of Paul's theological substructure that has relevance for the letter to Philemon, as if his other letters have nothing to add. But it is to say that Colossians contains the essential substructure Paul deemed necessary for Philemon to come to embrace Paul's vision of reconciliation. We will consider how each unit of text within Colossians contributes to this theological substructure for reconciliation and thereby constructs a roadmap of sorts for reconciliation in the church today.

##### A. REMINDER OF HOW THEY RECEIVED THE GOSPEL AND FIRST TRUSTED IN CHRIST (COL 1:1–8).

Paul begins the letter with a customary greeting followed by a thanksgiving. He uses this thanksgiving as an opportunity to remind the Colossians of how they became Christians when they heard and received the gospel from Epaphras and thereby came to know the grace of God, and how the gospel has now demonstrated its vitality in and through them, as they have demonstrated faith in Christ and love for the saints. He thereby beckons them all to remember back to their first moments of faith in Christ and to acknowledge the transformation they have experienced as the gospel has grown and born fruit among them.

Everyone in the church has a salvation story, including even Onesimus and Philemon, whose stories are remarkably similar in that Paul will insinuate they both received the gospel not from Epaphras but from Paul himself (Phile 10, 19). In this way, Paul begins controlling the narrative by shifting the focus away from the immediate narrative of the present conflict and toward the foundational and shared narrative of faith in Christ. This makes the gospel central to what brings believers together even in conflict, and it unites believers around their shared experience of salvation in Christ through the gospel. What we have in common is much greater than what



tears apart. Paul, therefore, begins by reminding Onesimus and Philemon of the gospel they have received and of their mutual faith in Christ.

B. PRAYER FOR SPIRITUAL GROWTH, INCLUDING TRANSFORMATION  
IN KNOWLEDGE OF THE WILL OF GOD THAT THEY MIGHT  
PLEASE GOD IN EVERY WAY (COL 1:9–14)

Paul next describes specifically how he continually prays for the Colossians to grow in maturity by being filled with knowledge of God's will and spiritual wisdom that will in turn guide them toward living in a manner worthy of Jesus as they desire to please God in every way (1:9–10). His prayer insinuates their present lack of such wisdom and the need to exchange their current patterns of thinking and behavior for those patterns that will please God, even as they continue growing in knowledge of God and bearing the fruit of good works (1:11–12). Further, Paul reminds the Colossians that the strength they need to live this new way of life can come only from God, indicating the demanding nature of pleasing God in all things (1:11). At the same time, this life must be lived with an attitude of thanksgiving towards God for what they have received in Christ, including a future inheritance, deliverance out of the kingdom of darkness and into the kingdom of Christ, and the forgiveness of sins (1:12–13). These themes will re-emerge throughout the letter in the form of theological teaching and exhortation.

Before Paul lectures the church, or addresses Philemon and Onesimus directly, he leads them all in didactic prayer together, articulating through prayer the broad contours of his desired outcome for them. He desires that they will be filled with the spiritual wisdom they need in order to discern how they might manage this situation in a way that is worthy of the Lord Jesus and pleasing to God. His prayer faces honestly the difficulty of the path ahead and at the same time states unflinchingly the necessity of walking that path, and doing so with gratitude towards Christ, who has placed them on this path of spiritual growth when he led them out of darkness and into his kingdom. Paul's prayer for the church applies also to Onesimus and Philemon, for Paul anticipates that their need for spiritual wisdom as they seek to discern how what it would look like to please God in how they manage their conflict by walking the path of reconciliation.

C. REMINDER OF FOUNDATIONAL CATECHETICAL TEACHINGS  
ABOUT CHRIST AND ESPECIALLY HIS WORK OF  
RECONCILIATION (COL 1:15–23)

Paul's prayer finally gives way to the famous hymn about Christ (1:15–20) and its application to the Colossians (1:21–23). The hymn has often been recognized for its poetic and even hymnic characteristics as it extols the person and work of Christ.<sup>13</sup> The first half of the hymn presents

<sup>13</sup> F. F. Bruce, "Colossian Problems Part 2: The 'Christ Hymn' of Colossians 1:15–20," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141 (1984): 99–111; Matthew E. Gordley, *The Colossian Hymn in Context: An Exegesis in Light of Jewish and Greco-Roman Hymnic and Epistolary Conventions*, WUNT

Christ's work with regard to creation, where all things were made by, through, and for him, and all things are sustained by him, so that he has absolute supremacy and authority over all things (1:15–17). The second half of the hymn presents Christ's work with regard to redemption, where Christ, in whom the fullness of deity dwells, is the head of his body, the church, having accomplished reconciliation on a cosmic scale through his peacemaking work on the cross and having secured eternal pre-eminence by his resurrection from the dead (1:18–20).

Throughout the rest of the letter, Paul will repeatedly appeal to the hymn and develop arguments from it, suggesting that Paul presumes the Colossians are already familiar with it and affirm its veracity.<sup>14</sup> The hymn may even have been a catechetical device familiar to the Colossians through the teaching of Epaphras. In other words, he presumes they already have agreement regarding the truth of these statements, so that the hymn functions as the theological substructure to Colossians, and therefore is the bedrock foundation upon which the entire edifice of both letters stands.

Paul next draws upon the hymn's theme of reconciliation and he applies it directly to the Colossians (1:21–23; note the repetition of ἀποκαταλλάσσω in 1:20 and 22). He reminds them that they were themselves formerly enemies of God who were hostile toward God in their minds, but God reconciled them to himself through the death of Christ and aims to present them blameless before him. Thus, Paul invites the church in Colossae, including Onesimus and Philemon, into poignant reflection upon the foundational (even catechetical) teachings they have received about Christ, namely his peacemaking work on the cross and the cosmic reconciliation he has achieved and has already applied to all who believe. This theological teaching about reconciliation between believers and God provides an essential model for Paul's appeal for reconciliation between one believer and another. If Onesimus and Philemon can grasp the magnitude of the reconciliation they have received in Christ, then the implications for how they must reconcile with one another will not be difficult to infer.

#### D. ESTABLISHMENT OF THE GOAL OF THE MEDIATOR (COL 1:24–2:5)

Paul shifts now to a description of his own ministry, thereby explaining and validating why he is concerned for the Colossian church. He identifies himself as a servant who has been entrusted by God with the responsibility of making Christ known to all people (1:25–27). Toward this end, Paul labors to see all people grow to maturity in Christ (1:28–29) and he suffers for the sake of the church, even as Christ himself suffered (1:24). He then

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(Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 3–30; S. E. Fowl, *The Story of Christ in the Ethics of Paul: An Analysis of the Hymnic Material in the Pauline Corpus*, JSNTSup (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990), 31–45.

<sup>14</sup> For a full analysis of how the hymn provides the foundation for Paul's argumentation in Colossians, see Adam Copenhaver, "Echoes of a Hymn in a Letter of Paul: The Rhetorical Function of the Christ-Hymn in the Letter to the Colossians," *JSPL*, no. 4.2 (2014): 235–55.

affirms that he has labored in this way already for the Colossian church, for he wants to see their hearts strengthened and drawn together even as they grow together in Christ (2:1–3). He wants to see them stand firm in Christ, with order and unity, rather than being pulled apart by teachings contrary to Christ. Paul writes, therefore, as a servant, out of his duty to Christ, and with a willingness to personally suffer for the sake of the church.

This sets the stage for the personal nature of Paul's appeal to Philemon, where he will remind Philemon of how he has personally gained from Paul's sacrificial ministry so that he is now indebted to Paul (Phile 19). Further, Paul will offer to personally pay Onesimus's debt, taking upon himself the cost of reconciliation, even though he is a third party to the entire conflict (Phile 18). Paul thereby sets aside his own rights and takes upon himself the role of Christ on the cross. Even as Christ suffered for the sins of others in order to reconcile them to God, so also Paul will be willing to suffer for Onesimus and Philemon, that they might be reconciled to one another, and that the church thereby might be unified and strengthened.<sup>15</sup> He does not enter the fray from an authoritarian posture lecturing down to the congregation, but he operates as a servant of the church entrusted with a sacred duty from Christ for which he is willing to sacrifice his time, comfort, finances, and dignity.<sup>16</sup> He will likely disappoint both Onesimus and Philemon in his refusal to adjudicate the matter and take one side over the other, but Paul stands with Christ for the sake of the church, and he hopes that Onesimus and Philemon will receive his counsel more willingly when they know it comes from this posture of humble servitude on their behalf.

#### E. REMINDER OF WHAT THEY HAVE RECEIVED IN CHRIST (COL 2:6–15)

In Colossians 2:6, Paul finally gives his first imperative in the letter, and it is a broad injunction to live all of life under the lordship of Christ.

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<sup>15</sup> Martin Luther beautifully summarizes how Paul plays the role of the suffering Christ: "What Christ has done for us with God the Father, that St. Paul does also for Onesimus with Philemon. For Christ emptied himself of his rights (Phil. 2:7) and overcame the Father with love and humility, so that the Father had to put away his wrath and rights, and receive us into favor for the sake of Christ, who so earnestly advocates our cause and so heartily takes our part. For we are all his Onesimus's if we believe." (Martin Luther, "Preface to the Epistle of Saint Paul to Philemon," 1546 [1522] in *Luther's Works*, American Edition, vol 35.1, ed. E. Theodore Bachmann [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1960], 390; cited by Eduard Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon: A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon*, trans. William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris; Hermeneia [Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971], 188). Wright draws a similar comparison: "As Paul could say of Jesus, 'he loved me and gave himself for me', so also Onesimus might well say, in days to come, 'Paul loved me and gave himself for me'" (Wright, *Paul and the Faithfulness of God*, 33).

<sup>16</sup> It has been my experience that a mediator often loses a lot of dignity by engaging warring Christians, for both sides can quickly agree on this one point, that the person who stepped in to try to help them reconcile now shoulders the blame for all their problems! When everyone is angry, the mediator often becomes everyone's target, but Paul is willing to endure such shame for the sake of the church.

Paul gives an initial warning about false teaching (2:8), a theme he will develop at length in the next section (2:16–23), but for now he simply introduces the very real possibility of believers being taken captive and led away from Christ by vacuous teachings. He then theologizes at even greater length regarding what believers have already received and become in Christ, for the Christ who himself possesses the fullness of the divine nature in his being has given the fullness of his blessings to his people (Col 2:9–10). This fullness comes by virtue of union with Christ, in which the accomplishments of Christ have been applied directly to believers. Paul uses the imagery of circumcision and baptism, both of which signify membership in the people of God, to say they have died with Christ as a spiritual form of circumcision in which their flesh died, and their baptism represents their burial with Christ and resurrection with Christ to new life (Col 2:11–12). As a result, they have gone from being dead in their sins to be raised to new life in Christ, their sins having been forgiven (2:13), and they now belong to the Christ who has triumphed over the written code of the law and over the spiritual powers of evil (2:14–15).

Paul encourages the Colossian church, including Onesimus and Philemon, to reflect on what they have personally received in Christ. From an abstract, theological perspective, they can reflect on their union with Christ and the new life he has given them through the forgiveness of their sins and his victory in the cross. But from a more tangible, practical perspective, they can reflect on their baptisms which symbolize their union with Christ and membership in the body of Christ. Both Philemon and Onesimus now have stories of baptism to share, perhaps having both been baptized by the hand of Paul, and Paul surely intends for them to relate those stories to one another. Paul envisions their baptismal testimonies functioning as a heuristic tool leading them into deeper reflections regarding their shared union with Christ and the kind of lifestyle they must now live as those who belong to Christ. This adds an aquatic layer to the substructure Paul is building for their reconciliation with one another.

#### F. APPEAL TO LEAVE BEHIND THE OLD WAYS OF THE WORLD (COL 2:16–23)

Here Paul delivers specific warnings regarding false teachings that might lead the church astray, and each warning is followed by an explanation of how the false teaching runs contrary to Christ. First, Paul warns against being judged according to Jewish regulations, since such regulations were shadows of a former age pointing to Christ (2:16–17). Second, Paul warns against succumbing to the pressure to engage in worship rituals associated with pagan deities, for such worship is detached from Christ and disconnected from the body of Christ, through which all spiritual growth comes from God (2:18–19). Finally, Paul warns against living under the rules and patterns of the world in general, because Christians have died in Christ out of the world and because the world's systems are completely incapable of

solving the ultimate problem of the flesh (2:20–23), a problem which can only be resolved in Christ (contrast 2:13 with 2:21).

These warnings expose the fallacy of living according to any system of thought or behavior that runs contrary to Christ, that neglects the body of Christ, and that does not resolve the problem of the flesh. Paul thereby undermines the rules of the world that dictate how we manage life, whether those rules are spoken or unspoken, and whether they are social, cultural, philosophical, or religious. Philemon's culture had established rules directing him to reinscribe his past relationship with Onesimus through either punishment or forgiveness, and Onesimus's only options were to flee or to return and receive whatever justice Philemon deemed appropriate. But Paul appeals for Onesimus and Philemon to reject the rules of the world and develop instead a new kind of theological vision that penetrates through the veneer of the world's rules to see the underlying problem of the sinful flesh and the solution that is found only in Christ and the church.

#### G. APPEAL FOR A NEW MANNER OF LIFE IN CHRIST AND IN THE BODY OF CHRIST (3:1–17)

Paul, having previously repudiated false patterns of thinking and conduct (2:16–23), now moves to the development of proper patterns of thinking that lead to transformed conduct (3:1–17). He calls the Colossians to have a new mental disposition centered upon the resurrected and exalted Christ, with whom they have been raised to new life and in whom their present life now resides (3:1–4). Their entire way of thinking about life in this world must be directly informed by Christ, and this must necessarily lead to new patterns of conduct. They must mortify the behaviors that were suitable to their former way of living before they knew Christ, including sexual immorality, evil desires, greed, anger, slander, and lying (3:5–9). Paul further justifies this moral appeal on the basis of their new identity as the body of Christ who are called to be renewed into the image of Christ, and here he adds a direct implication, namely the irrelevance of the world's ways of identifying people, including the distinctives of slave and free (3:10–11).<sup>17</sup>

Here Paul calls upon Onesimus and Philemon to recognize the extraordinary work of renewal being experienced not only in their own life, but also in the life of the other person, who also is being renewed in knowledge into the image of Christ (3:10). The Onesimus of today who returns to Colossae is no longer the Onesimus of yesterday who left Colossae, and the Philemon of today who receives Onesimus back to Colossae is no longer the Philemon of yesterday who saw him leave. Both have a new identity

<sup>17</sup> Paul seems to be taking advantage of two possible interpretations of *ἄνθρωπος* as referring either to an individual person or to corporate humanity. In 3:9–10, Paul seems to have the individual sense in mind as he speaks of the transformation believers undergo in Christ by taking off the old person and putting on the new. But in 3:11, he says “where” (*ὅπου*, with reference to *ἄνθρωπος*) there is no Greek or Jew and so forth, suggesting a corporate humanity including people of multiple backgrounds. This shift seems abrupt to modern readers but was sensible in Paul's mind, for he could not conceive of separating what a believer has received individually in Christ from their membership in the corporate body of Christ.

in Christ and both are being transformed by Christ, and both therefore must no longer be regarded as the person they were yesterday. This opens the door to establishing a new relationship today based on the person they have become and are becoming.

Paul then exhorts the Colossians to put on new behaviors appropriate for God's people, including compassion, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another, and forgiving any and all complaints against one another (3:12–13). Further, they must put on love, which will bind the body together, and be ruled by peace, which will allow the church to truly be the *one* body they were called to be (ἐκλήθητε ἐν ἐνὶ σώματι; 3:14–15), a place where the Word of Christ dwells richly and where everything is done for the honor of the Lord Jesus with thankfulness to the Father (3:16–17). All of these exhortations call for personal transformation within the context of interpersonal relationships inside the body of Christ. Paul sets forth a vision of unity and he calls upon each believer to put on the characteristics that will allow them to become the unified body of Christ together in Colossae.

We can easily see how Paul's specific exhortations apply directly to both Onesimus and Philemon. Instead of anger and slander, they must put on meekness and patience, and they must forgive one another, no longer holding past grievances against each other. They must be bound together in love and ruled by peace as members together of the one body of Christ in Colossae. The unity of the body is not optional, and therefore Onesimus and Philemon do not have the option of prolonging their feud or of leaving or casting the other out of the body. Their only option is to piece together a new kind of loving and peaceful relationship with one another in the church.

Thus, Paul lays a clear and compelling foundation for his specific appeal for Philemon to forgive the debts of Onesimus and to receive him not as a slave, but as a full member of the body of Christ, a beloved brother. Surely this is the *least* Philemon could do if and when he comes to think and act in accordance with Paul's exhortations in Colossians 3. Paul has set a trajectory for Philemon and Onesimus to go much further in establishing this new kind of relationship, as they envision what it means to be equal members of the body of Christ, where there is no slave and free, where offenses are forgiven, and where love and peace reign. As Philemon and Onesimus embrace this vision and put it to work, they will soon discover why Paul is confident Philemon will do *even more* than he specifically asks (Phile 21).

#### H. APPEAL FOR ESTABLISHING A NEW WAY OF RELATING TO ONE ANOTHER WITHIN THE CONTEXT OF THEIR FORMER SOCIAL POSITIONS (3:18–4:1)

Paul's inclusion of a household code has often been treated as disconnected from the rest of Colossians, but when Colossians is read as the theological substructure undergirding the reconciliation of Onesimus and Philemon, the household code's essential role becomes clear. In the code, Paul gives instructions to specific groups of people based on their social role

within standard household structures. He gives brief instruction regarding marriage (3:18–19) and parenting (3:20–21), followed by extended instruction to slaves and masters (3:22–4:1). Christian slaves are to obey their masters in everything and prove themselves trustworthy and hardworking even when their master is not watching, since they serve the Lord Jesus in all things and will ultimately receive an inheritance from him. They should view their slave labor as a form of service to the Lord Jesus, wherein they control their inner disposition and can please him with their attitude even when they have no control over the duties they perform throughout the day. Christian masters, too, must function in light of their master in heaven, the Lord Jesus, and they must thereby treat their slaves with justice and fairness, recognizing that all wrongdoers – including masters – will be judged without partiality.

Here Paul sets a course for how Onesimus and Philemon will function in their daily labor at home. Their expressions of forgiveness and reconciliation on Sunday must carry over to their conduct on Monday. They must both continue within their former societal roles but now they must also be transformed by the lordship of Christ in how they discharge their respective roles. They will work alongside one another in the household as master and slave, while at the same time recognizing their new relationship with one another as brothers in Christ, who both serve Christ as their master. This is the essential substructure that will prevent them from simply reinscribing their former relationship.

For Onesimus, this means that he cannot simply return to his previous manner of being a slave. If, in fact, he has earned the reputation of being “useless” (Phile 11), he must now be useless no longer, but must live up to his nomenclature – Onesimus means “useful” (BDAG, 711) – by becoming the hardest working and most faithful slave he can possibly be. No more stealing or lying or lazing; he must toil for the Lord Jesus. Paul puts Onesimus on notice with these instructions, and at the same time he puts Philemon at ease, for forgiveness here does not permit Onesimus to continue repeating his former mistakes. He must become a new kind of slave in Christ.

And for Philemon, this means he cannot return to his former ways of managing his household. To whatever degree he has been exacting and difficult to please, placing unfair expectations upon his slaves and perhaps even running Onesimus down as “useless” (Phile 11), he must now set aside these former patterns of malice and slander and instead become the most just and reasonable master he can possibly be. He will treat his slaves in accordance with the virtues of Christ, who is also his master, and he will therefore employ compassion, kindness, humility, and patience as his trademarks. Now Philemon is put on notice and Onesimus is put at ease, for reconciling does not mean Philemon can continue in his past conduct toward Onesimus. He must become a new kind of master in Christ.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Many Christians today criticize Paul for failing to call for the abolition of slavery, as if Paul capitulated to his culture and took the easy way out with this household code and

I. APPEAL TO CONSIDER IMPLICATIONS  
FOR PUBLIC WITNESS (4:2–6)

Paul now charges the Colossians to become active participants in the mission of making the gospel known among those who do not yet know Christ. He first instructs the Colossians to pray for his own mission, as he discharges his duty (δεῖ; 4:3) to speak and to make known the gospel in new places as God opens doors (4:2–6). Then he commands the Colossians again to live out their lives in Christ with a kind of wisdom that shows due consideration “for those outside” (πρὸς τοὺς ἔξω; 4:5), that they might speak and act in a way that will create opportunities for the gospel wherein they can discharge their duty (δεῖ; 4:6) to make the gospel known in how they respond. These instructions orient the Colossian church toward those outside the church in such a way that they will use wisdom to discern how to conduct themselves in a manner that will be most advantageous for the gospel to reach outsiders in their own community. The world is watching, so act accordingly.

This adds one more layer of consideration for Philemon and Onesimus, who must recognize that the path they chart from this point forward will be scrutinized by those who are outside Christ to determine the value of the gospel itself. These folks who are outside Christ may very well be inside Philemon’s household, where they will watch every word and action of these two professed Christians, to see whether or not God’s grace has truly transformed their relationship with one another. In other words, nothing short of the salvation of their own friends, family, and neighbors is at stake in how they move forward with one another. If they do not reconcile, the gospel will be undermined; but if they reconcile and undergo the transformation Paul has set forth, the gospel will be validated and all around will want to hear what has precipitated such a radically new vision for masters and slaves. Paul raises the stakes on reconciliation and trusts Philemon and Onesimus to apply wisdom in determining the particular steps they will take.

J. PLACEMENT OF THEIR STORY OF CONFLICT  
AND RECONCILIATION WITHIN THE BROADER  
BODY OF CHRIST (4:7–18)

In the closing section of Colossians, Paul issues a series of greetings and final instructions that weave the Colossians into Paul’s broad network of churches and workers. He first introduces Tychicus as the letter carrier

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even with sending Onesimus back to Philemon. But when we read the household code in light of the situation between Onesimus and Philemon, we see that the household code’s instructions regarding slave and free reveal less about Paul’s posture toward slavery as an institution and more about Paul’s vision for specific Christian masters and slaves who live within a society where slavery is an institution. It would have actually been easier for Paul to simply call for the abolition of slavery as an institution than to expect Christian masters and slaves to learn to operate as brothers together in Christ. Such a reorientation of the slave-master relationship embeds the seeds that will invariably lead not only and merely to the abolition of slavery but also to the even more radical and elusive embracing of one another forever as equals without distinction.



who will have further information to share about Paul's personal situation, along with Onesimus (Col 4:7–9). In addition to his careful introduction of Onesimus as a brother rather than as a slave, Paul also indicates Onesimus will share in Tychicus' work of informing the Colossians about Paul (note the plural *γνωρίσουσιν* in 4:9, applying to both Tychicus and Onesimus). Second, he sends greetings from six of his coworkers, who represent a diversity of Jews and Gentiles working together for the gospel, indicating that his team reflects the ideal he has previously established (Col 4:10–14; cf. 3:11). Paul gives brief commentary about a few of these coworkers, especially Mark, whom Paul reminds the Colossians to welcome when he comes to them, and Epaphras, whom Paul affirms as laboring in prayer for the Colossians even when he is not physically present with them. Finally, Paul gives a series of rapid-fire closing instructions: the Colossians are to work together with the Christians in neighboring Laodicea to pass along his greetings and to swap letters with them (4:15–16), and they are to exhort Archippus to accomplish the ministry duties he has received in the Lord (4:17), and they are to remember Paul's chains even as they receive his greeting and blessing (4:18).

In this series of greetings and instructions, Paul effectively folds the Colossian church into the broader body of Christ, and Onesimus and Philemon along with them. Here Onesimus and Philemon realize they stand in good company in several ways. In the presence of Tychicus, they find that Paul has not left them without personal companionship and guidance as they forge a way ahead. In Mark, they find a person who has previously walked their path of conflict and reconciliation, for Mark was at one time in conflict with Paul but has now apparently reconciled and become a coworker with Paul, and Mark will surely tell the story when he arrives in Colossae. (The fact that Paul must remind the Colossians to actually welcome Mark demonstrates their awareness of his former estrangement.) In Epaphras, Onesimus and Philemon are reminded of the fervent prayers that stand behind them. In the churches of Laodicea, they will find close support and camaraderie. And in Archippus, they realize they are not the only ones with a difficult path to walk. Tychicus stands with them, Mark has gone before them, Epaphras stands behind them, and Archippus stands alongside them. In short, their experience, though difficult, is not unique, and they will one day have a story to share with other Christians about their own experience of reconciliation.

## V. CONCLUSION

Paul's response to the complicated interpersonal conflict between Onesimus and Philemon provides a model for reconciliation in the church today. For Paul, reconciliation between estranged Christians requires nothing less than the forging together of a new kind of relationship as beloved brothers and sisters in the body of Christ. This approach to reconciliation can, on the one hand, be set forth succinctly as a simple appeal to an aggrieved Christian (Phile 16), but on the other hand, this simple appeal

can only be fully understood and appropriated when it is received as the theological apex of an underlying theological substructure (Colossians). Thus, for Paul, the conflict between Onesimus and Philemon requires careful attention to theology centered upon who Christ is, what Christ has accomplished, who we have become in Christ, and how Christ calls us to live. This theological reflection in turn determines the path forward. It eliminates what might otherwise be viable options for managing the conflict, including abandoning their relationship with one another, whether by emancipation or separation, or simply reinscribing their former relationship, whether by punishment or merely forgiving the past offense. Instead, Paul's theological vision as set forth in Colossians allows for only one viable path, and it is the far more difficult path of Christian reconciliation whereby they will forgive past offenses and then forge a new kind of relationship as brothers together in the body of Christ. The theology of Colossians provides the rationale behind both Paul's appeal to Philemon and his confidence that Philemon will be obedient to do even more. As Onesimus and Philemon put into practice Paul's theological vision, their conflict will be transformed into an opportunity for profound Christian growth together.

Reconciliation, therefore, requires much more theological work than is often presumed, but it also presents a much richer opportunity for spiritual growth than is often realized. Many Christians today manage conflict with one another by harboring unresolved grievances toward one another, or by forgiving and releasing the grievances only to then reinscribe the relationship of the past, or by simply leaving the church and walking away from the relationship altogether. When we allow these approaches to be pervasive in the church, we deny Christians the opportunity to do the serious theological work that will result in their spiritual growth. Instead, Paul's theological vision of reconciliation requires interpersonal Christian conflict to be confronted with meticulous theological catechesis that will in turn provide the substructure for forgiving and establishing together a new relationship centered in Christ. As Christians today learn to think according to the theological substructure of Colossians, they will understand and heed the appeal to do what once seemed impossible – to forgive those Christians who have wronged them and to welcome them no longer as *others* but as beloved brothers and sisters in Christ.