

Paul Pleads for Onesimus (Philem 1-25) – An Enduring Example for every Christian

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Introduction

Paul's plea for Onesimus is contained in his letter to Philemon. This letter is the shortest of all the extant letters of St. Paul, being made up of only 335 words and 25 verses in the original Greek. Moreover, when further compared with those other letters written by Paul to communities and groups of communities, this letter is seen to be closely related to the ordinary private and personal letters of the time when it was written, in a way that those others are not. Yet, it is not just a private letter, as it is also addressed to other people (v. 2); and its subsequent inclusion in the Canon of the New Testament also strongly amplifies this fact. It is, thus, together with the entire Pauline corpus, an instrument for continuous missionary work.¹ It is, therefore, from this underlying perspective – as an instrument for continuous missionary work – that this reflection takes its bearing.

The major actors in the letter

The major actors in this letter are Paul (himself the writer), Philemon and Onesimus.

Paul describes Philemon in the introductory section as “our beloved fellow worker” (v. 1). As this introductory section consists mainly of greetings, a pattern characteristic of Paul in his letters, other names are also mentioned there. They are “Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier, and the Church in your house” (Philem 2). Of interest here is Archippus who is also mentioned as

¹ Cf. P.T. O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon* (Word Biblical Commentary, 44; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982) 265.

a member of the Church in Colossae (Col 4,17). The same is said of Onesimus (Col 4,9) for whom Paul now pleads. And since this Onesimus had run away from the house of Philemon, the conclusion naturally suggests itself that Philemon also lived in Colossae.² This Philemon, in his turn, may have been converted by Paul himself (cf. Philem 19), and has, indeed, proved to be a good and exemplary Christian (Philem 4-7). For this, Paul thanks God when he remembers him (Philemon) in prayers (v. 4), "because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and all the saints" (v.5). He also prays for the continuous fructification of his faith: "And I pray that the sharing of your faith may promote the knowledge of all the good that is ours in Christ" (v. 6).

The above observations suggest themselves from the text of this letter to Philemon as well as from the other NT texts already cited. Of particular stress here is that this letter was written principally to Philemon³ and not to Archippus as some scholars seem inclined to suggest. This last opinion is one which cannot be really substantiated from the text of this letter.

Who is Onesimus?

Much of what we know about Onesimus is from this letter to Philemon (cf. especially vv. 8-20). Onesimus was a slave whose master was Philemon. He had wronged his master, no one is sure of the precise nature of the wrong, and had run away from him. He had, somehow, come into contact with Paul – perhaps, he had sought refuge with him, Paul being then in prison in an unspecified location.

² Cf. O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 265-266.

³ On this, cf. also, R.E. BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997) 502; J.A. FITZMYER, "The Letter to Philemon", in R.E. BROWN – J.A. FITZMYER – R.E. MURPHY, ed., *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1994) 869 (869-870).

Although no one can say precisely what exactly Onesimus had done wrong before absconding from his master, as already indicated, it is generally believed that he had stolen his master's money and then fled.⁴ This belief, I believe, comes principally from the letter where Paul states his firm readiness to make restitution to Philemon for Onesimus: "If he has wronged you at all, or owes you anything, charge that to my account" (v.18).

However, by running to Paul, whom he knows is known to his master, Onesimus exhibits a very high and admirable intelligence. This is because, as Hanlon has observed, it was a very serious offence in those days for a slave to take flight. Special soldiers were saddled with the responsibility of tracking this fugitive slave down and returning him to the owner, who determined the appropriate punishment to be given him – be it crucifixion or the branding of "F" (*fugitivum/fugitive*) on the forehead.⁵ In any case, this strict security outfit was in no way deterrent enough, for it is known that in that Roman world of Paul's day, slaves did often run away. They often joined groups of brigands and robbers and attempted to disappear in the subcultures of large cities. Some tried to flee abroad where they might be absorbed into the workforce, while others sought asylum in a temple. But, on his part, Onesimus chose none of these methods of escape. Instead he, wisely, sought refuge with the imprisoned Paul.⁶ And, according to Bartchy, what Onesimus did was perfectly permitted under the then prevalent Roman legal system whereby a slave who got into some difficulty with his or her master

⁴ Cf. J.B. LIGHTFOOT, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon: A Revised Text with Introduction, Notes and Dissertations* (London: Hendrickson, 1995) 312.

⁵ K.J. HANLON, *Paul: Pastor of Communities today* (Middlegreen: St. Paul, 1991) 49.

⁶ O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 267.

would seek a respected third party to act as his advocate before his angry master.⁷

This clear intelligence may have helped Onesimus to strongly win Paul's love and sympathy. This was so strong that Paul, in his appeal to Philemon, had called himself the father of Onesimus: "I appeal to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment" (v. 10). He has, indeed, become Paul's very beloved child, "my very heart" (v. 11). All these have contributed to the moving nature of this letter which Paul wrote to Philemon.

The question of slavery

Slavery could generally be described as "the holding of human beings in bondage against their wills, usually for the purpose of forcing them to work without compensation... Most often, a slave is regarded as the legal property of his master and is deprived of human rights."⁸

As already hinted, Onesimus was a slave. His master was Philemon. Thus, to completely grasp the full implications of this letter to Philemon, one also has to seriously consider the question of slavery in the early Roman Empire in which this letter was written, as well as slavery in the NT and early Church from which standpoint the letter was also penned down.

Slavery in the early Roman Empire

Slavery in the early stage of the Roman Empire was not much different from what obtained in the other ancient and historically known lands, especially in the Ancient Near East. Hence, slavery was already an economic and social institution in the Fertile Crescent, particularly the ancient kingdoms of Babylon,

⁷ S.S. BARTCHY, "Philemon, Epistle to", in D.N. FREEDMAN, - *al*, ed., *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, Vol. V (New York: Doubleday, 1992) 307 (305-310).

⁸ A.S. FOLEY, "Slavery" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, Vol. X, 149 (149-153).

Assyria and Syria. Egypt was also highly involved. And since these kingdoms had much to do with biblical Palestine, slavery in Ancient Israel – as recorded in the OT – is better understood from a proper reference to the slave systems of these neighbouring peoples. The slave legislations in the Bible are recorded in Exod 21; Lev 25 and Deut 15. There are also other references to slavery in the other parts of the OT. One also finds extra-biblical data relating to Jewish slavery in that period in the Aramaic Papyri from the Jewish colony at Elephantine in Egypt, dated around the fifth century B.C.⁹ All these, put together, would help throw more light on the emphasis of this work at this stage, namely, slavery as it obtained in the early Roman empire.

In these ancient lands, the sources of slavery were varied. They included captives of war, even large segments of defeated civil populations, who were reduced to slavery. Traffic in foreign slaves was also part and parcel of the merchant's activity in the entire Ancient Near East. Voluntary sale of children by parents, particularly during times of economic stress and war, was also a common practice. Voluntary self-sale into slavery also obtained in the whole region; it was, indeed, the case among strangers as well. Often hunger and debt drove people to sell their children first into slavery, and then themselves. And finally, the insolvent debtor could be reduced to slavery by the person being owed. And although all the other sources of slavery were common in the entire region, what could be said to be the basic source of supply of slaves was the freeborn natives who defaulted as debtors.¹⁰

What has just been described equally applies, more or less, to Ancient Israel. Franco summarizes it as follows:

In ancient Israel the following were reduced to slavery: captives taken in raids (Amos 1,6.9), insolvent debtors (Amos 2,6; 2kings 4,1; Neh 5,5.8), convicted thieves unable to make retribution (Exod 22,2), young girls sold

⁹ I. MENDELSON, "Slavery in the OT", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol IV, 383 (383-391).

¹⁰ MENDELSON, "Slavery in the OT", 384-385.

by their fathers into conditional slavery (Exod 2, 21.7-11), and non-Israelite prisoners taken in war (2Chr 28,8-15). The captives taken in war might become Temple slaves, domestic slaves, or state slaves. It was customary to dedicate some of the captives to Temple service (Num 31, 25-47; Josh 9, 21-27); some became slaves in private households; others were made to work as slaves on state projects. The insolvent debtors mentioned above were sold into slavery to satisfy their creditors.¹¹

On the general near-hopeless status of the slave, Mendelsohn makes these observations:

Legally the slave was a chattel. He was a commodity that could be sold, bought, leased, exchanged, or inherited. In sharp contrast to the free man, his father's name was never mentioned; he had no genealogy, being a man without a name. As a piece of property the slave was usually, although not universally, marked with a visible sign, just as an animal was by a tag or a brand.¹²

If the slave was a female, more responsibilities accruing from her sex were also the case:

She was leased for work, given as a pledge, or handed over as part of a dowry. In addition to her routine duties as a maidservant, she was subject also to burdens peculiar to her sex. Ownership of a female slave meant, not only the right to employ her physical strength, but also, and in many cases primarily, the exploitation of her charms by the male

¹¹ H.C. FRANCO, "Slavery in the Bible", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. XIII, 280 (280-281).

¹² MENDELSON, "Slavery in the OT", 385.

members of her master's household, and the utilization of her body for the breeding of slave children. The highest position a female slave could achieve was to become a childbearing concubine to her master, and the lowest, to be used as a professional prostitute.¹³

Be the above as it may, a difference has to be noted in the OT status of slaves, especially regarding their release. In Israel, those who became slaves because of insolvency were to be so for a maximum of six years only (Exod 21,2; Deut 15,12). At the end of these, they were to be provided with the necessary means for returning to normal life (Deut 15,13-18). Also, a Hebrew who had sold himself into slavery on account of poverty was to be so till the Jubilee Year. But if his master was a foreigner, this slave could either buy his freedom back or demand to be redeemed by any of his relatives before the Jubilee Year.¹⁴

It is in the aforementioned exceptions that Israel became different from many other cultures in those ancient times – and this “difference” flowed into the NT, as we shall soon see. Two factors could be said to be responsible for this. The first is Israel's knowledge and belief in one God and one Creator, as well as the conviction that all human beings – slaves included – were made in the image and likeness of God (cf. Job 31, 13-15; Eccl 7,21-22). The second is the acknowledgement on the part of Israel that Yahweh, their God, led his people out of slavery in Egypt (Exod 5,15). By so doing, Yahweh has claimed all Israel as his servants (slaves), with the result that no one of them could naturally enslave another.¹⁵ Therefore, “a comparison of Israelite slave laws with those of neighbouring countries shows that in Israel there were

¹³ MENDELSON, “Slavery in the OT”, 385-386.

¹⁴ FRANCO, “Slavery in the Bible”, 280.

¹⁵ W. ZIMMERLI, “Slavery in the OT”, in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Supplementary Vol), 829-830 (829-830).

tendencies to humanize this institution, even though slavery itself was in no way questioned."¹⁶

What has been generally described of slavery above, with that exception of Israel's near uniqueness, was not very different, as already hinted above, in the early stage of the Roman Empire – that is, before the advent of Christianity. Foley describes it:

Just before the Christian Era, the enslavement of millions in the wars of Greece and Rome was in glaring contrast to the pride in freedom that Greeks and Romans had as part of their citizenship. The Romans developed the slave trade into a very profitable business. The Roman Empire was expanded by the cheap slave labour which built roads, manned galleys, erected cities, and carved monuments that proclaimed the grandeur of Rome.¹⁷

From the post-Augustan period, however, Rome began to rely increasingly on home-bred slaves to sustain its labour force, as against the earlier practice, mainly, of mass enslavements during war – with a single battle producing as many as 30,000 slaves.¹⁸

It is within this culture that Onesimus was a slave.¹⁹ It was this culture that was, however, positively influenced by the Advent of Christianity, as it was within the same empire that Christianity was born and began to spread. Thus, partly on account of the theories of Stoicism, which had begun to wield some influence in the first century before the Christian era, and, definitely, on account of Christianity, the legal status of slaves improved a lot toward the end of the Roman Republic and in the Roman Empire:

¹⁶ ZIMMERLI, "Slavery in the OT", 829.

¹⁷ FOLEY, "Slavery", 150.

¹⁸ W.G. ROLLINS, "Slavery in the NT", in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (Supplementary Vol), 830 (830-832).

¹⁹ And this particular name "Onesimus" was very commonly borne by slaves during this time (cf. LIGHTFOOT, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 310).

The powers of masters were reduced by law. It was forbidden to deliver a slave to wild beasts without a formal judicial sentence, and any master who mistreated a slave was obliged to sell him. An ailing or aged slave who was abandoned by his master was freed *ipso facto*. By degrees, the magistrate replaced the master as judge in slave proceedings.²⁰

Yet, the general societal structure in the empire still remained highly stratified:

Society in the provinces of the Roman Empire where Paul conducted missionary activity was highly stratified. At the upper level would have been the Romans appointed by the Senate or the emperor to administer the province politically, fiscally, and militarily; next would come the local privileged class (through heredity or money); then the small landowners, shop owners, and craftspeople. These would have been followed in social rank by the freedmen and freedwomen who had been released from slavery through the action of their masters or by their own purchase of freedom; and then at the bottom would have been the immense number of slaves with whose existence the economic welfare of the Empire was intimately involved.²¹

It is then the generally healthy influence from Christianity on the Roman Empire which would be the object of greater examination in what follows.

²⁰ C. VERLINDEN, "Slavery (History of)", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol XIII, 282 (282-287).

²¹ BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 503.

Slavery in the NT and Early Church

From what has been described so far, one is not left in doubt that slavery "is a conspicuous feature of the world in which the NT emerges."²² Indeed, Williams writes: "The Church was born into a world in which slavery was universally accepted as a social and economic institution pertaining to the very structure of society, just as today the system of remunerated employment is taken for granted."²³

Hence, Jesus made a strong case against every form of oppression and subjugation, right from the inception of his earthly ministry. In the synagogue at Nazareth (cf. Luke 4,16-21), he programmatically identified himself and his mission with Isaiah 61,1-2, thus:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Luke 4,18-19).

With the foregoing words, Jesus proclaimed his purpose to liberate captives, slaves and the oppressed. Therefore, in line with OT thought which has been amply treated above, Jesus laid down for all future Christians the ideal that no man should hold another in slavery: "It was part of His mission as Saviour to bring hope to the oppressed and the enslaved. This hope and this promise of freedom, together with the spiritual and the supernatural promises of salvation, led many slaves to look to Christianity as their hope for the future."²⁴

²² ROLLINS, "Slavery in the NT", 830.

²³ C. WILLIAMS, "Slavery and the Church", in *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol XIII, 281 (281-282).

²⁴ FOLEY, "Slavery", 150.

That notwithstanding, one observes it here that on account of the generalised nature of slavery in the society in which the early Church was born, the presence of slaves in the Church was taken for granted. It receives no special notice in the NT except when servile status brings up a problem, like in this case of Onesimus or when there were difficulties between slaves and their masters (cf. Eph 6,5-9; Col 3,22-41; 1Tim 6,1-2; Tit 2,9-10, 1Pet 2,18-25). Thus, "though maltreatment of slaves is repudiated in the NT, the existence of the institution of slavery itself is not."²⁵ Therefore, it could be said that what was achieved in the NT is that, in line with OT thought and the programmatic focus of Jesus already seen, consistent principles were preached which eventually logically led to the destruction of slavery. In other words, "in the NT the foundations were laid for a slow but effective social revolution that eventually caused the abolition of slavery in Christian countries."²⁶

Fundamentally, then, the NT emphasizes the acceptance of the slave as a brother (Philem 16), because in Christ the slave and the free person are one (1Cor 12, 13; Gal 3, 28; Col 3,11). No one should abuse slaves (Eph 6,9; Did 4,10; Barn 19,7), but all should treat them with equality and fairness (Col 4,1). On the other hand, the slave is to be conscientious in performing his duties. He should not fawn (Col 3,22), or act insubordinately or in a thieving manner (Tit 2,9.20), neither should he misuse his brotherly relationship with his master to be an occasion for disrespect (1Tim 6,2).²⁷ In short, slaves are not to be impatient with their situation, but they should accept it in the realization that they have a higher life in Christ Jesus (1Cor 7,21-24).

It becomes understandable, then, that as the Church gradually became institutionalized in the Roman Empire, converts were encouraged to free their slaves. This they did willingly.²⁸ As the slavery situation gradually began to weaken, some former slaves even rose to prominence in the Church: "At least two former

²⁵ ROLLINS, "Slavery in the NT", 831.

²⁶ FRANCO, "Slavery in the Bible", 281.

²⁷ ROLLINS, "Slavery in the NT", 831.

²⁸ FOLEY, "Slavery", 150-151.

slaves became popes: St. Pius I (140-155) in the middle of the second century and St. Callistus (217-222) in the third century.”²⁹

Paul's emphasis in the letter to Philemon

The structure of this letter is a simple but interesting one: Paul introduces it with greetings (vv. 1-3) followed by thanksgiving (vv. 4-7). This leads into the main body of the letter where Paul develops his plea for Onesimus (vv. 8-20). The letter then concludes with final greetings (vv. 23-24) and benediction (v. 25).³⁰

The powerfully persuasive manner in which this letter is written easily strikes one, as one considers its tactical structure as well as the words employed by Paul to bring forward his request. He seems to have weighed each word, in order to ensure the freedom of Onesimus.³¹ Hence, the thanksgiving paragraph (vv. 4-7) prepares the ground for the request that follows. In this section, he emphasizes mostly the aspect of “love” for which Philemon had been noted, well-framed to capture the fancy of Philemon. One notes the consecutive use of the word “Love” (*agapē*) beginning right from the very first verse: “our beloved fellow worker” (*tō agapētō kai sunergō hēmōn*, v.1); “I hear of your love” (*akouōn sou tēn agapēn*, v.5); deriving joy and comfort “from your love” (*epi tē agapē sou*, v. 7); Paul prefers to appeal to him “for love’s sake” (*dia tēn agapēn*, v. 9) and not to make him act out of compulsion. This “love strand” beautifully connects these three initial parts of this letter, with maximum effect.

Paul also structures the body of the letter (vv. 8-20), in which he actually intercedes for Onesimus, so that the reader is gradually led to the main request. He briefly describes his situation (vv. 8-12) and indicates the basis of his appeal, stressing how dear Onesimus has become to him. Hence, he writes in v.10: “I appeal

²⁹ FOLEY, “Slavery”, 151.

³⁰ Cf. FITZMYER, “The Letter to Philemon”, 870; O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 268.

³¹ C. THOMAS, *Reading the Letters of St. Paul: Study, Reflection and Prayer* (New York: Paulist, 2002) 75.

to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become in my imprisonment" (*parakalō se peri tou emou teknou, hon egennēsa en tois desmois, Onēsimon*). So, if Onesimus is Paul's son, he becomes by that fact Philemon's brother – as Philemon owes his conversion to Paul as well (v. 19). Paul then looks back (vv. 13-14) to the time when the slave came to him seeking refuge, and tells why he did not keep Onesimus (cf. vv 15-16) – out of respect for Philemon himself. It is only at the conclusion of this main section that Paul states the very content of his request for the first time: "receive him as you would receive me" (*proslabou auton hōs eme*, v. 17), assuring to restore whatever Onesimus may have done wrong (v. 18).³²

Furthermore, in referring to Onesimus as "a beloved brother" (*adelphon agapēton*, v. 16), Paul addresses him exactly as he does Philemon (cf. vv. 7 and 20: *adelphe*, brother). In other words, Onesimus has also been incorporated into the body of Christ. As a result of this, the relationship of slave owner to slave within the existing structures is now to be conducted in the light of those who belong to the same Lord. The relationship between the two men is now deepened, thereby transcending the relationship of master and slave.³³

Brown underlines the emphasis here:

Notice how much is being asked: not simply that Onesimus escape punishment that could legally be imposed, not simply that Onesimus be freed (which we might have expected as a more noble gesture), but that Onesimus be moved to the plane of the Christian relationship: "Receive him as you would receive me" (v. 17). The request is a dramatic example of Paul's way of thinking in fidelity to the change of values brought about by Christ: His antinomy is not simply slave and free, but slave and new creation in Christ.³⁴

³² Cf. O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 268, 290-291.

³³ Cf. O'BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 297-298.

³⁴ BROWN, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 505.

Having, thus, beautifully and tactfully stated his request, Paul now concludes, requesting, somewhat personally, "Refresh my heart in Christ" (*anapauson mou ta splanchna en Christō*, v.20), for it is to Christ that all – Paul, Philemon, Onesimus and, indeed, everyone – owe their very being and existence. Paul's approach here is, indeed, a deliberative rhetorical masterpiece.³⁵

Reflection

Paul's masterfulness in this letter commends it a lot: "Nowhere is the social influence of the Gospel more strikingly exerted; nowhere does the nobility of the Apostle's character receive a more vivid illustration than in this accidental pleading on behalf of a runaway slave."³⁶ Consequently, that he succeeded with Philemon in his plea for Onesimus, is widely believed by most scholars, hence, the preservation of this letter which "was like a 'spiritual nuclear bomb' in a Roman society based on slavery, and is relevant to our century which has seen slavery on a vast scale in gulags and concentration camps."³⁷ From this letter, then, the Christian is bound to learn much.

One begins with the issue of slavery which, as already shown, is a practice known right from the early times in many cultures. Even though this was the case in the past, it has now been largely overtaken, both from the standpoint of Christianity and that of the civil and civilized society. Yet, this dehumanizing practice still survives in one form or another, particularly in the caste systems, in some places – especially in India and Nigeria.

In the Igbo speaking areas of Nigeria, for instance, vestiges of this obnoxious practice and its mind-bugging discriminatory influences may still be found in the *Osu* (slave) and the *Nwa Diala* (free born) practice, the full explanation of which is, however,

³⁵ Cf. S.S. BARTCHY, "Philemon, Epistle to", 306-307.

³⁶ LIGHTFOOT, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 303.

³⁷ HANLON, *Paul: Pastor of Communities today*, 47.

beyond the scope of this article.³⁸ Chinua Achebe once painted the ugly picture between a Church minister and his new converts, the latter of whom strongly protested against the in-coming of two *Osu* outcasts to worship with them – and one of them (protesters), against all explanations, left out-rightly for good!³⁹

The situation today, thanks be to God, is certainly no more as acute as the one just described above. Yet, as already pointed out, vestiges of it still remain, still causing serious concern. Some important newspaper publications, for instance, bear this out. Enenezer Edohasim, the Features Editor of the *Daily Champion*, cautions that although the situation has seriously improved – thanks to the influence of religion – discrimination still remains in “the issue of being made kings, or title holders in their communities or in most cases, having the opportunity to marry from the *diala* stock.”⁴⁰ Edohasim goes on to narrate the recent sad and painful story of one *Ijeoma* and *Davidson* who had become friends in the United States but whose almost concluded marriage arrangements had to be catastrophically called off at the last minute here at home – all because *Ijeoma* was discovered to be an *Osu*, to the vehement distaste of *Davidson’s* family! This heart-rending story becomes, regrettably, reminiscent of a similar one earlier narrated in 1960 by Chinua Achebe in his *No Longer at Ease*, regarding the almost accomplished marriage between *Obi* and *Clara*.⁴¹ How many years ago!! In the same light, a similar article by Leo Igwe⁴² and its

³⁸ For the full and, indeed, studied description of the *Osu* and *Nwadiala* practices, cf., for instance, J.C. MGBOBUKWA, *Alusi, Osu and Ohu in Igbo Religion and Social Life* (Nsukka: Fulladu, 1996), as well as, J.N. OKAFOR, *The Challenge of Osu Caste System to the Igbo Christians* (Onitsha: Veritas, 1993).

³⁹ Cf. C. ACHEBE, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958) 111.

⁴⁰ E. EDOHASIM, “Osu Caste: Burden Igbo must cast away”, in *Daily Champion*, Tuesday, February 23, 2010, 13 (12-13).

⁴¹ Cf. C. ACHEBE, *No Longer at Ease* (London, Heinemann, 1960) 60-62.

⁴² Cf. L. IGWE, “Nwadiala caste and human rights abuses”, in *The Guardian*, Wednesday, June 16, 2010, 52.

rejoinder by Luke Onyekakeyah⁴³ all help to buttress the fact that much more still remains to be done regarding this issue. Hence, Edohasim concludes:

The fact remains that *osu* caste was a human creation, and is still a social problem in Igbo land, no matter how some people tried to play it down. Any system which could derail the plans by two lovers to marry themselves, on account of social stratification, is definitely anti-human, and therefore, should be eradicated without further delay. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights recognized that all human beings are born equal and should not be discriminated against on the basis of sex, colour, religion, sect or social status.⁴⁴

Thus, in line with this just mentioned submission, Paul's exemplary treatment of Onesimus, the enduring emphasis of the Christian Religion as well as civility itself, all urge us to practically struggle to deal a lasting blow to this nefarious, pagan, primitive and uncivilized mode of existence. The Eastern Nigerian House of Assembly which officially abolished this despicable practice with effect from 10th May, 1956, had already, thereby, given us a laudable example and the initial driving impetus.

Next is the issue of "service." From what has been seen so far, it is clear that all forms of maltreatment and subjugation of human beings by others are repudiated in the NT. But to "serve" is not. And by "serving" here is meant the practice of one working under the direction of another "for their own good and for the common good of all."⁴⁵ Paul's pleading for Onesimus also throws light on this assertion. And, in fact, in the Christian dispensation, work and service are, indeed, noble activities which are in keeping with true human and Christian dignity. Hence, Christ's coming on earth was to do the will of his Father (cf. John 4, 34; 6, 8; Heb 10,7.9), being even obedient unto the death of the cross (Phil 2,8)

⁴³ Cf. L. ONYEKAKEYAH, "Nwadiala/Osu Caste is practically dead", in *The Guardian*, Tuesday, June 22, 2010, 73.

⁴⁴ E. EDOHASIM, "Osu Caste: Burden Igbo must cast away", 13.

⁴⁵ WILLIAMS, "Slavery and the Church", 282.

out of love for his eternal Father and for mankind.⁴⁶ For although he is Lord, he condescended to the status of a servant (Luke 22, 27), as he came among men not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10, 45).

In our own culture today, people from less privileged backgrounds often “serve” and help out in other, perhaps, better privileged, families and business enterprises. In families, they are normally locally called “house helps” while in businesses, “apprentices.” Sometimes, they are also officially paid. In general, however, the understanding is that these dependents grow up well in these environments in order to become better and more productive individuals later in the society. Often it is happily so. At other times, it is but tales of woe, acrimony and regret.

Paul’s pleading for Onesimus as well as Philemon’s treatment of the same young man challenge us strongly. Tradition has it that Onesimus may later have become the Bishop of Ephesus and that it is he, perhaps, who had ensured that this letter to Philemon was included in the NT Canon.⁴⁷ Similarly, in this part of the world, most people who later become important in society begin rather humbly. Just two examples would suffice: our present President, Mr. Goodluck Jonathan, on the one hand, and our dear Blessed Iwene Tansi, on the other.

During the launching of his presidential campaign in September 2010 at the Eagles Square, Abuja, Jonathan gave the nation a glimpse of who he is and how he has arrived where he is today. He began it this way:

I was not born rich, and in my youth, I never imagined that I would be where I am today, but not once did I ever give up. Not once did I imagine that a child from Otuoke, a small village in the Niger Delta, will one day rise to the position of President of the Federal Republic of Nigeria. I was raised by my mother and father with

⁴⁶ WILLIAMS, “Slavery and the Church”, 282.

⁴⁷ Cf. O’BRIEN, *Colossians, Philemon*, 268, 268.

just enough money to meet our daily needs.⁴⁸

The president then continued:

In my early days in school, I had no shoes, no school bags. I carried my books in my hands but never despaired; no car to take me to school but I never despaired. There were days I had only one meal but I never despaired. I walked miles and crossed rivers to school every day but I never despaired. Didn't have power, didn't have generators, studied with lanterns but I never despaired. In spite of these, I finished secondary school, attended the University of Port Harcourt, and now hold a doctorate degree. Fellow Nigerians, if I could make it, you too can make it!⁴⁹

That is our president, and I mean, the president of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, at this time of writing!

The case of Blessed Iwene Tansi, I believe, does not need much commentary – his humble birth and background in Aguleri in Anambra State, is well known.⁵⁰ His Canonisation is simply there on course. And when finalized – for which we all keep praying – he becomes, by God's grace, the first Nigerian Saint!

What this write-up emphasizes here, then, is that it took the merciful, loving and considerate hands of Paul and Philemon to make the near hopeless Onesimus great. All of us Christians, and, indeed, all men and women of goodwill, could be other Pauls and Philemons to the less privileged, especially those under our care – be they our children or other dependents.

⁴⁸ Cf. "Jonathan's declaration speech", in *The Guardian*, Newspaper Online, Saturday, September 18, 2010, <http://www.ngrguardiannews.com>

⁴⁹ Cf. "Jonathan's declaration speech".

⁵⁰ For more on the life of Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi, cf. E. ISICHIE, *Entirely for God: The Life of Michael Iwene Tansi* (London: Macmillan, 1980) and H.M. ANISIOBI, *Life of Blessed Iwene Tansi: Parish Priest, Monk and Spiritual Leader* (Enugu: SNAAP, 2007), among others.

Paul has also an important message for leaders in this letter, especially Pastors of souls. The brief exegetical and philological analyses already undertaken above, helped to highlight Paul's very diplomatic and tactical approach in dealing with the sensitive issue of the slave Onesimus. Although he was quite acquainted with Philemon as a person, he never took him for granted. Rather, he gave him all the respect that could be possible. In fact, the effort on the part of Paul to positively dispose Philemon to his request, is evident at every point of that letter. The implication from Paul, then, is: The manner of approach in any undertaken matters a great deal. In other words, one can make or mar one's undertakings, not because one lacks the right intention or goodwill thereto, but on account of one's approach. Examples abound here and there is no point giving any – as one does not need to go far to see one. It suffices to say that the need for this emphasis in our pastoral work is called for today, more than ever, as our society is becoming more complex and sophisticated with each passing day.

Conclusion

Paul's letter to Philemon, as already indicated, is the shortest in the NT. Perhaps, on account of this, not very much seems to be said about it. Yet its message and appeal remain valid and compelling at all times, especially in "its significance as exhibiting the attitude of Christianity to a widely spread and characteristic social institution of the ancient world."⁵¹ It is in this understanding that this article has tried to delve into the legacy which Paul has bequeathed to both the Church and humanity in that seeming simple letter – indeed, the voice of the voiceless!

Thus, although that letter to Philemon tows the line of the entire NT in not dealing headlong with the issue of slavery regarding its immediate abolition, it drastically deals with that institution by actually removing its fibre, this time, in the particular case of Onesimus. It does so by emphasizing, as does the entire

⁵¹ LIGHTFOOT, *St. Paul's Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, 319.

NT, the centrality of the essential brotherhood of all believers in Christ – a fact which makes every other relationship, including slavery itself, secondary. And slavery was abolished! This abolition also finally included that of the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade which touched much of West Africa and whose history many of us may still be acutely aware of.⁵² It is, thus, the mind of this article that remain today in any of our cultures in any of its forms. Christianity has come to stay. Our civil society has also laudably evolved. And as we celebrate the "year of Faith" during this time, such issues that have been raised in this paper summon us to serious and deep reflection regarding our Christian faith and praxis. With the apostles, therefore, we keep praying to our Lord to please "increase our faith" (Luke 17,5), so that we could always more relevantly influence and improve our society.

⁵² For some aspects about this history, cf. FOLEY, "Slavery", 150-153; M.H. RICE, "Slavery, United States", in *The Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home*, Vol X, 153-156.

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