

PAUL'S USE OF RHETORIC IN PHILEMON:  
BACKGROUND AND STRUCTURE

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by

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The Mediterranean world was heavily influenced by Greek culture and thought. One caveat of this influence was Greek philosophy. With rhetoric having Greek philosophical origins it is assumed by many that Aristotelian rhetoric was understood and used throughout the Greco-Roman world.<sup>1</sup> This influence is clearly reflected in the writings of the apostle Paul.<sup>2</sup>

Consideration of first century rhetoric has exploded in the last 45 years. The search for the true context and interpretation of many, if not all New Testament writers, has brought a keen awareness to the role of rhetorical styles.<sup>3</sup> This is not a new consideration. Studies on Pauline rhetoric can be traced back as far as 426 AD with Augustine's *de Doctrina Christiana* in the fourth and final book of his series.

In contemporary scholarship, this line of rhetorical criticism has been furthered by the work of G.A. Kennedy and a host of others. Kennedy has attempted to bring classical rhetorical tools to the table to accomplish criticism relevant to the first century.

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<sup>1</sup> Burton L. Mack, *Rhetoric and the New Testament*, (Dan O. Via ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990), 25-28.

<sup>2</sup> F. Forrester Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Harvard Theological Review* 71: 21.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Witherington, "Rhetorically Writing – The New Testament authors used every tool of the trade to influence their listening audiences," *Biblical Review* 18 (December 2002): 14.

## Epistles vs. Speeches

Another concern that is posited is that there is a strong difference between epistles and speeches.<sup>4</sup> Rhetoric was designed for use in persuasive public speeches. In the Greco-Roman world, rhetoric and epistolography were two different things with entirely different forms.<sup>5</sup> Whereas Kennedy believes the structures are quite similar.<sup>6</sup>

Philemon is recognized as an epistle, but even as such it does not precisely follow epistolary form. Church notes incongruities between Philemon and recognized epistolary form. He and others maintain that the bodies of Paul's letters are too long to fit an epistolary form. So what are we left with? Church believes that Paul's letters are a different breed and can best be understood through a variety of methods, including rhetorical criticism.<sup>7</sup>

Paul's responsibility in supporting the churches ranged from Rome to Asia Minor. With many regions, cities, and specific churches to shepherd. Paul's letters could serve, "effectively as a speech ...in absentia, since the

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<sup>4</sup>Jeffrey Weima, "What Does Aristotle Have to do With Paul? An Evaluation of Rhetorical Criticism," *Calvin Theological Journal* 32 (1997): 459.

<sup>5</sup> Dean Anderson, *Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul*, (Kampen, The Netherlands: Pharos, 1996), 100-102.

<sup>6</sup> George A. Kennedy, *New Testament Interpretation Through Rhetorical Criticism*, (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984), 141.

<sup>7</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 18.

letter would be read aloud to the assembled company of Christians.”<sup>8</sup> Paul utilized letters to convey the message he would publicly proclaim were he able to be there in person. Due to this facet of Paul’s ministry, his writing was more than just epistolary. This is backed by the words of Paul himself (Philemon 1:21, 22, 2 Cor. 13:10, and 1 Tim. 3:14, 15). It is evident that Paul’s writing shows “familiarity with recognizable epistolary conventions and rhetorical techniques reminiscent of oral argumentation.”<sup>9</sup>

Weima and Harding take issue with this, saying that the textual evidence is against Paul using rhetorical tools even if he knew them.<sup>10</sup> According to Weima, verses like 2 Cor. 10:10 “his bodily presence is weak and his speech of no account.” This statement is horribly out of context. The verse begins with “For some say, ‘His letters are weighty and forceful.’”<sup>11</sup> Weima has concern for using speech tools to critique letters. He does the exact same thing by applying a report of Paul’s physical presence as evidence

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<sup>8</sup> Steve Walton, “What Has Aristotle to do With Paul? Rhetorical Criticism and 1 Thessalonians,” *Tyndale Bulletin* 46 (November 1995): 249.

<sup>9</sup> Clarice J. Martin, “The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul’s Letter to Philemon (Verse 18),” *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, ed. Duane F. Watson, no.50, 321-337. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 325.

<sup>10</sup> Mark Harding, “The Classical Rhetoric of Praise and the New Testament.” *The Reformed Theological Review* 45. no.3 (September – December 1986): 79,81.

<sup>11</sup> I will be using the New International Version unless otherwise noted.

of why Paul would not have used rhetoric in his letters, while the first part of the verse contradicts Weima's very application.<sup>12</sup>

Several significant challenges have arisen in regard to the theory of widespread use of rhetoric in the first century and Paul's likelihood of having received such training.<sup>13</sup> Some scholars argue that Paul would have never learned rhetorical theory in his Pharisaical training. In light of Aristotle's comments we must remember that not all master painters gain their skills from formal education.

The presence of rhetorical devices in Paul's letters is clear. Olinger notes on Philemon, "Paul's rhetorical structuring of his letter is deliberate and meaningful as it drives the reader to the heart of his theological argument."<sup>14</sup> If this is the case then rhetorical considerations are important aspects of study. They are important because they allow us insights into the interplay between the writer and the reader, which is a very important consideration in Philemon. "Rhetorical criticism changes the long-established perception of authors as

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<sup>12</sup> Jeffrey Weima, "What Does Aristotle Have to do With Paul? An Evaluation of Rhetorical Criticism," 465-466.

<sup>13</sup> Dean Anderson, Ancient Rhetorical Theory and Paul, 249-250.

<sup>14</sup> Olinger, Danny. "A Redemptive-Historical Consideration of Philemon," *Kerux* 12 (May 1997): 23-24.

active and readers as passive or receptive by showing the rationale for readers as active, creative, productive. Moreover, rhetorical criticism changes the status of readers to that of judges and critics to that of validators."<sup>15</sup>

Rhetorical Criticism, a Warning:

One point scholars have seemingly missed in regard to rhetorical criticism itself is that Aristotle gave warning not to view rhetoric as a science. Aristotle's work on rhetoric was fittingly titled "The Art of Rhetoric". He saw rhetoric as an art form. One does not enter an art gallery with a ruler, a protractor, and a calculator in order to judge the quality of an artist's work. Similarly, a critic cannot use a mathematical equation to quantify artistry. In a like manner, Aristotle comments,

"But in proportion as anyone endeavors to make of Dialectic or Rhetoric, not what they are, faculties, but sciences, to that extent he will, without knowing it, destroy their real nature, in thus altering their character, by crossing over into the domain of sciences, whose subjects are certain definite things, not merely words."<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Wilhelm Wuellner, "Where is Rhetorical Criticism Taking Us?," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 49: 461.

<sup>16</sup> Aristotle 1.4.5-7.

We must proceed with caution and humility in rhetorical criticism and hold firm to the ancient belief that this is not meant to be a science but an art.

Additionally rhetorical examination helps us understand Paul's intent in writing.<sup>17</sup> The philosophical framework of first century culture provides a context by which we can more accurately understand a persuasive message from that time period.

### Greco-Roman Slavery

One further contextual issue that must be examined before the text of Philemon can be taken into consideration is the issue of first century slavery. In the first century, slavery was extremely common and rarely challenged as to its appropriateness in society. Views on American slavery have colored the interpretive framework.

"knowledge of slavery as practiced in the New World in the 17th-19<sup>th</sup> centuries has hindered more than helped achieving an appropriate, historical understanding of social-economic life in the Mediterranean world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, knowledge of which is absolutely essential for a sound exegesis of those NT texts dealing with slaves and their owners."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Stamps, Dennis L. "Rhetorical Criticism of the New Testament: Ancient and Modern Evaluations of Argumentation," *Approaches to New Testament Study*, eds. Stanley E. Porter and David Tombs, no.120,. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995, 135.

<sup>18</sup> S. Scott Bartchy, Anchor Bible Dictionary, vol. 6, "Slavery (Greco-Roman)", ed. David Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 67.

Slaves were viewed as property. They were able to sell themselves into slavery, purchase slaves for themselves, earn wages, and buy their way out of slavery. Slaves could come from any conceivable background. Some slaves were doctors, philosophers, and government officials. For some, slave life was voluntary. If a person wanted Roman citizenship, they could become a slave to a Roman and when manumitted gain Roman citizenship. Slavery was not a racial matter, rather it was a means to get manual labor done.<sup>19</sup>

#### Slavery in Philemon

Three lines of interpretation have been offered to explain Onesimus' condition. The traditional interpretation is that Onesimus was Philemon's slave. Onesimus stole money from his master and fled the household. Philemon finds Paul in prison and is converted to Christ. Paul then writes a letter to Philemon asking him to forgive Onesimus and take him back.<sup>20</sup>

This interpretation has not set well with those who would rather not think Paul would deliberately send a man back into slavery. A closer look at first century slavery in the Roman Empire will alleviate many of these concerns.

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<sup>19</sup> Joseph A. Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, The Anchor Bible, vol. 34C (New York, NY: Doubleday, 2000), 25-28.

<sup>20</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 41 (February 1991): 97.

Additionally, Bruce points out that Onesimus was probably not a prisoner with Paul because Paul presupposes Onesimus is able to leave to go back to Philemon.<sup>21</sup>

Knox championed a counterview that Onesimus may not have been a runaway slave at all, rather he was sent by Philemon to help Paul in prison. This view has not held up very well.<sup>22</sup> A more recent advocate of this theory is Glaze. Multiple reasons why Onesimus would probably not be a runaway slave. His conclusion, however, sides with Knox, seeing Onesimus as sent by Philemon.<sup>23</sup> Many questions remain unanswered by this theory. Why call him useless? Why does Paul feel so compelled to plea with Philemon to take him back? This theory puts the tension on Paul as the one with a problem rather than on Philemon.

Fitzmyer offers a third interpretation to Onesimus' condition. His research into backgrounds of runaway slave litigation has proven groundbreaking in understanding the context of Philemon. It was Roman law that if someone found a runaway slave, they must report it to the authorities. Runaway slaves were often punished severely when they were

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<sup>21</sup> F.F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, vol. 9. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1984), 196.

<sup>22</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 14.

<sup>23</sup> R.E. Glaze, "Onesimus: Runaway or Emissary?," *The Theological Educator* 54 (Fall 1996): 11.

captured and returned. Harboring a slave was considered theft.<sup>24</sup>

In this theory Onesimus seeks intercession from Paul between himself and his master, Philemon. In this process, the master's friend would write a letter asking the master to take the slave back in a peaceful manner. Onesimus would not be considered a fugitive<sup>25</sup>, rather, a slave seeking intercession with every intention of returning to his master.<sup>26</sup>

This theory has much merit. It retains the traditional and most likely event that Onesimus is a slave but his finding Paul becomes intentional rather than by chance (as in Knox view). His time with Paul serves a purpose for Paul, Onesimus, and Philemon. Paul gained the services of Onesimus, Onesimus gained an intercessor and salvation, and Philemon will gain back a worker and brother. It also has precedent in the legal writings of the day. A letter from Pliny the Younger to Sabinianus asking him to take back a

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<sup>24</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 26-28.

<sup>25</sup> N.H. Taylor, "Onesimus – A Case Study of Slave Conversion in Early Christianity." *Religion and Theology* 3 (March 1996): 267-268.

<sup>26</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 18.

freedman who had wronged Sabinianus and who had come to Pliny for intercession.<sup>27</sup>

Previous attempts to examine the rhetoric of Philemon have viewed Onesimus as a runaway, which is not stated in the text. This presupposition has influenced the outcome of the previous rhetorical analysis of Philemon. Another common interpretation is that Onesimus had stolen money from Philemon, as Paul offers to pay Philemon in full (vs.18). O'Brien offers an equally valid interpretation that perhaps Paul was offering to repay Philemon to labor lost in the absence of Onesimus' presence.<sup>28</sup> In the present paper, an attempt will be made to incorporate this new context of Philemon with the old methods of rhetorical criticism.

#### Aristotle's Rhetorical Structure

Oratory and rhetoric were highly praised in the ancient world. "Oratory is the art of persuasion. At all times and in all places the ability to win others to one's point of view has been esteemed."<sup>29</sup> Aristotle posited that

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<sup>27</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," 99. & Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 21-22.

<sup>28</sup> O'Brien, Peter T. Colossians, Philemon. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44. (Waco: Word Publishers, 1982), 266.

<sup>29</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Conner, "Paul the Letter-Writer, His World, His Options, His Skills," (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1995), 65.

there were three basic parts to any speech: the speaker, the subject of the address, and the audience.<sup>30</sup> Additionally there were three basic devices by which ancient rhetoricians won the favor of men: deliberative rhetoric, forensic rhetoric, and epideictic rhetoric. Each of these three has a positive and a negative way to be used, a period of time examined, and the result.

Deliberative rhetoric is designed to exhort toward the most expedient or to discourage from something that could be harmful. This type of rhetoric looks toward the future as it encourages or discourages someone from a particular course of action. If the listener accepts the speaker's advice, their plight is expedited toward something more beneficial. If they chose not to heed the advice they will face harm.<sup>31</sup>

Forensic rhetoric is designed to accuse or defend. This rhetoric examines past actions. Justice or injustice is the final result. A man may even admit that he did something but he will always argue that what he did was just.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Aristotle 1.3.1.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 1.3.1-5.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 1.3.1-5.

Epidictic rhetoric is the rhetoric of praise or blame. It looks to the present situation, "for it is the existing condition of things that all those who praise or blame have in view".<sup>33</sup> Aristotle mentions that it is not an unusual thing for epidictic to look to other time periods. "It is not uncommon, however, for epidictic speakers to avail themselves of other times, of the past by way of recalling it, or of the future by way of anticipating it."<sup>34</sup>

Rhetorical phrases are not just thrown into a jumble and hoped that the most persuasive form will result. Aristotle had a very precise mold with which to structure the rhetorical speech. Speeches start off with an Exordium. The main body or arguments is called the Proof. Concluding remarks are in the Epilogue or Peroration.

The three types of speeches have different purposes for the exordium. The exordium in Philemon is loaded with epidictic rhetoric, which is usually the case in the exordium. There are several purposes in an epidictic exordium: "praise, blame, exhortation, dissuasion, appeals to the hearer."<sup>35</sup> All but blame, dissuasion, and appeals will be found in the opening of Philemon.

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, 1.3.4.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid, 1.3.4.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid, 3.14.4.

The Exordium is followed by Proofs. Ethos and Pathos are typically appealed to in the proof of most rhetorical works.<sup>36</sup> Here examples from the past are applied toward the future. Moral maxims are also used in the proof.<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the Peroration or Epilogue in which a speaker would: "dispose the hearer favorably towards oneself and unfavorably towards the adversary; to amplify and depreciate; to excite the emotions of the hearer; to recapitulate."<sup>38</sup>

Church labeled Paul's use of rhetoric in Philemon with the following structure: Introduction (1-3), Exordium (4-7), Proof (8-16), Peroration (17-22), and Final Greetings (23-25).<sup>39</sup> The Introduction and Final Greetings are not part of traditional rhetorical form but one has to remember this is a letter and not a speech. A case could be made for modifying Church's model and extending the Exordium to verse 10. In these additional three verses, Paul makes his two appeals. As stated above, this is

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<sup>36</sup> Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)," 326.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle 3.17.5-9.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid, 3.19.1

<sup>39</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 21-33 and Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)," 325.

traditionally reserved for the exordium. On the other hand, vv 8-10 do include arguments from Ethos, which are classically in the Proof.

### Philemon

1-3. In the first two verses, Paul names two of the three subjects, as defined by Aristotle, of his letter. These three subjects include: the speaker, the subject of the discourse, and the audience. Paul identifies himself as the writer and his audience includes Philemon, Apphia- possibly Philemon's wife<sup>40</sup>, Archippus, and the church that meets in Philemon's home.<sup>41</sup> Some have taken the inclusion of others in the greeting to mean the letter was not private and would further pressure Philemon to make good on Paul's request.<sup>42</sup> Others see this as courtesy and the body of the letter solely for Philemon's eyes (due to use of second person, singular throughout the letter).<sup>43</sup> For the counter-argument, see Fitzmyer<sup>44</sup>

Paul furthers his greeting by sending grace from God and Christ. Paul will not specifically address Onesimus as

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<sup>40</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 87

<sup>41</sup> Aristotle, 1.3.1

<sup>42</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 81

<sup>43</sup> O'Brien, Peter T. Colossians, Philemon, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44. (Waco: Word Publishers, 1982), 273.

<sup>44</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 81

the subject of the letter until verse 10. Additionally, Paul does not address himself as "apostle" as is the case in most of Paul's letters. Instead he calls himself a "prisoner of Christ Jesus". O'Brien sees this as a means to "entreat Philemon (vv 8,9) rather than command."<sup>45</sup>

#### Exordium (4-10)

4-7. Verses four and five follow the tradition of epideictic rhetoric in line with the classical function of the exordium. As mentioned, epideictic rhetoric can praise past actions. That is precisely what Paul does in praising him for his "love for all the saints". F.F. Church noted that verses 4 through 7 made up an exordium, a section of thanksgiving, of Paul for Philemon. Where Church misses the mark is in describing Paul's awkward position in the composition of the letter. Church presupposes Onesimus is a runaway. If in fact Onesimus is not, then it is with great joy that Paul could write such a letter.<sup>46</sup> Church also falls short by missing the function of appeal in the exordium (vv. 8-10), which he places in the proof.

Verse 6 makes strong use of deliberative rhetoric. The NIV fails to capture the rhetorical language of this verse.

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<sup>45</sup> O'Brien, Peter T. Colossians, Philemon. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44. (Waco: Word Publishers, 1982), 272.

<sup>46</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 21.

The NASB, however, translates as follows: "and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake."<sup>47</sup> Paul is praying "Philemon's faith may be always active and efficacious in its manifestation of love toward Christians who depend on him." This prayer is deliberative in nature, that Philemon will be effective in his love toward others, soon to be Onesimus.<sup>48</sup>

There is one striking difference between traditional epideictic rhetoric and Paul's use of praise in the letter to Philemon. Epideictic rhetoric was often used by classical speakers solely to showcase their rhetorical skill.<sup>49</sup> Paul, however, praises Philemon for the very traits he knows he is going to appeal to later in the letter, "refreshing the hearts of the saints".

In examining verses 4-7, Church attempts to show three ways Paul uses deliberative rhetoric. The first way is that Paul's praise will put he and Philemon on good terms. The second is that the very attributes Paul praises are directly related to taking Onesimus back. Third, Paul

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<sup>47</sup> NASB (Phil 1:6)

<sup>48</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 97

<sup>49</sup> Jerome Murphy-O'Conner, "Paul the Letter-Writer, His World, His Options, His Skills," (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1995), 68.

"alludes to particulars which later will be adduced in the proof and underscored in the peroration."<sup>50</sup> The use of "heart" will appear again in the proof of the letter (vs.12) and a third time in conclusion (vs.20). This allusion is of the deliberative nature. Paul is telling Philemon that the most expedient way to refresh Paul's heart and the hearts of the saints is to take Onesimus back.<sup>51</sup>

Here, Church's theory does not match Aristotelian rhetoric. Church makes no distinction between deliberative and epideictic rhetoric in this passage. Aristotle gives five ways deliberative rhetoric must be used. Praise is not involved.<sup>52</sup> This is epideictic rhetoric at its finest.

8. In verse 8, Paul alludes to an argument from ethos. But he concludes that is not what he is seeking to accomplish. Instead, Paul basis his request on pathos, the love he had just praised Philemon for possessing (vs.9). What Philemon "ought to do" is the most expedient thing and is therefore deliberative in nature.

9-10. Arguments from ethos are classically used in the Proof. I would like to contend that Paul's mention of

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<sup>50</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 22.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid*, 24

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, 1.4.7-8

himself as an old man and prisoner (vs.9), being like Onesimus' father (vs.10), and "in chains for the gospel" (vs.13) is more than an argument of ethos, as Church contends.<sup>53</sup> It is an argument from ethos intended for Philemon to understand and choose the most expedient, deliberative route in this situation. That route is to take Onesimus back. It is here that Paul first names Onesimus. This is the third subject of the letter, that which Paul's letter is concerning.<sup>54</sup>

#### Proof (11-16)

Verses 11 through 16 compose the Proof of the letter. This term is confusing because it is a rhetorical term itself. In rhetoric, however, this term does not only mean the main body of a speech or letter. It also means an example or illustration of why one course is better, more just or more praiseworthy than another.<sup>55</sup>

11. Starting in verse 11, Paul begins a play upon a classical use of deliberative rhetoric. In Aristotle's *The Art of Rhetoric*, mentions five ways deliberative rhetoric can be used: "ways and means, war and peace, the defense of

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<sup>53</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 26.

<sup>54</sup> Aristotle, 1.3.1.

<sup>55</sup> *ibid*, 3.17.

the country, imports and exports, legislation.”<sup>56</sup> “Ways and means” pertains to the use of deliberative forms to persuade economic decisions. Here, an orator must understand the nature of resources, debts, and expenditures. In effect, the orator must be skilled in making the accounts balance.<sup>57</sup> This economic or “ways and means” language runs through verse 16. Within this, Paul also plays upon Onesimus’ name. Onesimus has been made what his name suggests, “useful”.

12-14. The motif of honor also arises in this section. “Philemon is given the opportunity to do a good deed.”<sup>58</sup> For Aristotle, honor “is a token of a reputation for doing good; and those who have already done good are justly and above all honored.”<sup>59</sup> This is precisely what Paul has just reminded Philemon of. On appeal of Philemon’s past honor, Paul persuades him to further his good deeds and receive Onesimus back. Paul also models honor for Philemon, “he would do nothing without Philemon’s consent: to have done

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<sup>56</sup> *ibid.* 1.4.8

<sup>57</sup> *ibid.* 1.4.8

<sup>58</sup> F. F. Church, “Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul’s Letter to Philemon,” 27.

<sup>59</sup> Aristotle, 1.5.9

so would at the least have involved a breach of Christian fellowship."<sup>60</sup>

12-16. By identifying himself with Onesimus, "my very heart" and Onesimus with Philemon, "so that he could take your place in helping me...", Philemon gets bound into this circular relationship through Paul's use of pathos. To refuse Paul his request is to choose the least expedient choice in the deliberative equation. Church makes a grand point in this matter by stating, "with considerable persuasive force, he now has established grounds for mutual reciprocity between Philemon, Onesimus, and himself, a reciprocity based upon service in the Lord."<sup>61</sup> This is also accomplished by calling both Onesimus (vs.16) and Philemon (vv.7, 20) "brother".<sup>62</sup>

In the middle of this deliberative section is the only example of forensic rhetoric in the book. Paul looks to the past, how Onesimus had been useless to Philemon and he notes the justness that has ultimately been revealed, "that you might have him back for good." (vs.15). Paul's argument from ethos is quite different from that of Philosophers. He

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<sup>60</sup> O'Brien, Peter T. Colossians, Philemon. Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 44. (Waco: Word Publishers, 1982), 294.

<sup>61</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 27.

<sup>62</sup> O'Brien, Peter T. Colossians, Philemon. 297.

does not appeal to his own ethos, but to the ethos of God. In verse 15, the character of God is the basis for Paul's argument. God purposed this incident in the lives of Philemon, Onesimus and lastly Paul, for the good. By taking him back he is not only welcoming a brother, but he is "completing God's designs."<sup>63</sup>

An interesting caveat to this discussion is Aristotle's discussion of happiness. He believed that anyone who partook of deliberative rhetoric would inevitably discuss happiness, "for all who exhort or dissuade discuss happiness and the things which conduce or are detrimental to it."<sup>64</sup> He linked happiness with the following: virtue, wealth, "possessions and slaves, combined with power to protect and make use of them."<sup>65</sup> Additionally, noble birth was important to bring about happiness.<sup>66</sup>

Clearly the language of Philemon reflects the Aristotelian stance. Paul was encouraging Philemon to use his power to make the right choice in regard to his slave, Onesimus. In making this argument, he appeals to the noble

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<sup>63</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 28.

<sup>64</sup> Aristotle, 1.5.2

<sup>65</sup> *ibid*, 1.5.3

<sup>66</sup> *ibid*, 1.5.5

birth of both men, that they are both children of God. This gives slave and master equal footing in the most important respects. One notable departure for mainstream interpretation is Taylor's theory, based on house-church dynamics, Onesimus was a Christian before he fled.<sup>67</sup> But this view is in the extreme minority and will not here be taken into consideration as context to the rhetoric of verse 16.

#### Peroration (17-22)

17. Verse 17 is a verse in transition. It still contains the arguments from ethos usually contained in the proof. The Peroration, as mentioned above, can serve as a recapitulation of the proof. Paul recapitulates the theme of Onesimus as his "very heart" by telling Philemon that by welcoming Onesimus he is welcoming Paul.<sup>68</sup>

18. From here, Paul anticipates possible objections Philemon might have.<sup>69</sup> To accomplish this, Paul continues the use of "ways and means" deliberative rhetoric. The background of Paul's offer to pay Philemon back for any wrong or debt Onesimus may have caused is uncertain.

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<sup>67</sup> N.H. Taylor, "Onesimus – A Case Study of Slave Conversion in Early Christianity," 273.

<sup>68</sup> F.F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 218

<sup>69</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 29.

Much of the weight of the meaning of this passage and Paul's use of rhetoric dependent upon whether or not we see Onesimus as a runaway. It was a common practice for runaway slaves to steal things on their way out.<sup>70</sup> If Onesimus did run away then it is possible that because Paul was harboring him, he was offering to pay Philemon for the lost work.<sup>71</sup> If we hold to the position that Onesimus was not a runaway but was seeking intercession from Paul then Onesimus' wrongdoing is presupposed. Paul is alleviating any source of punishment for Onesimus upon his return.<sup>72</sup> Here Paul uses the imperative, telling Philemon to charge it to his account, which "highlights the heightened and intensive force of Paul's plea."<sup>73</sup>

19. In verse 19, Paul uses his trump card. He, as Martin puts it, "calls in" Philemon's own debt to Paul as reason to forgive Philemon. The language of verses 18 and 19 function to destroy any barriers left that might keep Philemon from accepting Onesimus back. "The commercial language in the peroration has enabled Paul skillfully and

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<sup>70</sup> John G. Nordling, "Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon," 109-110.

<sup>71</sup> F. F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," 30.

<sup>72</sup> Fitzmyer, The Letter to Philemon, 117.

<sup>73</sup> Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon (Verse 18)," 335.

masterfully to formulate a convincing and practicable case for conforming (realigning) Philemon's will to his own."<sup>74</sup>

20. Verses 20 is not so much a word of persuasion but an imperative. By refreshing Paul's heart, a.k.a. Onesimus, Philemon will be performing a service to Paul. As earlier in the letter, Paul anticipates Philemon's actions by stating that Philemon in all likelihood will do more than he is asking. Whether this is epideictic in nature or not is difficult to ascertain.

21. Verse 21 serves a deliberative function. Paul is looking toward the future action of Philemon. He is certain that Philemon is the type of man who will do more than what is asked. This, in effect, will be the most expedient course of action.

22. One final imperative, Paul tells Philemon he will be in need of lodging as he plans to make a visit. One must wonder whether or not this pushes the point of Philemon's obedience to Paul's request. In a short time, Paul may stop by and if Onesimus had not been received well Paul himself will have been short-changed. Bruce does not think that Paul is adding any pressure here.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid. 337.

<sup>75</sup> F.F. Bruce, The Epistles to the Colossians, to Philemon, and to the Ephesians, 222-223

### Final Greeting

23-25. Verses 23 through 25 contain Paul's final greetings to the audience of his letter. This salutation mirrors the greeting. Similar to the greeting, the final remarks have not been shown to contain rhetorical remarks and functions as has the Greeting.

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