



## RECONCILIATION COMES AT A COST

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Paul and Timothy's letter to Philemon intimates that reconciliation comes at a cost.

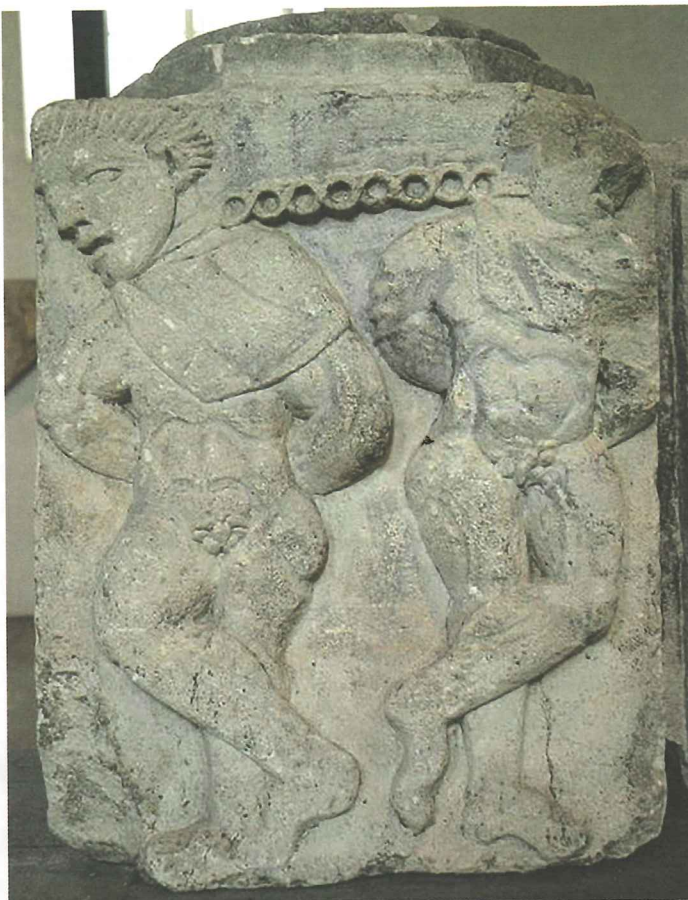
In order to understand this letter, we need to reconstruct the situation it presupposes. This is difficult as we rely predominantly on the details of the letter itself, and Paul is here rather cryptic and indirect.

The standard "patristic" explanation goes something like this: the letter concerns the runaway slave Onesimus and his fate at the hands of his slaveholder, Philemon. Onesimus has erred, possibly stealing from his master or incurring some kind of financial loss. In Roman society, this was a capital offense, and owners would be within their rights to take severe vengeance. Rather than facing the consequences, Onesimus flees to Paul, the apostle who had previously converted Philemon to Christ and presumably now a respected authority for Onesimus' master. Upon visiting Paul, something unexpected happens. Onesimus himself comes to share faith in Christ. This turns out to be rather convenient, for Paul now recommends Philemon receive Onesimus back not just as his slave, but as his brother in Christ (v16). Paul urges Philemon not to punish his slave, but instead charge Paul with the debt incurred by Onesimus' theft. Of course, Paul does this in the knowledge that Philemon may write off his loss, as he already owes Paul a (spiritual) debt for bringing him to Christ.

Despite its cryptic message, one thing about this letter is clear: Paul engages in full-strength arm-twisting of Philemon to make him commit his "good deed" (v14). The final decision of what to do, however, is left entirely up to Philemon himself.

Paul's direction to "welcome him as you would welcome me" (v17) suggests Paul hoped Philemon would welcome, embrace, and reconcile with Onesimus as his brother in Christ. To reconcile would mean seeing each other in a relationship constituted not as master and slave but as siblings.

Be that as it may, Paul gives no explicit direction to Philemon to set his slave free. While slavery is mentioned a handful of times in the New



Testament, it is never condemned. Elsewhere, Paul encourages slaves to remain in their subordinate social roles (1 Corinthians 7:17-24), and some scholars have even argued that Paul himself made extensive use of slave labour in undertaking his ministry work.

While Paul doesn't critique slavery, he does model a form of advocacy that renounces his own authority and highlights just how costly reconciliation is. In a status-obsessed society, Paul, as Philemon's spiritual superior, could issue a direct command. Instead, he leaves the ultimate decision up to Philemon. But in order for them to reconcile, Philemon and Onesimus must also give something up: Onesimus will have to return to his condition of slavery, and Philemon forgive the debt - or at least forgive Onesimus for the dishonour suffered as a result of his slave's shameful actions. Paul rounds out his letter by adding "One thing more - prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you" (v22). That is, to be reunited as brothers. Not three levels of hierarchy, but as siblings in Christ.