

# Human Reconciliation in the New Testament with Special Reference to Philemon, Colossians and Ephesians

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## SUMMARY

The study begins by noting that while *katallassō* ('to reconcile') and its cognates are rarely used of human reconciliations in the NT (only four clear cases), the 'concept' of 're-establish[ing] proper friendly interpersonal relations after these have been disrupted or broken' (Louw-Nida) is widely present. The letter to Philemon does not use *-allassō* compounds, but it provides the most delicate and detailed discussion of the topic in the NT, as Paul seeks to bring reconciliation between Philemon and his absconded slave Onesimus.

Part 1 of the paper probes the process and the intended outcome and concludes Paul takes reconciliation much deeper than the mere restoration of healthy conventional master/slave relations. The climax of the exquisite rheto-

ric is that he bids Philemon welcome Onesimus back, not merely as a slave, but as a *beloved brother*; indeed, *as he would welcome the apostle himself* (Philem 16-17). The practical implications of this are investigated.

Part 2 sets the specific portrait in Philemon on the broader theological canvas of Colossians and Ephesians. On this, the surprising depth of reconciliation Paul attempts is understandable as an instance of the final cosmic reconciliation and total harmonious unity which is already inaugurated in Christ (Col. 1:15-20; Eph. 1:9-10). The 'old humanity' marked by the multiple alienations of the fall are being overcome by the new creation in Christ of a thoroughly relational 'personhood' in the image of the self-giving, forgiving, love of Christ himself (Eph. 4:17-5:2).

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## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Artikel beginnt mit folgender Beobachtung: Während *katallassō* ("versöhnen") und die verwandten Wörter im Neuen Testament selten in Bezug auf menschliche Versöhnung gebraucht werden (nur in vier eindeutigen Fällen), ist das "Konzept" des "Neuaufbaus echter freundlicher zwischenmenschlicher Beziehungen, nachdem diese gestört oder zerbrochen waren" (Louw-Nida), weit verbreitet. Der Brief an Philemon benutzt keine Wörter der *-allassō* Gruppe, bringt aber die feinfühligste und detaillierteste Diskussion des Themas im NT, da Paulus versucht, Versöhnung zwischen Philemon und seinem entflohenen Sklaven Onesimus zu stiften.

Teil 1 des Artikels untersucht den Prozess und das beabsichtigte Ergebnis und schlussfolgert, dass Paulus Versöhnung viel tiefer versteht als die bloße Wiederherstellung gesunder konventioneller Herr-Sklave-Beziehungen. Der Höhepunkt der vorzüglichen Rhetorik

besteht darin, dass er Philemon bittet, Onesimus nicht nur wieder als Sklave, sondern als *geliebten Bruder* willkommen zu heißen, ja sogar so, *wie er den Apostel selbst willkommen heißen würde* (Phlm 16-17). Die sich hieraus ergebenden praktischen Konsequenzen werden untersucht.

Teil 2 positioniert das spezifische Portrait des Philemonbriefes auf dem größeren theologischen Gemälde des Kolosser- und Epheserbriefes. Innerhalb dieses Gemäldes ist die überraschende Tiefe der von Paulus angeregten Versöhnung als ein Beispiel der endgültigen kosmischen Versöhnung und völligen harmonischen Einheit zu verstehen, die in Christus bereits begonnen hat (Kol. 1,15-20; Eph. 1,9-10). Die "alte Menschheit", gezeichnet von vielfachen Entfremdungen des Falles, wird in Christus durch die neue Schöpfung eines durch und durch relationalen "Menschseins" nach dem Bilde der sich selbst opfernden, vergebenden Liebe Christi überwunden (Eph. 4,17-5,2).

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## RÉSUMÉ

L'auteur commence par noter que les mots de la famille du verbe *katallassô* (réconcilier) sont rarement utilisés pour la réconciliation entre humains dans le Nouveau Testament (seuls quatre cas sont clairement attestés). Par contre, le concept du rétablissement de relations personnelles normales et amicales après leur rupture ou leur détérioration (selon la définition donnée par Louw et Nida) y est très présent. L'épître à Philémon, où l'on ne rencontre aucun terme de la racine d'*allassô*, offre un traitement détaillé et plein de tact de ce sujet : Paul l'écrit pour amener Philmon à se réconcilier avec Onésime, son esclave en fuite.

Dans la première partie, Max Turner considère quel processus et quelle issue Paul recommande et montre qu'il vise quelque chose de plus profond que la simple restauration d'une saine relation correspondant aux usages entre maîtres et esclaves. Il va même jusqu'à

inviter Philémon accueillir Onésime, non plus seulement comme un esclave, mais comme un frère bien aimé, et même comme il accueillerait l'apôtre Paul lui-même (Phm 16-17). Turner explore les conséquences pratiques d'une telle approche.

Dans la seconde partie, l'apport spécifique de l'épître à Philémon est étudié à la lumière de l'enseignement théologique plus global des Épîtres aux Ephésiens et aux Colossiens. La réconciliation que Paul souhaite entre Philmon et Onésime doit être vue comme un cas particulier de la réconciliation cosmique finale et de l'unité pleinement harmonieuse déjà inaugurées par l'œuvre de Christ (Col 1.15-20 ; p 1.9s). Dieu est en train de triompher des multiples aliénations dont l'ancienne humanité souffre en conséquence de la chute, par la nouvelle création en Christ d'une nouvelle nature pleinement relationnelle de personne, l'image de l'amour miséricordieux de Christ qui s'est donné pour nous (p 4.17-5.2).

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## Introduction

Some readers may be puzzled by the restriction of scope implied in the title, and, perhaps, by the inclusion of Philemon as a starting point.

*On the first count*, after all, it is not as though the word-group 'reconcile/reconciliation' is particularly common in the New Testament (some 16 occasions), and the majority of cases are about reconciliation with God (including, perhaps, the references to cosmic reconciliation in Eph 2.16 and Col 1.20, 22, which we will deal with below),<sup>1</sup> not primarily about reconciliation between human persons.

Otherwise, in relationship to human reconciliation we only have *four* clear occasions:

1. Matthew 5.24, in which Jesus teaches that you should first be reconciled (imp. aorist passive of *diállassomai*) with a brother who bears a specific complaint against you before offering a gift in the temple.
2. Luke 12.58, in which Jesus enjoins that a person get reconciled (perf. passive inf. of *apállassō*) with his accuser, on the issue at hand, before they arrive in court.
3. 1 Corinthians 7.11, where Paul virtually requires that if a woman be separated from her husband, she should either remain single, or become reconciled (imp. aorist passive of *katallassō*) to him.<sup>2</sup>
4. Acts 7.26, where Stephen recounts Moses' attempt to reconcile (imperf. active of *sunállassō*) two quarrelling Jews (see Exod 2.13)

These are relatively straightforward instances of an otherwise widespread secular hellenistic usage of the terminology;<sup>3</sup> and it may be argued that this paper should concentrate on all four instances, relatively trivial as they are on the broader theological canvas (excepting, just perhaps, Mt 5.24).

*On the second count*, it is clear that no lexeme belonging to the immediate word-group appears in Philemon, so why should that letter even appear on the radar screen, let alone be a starting point?

But the response is, I hope the relatively obvious one, that the 'idea/concept' of 'reconciliation' draws in much more material than merely texts which include '*-allassō*' cognates. The linguistic principle is that you determine the 'sense' of the lexemes in the related word-group, and then scour the texts for the 'concept' embodied in the 'sense', and its componential meanings.

Central to the linguistic *sense* of the reconciliation word-group is 'to reestablish proper friendly interpersonal relations after these have been disrupted or broken'. And that 'sense' usually has the following components of meaning (to continue the quote of Louw-Nida): '(1) disruption of friendly relations because of (2) presumed or real provocation, (3) overt behavior designed to remove hostility, and (4) restoration of originally friendly relations'.<sup>4</sup>

In which case, Philemon is 'all about' human reconciliation: indeed, probably the most detailed discussion in the New Testament thereof,<sup>5</sup> even though it does not specifically use the 'reconcile'



word-group. And Colossians and Ephesians crucially paint that concept on a broader theological canvas, in a way no other NT writing does (though, in a sense, we could have included every other writing). That is my justification for the scope and restriction of this paper, the sections of which will follow what is suggested by the title.

## 1. Reconciliation in Philemon

There is no actual use of the lexeme *katallassō* or of its cognates in this rather more than standard-size letter. Yet those commentators are surely right who argue that ‘reconciliation’ is its central concern. The story behind the letter clearly involves a catastrophic breakdown of relationships between Philemon and his slave Onesimus, with presumed provocation, and the letter itself is arguably quite the most exquisite short piece ever written in any attempt to resolve such concerns. So let us tease out the issues, in terms of Louw-Nida’s classification.

### 1.1 The break-down of relationships.

This is evident in that Onesimus has absconded without his master’s leave, and almost certainly contrary to his will. For an intelligent slave (such as Onesimus clearly was) to do so must have required considerable resolution, and the facing of inordinate hazards and potentially horrendous consequences, including (at least) severe flogging, but also branding, chaining, and very possibly execution by crucifixion.

The degree of the break-down in relationship can also partly be measured by the distance he intended to traverse, and, more importantly, the time he intended to be away. On the latter point, it is traditionally assumed that Onesimus was a run-away slave, with absolutely no intention of return. He would get himself ‘lost’ in Rome (or wherever, and distant Rome would certainly be safer than relatively nearby Ephesus), because, in his terms, the break-down was fundamentally irretrievable.<sup>6</sup>

But there is now a more probable reading of the Onesimus story which makes the conflict with Philemon a potentially resolvable one. A slave in dispute with his master, or fearing unjust punishment, could run to a patron or friend of the master, seeking refuge and intervention, without criminality, if his overall strategy could be construed as in his master’s long-term interest. Onesimus may have set out deliberately to find Paul, because he knew that the apostle had a very strong relation-

ship with his master – Paul was, after all, his master’s ‘father-in-Christ’ (Philem 19) – and he had grounds to think that Paul would intercede for him successfully, and restore harmonious relations. In that case, Onesimus would not (technically) be a *fugitivus/phygas* (i.e., a criminal run-away: a term which Paul conspicuously does *not* use of Onesimus)<sup>7</sup> on his journey to and from Paul,<sup>8</sup> though he must have been aware that not all authorities would have seen the issue quite that clearly.

Onesimus would know where Paul was from Epaphroditus (and may even have journeyed to Paul with him: cf. Philem 23; Col 4.12). Were Paul in prison in Ephesus, Onesimus would only need to count on two weeks to be there and back. If in Caesarea, he would have to reckon with at least a month. If in Rome, then the very shortest, speediest, possibility was a month, and the vagaries of travel were more likely to stretch it out to three months – or considerably more if the return journey fell into the seasons when travel was simply not feasible.

On any account, the calculation suggests the degree of breakdown in the relationships between Onesimus and his master was very considerable. We now turn to that issue.

### 1.2 The Presumed or Real Provocation

What could drive a slave to run to his master’s friend or patron seeking protective intervention? He might do so for fear of an unjustified whipping if the patron lived just down the street, or even in the next town (Laodicea, even Hierapolis?). But to envisage a trip to Ephesus, one hundred and twenty miles away, let alone the much more distant Rome, implies a more serious problem. It is difficult to believe that from Onesimus’ point of view the fundamental difficulty was that Philemon was an unbearable tyrant. He was, after all, a *christian* master, and evidently held in high regard by Paul, whose convert he was. I suspect, but have no means of showing, that the crisis issue in dispute was Onesimus’ manumission (something Onesimus had done, or not done, had perhaps jeopardized or severely delayed that): reason indeed for seeking out an *amicus domini*. Onesimus does not appear to think the fundamental fault is on *his* side, otherwise Paul would have been quick to mention his regret and repentance, on which he is entirely silent.<sup>9</sup>

If we look at the question from Philemon’s side, there is evident cause for severe discontent: whatever the original dispute was about, Onesimus has



absented himself without permission for a considerable time (constituting 'self-stealing'): time not merely to travel to Paul, but to stay with him long enough to become a convert to Christ, the apostle's beloved 'child', and to prove himself a 'faithful' brother (and 'useful' co-worker?: cf. Col. 4.9; Philem 11, 13, 16). Technically and legally, of course, Paul should have returned him *at the very first opportunity*: it was a crime in itself to harbour a slave.

To account for Paul's failure to do so we may only suppose that Onesimus arrived at the place of apostle's confinement near the close of the season of travel,<sup>10</sup> and so was forced at least to winter with him. So we may be thinking of the period from October to May: a significant loss of Onesimus' due services to Philemon! In addition, of course, Onesimus may well have purloined items from Philemon's house, with which to ease his passage (but, on return, that could presumably be counted against what otherwise would have been the master's costs of hearth and board during the months of absence).

### 1.3 Overt Behavior Designed to Remove Hostility.

On a minor, but not often observed point, Paul's writing of a 'cover-letter' for Onesimus was itself a quite expensive commitment to his cause: Richards calculates it at about the modern equivalent of \$100.<sup>11</sup> And, of course, that does not include the (probably considerably greater) cost of sending Tychicus as his companion, though this would partly be mitigated by the fact that Paul had a broader task for Tychicus in relation to the letters to Colossae, Laodicea and Ephesus (cf. Col. 4.7-9; Eph. 6.21-22).

But the letter itself is quite astonishing! Paul does not just do the 'Pliny-to-Sabinianus' thing of advocating clemency, with a plea for recognition of former affection in the relationship with this freedman. Paul writes on behalf of a *slave* (Philem 16), not a freedman, and he bids Philemon welcome Onesimus back, not merely as a slave, but as a *beloved brother*; indeed, *as he would welcome the apostle himself* (Philem 16-17).

That comparison is evidently not just an empty literary platitude. In a quite exquisite three-way 'take' on the issue,<sup>12</sup> he reminds Philemon that he, Philemon, is Paul's beloved brother (Philem 7, 20), partner (Philem 17), and 'son' (in the sense that Paul brought him to 'life'; Philem 19), and thus owes Paul a countless debt (not too subtly put

in Philem 19-20). He then also, earlier, in parallel identifies Onesimus as the 'child' he has begotten (Philem 10) and 'beloved brother' (Philem 16), *and* urges that he should be accepted as beloved brother by Philemon also (v.16).

In addition, he strongly identifies himself with Onesimus ('my very heart'; Philem 12), as slave/prisoner (Philem 1, 9, 13), and as one who has no 'rights' with Philemon, but can only 'appeal' to him (Philem 8-10, 14, though the pressure is put on a bit in 17-20!), and promises to pay all monetary debts incurred (v.18). It is then as a *deliberate and well-prepared climax* that in v.16 he bids Philemon accept Onesimus back no longer as a slave, but now as a beloved brother, indeed as the apostle himself (v.17). This whole of vv.8-17 is a cruciform appeal: as N.T. Wright nicely put it, with deliberate echoes of 2 Corinthians 5.17-21, 'God is in Paul reconciling Philemon to Onesimus'.<sup>13</sup>

In keeping with this, a number of commentators argue that taking Paul's expressed wish that Onesimus stay with him, as co-worker (v.13), and the final confidence that Philemon will 'do even more' than he explicitly asks (v.21), the apostle is effectively requesting the *manumission* of Onesimus, and his re-assignment to Paul.<sup>14</sup>

Anyone *not* shocked by all that in the ancient world might well have been advised to consult the equivalent of a psychiatrist, for treatment of apathy. In brief, the writing of the letter to Philemon is in itself a more-than-generous act of reconciliation, and takes reconciliation well beyond the thought of.

### 1.4 Restoration of Originally Friendly Relations, or Total Transformation thereof?

We, of course, do not know the actual outcome, though Paul warns, again not too subtly, that he will check it out ('Prepare a room for me!' v.22). But the *envisaged* outcome goes well beyond the mere restoration of 'normal' master/slave relationships. Let us consider the implications.

At very least, Paul anticipates a return that does not involve the heavy discipline that would be usual. After all, you do not welcome a brother back by flogging his back!<sup>15</sup>

At the other extreme it seems unlikely that Paul seeks the immediate manumission of this slave, and far less probable that he does so as a paradigm for the release of all christian slaves by their christian masters. It is in fact less than clear that he seeks Onesimus' manumission, and the advice in the letters purportedly sent out with that to Philemon,



namely Colossians and Ephesians, clearly implies that he has no challenge to the institution of slavery as such, nor that he expects christian masters to free their slaves, but rather to treat them well (Col 3.22-24; Eph 6.5-9).

So with what are we left in practical terms? How exactly was Philemon to take the quite extraordinary step of welcoming Onesimus back as a 'beloved brother', while also retaining him as his 'slave'? Would it not be an unbearable, unresolvable tension. On this issue, Barclay proves the perhaps slightly cynical realist, asking such important questions as: can you warmly welcome back an absconded slave without sending dangerous signals to other slaves in your household and your community? Can you manumit a converted slave without instigating a Gadarene rush of other slaves to convenience christianity? And how can you treat such a slave as a 'brother', without breaking down the whole 'world' of responsibilities and duties he is heir to, and encouraging all manner of insubordination?<sup>16</sup> If Philemon provides the venue for the 'church', then he needs his slaves to prepare and serve the meals, and to clear up afterwards, no? And can Onesimus realistically 'challenge' Philemon on any moral, spiritual, or ecclesial issue, as a 'brother' might be expected to (cf. Gal 6.1), etc? Barclay is perhaps slightly overly pessimistic, though it must be admitted that the history of Christian master/slave relations shows a strongly dualistic tendency to recognize the slave as a brother in the Lord only from the perspective of eternity, or 'the kingdom of God', while oppressively subjecting him in the economy, or 'in the flesh' (cf. v.16: exactly contra to Paul's own advice).<sup>17</sup>

But Paul evidently does expect a *radical transformation* of relationships. Philemon is implicitly invited to forgo his 'rights', and lovingly embrace Onesimus, *even* as he would Paul himself. How in practice it would work out is unclear and left to Philemon's discretion,<sup>18</sup> but it need not have led to the loss of labour and insubordination that Barclay suspects. Everyone in a household, including the beloved spouse and offspring, knew how to respect the wishes of the *pater familias*, how to work with him for the household good, and how to be tactful on delicate issues. Arguably a slave in the Christocentric environment of love that Paul envisages would actually offer *more* sincere service and respect, rather than less (and that is the assumption in the advice in the *Haustafeln*, as well as in the letter to Philemon itself). And Onesimus could probably hope for an equitable manumis-

sion, sooner rather than later, with the normal good on-going relations and mutual obligations as a freedman.

### 1.5 Theological Implications of the Correspondence with Philemon.

The letter to Philemon is arguably the best test-case of the apostle's understanding of reconciliation. But what it shows, quite clearly, is that he anticipates something much more profound than merely the stabilisation of conventional social relations after they have become disrupted by a conflict. It appears that for him reconciliation means something more like the reversal of the alienations which allow and define the demeaning conditions of 'slavery'.

Here we must tread with caution. As we all know, Paul does not make an explicit attack on the institution of slavery *per se* (nor could he in any practical terms). Some accounts of slavery by NT scholars almost imply that at least 'household' slavery had become a relatively benign state of affairs that called for little criticism, even an opportunity for upward mobility, with the expectation of manumission after six to seven years.<sup>19</sup> It is true that household slaves generally fared better than agricultural slaves (depending on the proclivities and status of the master), and certainly very much better than those labouring in mines,<sup>20</sup> but virtually all slavery in the Roman world of the period reduced the person in question to the status of a property; it was a subjection to the power of another that was regarded as 'contrary to nature', and thus a fundamental alienation, a 'shame', even a social death.<sup>21</sup> If Paul does not attack the institution and legal status itself, and indeed seems curiously *laissez-faire* about it in 1 Corinthians 7.21-22,<sup>22</sup> that is because his own advice (as offered in Philemon) *largely gives back the personal identity, honour and social standing ('brother' rather than 'slave') that the institution itself effectively denied or effaced.*

It is when we turn to Colossians and Ephesians that we are able to appraise this in its broader theological context.

## 2. Human Reconciliation in Colossians and Ephesians

### 2.1 Introductory Issues

There are good reasons for taking these two letters together, the most important being their very close literary relationship: most of the sections of Colos-



sians reappear in some revised (often expanded) form in Ephesians, largely in the order of the Colossians material, and Ephesians shares about one third of the wording of Colossians.<sup>23</sup>

The 'canonical reader' will readily connect Colossians and Philemon through the common destination, the common list of those present with Paul (see esp. Philem 23-24; Col 4.7-16), including, crucially, Onesimus and Epaphroditus, but also Mark, Barnabas, Luke, Aristarchus and Demas: a collection that could not have been 'usual'. Such a reader will also anticipate Ephesians to be a letter sent on the same occasion, not just because of the close material relations with Colossians, but on account of the extensive virtually word-for-word identical passage about Tychicus' role in relation to his giving support information about Paul's circumstances (Col 4.7-8=Eph 6.21-22).

Historical-critical readers may, however, demur, and spread out on a spectrum that (a) accepts the authenticity of both Colossians and Ephesians (and their close relationship to Philemon),<sup>24</sup> (b) accepts Colossians and its implicit relationship to Philemon, while reckoning Ephesians as 'deutero-pauline'<sup>25</sup>; (c) regards Colossians as deutero-pauline, and Ephesians as a contemporary or even later writing.<sup>26</sup> And, naturally, there are various positions in between! It is not possible to enter into detail, in this paper, but for the record, I consider Philemon undoubtedly authentic, Colossians as very probably directly Pauline (albeit with Timothy materially contributing), and Ephesians most probably sent on the same occasion, primarily as a subtle prophylactic but positively encouraging letter (against the incipient Colossian heresy), addressed to Laodicea (and intended to be read in Colossae; cf. Col 4.16b), but with a copy deposited at Ephesus (Paul could not expect his co-workers to pass through Ephesus without the conventional hospitality, information exchange, and encouragement, and the letter would be fairly-well targetted to their concerns with the 'powers' too).<sup>27</sup> I base that judgment in part on Richards' research,<sup>28</sup> and on his conclusions that: (1) named co-authors (such as Timothy at Col 1.1; Philem 1) were genuinely active participants (not merely secretaries, certainly not amanuenses, except in trivial cases); (2) secretaries would have a variety of ways of making 'first-draft' notes, from minimal to full dictation, but that the latter was rare, and secretaries would thus inevitably affect details of 'style'; (3) letter scribes would be given pre-formed material (from, e.g. notebooks, such perhaps as the Colos-

sian 'hymn' of 1.15-20, and the *Haustafeln*) simply to be added (that too would change 'style analysis' of any purported letter); and, perhaps most important, (4) *both the initial 'composition/dictation', and all the subsequent drafts to completion, would be read out publicly, and discussed, with the consequence that letters sent on the same occasion (in this case Philem, Col and Eph) on related subjects would naturally interpenetrate considerably.*

On such an assumption, i.e. that the three letters were sent at the same time, they immediately co-interpret in a way that would be less true, even if still partially true, if we stretch out the time scale by decades. So, to avoid unnecessary repetition, we shall discuss first the purely 'distinctive' contribution of Colossians, then the fuller, inclusive, treatment of Ephesians.

## 2.1 The Distinctive Contribution of Colossians

The use of reconcile/reconciliation cognates in Colossians sets the specific portrait in Philemon on a broader canvas, while still addressed to Philemon's own community. Colossians 1.20, 22 are cardinal in this respect, especially the former. As is widely agreed, it belongs to a 'hymnic' section (1.15-20) of some kind, which begins with a strophe in celebration of the pre-existent Christ's unique role, protological, sustaining, and eschatological, in creation (1.15-16, continued in the intermezzo of vv 17-18). From that perspective, all would seem to be at 'peace' under his sovereign control. But the second strophe (1.19-20) unexpectedly speaks of reconciliation and peace being wrought through Jesus' death, on the cross,<sup>29</sup> and so, with Dunn, and others,

between the two strophes, and the two phases of divine activity in Christ, there is presupposed an unmentioned event or state, that is, presumably the falling of the cosmos under the domination of the heavenly powers created as part of *ta; pavnta* (1:16), the state already spoken of in 1:13 ("the power of darkness"), an ongoing crisis now resolved in the cross [cf. 2.15]. The defeat of these powers is also the means of reconciling heaven and earth.<sup>30</sup>

The verb used both here and at 1.22 is the intensifying neologism *apokatallassō*, found elsewhere only at Ephesians 2.16, and quite possibly Paul's own creation. As with *katallassō*, it implies an erstwhile alienation, estrangement and hostility (as v.21 clarifies), but not a series of historical events of



‘falling out’ with God and Christ, but as a universal condition of multiple alienation/estrangement. While Merkel is wrong to say the saving act in 1.20 does ‘not concern the reconciliation of the world of humanity to God [more accurately, to Christ?; this is exactly how 1.21-22 interprets the matter], he is nevertheless nearer the mark when he continues,

but instead involves the reconciliation between the parts of the universe. In the background of this statement stands “the feeling, widespread through the Hellenistic world, of living in a world that is breaking up, in which the struggle of everything against everything else characterizes the whole of nature”.<sup>31</sup>

In short, the big plot in which Philemon and Onesimus play their respective parts is one of a fractured, alienated creation, and an eschatology of total cosmic harmony, inaugurated in Christ, and already becoming visible in the church. It is from the perspective of the fulfilment of *that* vision that Paul can maintain that the alienating divisions of mankind (race, circumcision, status: so 3.11) are dissolved in Christ. It is partly why he opposes the elitist, divisive, false-teaching (probably a syncretistic brand of Jewish Christian apocalyptic mysticism),<sup>32</sup> and commends instead a ‘new-humanity’ ethic of forgiveness, forbearance, compassion, meekness, and self-giving love, which ‘binds everything together in perfect harmony’ and in ‘Christ’s peace’ (3.12-15). But all this is writ large in Ephesians to which we now turn.

## 2.2 The Contribution of Ephesians

Ephesians gives a wider picture within which to interpret both Philemon and Colossians. From the perspective of Ephesians, individual reconciliations are part of a much larger scheme of cosmic re-unification. To avoid repetition of previously published material, I first summarise the relevant parts of the argument of two earlier articles – one examining the relationship between cosmic reconciliation and ‘unity’; and a second on implications for understanding of personhood – and then turn to some aspects that deserve fuller attention, especially in the light of more recent publications.

### 2.2.1 Reconciliation and ‘Unity’ in Ephesians.

It is well known that Ephesians has a predominating emphasis on ‘unity’, and that this is the case in a variety of dimensions. There is (1) the unity of the whole church as one body, one eschatological congregation, and one corresponding temple, with

Christ, the source of that unity; (2) the unity of reconciliatory harmony, between the erstwhile fundamental division between Jew and Gentile, and (3) the unity of interpersonal relationships in the local congregation and in the household.

In an article written in 1995,<sup>33</sup> I argued the following:

1. Ephesians 1.9-10 paradigmatically summarises Paul’s gospel as the ultimate ‘summing up’ or ‘unifying’ of all things (*anakephalaiōsthai*) in Christ. The passage interprets the thoughts of Colossians 1.15-20, and reflects a much broader Jewish background view that the original harmony of the cosmos, expressed in the paradisaical conditions of Genesis 1-2, had dissolved into multiple alienations, and needed to be resolved by eschatological reunification.<sup>34</sup>
2. The rest of the letter deliberately clarifies, exemplifies, and applies this as follows: (a) in Eph 2.1-22 the author articulates two major dimensions of cosmic reconciliation in Christ – that between *all* and God, and that between the major divisions of mankind, i.e. (as seen from a very Jewish perspective), between Jew and Gentile; (b) in Eph 3, the ‘mystery’ of God’s purpose is revealed as his Christocentric action to make Gentile believers co-heirs and co-body members of a new ‘people of God’, and thus a witness to the world (and to the divisive powers) of his final unifying intent; (c) Eph 4 opens with a climactic exhortation to unity (4.1-6), and expounds it in terms of ministry-enabled corporate growth towards Christ (4.7-16); (d) Eph 4.17-6.18 consists of clarion call to abandon the life of the old alienated humanity and to live according to the pattern of a ‘new humanity’ revealed in Jesus (and uniquely illustrated by the marriage relationship in Eph. 5.21-32).

### 2.2.2 Reconciliation and the Renewal of ‘Personhood’ in Ephesians

All the above, I have argued, implies a completely new view of what it means to be (in modern terms) a ‘person’.<sup>35</sup> In Ephesians, there are two (perhaps three?) types of humanity. Gentiles (outside Christ) are stereotyped as beings in the very worst form of alienation from God and from each other (esp 4.17-19, but cf. 2.1-3). Jews are somehow ‘nearer’ (2.11-12), but still in need of reconciliation to God and to the outsiders (2.14-17). Both of these are regarded as a form of personhood that



needs to be 'put off' and replaced by the 'new man' configured on Christ. I summarised the essential position thus:

- (i) The church is constituted as a community of the reconciliation of all things in Christ, and as the bringing together of the two 'realms' – Jews and Gentiles, formerly in hostility – as one new body in Christ, one heavenly eschatological temple (so Eph. 1-2). She is the realm of (messianic) 'peace' that results when alienating enmity is torn down (2:14-18; cf. 4:3). Her very existence in history as one harmonious ecclesia of Jews and Gentiles, and with a new distinct identity (neither Jew nor Gentile, but one body in Christ) is God's witness to the heavenly powers of his manifold wisdom and eschatological intent (3:4-6; 8-11).

All this presupposes that the new man created in Christ is fundamentally restructured away from a personhood of 'self'-centredness, 'closedness' and alienation, towards one of reconciliation, and a new 'openness' of self-giving love to the neighbour.

- (ii) Precisely this is the assumption of the extensive treatment of ethical topics, in chs 4-6. This sets out from the urgent call to be 'eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit [=the unity he gives] in [the] bond of peace' (4:3) to a definition of the church in terms of such foundational unity (4:4-6) and then describes the task of all ministry as to promote the harmonious growth of the body in unity towards the stature and maturity of its Lord (4:7-16). It is in that context, that Paul calls his readers to put off 'the old man' and to live instead the personhood they have learned through the Christ-event (4:20-24; 4:30-5:2): the forgiving, loving, self-giving, God-imitating, life of Christ. The ethical advice which follows exemplifies this call.<sup>36</sup>

### 2.2.3 Special Issues in the Jew/Gentile Reconciliation of Ephesians 2.11-22

It is clear that this passage implies a reconciliation between Jews and Gentiles. But what form does it take? For Markus Barth it means a unification between *all* Jews (believing, or not) and Gentile Christians.<sup>37</sup> For most, it is more probable that the unification in question involves the creation of a new 'set'; some kind of *tertium genus*, however horrible that seems to a post-holocaust genera-

tion. That is, a quite new 'humanity' defined by its radical new existence in Christ. But Barth's position has found new support in a monograph by T-L Yee,<sup>38</sup> who presents a post-Barth, 'new Pauline' perspective. For Barth:

(1) the 'new man' created in Christ (2.15) is not constituted by the abolition or denial of differences between Jews and Gentiles. The readers are still addressed as Gentiles (2.10) and Jewish Christians are still Jews. The 'new man' is neither Christ, nor the 'christian personality', nor some *tertium quid* ('third entity' – e.g. a new Israel/people of God standing somehow over and against both empirical Israel and the Gentile world). Rather the one 'new man' is created simply by the *ending of the hostility* between Jew and Gentile, by the removal of the separating, enslaving, accusing and provisional functions of the Law.

(2) The 'commonwealth of Israel' (2.12) relates to the *whole nation*; not only the faithful remnant (as Schlier, Robinson, and Dahl have argued);<sup>39</sup> nor an 'ideal' Israel, the 'true' Israel (Vielhauer), or the Church (Hanson). But, *against* most commentators, he asserts that Paul does not subsequently in the passage anywhere restrict the scope of the concept of Israel. Paul does not tell the Gentiles readers that their new relationship is only with *believing* Jews – 'Rather it is clear that 'in Christ' they have been united with Israel as a whole and come before God'. Christ is the Messiah of *all* Israel, not just a part of it, and it is in him that the Church is united with Israel. *The Church has no Mission to Israel, only a calling to oecumenical dialogue*.<sup>40</sup>

To this Yee adds the claims that (a) Paul's criticism of unbelieving Gentile existence, in such passages as Ephesians 2:1-2; 11-13; 4:17-19, is pan-Jewish, rather than distinctively Christian, and (b) that the writer has no theological criticism of (unbelieving) Israel, as such.

The scope of this paper does not allow a detailed response, but requires at least the following demurral and qualification:

1. It simply is *not* true to say that Ephesians has little-or-no criticism of covenantal Judaism. In 2.11-13 Paul offers a restrained polemic against those who brand Gentile converts as still the *akrobestia* (literally, and certainly not neutrally, 'the foreskin'): those who denigrate the Gentile believers in such a fashion (and he is thinking primarily of those who promote the quasi-Jewish false teaching in Colossae) he dubs 'the so-called circumcision, merely performed by human hands in the flesh'. The



use of the adjective *cheiropoiotos* (by human hands) here, with its connotations of idolatry, is clearly polemical (contra Yee). In 2.16 it is *both* Jews and Gentiles that are together reconciled with God through the Christ-event, which assumes that even Jews need such reconciliation. Most importantly, while 2.1-2 paint Gentiles (before faith) in blackest terms, 2.3 *incorporates Judaism into exactly the same state: dead*, in the thrall of the devil, and children of wrath. It is clear from both Colossians and Ephesians that all those who do not find their essential identity in Christ – whether Jew or Gentile – are in very deep peril: they are without the eschatological Spirit, and are no part of the heavenly temple built on the cornerstone of Christ and his apostles/prophets. And it is simply wrong to say that Paul's mission was only to Gentiles, while he could only conceive of 'oecumenical dialogue' with Jews: that simply makes a nonsense of his polemic in Galatians and of his anguish in Romans 9-11. We need to resist the temptation to devise post-holocaust re-readings of Paul that cut against the grain of his clear criticism of unbelieving Israel. Let Paul be Paul!

2. The above notwithstanding, Ephesians is not in any way 'anti-Jewish'. Even before Christ they are the 'near' to God of Ephesians 2.13, compared with the Gentiles who were those 'afar'. The writer himself is evidently proud of his Jewishness, and regards the people of God 'in Christ' as having a distinctively 'Israel' shape: the fulfilment of her hopes, while Gentiles had no hope.

### 2.2.4 Reconciliation and 'Forgiveness' in Ephesians 4.32-5.2

We have noted that the 'concept' of reconciliation might require consideration of many passages that do not specifically use '-*allassō*') cognates. Very closely allied, and in the same semantic domain, is the language of 'forgiveness'.<sup>41</sup> To 'forgive' is to put away hostility, in a manner that is usually personally costly. Its meaningful and intended end is the restoration of a fractured relationship (real or potential), and thus 'reconciliation' (that observation, of course, could pull in much of the NT for a consideration of the subject 'human reconciliation', and is part of the reason I have restricted the scope of this paper to Philem-Col-Eph). Ephesians 4.32-5.2 is in a sense pivotal on this issue, even if

it not necessarily structurally so in Ephesians. It brims with language iridescent of reconciliation: the putting away of bitterness, wrath, anger and malice; the embracing of kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness, and a love to the other which imitates sacrificial self-giving for the other of Christ himself. All this and more lies at the heart of Paul's concept of reconciliation.

## 3. Conclusion

We began with the tale of Philemon and Onesimus, and what appeared to be Paul's quite extraordinary request that the master, Philemon, accept back his absconded slave, no longer as a slave, but as a brother; indeed even as the apostle himself. How can we understand such a request? The answer comes in the broader picture painted by Colossians, and, especially, Ephesians. The *whole point* of the gospel is to reverse the multiple 'alienations' of the 'fall'. This means two things:

1. Theologically, human 'reconciliation' is extraordinarily important: it is *not* just about fixing bad social relationships, occasioned by some dispute, though it very certainly includes that (as is obvious in the case of Onesimus).
2. At a fundamental level, theologically, 'reconciliation' is about re-integrating as persons who mirror/image (so Gen 1) the divine trinitarian personhood of loving unity, and demonstrate the grace of forgiveness exemplified in the Christ-event.<sup>42</sup>

## Notes

- 1 All three instances are of the apparent neologism *apokatallassō* ('reconcile'). The terminology of reconciliation *with* God is distinctive to Paul amongst the NT writers: for *katallassō*, 'reconcile', see Rom 5.10 (bis); 2 Cor 5.18, 19, 20; for *katallagē*, 'reconciliation', see Rom 5.11; 11.15; 2 Cor 5.18, 19.
- 2 On which see Antony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, NIGTC (Carlisle/Grand Rapids: Paternoster/Eerdmans, 2000), 519-24
- 3 For the terminology, see esp. I.H. Marshall, *Jesus the Saviour: Studies in New Testament Theology* (London: SPCK, 1990), 258-74; S.E. Porter, *Καταλλάσσω in Ancient Greek Literature, with Reference to the Pauline Writings* (Córdoba: Ediciones el Almendro, 1994)
- 4 Johannes P. Louw and Eugene A. Nida, eds, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament, based on Semantic Domains* (New York: UBS, 1988), 502
- 5 Second in line might be 'the parable of the prodigal son', in Luke 15, which too does not lexicalize



- either the 'love' or the 'reconciliation' which the passage gloriously epitomizes.
- 6 The traditional view – that Onesimus was a runaway slave – faces considerable difficulties: (a) he would not voluntarily visit Paul in prison, were he himself a fugitive; (b) it is most unlikely that, if apprehended, he would be put in the same kind of confinement as Paul (not in Caesarea or Rome, at any rate), and (c) had Onesimus been arrested, then Paul would have absolutely no say in the matter of returning him to his master. The magistrates would have been responsible.
- 7 Cf. the judgment of (third century) Julius Paulus: 'The slave who absconds to a friend of the master, to beg his intercession, is not a "fugitive"'. Similarly the Roman jurist Proculus in the earlier part of the first century, according to one Vivianus, as quoted in (6th century!) Justinian's *Digest* (21.1.17.4), whose slave had fled to V's mother to seek similar intercession.
- 8 For details see: P Lampe, 'Keine "Sklavenflucht" des Onesimus', *ZNW* 76 (1985): 135-37; Brian M. Rapske, 'The Prisoner Paul in the Eyes of Onesimus', *NTS* 37 (1991): 187-203, esp. 201; cf. Brian Rapske, *The Book of Acts and Paul in Roman Custody*, *AICS* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1994); I.H. Marshall in Karl P. Donfried and I. Howard Marshall, *The Theology of the Shorter Pauline Epistles* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 177-79; John M.G. Barclay, *Colossians and Philemon* (Sheffield: SAP, 1997), 98-102, reversing his previous acceptance of the traditional understanding (in J.M.G. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *NTS* 37 [1991]: 161-86); James D.G. Dunn, *The Epistles to the Colossians and to Philemon: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996), 304-07; Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*, *Anchor Bible* (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 17-23. Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon*, *ECC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 227-28, are more cautious in their acceptance of this possibility. Cf. J.G. Nordling, 'Onesimus Fugitivus: A Defense of the Runaway Slave Hypothesis in Philemon', *JSNT* 41 (1991), 97-119.
- 9 Contrast the positive emphasis on repentance made in the 'parallel' case of Pliny-the-Younger's appeal to Sabinianus on behalf of one of S's freedmen (*Ep.* 9.21).
- 10 On those seasons, see e.g. E. Randolph Richards, *Paul and First-Century Letter Writing: Secretaries, Composition and Collection* (Downer's Grove: IVP, 2004), chap. 12, and the sources he cites.
- 11 *Paul*, 161-170.
- 12 See the heart-warming analysis of Marianne Mey Thompson, *Colossians and Philemon*, *Two Horizons New Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids/Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2005), 219-22.
- 13 N.T. Wright, *The Epistles of Paul to the Colossians and to Philemon* (Leicester: IVP, 1986), 187; so also Thompson, *Colossians*, 223-25.
- 14 See Fitzmyer, 122; Dunn, 345; Barth, 492.
- 15 The term 'brother' did not imply egalitarian relations between siblings, and an older brother might, e.g., be expected to 'discipline' (including beating) a younger (for his benefit, of course!): see, e.g., Andrew D. Clarke, 'Equality or Mutuality? Paul's Use of 'Brother' Language', in *The New Testament in Its First Century Setting: Essays on Context and Background*, ed. P.J. Williams, et al. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2004), 151-64.
- 16 J.M.G. Barclay, 'Paul, Philemon and the Dilemma of Christian Slave-Ownership', *NTS* 37 (1991), 161-86, and, *idem*, *Colossians*, ch. 7. That the danger of insubordination was there is clear from the injunction that slaves honour and respect their christian masters, even though they are 'brethren' (1 Tim 6.2).
- 17 See Marianne-Mey Thompson's critique, in *Colossians*, 248-60.
- 18 And as Lohse points out, 'Love is resourceful enough to find the right way in accomplishing the good' (E. Lohse, *Colossians and Philemon*, *Hermeneia* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971), 202).
- 19 Cf. e.g., S.S. Bartchy, *Mallon Chrēsai: First Century Slavery and the Interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:21* (Missoula: Scholars, 1973); D.B. Martin, *Slavery as Salvation: The Metaphor of Slavery in Pauline Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: YaleUP, 1990); Thiselton, *Epistle*, 562-65. The suggestion that manumission was regular, and could be expected after six years of service, is a complete misunderstanding of a remark by Cicero: see, briefly, J.A. Harrill, 'Slavery' in Craig A. Evans and Stanley E. Porter, eds, *Dictionary of New Testament Background* (Leicester: IVP, 2000), 1126; cf. J.A. Harrill, *The Manumission of Slaves in Early Christianity*, *HUT* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1995).
- 20 For the variations see e.g. T.E.J. Wiedemann, *Greek and Roman Slavery* (London: Routledge, 1988).
- 21 Cf. O. Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: HarvardUP, 1982).
- 22 Cf. Thiselton, *Epistle*, 544, 552-62, for the defence of the translation of the notorious crux in 7.21-22 as 'If, when God called you, you were a slave, do not let it worry you. Even if there is a possibility that you might come to be free, rather start to make positive use of the present. For the slave who was called in the Lord is a freedperson to the Lord. . . '.
- 23 The argument for the dependence of Ephesians on Colossians is put in its most extreme and woodenly mechanistic form by George H. van Kooten, *Cosmic Christology in Paul and the Pauline School: Colossians and Ephesians in the Context of Graeco-Roman Cosmology, with a New Synopsis of the Greek Texts*, *WUNT* II (Tübingen: Mohr, 2003), whose synopsis of the



- two letters (215-89) argues that Eph has thoroughly plundered Col, excepting some of the material specific to the false-teaching (2.8-3.4), while adding only two sections (the ecclesiological material in Eph 2, and the 'spiritual warfare' passage in Eph 6). For a much more cautious analysis of the relationship, see esp. E. Best, 'Who Used Whom? The Relationship of Ephesians and Colossians', *NTS* 43 (1997), 72-96, with whom van Kooten rarely interacts.
- 24 So, recently, the commentaries by Barth, O'Brien (P.T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, Pillar Commentary [Leicester: Apollos, 1999]), and Hoehner (Harold W. Hoehner, *Ephesians: An Exegetical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2002]).
  - 25 J.D.G. Dunn, "Deutero-Pauline Letters," in *Early Christian Thought in Its Jewish Context*, ed. J. Barclay and J. Sweet (Cambridge: CUP, 1996), 130-44; John Muddiman, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, Black's New Testament Commentaries (London: Continuum, 2001).
  - 26 So (virtually) Rudolf Schnackenburg, *The Epistle to the Ephesians* [Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1991]; Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians*, vol. 42 of *WBC* (Dallas: Word, 1990), and Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998). W. Bujard's *Stilanalytische Untersuchungen zum Kolosserbrief*, SUNT (Göttingen: V&R, 1972) has been particularly influential on the current trend to deny the authenticity of Colossians. But see the cautions concerning his method in Barclay, *Colossians*, 30-33, and M.B. O'Donnell, 'Linguistic Footprints or Style by Numbers? The Use of Statistics in the Discussion of Authorship of New Testament Documents', in *Linguistics and the New Testament: Critical Junctures*, eds S.E. Porter and D.A. Carson (Sheffield: SAP, 1999), 206-62.
  - 27 So C.E. Arnold, *Ephesians: Power and Magic* (Cambridge: CUP, 1989), *passim*.
  - 28 E. Randolph Richards, *The Secretary in the Letters of Paul* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1991), and, especially, *idem*, *Paul*, *passim*. In many respects he is not far off from the classical, but somewhat ignored work by O. Roller, *Das Formular der paulinischen Briefe*, BWANT 4 (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1933).
  - 29 On critical issues: (1) I take 'the whole fulness' of v.20 to be the subject of the verb 'was pleased', (2) the *referent* to be God, and (3) the 'to him' to refer to Christ, in parallel with v.16f. In 1.22, Christ is the probable subject of the verb 'he reconciled' and the 'to him' and 'before him' now refer to God.
  - 30 Dunn, *Colossians*, 102-03. But cf. also R. McL. Wilson, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Colossians and Philemon*, ICC (London: T&T Clark, 2005), 154-59.
  - 31 O. Merkel καταλλάσσω, ἀποκαταλλάσσω, καταλλαγή in *EDNT*:2, 262: his quotation is from E. Schweizer, *The Letter to the Colossians* (London: SPCK, 1982 [EKK 1976]), 81. Schweizer need not have suggested it was a mainly 'hellenistic' view: it was there in Palestinian Judaism too. For Paul, it was not a question of a universal fiery flux, but of Adam's disobedience, and the consequential melt-down into multiple alienations: from God, from Eve, and from self. For Paul, this is all amounts to a fall into satanic darkness (Col 1.13, and cf. Eph 2.1-2 and 6.10-18). For the more Jewish background to the understanding of cosmic alienation, see, e.g., R.P. Martin, *Reconciliation: A Study of Paul's Theology* (London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott, 1981), ch. 4.
  - 32 With e.g. C. Rowland, 'Apocalyptic Visions and the Exaltation of Christ in the Letter to the Colossians', *JSNT* 19 (1983), 73-83; Thomas J. Sappington, *Revelation and Redemption at Colossae* (Sheffield: JSOT, 1991).
  - 33 Max Turner, 'Mission and Meaning in Terms of "Unity" in Ephesians', eds Antony Billington, Tony Lane, and Max Turner, in *Mission and Meaning: Essays Presented to Peter Cotterell* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1995), 138-66.
  - 34 On that I was initially dependent on S. Hanson, *The Unity of the Church in the New Testament: Colossians and Ephesians* (Uppsala: Almqvist, 1946); but see also Martin, *Reconciliation*, ch. 7.
  - 35 Max Turner, 'Approaching "Personhood" in the New Testament, with Special Reference to Ephesians', *EvQ* 77, no. 3 (2005), 211-33.
  - 36 Turner, 'Personhood', 228.
  - 37 Quintessentially, M. Barth, *The Broken Wall: A Study of the Epistle to the Ephesians* (London: Collins, 1960).
  - 38 Tet-Lim N. Yee, *Jews, Gentiles and Ethnic Reconciliation: Paul's Jewish Identity and Ephesians*, SNTSMS (Cambridge: CUP, 2005).
  - 39 See W. Rader, *The Church and Racial Hostility: A History of Interpretation of Ephesians 2.11-22* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1978), 224, for detail.
  - 40 For a response to Barth's position see A.T. Lincoln, 'The Church and Israel in Ephesians 2' *CBQ* 49 (1987), 605-24.
  - 41 See Louw-Nida 1: 502-04.
  - 42 On which see especially Miroslav Volf, *Exclusion and Embrace: A Theological Exploration of Identity, Otherness, and Reconciliation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1996); *idem*, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005).