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A Christological Reflection on Reconciliation in the Epistle to Philemon

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated reconciliation in Paul's Epistle to Philemon from a Christological perspective to uncover theological principles that guide the restoration of broken relationships. The discussion highlighted Paul's appeal for forgiveness and unity between Philemon and Onesimus as a model of reconciliation that is relational and theological. Insights were drawn from African cultural traditions, Pauline approaches, and Christological reflection, with practical implications for ministry. The study recommends that Christian communities adopt biblically grounded forgiveness and restoration to address conflicts. In conclusion, reconciliation in Philemon, viewed through Christology, offers enduring lessons for fostering unity in both human-to-human and human-to-divine relationships. The research contributes to scholarship by bridging biblical exegesis with practical conflict resolution, enriching Pauline theology while offering applicable insights for ministry and community life.

Keywords: Paul, Philemon, Reconciliation, Christology, Conflict Resolution.

INTRODUCTION

According to Osa, reconciliation and peace basically form the heart of all religious bodies in the world.[1] Osa buttresses his position by noting that "disputes are an integral part of human nature, which dates back to the origin of human beings."[2] After the fall of man in the Garden of Eden, sin entered the world and affected the thinking faculty of mankind. Following the rebellion of man through disobedience in the Garden of Eden, the divine relationship between God and man was broken. In recognition of the fallen state of man, which makes man susceptible to sin, nearly all religions seek to repair the broken relationship "between human beings and God, between human beings and the natural world, or among human beings themselves."[3]

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[1] Francis Iwuh Osa, "African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis The Sacrament Of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective," *An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* 5, no. 6 (2019): 36–50.
[2] Osa, "African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis The Sacrament Of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective,"36.
[3] Osa, "African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis The Sacrament Of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective,"36.

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The reality and inevitability of conflicts in human life are underlined by the Akan adage "Ɛ*se ne tɛkyerɛma mpo ko*" ("even the teeth and tongue fight"). The adage emphasizes the point that even the closest of friends can end up fighting. The Akan cosmology, in order to promote peace and tranquillity, has measures put in place for one who offends the other to follow in bringing about reconciliation. From the foregoing, reconciliation only becomes important when there is a conflict between two people. Conflict, according to Robbins, is defined as "a process that begins when one party perceives that another party has negatively affected, or is about to negatively affect, something that the first party cares about."[4] Hussein adds that conflicts can occur in the following forms: interpersonal conflict, intragroup conflict, interorganizational conflict, intergroup conflict, and intraorganizational conflict.[5]

Conflicts can emanate from unhealthy competition, culture of impunity, communication issues, lack of resources, corruption, intolerance among ethnic and religious groups, negative attitudes towards other people, ethnic marginalization, poverty, human rights violations, small arms and light weapons proliferation, favouritism, unequal distribution of the national cake, twisting and manipulation of history, among others. Conflicts escalate when steps are not taken at the initial stages to nip them in the bud. Once the conflict situation escalates after those involved do not settle their differences, it becomes necessary for a third party to reconcile them. According to Masango, "reconciliation" or "reconcile" means a change from a state of enmity to one of friendship, or healing of a quarrel, or a radical change occurs in which an intimate and personal relationship is renewed or repaired."[6] It is derived from Masango's definition that reconciliation heals broken relationships that once existed to produce a peaceful and harmonious environment. A key Biblical book that practically applies the doctrine of reconciliation is the book of Philemon. It teaches how conflicting parties can be reconciled with each other.

Although the letter of Paul to Philemon has been preached in the church over the years, the practicality of the lessons gleaned from it is hardly observed when conflict situations arise. In this backdrop, the author seeks to learn practical lessons from Paul's letter to Philemon and how it can be applied to contemporary ministry.

METHODOLOGY

The study employed a literature-based research approach to examine reconciliation in Philemon. This methodology integrated the following.

- **Background analysis**: situating reconciliation within African cultural traditions and broader theological discourse.
- **Textual examination**: close reading of the Epistle to Philemon to identify Paul's rhetorical and theological strategies.
- **Comparative study**: evaluating parallels between African cultural practices of reconciliation and Pauline approaches.
- **Deductive reasoning**: drawing Christological principles from the text and applying them to contemporary contexts.

Reconciliation in the African Life and Thought

The concept of reconciliation only becomes necessary after there is a conflict situation. Raymond Gilpin traces the origins of African conflict to "historical animosities, exclusionary politics, contested legitimacy,

[4] Abdul Fattah Farea Hussein and Yaser Hasan Salem Al-Mamary, "Conflicts: Their Types, and Their Negative and Positive Effects on Organizations," *International Journal of Scientific & Technology Research* 8, no. 8 (2019): 10–13.

[5] Hussein and Al-Mamary, "Conflicts: Their Types, and Their Negative and Positive Effects on Organizations."

[6] Kimion Tagwirei and Maake Masango, "Rethinking the Identity and Economic Sustainability of the Church: Case of AOG BTG in Zimbabwe," *HTS Teologiese Studies / Theological Studies* 79, no. 3 (March 10, 2023), https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v79i2.8129.

resource competition, external factors, globalized conflicts, and extremist ideologies."[7] Gilpin's point is that conflicts do not arise in a vacuum but have historical, economic, and political underpinnings. Coe et al. maintain, "Despite the importance of social relationships, conflict seems to be difficult for humans to avoid."[8] In their view, as long as humans remain humans, conflicts are bound to happen. Otite and Albert are cited to have defined conflict as "a struggle over values and claims to scarce status, power, and resources in which the opponents aim to neutralize, injure, or eliminate their rivals."[9] They trace the genesis of conflicts to incompatible events that can result in a win-win situation. To Ajayi and Buhari:

> Conflict can be described as a condition in which an identifiable group of human beings, whether tribal, ethnic, linguistic, religious, socio-political, economic, cultural, or otherwise, is in conscious opposition to one or more other identifiable human groups because these groups are pursuing what to be incompatible goals.[10]

Closer analysis of the description given by Ajayi and Buhari conveys the thought that the prime essence of conflicts is opposition. Opposition takes the center stage when the key actors of the conflict situation do not compromise in accepting each other's weaknesses and strengths to reach a consensus and thus take an established position, which will have to resist the interests of the other. Conflicts can emanate from all facets of human endeavor, including but not limited to tribal, religious, ethnic, economic, and cultural dimensions. Ajayi and Buhari further intimate that "more importantly, conflict arises from the interaction of individuals who have partly incompatible ends, in which the ability of one actor to gain his ends depends to an important degree on the choice or decisions that other parties will take."[11] Ajayi reflects the pervasive nature of conflicts on the African continent by asserting, "The regularity of conflicts in Africa has become one of the distinct characteristics of the continent."[12]

Reconciliation, on the other hand, according to Nguyen Vo, "is about restoring the right relationship between two people who have been enemies."[13] Deductively, reconciliation aims at bringing together old friends who have become enemies, mostly as a result of a clash of interests. Osa's attempt to explain reconciliation is captured as follows:

> The term "reconciliation" is derived from the Latin "reconciliare" or the Latin expression "conciliates," which means coming together or being united. "Conciliatus" has the same connotation as "conciliate," which also means, above all, to restore to friendship. It is the coming together for a friendly purpose. To this end, every definition of reconciliation must be geared toward building some sort of positive relationship.[14]

Osa also defines reconciliation as the process through which parties emerging from oppressive or destructive conflict seek to attain or restore a relationship they deem minimally acceptable.[15] He underscores the crucial role reconciliation plays after the breaking of the old relationship through disobedience.

Osa, in his submission, stressed that the end product of reconciliation should be "the building of some sort of positive relationship.[16] His position is that reconciliation is only achieved when a consensus is reached for the parties involved to embrace a sense of positive relationship with each other.

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[7] Raymond Gilpin, "Understanding the Nature and Origins," *Minding the Gap: African Conflict Management in a Time of Change*, 2016, 21.
[8] Kathryn Coe, Craig T Palmer, and Khadijah ElShabazz, "The Resolution of Conflict: Traditional African Ancestors, Kinship, and Rituals of Reconciliation," *African Conflict and Peacebuilding Review* 3, no. 2 (2013): 110–28.
[9] Adeyinka Theresa Ajayi and Lateef Oluwafemi Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society," *African Research Review* 8, no. 2 (2014): 138–57.
[10] Ajayi and Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society," 140.
[11] Ajayi and Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society," 140.
[12] Johnson Olaosebikan Aremu, "Conflicts in Africa: Meaning, Causes, Impact and Solution," *An International Multi-Disciplinary Journal, Ethiopia* 4, no. 4 (2010): 549–60.
[13] Dan Sinh Nguyen Vo, "Reconciliation and Conflict Transformation " (University of Notre Dame, 2008).24.
[14] Osa,"African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis the Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective," 37.
[15] Osa,"African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis the Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective," 37.
[16] Osa,"African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis the Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective," 37.

Davis, contributing to the concept of reconciliation, identifies four types of reconciliation approaches: deep mutual healing, shifting expectations, agreeing to disagree, and inner resolution.[17] She asserts that reconciliation can be achieved through any of the four types enumerated above.

Indigenous African approaches to conflict resolution can be grouped under negotiation, arbitration, mediation, adjudication, and reconciliation.[18] Before the arrival of the Whiteman to the shores of Africa, either to engage in trade or missionary work, Africans themselves had a way of resolving conflict situations. The key actors in these enterprises included chiefs, priests, elders, secret cult and priestesses.[19] Aremu, though, agrees with Ajayi but is quick to add that conflict is not the monopoly of Africans since it can be observed in countries from all over the world, including Bosnia, Serbia, Turkey and Northern Ireland (Europe), Cambodia, Iraq and Burma (Asia) and Peru, Guatemala, Mexico and Colombia (Latin America). Ajayi's position is subscribed to by Osa, who maintains that:

> The theme of peace and reconciliation is not a foreign notion to the African people, and its intensity has accelerated, whether we look at it from secular or religious considerations. It is deeply integrated into the total life and worldview of the people, without delineating life into religious and secular components, because religion is part and parcel of traditional life.[20]

The African communal worldview makes the effect of conflict and reconciliation transcend beyond the two people directly involved. In this light, Meiring uses the scenario of how a husband and wife who have been separated for some time can be reconciled. He emphasized the key role relatives and neighbors of the couple would play in the reconciliatory process.[21] He advances his argument by noting the crucial nature of the African community life, where an injury to one is taken to be an injury to all. As a result of the corporate community life, when one is injured, which affects all, "the whole corporate community must be reconciled and is therefore involved in the reconciliation between (seemingly) only two members of the community. For the same reason, the offender is not the only one held responsible for the injury and he or she will not be punished as if he or she acted alone."[22]

Meiring's point is that reconciliation in African thought is not only between the two people but encompasses almost everyone in the community. Coe et al side with Meiring by maintaining that "conflicts could have multigenerational effects, leading to blood feuds that were perpetuated through future generations, with future generations inheriting the conflict without being aware of its initial cause."[23] Meiring's engagement with Mbiti highlights the significance of cleansing in reconciliation, as he emphasizes that cleansing was essential in repairing a broken relationship, thereby paving the way for a new one to be formed. In his view, the act of cleansing had the efficacy of removing "both psychological and physical injuries."[24] This assertion fits well with the Christian doctrine of reconciliation, in which the blood of Jesus cleanses the believer and restores/repairs the relationship that was broken because of the Adamic sin and the individual's sins committed. In Igbo-African philosophy, the term *Igwebuike,* when literally translated, means "'number is strength' or 'number is power', that is, when human beings come together in solidarity and complementarity, they are powerful or can constitute an insurmountable force."[25] A similar thought is conveyed by the Akan of Ghana in the adage, which, when literally translated into English, goes like 'A single broom can easily be broken, but when the individual brooms are put together, it is difficult to break. The two proverbs seek to underscore the essence of reconciliation since disunity in a community can cause its ruin. In the words of Oraegbunam, the Igbo, conflict in African thought can be likened to palm oil, which,

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[17]Laura Davis, "4Types of Reconciliation," 2023, https://www.psychotherapynetworker.org/article/4-types-reconciliation/ as accessed on June 12,2024.
[18] Ajayi and Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society," 149-151.
[19] Ajayi and Buhari, "Methods of Conflict Resolution in African Traditional Society," 141-142.
[20] Osa, "African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis the Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective," 39.
[21] A. Meiring, " Ubuntu and Reconciliation in South Africa," *Verbum et Ecclesia* 26, no. 3 (2005): 729–47.
[22] Meiring, " Ubuntu and Reconciliation in South Africa."
[23] Coe, Palmer, and ElShabazz, "The Resolution of Conflict: Traditional African Ancestors, Kinship, and Rituals of Reconciliation."
[24] Meiring, " Ubuntu and Reconciliation in South Africa."
[25] Osa, "African Traditional Method of Conflict Resolution Vis-a-Vis the Sacrament of Reconciliation: An Igwebuike Perspective," 39.

when one finger gets soaked with it, quickly spreads to the other fingers to drive home the point that the bad behavior of one person can affect all, and this is nicely crafted in the Igbo idiom *"Ofu mkpulu aka luta mmanu o zue ndi ozo onu,"*[26]

In indigenous traditional African societies, such as the Kom traditional society, there is no award for winning an argument in conflict resolution because the "end result of conflict resolution is to accommodate all parties involved in the conflict, through genuine collaboration by all, in the search for effective compromise."[27] This is a key distinctive characteristic which differentiates it from the Western approach to conflict resolution by declaring a winner and a loser after hearing both sides. In the words of Lawal et al;

> Traditional societies resolved conflicts through internal and external social controls. The internal social controls use processes of deterrence, such as personal shame and fear of supernatural powers. External controls rely on sanctions associated with actions taken by others in relation to behaviours that may be approved or disapproved.[28]

Lawal et al. further highlight the dynamic nature of the African traditional conflict resolution, which takes cognizance of the extent of the conflict before the appropriate approach is employed. One unknown writer has made a profound assertion that conflict resolution existed in Africa and Ghana long before the coming of the white man (missionaries) to the shores of Africa. The traditional mechanism of reconciliation consisted of council of elders or a mixture of elderly men and women who acted as third parties in the resolution process. The choice of elderly men and women may have stemmed from the African thought that experience gives wisdom, and, for that matter, the elderly who had experienced life for a relatively long period of time could be relied on for counsel. This is supported by the Akan practice that, in times of difficult situations, and there seems to be no headway in resolving an issue between people, the process is put on recess to consult *aberewa,* literally translated as an old woman for counsel and insight.

Key personalities that were included in the reconciliatory process in Africa included Kings and Chiefs, Ancestors, Elders, Family Heads, and the families involved, among others. These key actors were expected to possess distinguished social values and norms such as transparency, truthfulness, selfishness, tolerance, justness, objectivity, and trustworthiness, among others.

Background of Paul's letter to Philemon

Scholars generally agree that Paul is the author of the epistle to Philemon. It is the shortest of all the Pauline letters, and this fact is echoed by Roy R. Jeal, who reflects that Philemon "is a short letter as Pauline letters go, the shortest in the corpus, at 335 words."[29] The letter was written under house arrest, for which scholars are divided with respect to the exact location, which could be Rome, Ephesus, Philippi, and Caesarea because these are the most notable places Paul was incarcerated. However, McCullough asserts that it is more plausible to identify the location of Paul at the time of the letter to Rome because the description of Paul as "an old" man is indicative of the fact that Paul had advanced in age and was a prisoner of Christ at this material moment, which fits a later time in his life.[30] She adds, "Paul was a younger man when he was in Ephesus during his second and third missionary journeys", and was never in Ephesus in his final journey to Rome.[31] He cemented his position by noting that;

> Demas appears to be a fellow worker of Paul at the time of writing the letter to Philemon, who later deserted Paul having fallen in love with the present world (2 Timothy 4:10). Given the mention of this individual in 2 Timothy 4:10, and given that the letters to Timothy are deutero-Pauline, the preferred assumption is that the letter to Philemon was written very late in Paul's life, likely between 61 and 63 A.D.[32]

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[26] Coe, Palmer, and ElShabazz, "The Resolution of Conflict: Traditional African Ancestors, Kinship, and Rituals of Reconciliation."
[27] https://www.accord.org.za/conflict-trends/traditional-methods-of-conflict-resolution/ accessed on June 20,2023.
[28] Rasaki Olanrewaju Lawal et al., "Resolving Conflict in African Traditional Society: An Imperative of Indigenous African System," *African Journal of History and Archaeology* 4, no. 1 (2020): 1851–2695.
[29] Roy R Jeal, *Exploring Philemon: Freedom, Brotherhood, and Partnership in the New Society*, vol. 2 (SBL Press, 2015), 1.
[30] Maureen McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: A Case of Persuasion" (2018), 3.
[31] McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: A Case of Persuasion," 3.
[32] McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: a Case of Persuasion," 4.

Fitzmyer and Wright are two key adherents of the position that Ephesus was the base from which Paul wrote the letter due to the geographical proximity between Ephesus and Colossae.[33]

Scholars have struggled to come to a consensus on what actually caused Onesimus to leave his master, Philemon. In an attempt to unravel the challenge, four positions (theories) have emerged: Onesimus has been variously interpreted in scholarly tradition as a fugitive who absconded from Philemon's household and possibly committed theft, an absconder who sought mediation through a friend of his master, a messenger dispatched to Paul, or a servant intentionally sent to provide support during Paul's imprisonment.[34]

Slavery in the Greco-Roman World

Paul's letter to Philemon was a semi-private one in which the former sought to plead for forgiveness and acceptance for Onesimus, a runaway slave from the latter, the slave owner. Slavery constituted the very foundation of the social structures in the Greco-Roman world, and generally, slaves had no legal rights. Though the letter is silent on what occasioned the slave to run away from the owner, the Greco-Roman context in which the story emerged made the slave guilty, irrespective of the cause. In this regard, Cartwright submits that Enslaved individuals, ranked beneath even freed criminals, were wholly deprived of rights, legal recognition, and individuality, regarded within prevailing social and legal frameworks as mere property of their masters—comparable to inanimate objects such as buildings or vessels—with their capacity for speech as the sole distinction.[35] Cartwright's assertion paints a clear picture of how slaves were treated with disdain and no sense of recognition in society. Benjamin Hicks, subscribing to this position, observes that: Roman legal frameworks governing slavery were profoundly severe, conceiving enslaved persons as mere possessions whose masters held absolute entitlement to their labor, progeny, and commodified exchange, while prevailing norms further presumed their sexual availability, thereby underscoring the depth of their subjugation and absence of autonomy.[36] Hick's observation underscores the extent to which enslaved individuals were subjected to systemic disregard, effectively reduced to a status of non-entity within the social and legal order.

Onesimus, as a slave to Philemon, was viewed not only as the latter's property but also as a member of his household. As a result, Onesimus had no right to desert his master without permission.[37] By the traditional hypothesis that Onesimus ran away from his master without his consent, it is safe to conclude that Philemon might have been very angry about his slave's conduct at the time the letter was written. The types of punishments inflicted on such fugitives included, but not limited to, the slave being resold to a harsher master, branded, scourged, made to wear an iron collar, crucified, thrown to beasts or killed by some other means.[38] With these harsher and inhumane punishments awaiting a fugitive, it only took slaves who were severely maltreated to consider the thought of running away. Paul, in keeping Onesimus, was at risk of being guilty of harbouring a fugitive if he did not make a conscientious effort to return Onesimus to Philemon, the slave-owner. A slave such as Onesimus, even when returning voluntarily, was not exempt from punitive measures; rather, he remained subject to severe forms of discipline that could include whipping or beating to the point of permanent injury, branding on the head or arms, the burning away of the skin beneath the feet with heated iron plates, the imposition of a metallic collar inscribed with identifying information, or, in extreme cases, execution intended to serve as a deterrent to others who might contemplate similar acts.

[33] McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: a Case of Persuasion," 4.
[34] McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon: a Case of Persuasion," 22-23.
[35] Mark Cartwright, https://www.worldhistory.org/article/ 629/slavery-in-the-roman-world/ accessed on June 24,2023.
[36] Benjamin Hicks, https://www.jacobswellnj.org/articles/post/youre-gonna-hve-to-serve-somebody-greco-roman-slavery-and-the-early-church/accessed on une14,2023.
[37] Cartwright,https://www.worldhistory.org/article/ 629/slavery-in-the-roman-world/ accessed on June 24,2023.
[38] https://www.dilworthcitymn.com/faq/what-were-the-punishment-of-slaves-were-caught-escaping-the-underground-railroad-professionals-recommend.html/accessed on 24th June,2023.

Paul's Approach to Reconciliation in Philemon

With the background given above, Paul needed to be more strategic and tactical to ensure that Philemon accepts Onesimus without punishment. The central trajectory of the letter emphasizes the transformative efficacy of the gospel in reshaping the lives and interpersonal relationships of believers, fostering reconciliation that transcends class divisions and other social distinctions.[39]

Paul, rhetorically after the initial greetings, expresses his prayerful gratitude for the Christian example that Philemon modelled (Verses 5-7)."[40] He rejoiced in hearing the spiritual growth of Philemon and its impact on the saints, people of God and further desired that Philemon's life continue to impart to other people in furtherance of the gospel. Paul strategically says this for Philemon to know that his work has been acknowledged by the Apostle Paul himself, so that Philemon will not say "No" to his request.

After being commended by Philemon, the real purposes of the letter unfold, resulting in a shift in tone of the letter.[41] He first reminds Philemon about his apostolic authority, which could have been enough reason for him to have been bold in his request, but rather chose to address him in love (v. 8). It is plausible to state that Paul usurped his apostolic authority and chose words carefully in the knowledge that Philemon may have been nursing anger, hurt or resentment from Onesimus' act. Paul's approach of carefully choosing words mirrors Solomon's statement in Proverbs 15:1: "A soft answer turneth away wrath, but grievous words stir up anger." He ensured that Philemon had a cool temper in order not to turn his request down.

Paul moves on to make his request concerning the runaway slave. Paul uses a play on words by employing humor as he calls Onesimus profitable since his name means useful and profitable, with his profitability being two-fold, as a slave and as a brother (v. 11). "He could now benefit/profit his master while helping Paul further the gospel.[42] McCullough reiterates that the intent was to capture the reader's attention and to cultivate empathetic engagement.[43]

Another tactic Paul used in reconciling Philemon and Onesimus was an attempt to appeal to the conscience of the slave owner. To this end, Jeremiah E. Shipp reflects that Paul's employment of dramatic intrigue functioned as a rhetorical strategy designed to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus, and his overall approach was voluntaristic in nature, seeking resolution through an appeal to Philemon's conscience rather than coercion.[44] Despite the fact that Onesimus was useful to Paul in his prison days, he expressed his desire for Onesimus to go back to his master (vs 13). This was partly due to his understanding of the nitty-gritty of the Roman culture, which made him susceptible to the legal ramifications associated with someone who had harboured a Roman fugitive.

Furthermore, Paul resorts to relational language. Paul conveyed his message through relational language such as beloved, our brother, our sister, a fellow worker, a fellow soldier, an old man, son, father, a partner, and a prisoner of war to establish a common ground of a family setting where one had the obligation to settle disputes between members in a world that was communalistic in nature.[45]

Again, Paul subtly drew Apphia and Archippus into the conversation, whom some scholars, including J.B. Lightfoot, Marg Mowczko, and Ellicott believe were, respectively, the wife and son of Philemon, by including them in his introductory remarks (Verse 2). This was aptly done to ensure that they support the process of reconciliation in order not to ill-advise Philemon incorrectly. This approach compares well with reconciliation in the African context, where reconciliation goes beyond the two people who are directly involved as a result of the communalistic worldview. With this understanding, Paul included the supposed wife and son of the offender (Onesimus), the church and the offended (Philemon).

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[39] Douglas Scalise, "A Plea for Reconciliation" (Boston University School of Theology, 2007), 13.
[40] E. Jeremiah. Shipp, "The Book of Philemon: A Critical Analysis Of The Intersectionality Of Leadership, Love, And Life," *AJBT* 21, no. 10 (2020): 1–14.
[41] Shipp, "The Book Of Philemon," 5.
[42] Shipp, "The Book Of Philemon," 7.
[43] McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon," 34.
[44] Shipp, "The Book Of Philemon," 7.
[45] McCullough, "Engaging Hearts in the Letter to Philemon," 35.

Paul's approach to reconciliation in his letter to Philemon is marked by diplomacy, empathy, and a deep understanding of Christian principles. When addressing the delicate situation involving Philemon, a Christian slave owner, and Onesimus, his runaway slave who has become a Christian under Paul's ministry, Paul demonstrates his commitment to fostering reconciliation and restoration within the Christian community.

Firstly, Paul employs tact and diplomacy in his appeal to Philemon. Rather than issuing a command or condemnation, Paul adopts a gentle and respectful tone, appealing to Philemon based on love and friendship (Phil. 1:4-7). He begins by expressing gratitude for Philemon's faith and partnership in the gospel, establishing a positive rapport before addressing the issue at hand. This approach reflects Paul's understanding of the importance of maintaining unity and harmony within the body of Christ, even in the face of conflict or disagreement.

Secondly, Paul demonstrates empathy and solidarity with Onesimus, the marginalized and vulnerable party in this situation. Despite Onesimus's status as a runaway slave and his potential wrongdoing in fleeing Philemon, Paul does not condemn or judge him. Instead, Paul intercedes on Onesimus's behalf, appealing to Philemon to receive him back not as a mere slave, but as a beloved brother in Christ (Phil. 1:8-10). By advocating for Onesimus and emphasizing their shared bond in the gospel, Paul challenges Philemon to extend grace and forgiveness towards Onesimus, modeling Christ-like compassion and reconciliation.

Furthermore, Paul grounds his appeal for reconciliation in the principles of Christian love and equality. He reminds Philemon that in Christ, there is neither slave nor free, but all are one in Him (Phil. 1:15-16). This theological foundation underscores the transformative power of the gospel to break down social barriers and unite believers in love and fellowship. By appealing to Philemon's faith and commitment to Christ, Paul encourages him to transcend societal norms and to embrace Onesimus as an equal and a brother in the Lord.

To summarize, Paul's approach to reconciliation in his letter to Philemon exemplifies the principles of diplomacy, empathy, and Christian love. Through his gentle and respectful appeal to Philemon, his solidarity with Onesimus, and his grounding in Christian theology, Paul seeks to foster reconciliation and restoration within the Christian community. His letter serves as a timeless example of the transformative power of forgiveness, compassion, and reconciliation to overcome social divisions and build unity in Christ.

Christological Reflections

Reconciliation requires Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a fundamental prerequisite for reconciliation. Following the fall of humanity, sin created an immense divide between God and humankind, severing the intimate relationship that once existed. Only through the shedding of Christ's precious blood on the cross was reconciliation between God and humanity possible. Lee Bee Teik makes an important distinction between forgiveness and reconciliation, stating that forgiveness may be understood as a unilateral act of grace, extended by the one who has been wronged toward the offender, whereas reconciliation constitutes a reciprocal process, a mutual restoration of friendship between individuals or parties formerly in conflict.[46] This distinction underscores the fact that God's act of forgiveness is an expression of undeserved grace, an act that believers are also called to emulate.

Despite the clear biblical mandate to forgive, many struggle with the concept. Teik categorizes these struggles into three groups:[47] first, those who openly admit their unwillingness to forgive their oppressors; second, those who desire to forgive but do not know how; and third, those who have made a conscious effort to forgive but still experience recurring pain from past wounds. The book by Philemon provides a practical case study to navigate such struggles. Paul, in his letter, models the process of forgiveness and reconciliation by interceding for Onesimus, a runaway slave, and appealing to Philemon to forgive and accept him as a brother in Christ. The letter demonstrates that true forgiveness is not just about releasing past grievances but also about restoring broken relationships in a Christ-centered manner.

[46] Lee Bee. Teik, "Forgiveness & Reconciliation," 2014, 6.
[47] Teik, *"Forgiveness & Reconciliation,"* 4-5.

Reconciliation Leads to Acceptance

While forgiveness is the foundation of reconciliation, true reconciliation is evidenced by acceptance. God's act of reconciling humanity through Christ did not merely remove the penalty of sin; it also restored believers to their rightful place as children of God. John 1:12-13 affirms this reality: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God." This divine model illustrates that reconciliation is incomplete unless it leads to full acceptance and restored fellowship.

Paul applies this principle in his appeal to Philemon. Onesimus, who was previously seen as a mere slave, is now to be welcomed as a beloved brother. Paul urges Philemon to move beyond mere forgiveness and extend full acceptance to Onesimus, treating him as an equal within the Christian community. In the African worldview, as in biblical teaching, reconciliation is not merely the cessation of hostility but the restoration of harmony and social cohesion. In African communal societies, reconciliation involves reintegration into the community, reaffirming relationships, and ensuring that both parties fully embrace one another.

Reconciliation is Rooted in Christ's Lordship

A key theological insight from the book of Philemon is that reconciliation is not just a human effort but is ultimately grounded in Christ's lordship. Paul repeatedly references the shared faith of Philemon and Onesimus, emphasizing that their new identity in Christ transcends social, cultural, and economic distinctions. This Christ-centered approach challenges the power dynamics of the Greco-Roman world, where slavery was deeply entrenched. By referring to Onesimus as a brother, Paul undermines the very foundation of social stratification, demonstrating that in Christ, all believers stand on equal footing (Gal. 3:28).

This principle is crucial for contemporary Christian ministry. Many conflicts today—whether racial, ethnic, or socio-economic—persist because they are approached from a human-centered perspective rather than a Christ-centered one. True reconciliation requires believers to recognize Christ as Lord over all relationships, allowing His love to transform attitudes and actions. The church must embody this by fostering communities where reconciliation is not only preached but practiced, breaking down barriers that divide people.

Reconciliation calls for Mediation and Advocacy

Another significant theme in Philemon is the role of mediation in reconciliation. Paul does not merely command Philemon to forgive Onesimus; he acts as a mediator, advocating for Onesimus and presenting a compelling case for his acceptance. This intercessory role mirrors Christ's work as the ultimate mediator between God and humanity (1 Tim. 2:5). Just as Christ intercedes on behalf of sinners, Paul intercedes for Onesimus, urging Philemon to reflect the grace he has received from God.

This theme has practical implications for the church today. Many broken relationships persist because there is no one to facilitate the process of reconciliation. The church is called to be an agent of reconciliation, actively working to repair broken relationships in families, communities, and nations. Christian leaders, like Paul, must step into the gap, advocating for peace and helping conflicting parties find common ground through the transformative power of Christ's love.

Implications for Ministry

It is obvious that slavery was widespread in Paul's days and that men of faith needed to stand up to speak against it. However, as the scriptures say, "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves: be ye therefore wise as serpents, and harmless as doves" (Matt.10:16), one needs to be tactful in handling the cankers of society. Although Paul did not directly speak against the practice, a careful reading of the book reveals his wish for the abolition of the inhumane practice. In a world bedeviled with social injustice,

corruption, a culture of impunity, tribalism, poverty, and underdevelopment, among others, men of faith must rise to constructively criticize these ills of society and must not appear indifferent to what happens, but such criticisms must be devoid of personal emotions.

Jesus's command in Matthew 28:19 and Acts 1:8 mandates all believers to reach those who are under the slavery of sin. The gospel needs to reach all, irrespective of social status, gender, race, tribe, and educational background, among others. If Paul, in prison, did not see it as a barrier to preach the message to a slave who was not regarded in any way in the Greco-Roman world, then the letter serves as a wake-up call for believers to reach the unreached. Socio-cultural barriers that impede the spread of the message could be broken by embracing digital ecclesiology, in which the media space becomes a platform for evangelism. This is, in no way, less edifying than the physical ecclesiology because Paul's letter from prison was enough edifying and so served the intended purpose; otherwise, the letter would not have been preserved in the first place.

In contemporary ministry, there seems to be a sharp dichotomy between the specially ordained (Cleric) and the laity, with the laity mostly relegated to the sidelines to become bystanders, although most churches subscribe to the priesthood of all believers taught by 1Peter 2:9. Paul, in verses 5-7 acknowledges and appreciates the good deeds of Philemon towards the "saints". In verse 1, Paul calls Philemon a fellow-laborer to indicate that they both stood on an equal footing in the Lord. Since leaders are needed in our contemporary churches for the sake of church order and other sacramental duties, it is imperative to integrate the full gifting of the laity in areas such as decision-making processes at all levels, preaching, and administrative structures, among others.

Fourth, the letter serves as a blueprint for addressing conflicts in the church and the secular world. It teaches the importance of bringing all the key actors in a conflict situation on board to fast-track the reconciliation process. In an African context that parallels the biblical world, conflicts transcend beyond the key actors to their relations and, at times, their ethnic groups. Conflicts that arise must be understood from that perspectiveto provide the right steps in addressing them.

Finally, education is necessary for a successful ministry. It is interesting to hear people question the place of education in ministry. Some see no point in educating someone who avails himself for ministry and go ahead to question if Jesus had to school his disciples before assigning them duties, forgetting that informal education is a form of education. A careful reading of Paul's letters reveals how he uses the art of rhetoric to convince his readers. The art of rhetoric, which played a crucial role in his ministry, was gained through the secular education he had received at school. It was his multicultural background, which he gained from secular education, that informed him of the consequences of a slave who had run away from his master to prescribe the right approach in order not to fall into the Roman law. This again points to the fact that not everything secular is evil.

CONCLUSION

Conflicts are inevitable in human interactions, yet reconciliation remains a divine imperative and a central theme in Christian theology. However, true reconciliation is impossible without forgiveness, as demonstrated in God's redemptive act through Christ. Just as God forgave humanity through Christ's sacrifice, believers are called to extend grace to those who wrong them. Paul's epistle to Philemon serves as a Christ-centered model of reconciliation, where he tactfully appeals for Onesimus's acceptance—not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ. This highlights an essential truth: forgiveness is a one-sided act of grace, while reconciliation requires mutual acceptance. In both the African worldview and biblical teachings, reconciliation is complete only when both parties embrace each other. Moreover, Paul's approach offers practical implications for ministry today. Although he did not explicitly condemn slavery, his message subtly undermines it, advocating for the restoration of human dignity. In a world plagued by social injustices, corruption, and divisions, Christians must actively participate in peacemaking, guided by wisdom and love. Furthermore, the letter to Philemon underscores the need for inclusive ministry, where both clergy and laity work together as equals. Education also plays a crucial role in effective ministry, as seen in Paul's use of

rhetoric and legal awareness in handling Onesimus's case. Ultimately, the call to reconciliation extends beyond personal disputes to the broader mission of reaching the unreached, dismantling social barriers, and fostering unity in Christ's name.

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