

The Little Epistles of the New Testament - 1

Philemon

The Revd Stephen Motyer
Albury, Ware, Hertfordshire

Why on earth does Philemon always get tucked away at the back of commentaries on Colossians? There is no good reason at all for this unfortunate practice, which simply prolongs centuries of neglect. Three cheers for the German EKK commentary series (*Evangelisch-Katholisch Kommentar*), which is the only series of which I am aware to devote a whole volume to Philemon.

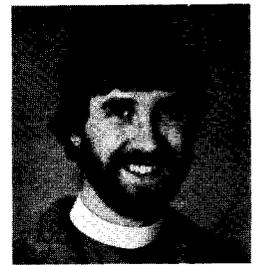
Yes, it probably was written at the same time as Colossians, and carried to its destination by the same courier (compare Col.4:9,17 with Philem.1-2). But that is the only link. As far as its content is concerned, Philemon would be much more appropriately twinned with 1 Peter, with which it has much in common. But I would oppose even that, for I believe that Philemon raises such profound issues and is so relevant to our understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world that it deserves much closer attention than we usually give it!

The situation that prompted the letter is clear. Paul, in prison in Rome, has come into contact with a runaway slave called Onesimus, and has led him to Christ. It seems probable that Onesimus sought Paul out, having previously met him in the home of his master, Philemon, one of Paul's 'fellow-workers' (v.1). Having nurtured him in the faith, Paul now sends Onesimus back to his former master, who must have been absolutely staggered to see his runaway standing on the doorstep with a letter from Paul in his hand. Paul feels that it is Onesimus' Christian duty to return, and even makes a formal offer personally to pay Philemon for any loss he has incurred as a result of Onesimus' flight (vv.18-19).

That immediately raises the question which takes us to the heart of the message of the letter: Why does Paul not appeal to Philemon for Onesimus' release? Or - putting it more pointedly - why does he not assume that the old slave-master relationship cannot continue, now that Onesimus is a brother in Christ, and simply write to tell Philemon the good news that his former runaway is now serving the cause of the Gospel in Paul's company (see v.13)? Why does he not condemn the institution of slavery in the name of Christ - as Wilberforce did, when he campaigned successfully to abolish slavery throughout the British Empire?

Paul's acceptance of slavery in this letter (and elsewhere - see for instance 1 Timothy 6:1-2), and his more general endorsement of the 'powers that be' (see Romans 13:1-7), has

*Stephen Motyer begins
a series of articles devoted to
the shorter New
Testament letters*



meant that he has been hailed as a champion of the *status quo* in debates about social issues. This has set the whole tone of the interpretation of Philemon. Luther, for instance, approaches Philemon like this:

This epistle displays a masterly example of Christian love. For we see how St. Paul accepts poor Onesimus and takes his side against his master with all the resources he can muster Just as Christ has acted for us before God the Father, so Paul acts for Onesimus before Philemon. For Christ deprived Himself of His rights, and by love and humility won over the Father, so that He had to lay aside His rightful wrath against us and accept us into His grace for the sake of Christ, who takes our side so earnestly and adopts us so heartily. We are all Onesimuses, if we can believe it.

Wonderfully moving! But note how Philemon's rights, as the one set in authority, are as little questioned as the rights of God Himself. Social order is simply reaffirmed unquestioningly. Is this right? It was this attitude which eventually led Lutheranism to its acceptance of the Third Reich - although that fact does not necessarily invalidate this interpretation of Philemon! But our response to many social issues today, and our attitude to the positions taken by Christians involved in social conflict elsewhere in the globe, will be deeply affected by whether we believe that Christianity is basically affirmative of social order or not - *and Philemon is a tremendous test-case of this.*

The only way to decide this sort of question is to pay as close and careful attention to the text as possible. The following is just the bare bones of an exposition!

Verses 1-3: Opening Greeting

The fascinating thing to note here is that, although the letter

turns out to be a personal appeal to Philemon, it is actually addressed not just to him but to the whole Church of which he was a member and leader. The final greeting in v.25 is also addressed to 'you-plural'. This means that the letter would have been read publically, in the presence of the whole church, meeting probably in Philemon's home, with both Philemon and Onesimus present. Philemon would therefore have been required to make his response to the letter in the context of public fellowship and worship. This corporate setting is not of passing significance - in fact it is fundamental to Paul's meaning and purpose, as we shall see.

It is also worth noting Paul's description of himself in the greeting. This is the only 'prison epistle' in which he actually calls himself 'a prisoner' at the start. Significant? He often drops hints in the opening greetings. He refers to his prisoner-status again in vv.9,10 and 13, and from these it appears that 'a prisoner of Christ Jesus' has a double meaning: both 'imprisoned *for* Jesus' and 'imprisoned *by* Jesus'. His outward incarceration for the sake of the Gospel is merely a symbol of the inner bondage he has taken upon himself - 'the bonds of the Gospel' (v.13), which constrain him more than anything else. Verse 13 is pointed: Paul would have liked to keep Onesimus, so that he could serve Paul 'in the bonds of the Gospel' *on behalf of Philemon*.

Paul's acceptance of slavery in this letter... has meant that he has been hailed as a champion of the *status quo* in debates about social issues

Philemon is one of Paul's prized inner circle, his 'fellow-workers', a long list of whom send Philemon greetings at the end (v.24). They are with Paul, and Philemon is not: is there a hint that he is not doing all that a 'fellow-worker' should? That he is not striving with Paul 'in the bonds of the Gospel' as he should? He is gently reminded that he owes Paul his 'very self' (v.19). I think we should imagine Philemon as quite a wealthy man - a landowner with a household of slaves and a home large enough for him to be the natural host to his Church. But these and other hints suggest that his comfortable life-style has lulled him into complacency - or so Paul fears.

Verse 4-7: Paul lays the foundation for his appeal

These verses revolve around the twin themes of *faith* and *love* (v.5, love and faith; v.6, faith; v.7, love). In v.5 Paul gives thanks for the measure of both that Philemon already has - faith towards the Lord Jesus and love towards all the saints; and he expresses special joy in v.7 about a particular act of love which has given him 'encouragement' (the use of the aorist gives v.7 this particular force). He is specially joyful in v.7, because the news about Philemon's love could be evidence that the prayer of v.6 is being answered!

Verse 6 is very difficult to translate, and has recently been the subject of a learned article all to itself. It is a 'this'll make you stop and think' sort of verse, of the kind that Paul frequently throws out at crucial points in his letters, in order

to do precisely that - to make his readers (Philemon particularly!) pause and reflect, so that the message does not wash over them but becomes embedded in the mind and heart. Literally, the verse says, '(I pray that) the fellowship of your faith may become active in the knowledge of all the good that is in us unto Christ'. The translations all 'unpack' this in different ways, but I would like to offer the following paraphrase (which is quite close to the suggestion made by the learned article!):

I pray that the corporate dimension of your faith - the fellowship which your faith creates - may become active, inspired by a full awareness of all the good which is given to us and demanded of us in order to bring us to our goal, which is Christ.

In other words, Philemon's faith is slumbering somewhat, particularly in regard to its corporate outworking (hence the close link here between faith and love). It needs to be stirred into activity, and the means to that end will be a growth in Philemon's knowledge of (in a nutshell) *the Gospel*: the good done to us and demanded of us by Christ. At its heart, v.6 is a prayer that Philemon will be led to *think* in a new and clearer way about his faith.

Paul's opening paragraph has in fact already outlined the real substance of what is to follow' (P. Stuhlmacher) - typical of Paul! I like to imagine a drama surrounding the reading of this letter at the gathering of the Church in Philemon's home. He listens attentively to the opening paragraphs, wondering whatever Paul can be driving at, aware that he is being gently prodded to become more aware of the responsibilities of love and community which his faith confers. Then, as v.10 is read, the door bursts open and there stands Onesimus! Having got over the shock, Philemon realises Paul's purpose It probably did not happen like that at all, but the fact that Paul delays mentioning Onesimus' name until v.10 reveals his technique: face Philemon with the 'real substance' of the matter, the faith and love which binds us to each other as well as to Christ, and then present him with a wonderful opportunity to put it into practice!

Verse 8-12: Paul makes his appeal

'I appeal to you concerning my child, whom I have begotten in the bonds, Onesimus' (v.10). The staggering thing is that Paul never says *what* he appeals concerning Onesimus! He does plenty besides: he assures Philemon that he does not intend to use his apostolic authority to *tell* him what to do, but is going rather to 'appeal to you because of love' - the love which has been revealed in Christ and to which we are called as 'prisoners of Christ Jesus' (vv.8-9). Further, he tells Philemon that Onesimus' conversion means that he now lives up to his name, 'Useful'. Previously, his behaviour was a denial of his name, but now he is truly 'Useful' to Philemon - and to Paul! (v.11). And, finally, he even movingly calls Onesimus 'my very own heart', in a vivid demonstration of what 'the fellowship of faith' really means in practice. We are bound to one another, we carry each other about with us. *But he never spells out to Philemon*

what he wants him to do!

Of course, at the most basic level he is asking Philemon to forgive Onesimus (see v.17). But if that were all that is going on, we would never have had a letter like this. Mutual forgiveness is a constant Christian duty, to be exercised under all circumstances. There would be none of this pussy-footing around! Paul clearly wants Philemon to work out for himself what his response to Onesimus' conversion and return ought to be. And we can connect this with the mysterious verse 6: as Philemon grows in his *awareness* of the good incumbent upon him (because of the good done to him) in Christ, so the whole corporate side of his faith will be stirred into activity. But in this particular case, that awareness must come, not by apostolic fiat, but by careful personal reflection. Hopefully, he will come to see for himself 'what is fitting' (v.8).

Why should this be so? If Paul feels that Philemon ought to 'manumit' Onesimus (the technical expression for the freeing of a slave), then why does he not say so directly? What inhibits him? If he does not feel that Onesimus' new-found faith alters his slave status, why does he drop all these hints, issuing an elaborately-supported appeal for something he does not specify? It all gets curiouser and curiouser. Before attempting to answer these questions we must look through the rest of the letter.

Verses 13-17: Three reasons for sending Onesimus back

We must note a fascinating background fact at this point. The Old Testament forbids the return of runaway slaves! Deuteronomy 23:15 teaches this, as part of the humanitarian legislation of the Old Testament which made Israel a refuge for the poor and the outcast. Paul is deliberately setting the Old Testament aside, and it is not surprising, therefore, that he sets out the reasons for his action. This is another example of the basic principle in Paul's dealing with the Old Testament, that it is constantly viewed through the spectacles of the Gospel and is not allowed to exert any claim of its own, apart from Christ.

Reason 1 (vv.13-14): For the sake of Philemon's Christian freedom

If Paul had simply done what he wanted, and kept Onesimus with him for work 'in the bonds of the Gospel', then Philemon's hand would have been forced. As a 'fellow-worker', he would have had no choice about accepting Onesimus as a member of the same team. Paul did not want to present him with a *fait accompli*. He wanted Philemon's 'goodness' to be willing, and unforced. The expression 'goodness' in v.14 (NIV 'favour', NEB 'kindness') is the same word as that used in v.6, and deliberately looks back to it. This is the 'goodness' which Philemon has to become aware of by himself, and which will prompt him to put Christian fellowship into proper practice. But this reason for returning Onesimus would make no sense were it not for the second:

Reason 2 (vv.15-16): Because of Philemon's legitimate claim on Onesimus

The vital principle here is that Onesimus' conversion abolishes neither his status as a slave, nor Philemon's as his master. 'No longer as a slave' (v.16) is not the equivalent of 'no longer a slave'. In fact, to translate it 'no longer just as a slave' would be strictly less accurate but in fact closer to Paul's intention. Onesimus is now related to Philemon 'both in the flesh and in the Lord' (v.16b), as both his slave and his brother in Christ. Neither status denies the other. This means that, although he is now a Christian brother, Philemon may still exercise over Onesimus all the rights of a slave-owner.

It is hard for us to realise quite how extraordinary it is that Paul allows these rights. The law gave Onesimus no protection whatsoever. If a slave-owner chose to pay back a runaway with summary execution, the authorities would not even blink. A slave had no rights and no property; not even his family belonged to him. Paul is quite prepared elsewhere to inveigh against harsh treatment of slaves (Eph.6:9), but he is not ready to regard as 'harsh treatment' the very system itself, which put human beings on the level of property. He affirms it and respects it - apparently. This is made all the more clear when the Old Testament allusion in v.15 is brought to the surface. In Exodus 21:5-6 provision is made for the slave who wished to stay with his master, when his time for release came in the seventh year:

If the servant declares, 'I love my master ... and do not want to go free', then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.

Paul seems to use 'for ever' in v.15 in order deliberately to pick up this passage. Onesimus is in the position of the slave who says, 'I love my master I do not want to go free' - all the more so, since he is now bound to Philemon by the love of Christ, as well as 'in the flesh'. So, far from calling his slave-status into question, his new faith undoes it. He is Philemon's 'for ever' - precisely *because* he is also now a 'beloved brother'. Paul discerns a possible divine purpose behind Onesimus' flight (v.15): Philemon is receiving back a slave from whom he can never be separated again, not even in eternity. Can Paul really mean this?

Reason 3 (v.17): Because of the bond between Paul, Philemon and Onesimus

Paul meant it when he said that Onesimus was 'my very own heart' (v.12). If fellowship between Paul and Philemon was to remain unclouded, therefore, there must be reconciliation between the runaway and his master. If Philemon were not to receive Onesimus, it would be tantamount to refusing to receive Paul. 'If you consider me as a partner, welcome him as you would welcome me': 'Partner' is *koinonos*, related to

'fellowship' (*koinonia*) in v.6, and therefore it picks up the vision of that verse: 'If you feel yourself bound to me by the faith that we share, if you have an awareness of our mutual responsibility to love the other and serve his good because of Christ, then receive Onesimus in the same spirit.'

Verses 18-20: Paying and Owing

Here the letter reaches its climax. Paul shows how far he is prepared to go in expressing the fellowship-principle: he makes a solemn, signed declaration that he will pay back anything Onesimus owes to Philemon (vv.18-19a). I love the 'if' in v.18! There was no doubt that Onesimus had wronged Philemon, who would certainly have incurred expense employing labour or buying another slave to perform the duties Onesimus had abandoned. The 'if' does not apply to Onesimus, but to Philemon: 'if you want to press your claim for reparation for the wrongs he has done you ...'. Paul allows Philemon the full right to exact his due as the one wronged in law. But then, he qualifies this permission with a little whisper in v.19b which expands to a full-throated roar in v.20: 'But just remember, Philemon, if you are tempted to demand your due, that I do not intend to exact from you all that you owe to me - your life itself! BUT WAIT - I DO WANT SOMETHING FROM YOU, BROTHER! - SOMETHING "USEFUL"!'. Paul plays again on the name of Onesimus in an unmistakable but mysterious way, a way which would make Philemon scratch his head and ask, 'Is he asking me to send Onesimus back to him or not? Does he want me to manumit him, or would he be happy if I just forgave him and took him back?'

That is the beauty of this letter. It is a most moving appeal, but never reveals what is being asked! One reason for this unclarity is itself quite clear: Philemon has to make his own mind up about what is 'fitting' (v.8), has to come to his own awareness of the good demanded of him 'unto Christ' (v.6), has to decide for himself the best way to express 'the fellowship of his faith' (v.6), has to do this 'in the Lord ... in Christ' (v.20), and what is more has to take the decision in the context of the church gathered for worship. He cannot wait until his living-room has become his own again. He must decide now, while his house is the house of prayer and the believers are gathered for mutual encouragement and fellowship. What did he decide to do? I would love to have been a fly on the wall!

Verses 21-25: Final Encouragement and Greetings

Verse 21 is very loaded. Paul has not issued instructions (see vv.8-9), so 'your obedience' must mean 'your obedience to Christ'. All Paul has done is to ask Philemon to receive Onesimus (v.17). What, then, is the 'more than I ask' which Paul 'knows' Philemon will do? This is the dilemma facing Philemon, as well as us! Really, there can be no doubt that Paul would have been very disappointed if Philemon had just received Onesimus, and probably more than disappointed if he had taken Paul up on his offer of compensation. Why then did Paul make the offer? Was it disingenuous? If I was Philemon, I would have been a little horrified at the request in v.22: Paul intends to descend

upon him, to check up on his response! But perhaps there is more to Paul's request than meets the eye. Where is Onesimus to sleep? Having just been asked to receive Onesimus as if he were Paul himself, Philemon does not have much choice about this! He does not get returned to his old slave quarters, but finds himself comfortably 'fellow-workers', all of them supporting Paul personally in his ministry, and a final prayer for God's grace to rest on the whole church, Paul signs off.

It is not surprising that two distinct streams of interpretation flow from this letter. On the one hand, there is the predominant one, represented by the Luther quotation above, which emphasises the affirmation of social order here, the respect for the rights of natural authority, and consequently finds the 'message' of the letter in the wonderful condescension of Paul to a mere slave in need. On the other hand, there is a more 'liberal' stream, represented for instance by the great J.B. Lightfoot, which emphasises the hints at 'something more', and feels that the movement for the emancipation of slaves in the 19th century rightly found inspiration in this letter. Lightfoot writes about v.21b,

Did (Paul) contemplate the manumission of Onesimus? If so, the restraint which he imposes upon himself is significant. Indeed throughout this epistle the idea would seem to be present to his thoughts, though the word never passes his lips. This reserve is eminently characteristic of the Gospel. Slavery is never directly attacked as such, but principles are inculcated which must prove fatal to it.

To my mind, this second stream is more sensitive to the text than the first. But Lightfoot does not attempt to answer the vital question, *Why* does Paul impose this restraint upon himself? If we can answer this, we will have perhaps discovered something of usefulness to ourselves, in facing similar social issues today. There are various possible approaches:

(1) **We could look for a pastoral answer.** We could say that Paul refused to lay down the law about manumitting Onesimus, even though he knew that this was required by the Gospel, either because Philemon needed the spiritual challenge of working it out for himself, or because Paul was wary about Christianity gaining a reputation as a socially explosive movement. It would certainly have made a great difference to the spread and acceptance of Christianity, if from the start part of its social creed had been the abolition of slavery. But it was just as explosive in other ways, and Paul was not one to shrink from being radical if he felt it necessary. And as far as the other suggestion is concerned, while it is clear that Paul leaves Philemon to make up his own mind, it is not clear that the reason for this is simply Philemon's own stage of spiritual development. No hints are dropped in this direction at all. Altogether more seems to be at stake.

(2) We could find the answer in a 'spiritualised' Gospel. Perhaps the Gospel genuinely has nothing to say on this level of secondary ethics. On the primary level, when we are dealing with holiness of life and the basics of inter-personal relationships, it has much to say; but the Gospel does not extend its concern beyond the individual and his walk with God - so Paul has nothing to say about the broader issue of slavery. He is just concerned with reconciliation between two estranged Christians for the good of their own souls.

But why then all the hints at 'something more'? If it were just a matter of encouraging acceptance and forgiveness, Paul's arguments would surely have been different, more straightforward: 'Forgiving one another, as God in Christ has forgiven you ...' (Eph.4:32). But forgiveness would simply mean the restoration of Onesimus to his former position, accompanied perhaps by an assurance that Philemon would not find it convenient to sell him after six months! Paul seems to want altogether more than this. And his emphasis on the need to act 'in the Lord ... in Christ' implies that it is the Gospel which points to the 'more'.

(3) Are responses to this sort of issue genuinely relative? We could argue that this is an area in which Christians may genuinely differ - that is, differ without having to conclude that one of the parties involved is misjudging the implications of the Gospel. We *must* in Christ live a godly life, but we *may* in Christ keep our slaves, release them, be Tories, support the SDP, be capitalists or communists. We each have the responsibility to take our decisions in good conscience before God, and in brotherly debate with other Christians who might feel differently. There is more in this approach, I believe, and it certainly fits in with Paul's 'make you own mind up' technique in Philemon. But in the long run it just does not work. For one thing, why does Paul not say this? This would be a piece of foundational guidance which he simply omits to give. And for another, can we believe that Paul would have respected Philemon's decision if he had taken Onesimus back but kept him as a slave and taken up Paul's offer of compensation? The offer is genuine, no doubt, so we must conclude that Paul would have regarded this response from Philemon as reconcilable with his Christianity. But would he have felt that it was the best response? Hardly.

(4) Perhaps this sort of decision is torn between the two Ages in which we live. This is much the most fruitful approach. Christianity has been accused on both fronts - of being world-affirming (and so supporting the *status quo* come what may), and of being world-denying (and so have a 'down' on art and sex, and offering the hereafter as consolation for present injustice). It can indeed work in both ways in the same situation, as it did for instance in the Deep South, where Christian slave-owners found support for their status in God's ordering, and their slaves trusted the same God for justice in the world to come! We meet precisely this dilemma in Philemon. It arises from the fact that this world is simultaneously both created (and therefore good) and fallen (and therefore being redeemed through

Christ). So Philemon and Onesimus are related on two levels - 'in the flesh' as slave and master, and 'in the Lord' as Christian brethren. For the time being, both conditions exist side by side, because the Kingdom of God has broken in, but has not yet displaced 'the Kingdoms of this world'.

Paul can think in two apparently contradictory ways about the world. On the one hand, he can regard secular authority as the minister of God, wielding the sword on His behalf (Rom.13:1-7); on the other hand, in company with the book of Revelation, he can regard secular forces as manifestations of the 'principalities and powers', of the 'rulers of this age' by whose instigation Christ was crucified (1 Cor.2:8, Eph.6:12, etc). He looks forward with intense anticipation to the moment when the transformation of the world will be complete (Rom.8:18ff), and urges us to conduct ourselves now, in the hour before dawn, as if we were already clad in 'the armour of light' (Rom.13:12f). This is easy to grasp (though not to carry out!) when it is a matter of expressing now the *holiness* of heaven: but what about the *structures* of heaven? 'There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus', Paul roundly declares (Gal.4:28). From the perspective of the New Age, that is wonderfully true - but rooted as we are in the Old, we feel that the continuing existence of the basic sexual distinction between men and women (to take one of Paul's three pairs) is not only inevitable but also desirable! It is part of the createdness of the Old Order, however much it is destined to pass away in the New - and we thank God for it.

What then of 'neither slave nor free'? Should Philemon have the same attitude to slavery as we do to marriage, thanking God for it and prizing it, aware nonetheless that it is a manifestation of God's Old Order, and that it will not feature beyond the *parousia*? Or should he seek to bring the New Age to as full an expression as possible here in the midst of the Old, by turning his back decisively upon a distinction which has been abolished in Christ? What a question - and what a dilemma! The answer to this, I believe, is genuinely uncertain. Paul will not prescribe an answer to it, any more than he will tell the Romans how they can really regard the wicked Emperor Nero as a power 'instituted by God God's servant to bring punishment on the wrongdoer' (Rom.13:1,4). The New Age bursts in on the Old by the power of the Holy Spirit, displacing as it does so not only its wickedness but also some of the structures, good in themselves, which sin has used to bolster its power.

Philemon must just make up his mind which way the Holy Spirit is pointing in his case. Paul simply offers him one principle to guide his decision: whether the Old Age is allowed to stay or is swallowed up by the New, *every opportunity must be taken to further the Gospel of Christ and to show forth his love*. This is the force of v.13: because of his acknowledgement of the continuance of God's Old Order while this age lasts, Paul has lost one of his heralds of the New, and to that extent the proclamation of the Gospel has been stilled. Philemon could not miss the

Continued from page 6

implication of v.13: by all means, if possible, Onesimus should either be fully manumitted or released on permanent loan to Paul, so that he can continue his new ministry! Probably Paul would not mind in the least which course Philemon chose. The vital thing is the Gospel of Christ – hence the emphasis in v.6, 'unto Christ', and the repeated 'in the Lord in Christ' in v.20.

What decision did Philemon in fact reach? History is silent – rightly so, because this little letter functions like one of the parables of Jesus, facing us with a challenge and a decision in our own situations. We have discovered a vital ethical principle: existing as we do stretched between two ages, rooted in earth but with our home in heaven, it cannot be rigidly prescribed how much we should expect to see heaven on earth, nor how much we should strive to make the New Age real here in the midst of the Old. God will do that, when his time comes. But we have the Gospel, the message of the love of Christ which reveals the New to us and summons us to sing the song of heaven, witnessing to the reality of the world to come in the hour before dawn, by expressing his love in all our relationships. There is an area of grey between life-style and structure: we are shaped by the form God has given to this world, but 'the form of this world is passing away' - as Paul said, urging his married readers to qualify their attitudes to their marriages because of the imminence of the end (1 Cor.7:29-31).

It is *right* that structures should be reshaped by the world to come. But how? This is the dilemma Philemon faced, and we face it too, when we debate matters like the ordination of women, pacifism, the Christian attitude to the arms race, industrial relations and industrial reform, the establishment or disestablishment of the Church, the Third World, ecumenism, radical social action and violent change - in fact, there is hardly an ethical, political or ecclesiastical question facing us today which is not touched in some way by this principle! May God give us as much wisdom as he undoubtedly gave Philemon. History does give us one tiny crumb which might hint at the direction of his decision: the name of the Bishop of Ephesus at the end of the first century was - Onesimus! The same? We cannot say for sure! But there can be no doubt that the letter to Philemon blows slavery sky-high in principle, even if it allows it to continue in practice. Onesimus belongs to Philemon 'for ever' not by the perpetuation of his slave-status, but because 'we are members one or another' in Christ. For the Gospel abolishes all distinctions between people, even the basic sexual distinction, while yet permitting these distinctions to continue for the time being. Roll on, heaven!

SEARCH MAGAZINE

F The bi-monthly fellowship
R magazine which comes
E complete with its own Bible
E Study booklet as well as articles
E on all aspects of Christian living.
 WRITE TODAY FOR A FREE COPY FROM:
**The Open Bible Trust, 36 Hardwick
 Road, Reading, RG3 4LN, U.K.**

Scottish Evangelical Theology Society

Annual Conference

31 March - 2 April 1987
at
St Ninian's Centre, Crieff

MIRACLES

Subjects and Speakers

- Interpretation of the Biblical Miracles**
Revd Professor Ronald Wallace
- Role of Miracles in the New Testament**
Revd David Graham
- Miracles in Church History**
Revd Dr William Young
- Signs and Wonders Today**
Revd Peter Cook
- Miracles and Philosophy**
Revd Dr Gordon Martin
- Miracles and Science**
Revd Dr John Sharp
- Impassibility, Asceticism and the
Vision of God**
Revd Denis Sutherland

Finlayson Lecture (open to the public) Interpretation of Old Testament Story

Revd Professor Ronald Wallace

Cost: Full board accommodation in St Ninian's
Centre plus Conference cover £35, Students £28.

Reservation forms and further details from:

Revd Robert Higham
The Conference Secretary
The Manse, Greenlaw, Duns
Berwickshire TD10 6XF
Tel: 03616 218