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The Benefit of Role Reversal for Servant Leaders and Their Followers: A Genre Analysis of Philemon

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Among the New Testament canonical epistles, Paul's letter to Philemon serves as an exemplary text for illustrating Servant Leadership in a beneficial way for both the early church and contemporary Christian leaders. Using Osborne's (2006) epistle genre analysis, this study analyzes Paul's letter to Philemon on behalf of Onesimus, while reviewing Servant Leadership theory and emphasizing how the kingdom concept of role reversal advances the importance and possibility of leaders as servants first in the church. Kingdom dynamics that emphasize role reversal between leaders and followers also align Greenleaf's Servant Leadership theory together with Paul's teaching in his epistles and Jesus' commands in the Gospel narratives. Thus, Paul's letter to Philemon effectively portrays a paradigm-shifting, worldview renovation that persuades others by love and example to serve one another as brothers and sisters in Christ.

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When societal ideas about leadership, power, and influence conflict with key biblical principles, the clear commandments of Jesus, and the teaching of the apostles, a misalignment of leadership theory and local church goals can occur. For example, servant leadership, as conceived in the Gospels and epistles of the New Testament, may not always have the same appearance and effect that is expected by modern leadership models. Jesus himself exhorted his disciples to this sacrificial way of service, telling them, “Whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:43-45, *English Standard Version*, 2016). By considering the importance of genre analysis as outlined by Osborne (2006), analyzing Paul’s epistle to Philemon as regards Onesimus, and briefly considering the literature on servant leadership, this study emphasizes how role reversal positively impacts our understanding of servant leadership in the church. Paul’s letter to Philemon serves as the key mechanism for enabling readers to understand the paradigm-shifting, worldview renovation required at the heart of true Christian, servant leadership.

Exegetical Analysis

Among the New Testament canonical epistles, Paul’s letter to Philemon serves as an exemplary mechanism that illustrates the kind of servant leadership that benefited the early church while also providing application to our current ecclesial settings. Paul does not merely call Philemon and others to Christ-like leadership qualities and behaviors as examples to emulate, which might lead followers to retrofit servanthood traits and behaviors back into worldly paradigms. Rather, Paul’s letter to Philemon provides an exemplary model of the heart of servant leadership in action.

Importance of Genre Analysis for Epistle Hermeneutics

The hermeneutic evaluation of the New Testament epistles uses all of the general exegetical principles, including contextual, grammatical, semantic, historical, and cultural backgrounds analysis (Osborne, 2006, p. 181). For the purposes of this paper, additional hermeneutic principles used specific to the Philemon epistle include, analyzing: (a) the logical development of Paul’s argument; (b) the situation behind Paul’s statements; and (c) any different subgenres or intertextual considerations (Osborne, 2006, p. 318). Initially, the paper will consider the background of the epistle from historical, cultural, and contextual considerations. Then, the content of the epistle will be evaluated based on the above criteria, as pertains to Paul’s argument. Furthermore, a brief review of the past literature on the concept of Servant Leadership will be considered. Finally, a discussion of the implications of the text and servant leader theory further examines the beneficial contribution of the epistle to Philemon -- especially regarding the concept of kingdom reversal.

Background, Occasion, and Authorship

Of all Paul's letters and in the history of Christianity, no serious contentions appear that should threaten the authenticity of authorship or the contention that Paul wrote the letter to Philemon (Hughes, 2013, p. 374). In fact, Dunn (2014) affirmed that the scholarly consensus affirms Pauline authorship, stating that any claims of Pauline authenticity should not raise "alarm bells" (p. 300). Barentsen (2011) stated, Paul's earlier letters, including, Philemon tended to respond reactively to specific socio-historical situations. Since Tychicus already planned to travel to Asia in order to deliver two other letters to the Colossae and Laodicea churches, Paul seized on the opportunity by sending Onesimus along with an epistle Paul wrote on his behalf (Hughes, 2013, p. 380).

Considered the main recipient of the letter as stated in Philemon 1, Philemon held a high cultural status, as one who hosted the church in his home (Phm. 2) and apparently was capable of providing for long-term house guests (Phm. 22). However, the other recipients present included Apphia, Archippus, and the whole church that met in Philemon's home, according to Phm. 2. As one of Paul's fellow workers, Philemon likely held an active leadership role, rather than merely holding the background role of a typical wealthy patron (Dunn, 2014, p. 301). As author, Paul apparently wrote the letter from Rome, as a "prisoner in chains": a phrase that could refer either to physical confinement or a form of house arrest (Witherington, 2007). Either way, during his imprisonment, Paul had encountered the fugitive slave, Onesimus, and was now writing an appeal to Philemon for reconciliation – and would send Onesimus to deliver it himself. Since the epistle would be handed by the fugitive slave to his master from whom he had escaped, Paul's "relationship capital" with both Philemon and Onesimus would be put to the test. The difficulty and danger for all parties, as explained by Witherington (2007), included multiple layers of legal, social, and credibility factors.

Opening Epistle Analysis: Phm 1-7

In his discussion of Paul's greetings, Osborne (2006) stated that Paul typically mentions his legitimacy and official status as apostle in order to reinforce the authority of his words (Osborne, 317). However, in Philemon, Paul foregoes his apostolic status and leadership position, by rather emphasizing his imprisonment status of being "in chains" (Phm. 1, 10, 13). As previously mentioned, Paul addressed the letter not only to his fellow worker and brother, Philemon, but also to their sister in the Lord, Apphia, and their fellow "soldier" Archippus, who is widely considered a follower of Epaphras, mentioned in Col 4:17 (Witherington, 2006, p. 54). Furthermore, Witherington (2007), Moo (2008), and Dunn (2014) considered the fact that Paul uniquely addressed the letter to the house church assembly meeting in Philemon's home as a matter that overturns the private letter nature into a more public form of appeal. Indeed, Witherington (2007) considered the address to all members as a guarantee that the church would be fully aware of Paul's appeal and Philemon's response (p. 56).

Furthermore, both Witherington (2007) and Dunn (2014) call attention to Paul's use of "the Lord Jesus Christ" and his use of the term *kyrios*, which sets a unique tone in terms of the master (*kyrios*) and slave (*doulos*) motif that characterizes the much of the meaning of the text. Though Philemon and Paul both hold worldly authority positions, both are also subject to a greater Master, which Paul signifies by calling attention to Jesus Christ as *kyrios*.

Exordium: Thanksgiving and Prayer (Phm. 4-7)

Considered part of the greeting in this epistle, the section of thanksgiving and prayer, in most translations, tends to perform a special and important function, separate from the greeting and the body. Osborne (2006) described a syntactical investigation of Paul's greeting, by mapping the list of propositions. His exercise uncovered the kernel sortedness of Phil 4-7, stated as "I was moved because you loved all the saints" (Osborne, p. 117). Moo (2008), Dunn (2014), Hughes (2013), and Witherington (2007) agreed that Paul demonstrated exceptional rhetorical argumentation in developing his case in this *exordium* section. As such, Paul sought to gain Philemon's trust in these verses, as well as build his reputation among the congregants of the local house church community in Colossae before addressing the more serious matters in later verses. Witherington (2007) pointed out that Paul's Asiatic-style rhetoric used a form of prolix structure, in which ideas start in one section, but do not resolve until later in the passage (p. 57). Thus, the main point of Paul's emotional pleas in Phm. 4-7 is as an appeal to Philemon's and the hearers' affections by creating a type of *pathos*, described by Aristotle as preparing the hearers' receptivity and frame of mind (Witherington, 2007: *Rhet.* 1.2.3). In a sense, Paul motivated Philemon and the other recipients to embrace the difficult, dangerous, and unpopular message to come in the next section by securing their love, faith, and honor towards the saints and in the church community in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Body: Paul's Plea to Philemon on Behalf of Onesimus, Phm. 8-22

As Paul transitioned to address the specific situation and his plea to Philemon, the nature of the request continues to build through subtle insinuation, and eventually strong exhortation. Witherington (2007) stated that Paul used the rhetorical device of *insinuatio* to start with indirect statements, intended to avoid to offense, and building up to the *peroratio* where the writer would "pull out all the emotional stops" so as to make a bold and direct appeal (p. 64). The overall body section portrays Paul's various emotional appeals throughout, such as: Phm. 9: "yet for love's sake"; Phm. 10: "for my child"; Phm. 12: "sending my very heart"; Phm. 14 "in order that your goodness"; Phm. 16: "as a beloved brother"; Phm. 19: "I write this with my own hand" and "even your own self"; Phm. 20: "refresh my heart" (English Standard Version, 2016). With each emotional appeal, Paul attached a plea for Philemon's willing compliance by using *insinuatio* to build to his crescendo of full reconciliation and a soft appeal for more.

Insinuatio: Appeal to Love (Phm. 8-9)

In Phm. 8 and 9, Paul reminded Philemon and the other hearers that as an apostle, he could command Philemon to do as he wanted, and yet he would rather make an appeal based on love. Further drawing on the principle of saintly love, Paul referred to Onesimus as his spiritual son and stated that he had become his father by conversion of faith in Phm. 10.

Beneficial Reversal (Phm. 11-16)

In Phm. 11, Paul used a semantic device, the play on words, to describe Onesimus, whose name in Greek meant “useful” or “beneficial” (Moo, 2008, p. 434). Based on what Paul would write later, in Phm. 18, not only had Onesimus run away from his master, Philemon, but he may have stolen and caused other financial damages. Therefore, when Paul wrote that Onesimus was formerly useless, but now indeed useful to both to Paul and Philemon, Paul was setting up the reversal scenario. Yet, in his appeal, Paul carefully reiterated that he preferred Philemon’s consent and that any decision made by Philemon be of his own accord (Phm. 14). Thus far, Paul has not alluded to what his request would entail, though the passage continues to build. In Phm. 15 and 16, Paul’s appeal transitioned into *peroratio*, as he pulled out all the emotional stops for what was to come. He stated that perhaps Philemon would have Onesimus back forever (Phm. 15), “no longer as a bondservant (*doulos/slave*), but more than a bondservant, as a beloved brother...both in the flesh and in the Lord” (Phm. 16).

Peroratio: Paul’s Promise and Request (Phm. 17-22)

Still applying the principle of *insinuatio*, Paul asked Philemon in verse 17 to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself and attached to it a promise that Paul would repay anything owed to Philemon. In so doing, Paul puts his relationship on the line with Philemon, as well as his own legal status. Dunn (2014) helpfully pointed out that while Paul made no declarations against the Roman system of slavery, his actions in harboring and aiding a fugitive slave would subject him to the same law along with Onesimus (p. 324). Since Paul’s letters likely would have to be read by authorities, either as they were taken out of prison, or while on Onesimus’ person as he returned to Philemon, this guarantee by Paul to repay any of Onesimus’ debts served more than one purpose (Dunn, 2014, p. 324). Paul made the deliberate statement in Phm. 19 that he wrote the section “in his own hand”; therefore, it held legal status. Paul said that Philemon could charge whatever owed to his account and followed with a reminder of the debt Philemon also owed in return, “even your own self.” In essence, Paul masterfully covered his legal bases while banking on his relational and spiritual account with Philemon.

Dunn (2014), Hughes (2013), Moo (2008), Barclay (2003), and Witherington (2007) agreed that Phm. 20 represents the climax of Paul’s rhetorical emotional appeal. First, Paul confidently called on Philemon’s obedience, addressing him once again as “brother.” Paul still avoided appealing to his apostolic authority, in deference to

Philemon's to voluntary obedience in response to the gospel, which Moo (2008) referred to as a gospel imperative (p 434). Additionally, Moo (2008) asserted that scholarly consensus affirms that when Paul stated, "I write to you" (21), he used the Greek verb in "epistolary aorist" form, which is considered both present tense and ongoing (p. 434). Similarly, his injunction to Philemon represented both an optimistic and ongoing approach, in that Philemon would do even more than Paul asks with regard to Onesimus (Phm. 21). Furthermore, by requesting "this benefit" from him, Paul equated the benefit with refreshing of his very "inner being." Witherington (2007) asserted when Paul again deliberately used the word *onaimēn*, which aligned with Onesimus's name, he brought the entire plea full circle to reinforce the overall theme and to connect it back to Paul's ministry (p. 84).

Hughes (2013) suggested that Onesimus is profitable for church leaders today in terms of learning from Paul's method of reconciliation in the body of Christ. Yet, the next passage suggests even more than that single occasion of reconciliation between Onesimus and Philemon. In Phm. 21, Paul further extended his request, stating that he was confident that Philemon would do even more than Paul had asked of him. Here, historians offer conjecture about the extent of the results of Paul's plea. Barclay (2003) stated that one may safely assume that Philemon complied with the request, doing precisely as Paul requested of him (p. 309). Additionally, others further insinuate that Paul's countercultural example and plea to Philemon may have influenced others in the churches to respond similarly.

The historical evidence is suggestive that Philemon in fact returned Onesimus to Paul in Rome, in deference to Paul's request, where Onesimus faithfully served as a free man (Hughes, 2013). Witherington (2006) considered the evidence of the letter's proliferation suggestive that Paul's request was efficacious. Furthermore, Barclay (2013) (along with Moo, Hughes, and others) referenced the letters of Ignatius to the church in Ephesus nearly 50 years later, in which Ignatius praised their Bishop, Onesimus, using the same pun that Paul previously made to Philemon about this "benefit" (p. 315). It may well be that Philemon's obedience led to one of the greatest gospel testimonies and stories of reversal both in Christ and the church (Barclay, 2003, p. 316). Nonetheless, the account of Philemon's "benefit" -- the metaphoric reversal of slave and master, leader and follower -- remains today for Christians to learn, apply, and obey, not under coercion, but because of Christ's love, his perfect example, and our kinship to one another in His name.

Closing Benediction and Farewell: Phm. 23-25

In the final section, Paul closes with a rather standard greeting. Osborne (2006) considered the closing greetings, benediction, or farewell as a common element of the typical formula for ancient epistle writing (p. 317). Paul mentioned other laborers who would have been known to Philemon and the other hearers. The benediction of the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, again reminded Philemon of Jesus as their gracious, *kyrios*, or Lord and Master. DuGuid et al. (2020) cited Paul's desire that Onesimus might "serve" (*diakonē*) Paul on Philemon's behalf as a striking comment. By alluding to

Onesimus having acted on Philemon's behalf, even though Philemon was a master who had slaves to serve him, Paul is getting to the "heart of the distinctive ethic of servanthood lying at the heart of Christian community" (DuGuid et al., 2020).

Servant Leadership in Review

Greenleaf (1970) founded the servant leadership concept for modern leadership and in so doing conceptualized the servant first, not leader first. If one begins with the desire to serve first, rather than to lead first, the person makes a conscious decision to mitigate the desire for power and material acquisition (Greenleaf, 1970, p. 124)

Since Greenleaf's 1970 thought-provoking conceptual treatise on servant leadership, modern theorists have advanced the theory to include Patterson's (2003) development of foundational constructs that emphasized moral purpose and extensive theoretical research on servant leadership. Spears (1998), Farling, Stone and Winston (1999), Laub (1999), and Page and Wong (2000) made key efforts to operationalize the theory by emphasizing Greenleaf's theory. Additionally, Sanjaya (2003), Dennis and Bocarnea (2005), and van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2010) utilized constructs based on both Greenleaf's and Patterson's work to further operationalize and apply servant leadership dimensions in the workplace. Furthermore, Ayers (2008) described the Christological hymn found in Philippians 2: 5-11 as the Christ-like example of servant leadership that emphasized and leads to humility and authenticity.

Servant Leadership Theory and The Great Reversal

As Osborne (2006) contended, biblical interpretation moves from text to context as a spiral, from the original meaning and purpose to its significance and contextualization for today's church (p. 22). Likewise, systematic theologians hold to a trajectory of interpretation that moves from the particular statements found in the text to a formation of biblical theology, then to understanding within a systematic approach. Therefore, this section aims to connect the genre analysis above with aspects and implications of Servant Leadership theory.

Lee-Barnewall (2016) noted how Greenleaf and others emphasized that the desire to serve first precedes the leader-first mentality in Servant-Leadership and how that should shape our approach to church leadership, ultimately in terms she described as kingdom dynamics. Emphasizing the paradoxical nature of servant/slave and leader helps connect us with the New Testament's kingdom goals of "sacrifice, unity, and love" first before considering roles of functional authority (Lee-Barnewall, 2016, p. 106). Thus, the "leader as servant first" paradigm promotes a correct relationship between the members of Christ's body by considering the ultimate kingdom reversal, Christ's willingness to take on the nature of a servant for the sake of others (Philippians 2:5-11). Furthermore, in this version of reversal, God works through weakness, rather than strength, to confront worldly wisdom and strength with unity, love, and community for the purpose of building up his global body (Lee-Barnewall, 2016, p. 107). Thus, Jesus

pointed to this understanding of leaders as a certain form of slave when he told the disciples that whoever desired to be first, must become a slave, translated from the Greek, “*doulos*” (Matthew 20:27-28, Mark 10:22-45).

In addition, Lee-Barnewall (2016) highlighted the significance that Jesus and Paul frequently preferred to describe leaders as *doulos* rather than merely *diakonos* for relevant semantic reasons (p. 109). *Diakonos* is a broader term than *doulos*; therefore, a slave is always a type of servant, but not every servant is a slave (Lee-Barnewall, 2016, p. 109). Both Paul and Jesus provided examples of how they exercised the principles of kingdom reversal in their own interactions with followers, by referring to themselves as *doulos*. For instance, Carson (2016) discussed the importance of Jesus’ foot washing service to the disciples was not primarily reserved as an act of humility, so much as his imitation of the Gentile slaves who performed the role. Thus, Jesus here further enacted a reversal of expected social and economic roles, shocking the disciples, and shattering their expectations and sense of tradition (p. 462). Additionally, Paul referred to himself as (a) a slave of Christ in Romans 1:1 and Galatians 1:10; (b) a slave to all people for the sake of the gospel in 1 Corinthians 9:19; and (c) his apostolic role as being a “*doulos*” in 2 Corinthians 4:5. Just as Lee-Barnewall (2016) suggested, this notion of kingdom reversal serves to reflect Christ’s glory through the humility and weakness of those whom he calls as stewards and shepherds, because it is his power that is perfected through our weakness (2 Corinthians 12:8-10). Christ’s kingdom up-ends the existing order of the world, calling forth and promising eschatological blessings to the least likely individuals, while transforming man-made rules of power, prestige, and privilege.

Conclusion and Implications

While the eschatological promises remain under-realized in our day, Christian leadership still seeks to follow the sacrificial pattern set out by Christ and practiced by Paul. One day, when the ultimate reversal takes place, the first will be last, and the last will be first (Matt 20:16). Until then, leaders in the contemporary church, just as in ancient society, will often be tempted to associate their positions with their personal identity, worth, status, and honor. Thus, to take on the mindset of a servant or *doulos*, means giving up the very things that the world’s kingdom esteems, in exchange for that which matters eternally and for future promises of the kingdom to come. Hence, recognizing the paradox and reversal of Servant Leadership theory’s Christ-focused and other-centered approach can facilitate unity and enable Christian leaders to reflect God’s character in our various vocational settings. As Lee-Barnewall (2016) suggested, leaders may do well to ask whether current paradigms essentially serve to give the glory to God, or if our structures and processes give glory to the people who occupy those positions (p. 120). As Paul demonstrated in his letter to Philemon on behalf of the slave Onesimus, this kingdom-reversing dynamic that lovingly compels Christ followers to serve one another still continues to provide a persuasive challenge to prevailing worldly social assumptions and cultural norms.

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