

WEEK 10—1 Corinthians; Philemon

Corinth, served by 2 ports, was an important Mediterranean trade center; it also had a sketchy reputation. Paul's time there led to a number of conversations—but after he left, problems developed among the believers there. So Paul's letters cover a wide range of topics. You'll find, for instance, challenges to accepted behaviors (chapters 5 & 6), a long section on 'love' (chapter 13), and an extended treatment of 'the end times' (chap 15).

Paul spent considerable time there, so he would have been familiar with both the members of the house-churches there and the situations they faced. Indeed, it is that familiarity that allows Paul to take the tone he does: he is stern with those who mistakenly understand freedom in Christ as a license to do as they please; he can also encourage those with honest questions, like what to do about, for example, food sacrificed to idols (chap 8).

That concern—what to do about food sacrificed to idols—illustrates how understanding the local situation helps as we read Scripture. In this case (and this was true throughout the Roman empire in Paul's day), idol worship was common, and involved making sacrifices of food. Once offered, that food would then be sold, or prepared as part of a meal—and followers of Jesus wondered whether they should eat what had been a sacrifice. It's a tricky question: do you risk offending a host who serves you such food? Do you eat as though it doesn't matter (since idols are nothing before the God you worship)? Does eating indicate you're going along with those who worship these idols? Paul tries to help readers work through the various connected issues.

The book of Philemon is quite different from the epistles you've read so far. It's short; it's also addressed to an individual rather than a group. But it deals with a live, significant issue—which Paul often does in his writing. In this case, the slave Onesimus is returning to his master, bearing a letter Paul has written. Roman law gave Philemon, the slave's owner, the right to punish (often severely) such behavior—but Paul asks Philemon to see Onesimus not as a slave, but as a brother in Christ.

It won't help to use an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century North American view of slavery here; in Paul's day, 'slavery' such as Onesimus experienced was more of an economic arrangement, as one paid off a debt through an agreed-upon term of labor. Still, guidelines were clear and firm, and the master had far more rights than the slave. Knowing this, Paul asks Philemon to consider what would be possible as a follower of Jesus. It's a subtle (some would say subversive) move on Paul's part to call into question a common practice that was often oppressive, in the name of an equality (see Galatians 3:28) that was central to the Church.

