

CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE EPISTLE TO PHILEMON 1:8-21: IMPLICATIONS FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

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DECLARATION

I, Kobusingye Charity, hereby declare that this research report entitled “*Conflict Resolution in the Epistle to Philemon 1:8-21: implications for contemporary Christian leadership*” is my original work and has never been submitted to any institution of Higher Education for examination.

All sources consulted have been duly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with academic requirements. I therefore take full responsibility for any errors or omissions that may be found in this dissertation.

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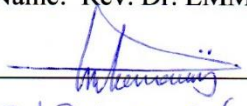
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APPROVAL

This student, Charity Kobusingye R. has written this dissertation entitled “*Conflict Resolution in the Epistle to Philemon 1:8-21: implications for contemporary Christian leadership*” under my supervision.

Her dissertation is worthy of the award of the Degree of Master of Divinity at Uganda Christian University, submitted with my approval.

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DEDICATION

This research report is dedicated to God Almighty, whose grace, wisdom, strength, and unfailing love have sustained me throughout my academic journey and enabled me to accomplish this study.

I also dedicate this work to my beloved siblings Dr. Brian, Ammabel, Patricia, Bruce, Wyclef, Lydia, Elizabeth, Andrew, all my Nephews and nieces, and Rev Canon Dr Jasper Tumuhimbise, for their endless financial support, love and prayers during the research process.

Special thanks go to my family, Duncan, Leone, Eleazar and Sasha, for their unwavering belief in my abilities, which inspired me to remain committed to my studies and complete this research. May God bless everyone who contributed to the success of this study.

Finally, I dedicate this work to all those who are committed to Conflict resolution, peacemaking, and reconciliation in Christian faith and character, that they may continue to impact the todays' church positively for the glory of God.

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ABSTRACT

Conflict remains one of the most common challenges facing contemporary Christian leadership. Leadership struggles, interpersonal disagreements, discord, and succession battles often threaten unity within churches and Christian organisations. This study examined conflict resolution as advanced in the Pauline epistle of Philemon 1:8–21, it explores its implications for contemporary Christian leadership. The study was guided by four objectives: to examine the historical and literary background of the passage; to analyse the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus; to investigate the nature of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership; and to appropriate conflict-resolution principles from the text for present-day ministry. The study employed a qualitative research design and utilised the Tripolar Exegetical Model, which incorporates distantiation, contextualisation, and appropriation. This was historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological analysed. Further, it examined Paul's role in mediating the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus and the principles underlying his appeal for reconciliation. Findings revealed that Paul approached conflict resolution through appeals for reconciliation, mediation, servant leadership, forgiveness, and the restoration of relationships. It was established that many conflicts fall within the confines of contemporary Christian leadership arising from leadership competition, communication breakdowns, misuse of authority, and relational tensions. The principles identified in Philemon 1:8–21, including, love based leadership, mediation, personal transformation, voluntary reconciliation, forgiveness, Christian fellowship, accountability, and relationship restoration were found to offer valuable guidance for addressing such conflicts in a manner consistent with Christian values.

The study concludes that effective Christian leadership requires a commitment to reconciliation, humility, dialogue, and relationship restoration. Philemon 1:8–21 provides a relevant Biblical framework that can contribute to healthier leadership practices and stronger Christian communities in contemporary contexts.

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CHAPTER ONE

1.0 Introduction

This chapter provides the foundational framework for the study of conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21 and its implications for contemporary Christian leadership. It presents the background and rationale for the research, identifies the problem of insufficient integration of biblical exegesis into modern conflict resolution praxis, and articulates the study's objectives, research questions, and thesis. The chapter also reviews existing scholarly literature on Philemon, identifies the research gap, and outlines the qualitative, exegetical methodology employed. Finally, it states the significance, limitations, delimitations, and the overall structure of the dissertation.

1.1 Background and Rationale

Conflict as a primary factor is critical in human relations. Research by Lifeway indicates that 87% of pastors who left their positions experienced congregational conflicts, with 56% dealing specifically with conflict over proposed changes and 49% enduring personal attacks.¹ Contemporary Christian leaders face multifaceted conflicts that mirror the complexities found in the Philemon narrative. Conflict within Christian communities persists despite ecclesial commitments to unity. Modern leadership literature frequently employs managerial models of negotiation and organizational strategy. However, such approaches may lack theological grounding in reconciliation as a redemptive act shaped by the cross.

The Epistle to Philemon offers a canonical example of mediation between estranged believers. It portrays a frame of social identity in Christ, voluntary relinquishment of authority, substitutionary assumption of debt, ecclesial accountability in conflict resolution, and reconciliation. Thus, despite its brevity, Philemon provides a fertile ground for developing a theology of leadership rooted in the Gospel rather than institutional pragmatism.

The letter unfolds as a personal appeal from Paul, imprisoned likely in Rome around 62AD. It was written to Philemon, a wealthy Colossian Christian hosting a house church. Onesimus is Philemon's runaway slave (Philemon 1:15-16), met Paul and converted to Christ (v10) and hence become useful as a "brother" rather than a slave.

¹ Lifeway Research, (2025) *Former pastors share reasons behind their ministry exit* (Retrieved from <https://research.lifeway.com/pastorprotection/>)

Paul sends him back not as a slave but as a beloved brother(v16), he urged Philemon to receive the fugitive as he would receive Paul himself. This relational triangle exemplifies conflict resolution. Paul navigates honor-shame dynamics by praising Philemon (vv 4-7), assuming Onesimus' debt(vv18-19) put it on my account, and invoking partnership in the Gospel(v17).

In Roman slavery, where slaves were taken as property, any attempt to run away faced severe punishment; Paul's strategy subverts imperial norms without direct abolition. This models gospel-transformed relationships. Patronage systems amplified the conflict, as Philemon held legal power, yet Paul appeals to love over rights (9,14).

Eschatological hope undergirds this separation, which was for a while, that it might be forever(v15). This points to eternal unity in Christ for all Christians. For contemporary leaders, amidst tribal conflict and church divisions, Philemon illustrates servant leadership that prioritizes conflict resolution and reconciliation over control.

1.2 Statement of the problem

The Epistle to Philemon, though the shortest of all Pauline epistles, presents one of the most profound Biblical models of conflict resolution. It depicts to the modern contemporary Christian leadership how they ought to act in the face of adversity. In a world grappling with issues of injustice, broken relationships, animosity, political strife, trauma, intrigue, Philemon provides a Biblical perspective on conflict resolution. This goes as far as restitution, arbitative reconciliation and leadership. The problem this research addresses is the need to examine the historical and literal context of this epistle of Philemon. Be able to understand the spirit of the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus. This explores how Paul's approach to conflict resolution and the eventual mechanism Paul used to resolve it provides insights into biblical principles of leadership.

Many contemporary Christian leaders address conflict primarily through administrative procedure or secular mediation frameworks. Such approaches risk neglecting the theological and Christological foundations of reconciliation evident in the Pauline corpus. This study addresses the insufficient integration of biblical exegesis, particularly of Philemon, into contemporary Christian leadership theory and praxis.

This study aimed at connecting these principles to contemporary Christian leadership, addressing the issue of how leaders today can effectively resolve conflicts in the church by applying biblical

teachings. This involved a critical exegesis of Philemon 1:8-21 and a clear articulation of the problem's relevance to the modern Christian context.

1.3 Research Objective

General Objective

To examine Paul's approach to conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8-21. This explores its implications for developing effective strategies for contemporary Christian leadership, especially in managing interpersonal and organizational conflict within its historical and literary context.

Specific objectives:

- i. To analyse the background of conflict resolution in the 1st century(AD), its historical, literary, and rhetorical features of Philemon 1:8-21, how conflict was resolved.
- ii. To conduct an exegetical analysis of Philemon, focusing on the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus.
- iii. To analyse the nature and dynamics of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership.
- iv. To appropriate principles of conflict resolution from Philemon 1:8–21 for contemporary Christian leadership.

1.4 Research Question

Specific questions:

- i. What are the historical, literary and rhetorical factors in the 1st century informing the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus in Philemon and how it was resolved?
- ii. How does the exegetical analysis of the passage contribute to Paul's persuasive strategy to conflict resolution?
- iii. What is the nature and dynamics of conflict in contemporary Christian Leadership?
- iv. How do the principles of conflict resolution identified in Philemon 1:8-21 inform contemporary Christian leadership?

1.5 Research thesis

This study argues that a close historical and literary analysis of Philemon 1:8-21 reveals Paul 's deliberate use of persuasive authority, relational mediation and theological appeal to conflict resolution between Philemon and Onesimus. This is showing key principles grounded in reconciliation, humility and servant leadership, which are essential for contemporary Christian leaders in resolving conflict and fostering unity within the church. This study is limited to Philemon and does not attempt a comprehensive theology of master and slavery in New Testament but rather examines the passage as a case study in conflict resolution and leadership within its immediate context.

1.6 Justification of the Study

Conflicts continue to affect relationships within churches, Christian organizations, and society at large. While numerous studies have examined conflict resolution from sociological, psychological, and organizational perspectives, relatively few have explored the contribution of Philemon 1:8–21 as a biblical model for reconciliation. The Epistle to Philemon presents a unique case in which Paul successfully intervened in a conflict involving personal injury, social inequality, and broken relationships. The passage therefore offers valuable insights into Christian approaches to conflict resolution.

This study was undertaken because of the need to examine how Paul's handling of the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus can contribute to contemporary discussions on reconciliation within the church. By conducting an exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21, the study seeks to provide a biblically grounded understanding of conflict resolution that is relevant to modern Christian communities. The research is further justified by the growing need for restorative approaches to conflict that promote healing, forgiveness, and the restoration of relationships.

1.7 Significance of the Study

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to biblical scholarship by providing a deeper understanding of conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21. Through a careful examination of the historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological dimensions of the text, the study will enrich existing discussions on reconciliation within Pauline literature.

The study is beneficial to church leaders, pastors, and Christian counsellors who regularly engage in conflict management within congregations. The conflict resolution principles identified in the

passage may provide practical guidance for addressing disputes in ways that promote forgiveness, reconciliation, and communal harmony.

In addition, the study serves as a resource for theological students and researchers interested in New Testament studies, Pauline theology, and conflict resolution. It is hoped that the findings will stimulate further research on the application of biblical principles to contemporary challenges facing the church and society.

1.8 Limitations of the Study

Like any academic study, this research faced certain limitations. First, the study relied entirely on library-based sources and therefore depended on the availability and accessibility of relevant scholarly materials. Some recent publications and academic resources were not readily accessible due to subscription restrictions and database limitations.

Second, the study focused on a single Biblical passage, namely Philemon 1:8–21. While this narrow focus allowed for detailed exegetical analysis, it limited the extent to which broader New Testament perspectives on conflict resolution could be explored in depth.

Third, because the study involved interpretation of ancient texts, some aspects of the historical circumstances surrounding Philemon, Onesimus, and Paul remain uncertain. Consequently, certain conclusions are based on informed scholarly interpretations rather than complete historical certainty.

Despite these limitations, the researcher ensures academic rigor by consulting a wide range of current scholarly sources and employing recognized exegetical methods.

1.9 Delimitations of the Study

This study was deliberately limited to an examination of conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21. Although the Epistle to Philemon contains additional verses, the selected passage was chosen because it contains the central section of Paul's appeal regarding the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus.

The study concentrated on the historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological dimensions of the passage as they relate to conflict resolution. Particular attention was given to the conflict itself, Paul's role as mediator, the reconciliation process, and the principles emerging from the text.

Furthermore, the research was confined to a library-based qualitative approach and did not involve field research, interviews, surveys, or case studies. The primary focus remained on biblical exegesis and theological reflection based on scholarly literature.

1.10 Literature Review

1.10.1 Conflict Resolution in New Testament Scholarship

Conflict is a recurring theme within the New Testament because the early church consisted of people from diverse social, cultural, and economic backgrounds. As Christianity expanded across the Roman world, disagreements and tensions emerged within Christian communities, requiring effective mechanisms for maintaining unity and fellowship. Contemporary scholars generally agree that reconciliation occupies a central place in New Testament theology and practice.

According to Michael J. Gorman, reconciliation is fundamental to Pauline theology because the gospel itself is rooted in God's reconciling work through Christ.² He argues that believers are called not only to experience reconciliation with God but also to embody reconciliation in their relationships with others. In this regard, conflict resolution becomes an essential expression of Christian discipleship.

This is supported by Brian J. Dodd who observes that Paul consistently sought to preserve unity within Christian communities through persuasion, mutual respect, and theological reflection rather than through authoritarian control.³ Dodd maintains that Paul's letters reveal a commitment to restoring relationships and strengthening communal harmony. Such observations are particularly relevant to the Epistle to Philemon, where Paul addresses a conflict involving personal, social, and economic dimensions.

While these scholars provide valuable insights into New Testament approaches to conflict resolution, much of the discussion remains broad and focuses on Paul's theology as a whole. Less attention is given to the process of conflict resolution and principles are specifically demonstrated only in Philemon 1:8–21. This study therefore sought to contribute to the existing scholarship by examining the practical conflict resolution strategies evident within the passage.

² Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 212–218.

³ Brian J. Dodd, *Paul and Social Transformation: Reconciliation in the Pauline Letters* (London: T&T Clark, 2021), 145–150.

1.10.2 Historical Perspective

Recent scholarship has emphasized the importance of understanding the historical and social context of Philemon. The letter was written within a society deeply shaped by slavery, patronage systems, and hierarchical social structures. These realities significantly influenced relationships between individuals and communities.

Jennifer A. Glancy argues that slavery was an integral component of Roman social and economic life. She advanced the notion that exercised considerable authority over enslaved persons.⁴ According to Glancy, the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus should be interpreted against this background of unequal power relations. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for appreciating the significance of Paul's appeal.

Likewise, John M. G. Barclay contends that the letter reflects the realities of patron-client relationships common in the Roman world.⁵ Barclay notes that Paul's intervention introduces a new framework for social relationships based on Christian fellowship rather than conventional social expectations. His analysis highlights the transformative implications of the gospel within existing social structures.

Although these studies provide important historical insights, they often focus primarily on reconstructing the social world behind the text. Less attention is given to how these historical realities shaped the process of reconciliation itself. This study seeks to bridge that gap by examining how conflict was addressed within these first-century social conditions.

1.10.3 Literary and Rhetorical Perspective

Scholars have increasingly recognized Philemon as a carefully crafted literary and rhetorical document. Rather than issuing direct commands, Paul employs persuasive strategies designed to influence Philemon's response while preserving his freedom to choose.

Scot McKnight argues that Paul's appeal is characterized by affection, respect, and relational persuasion.⁶ He notes that Paul intentionally appeals to love rather than authority and seeks to

⁴ Jennifer A. Glancy, *Slavery in Early Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), 35–48.

⁵ John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 562–569.

⁶ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 68–75.

motivate Philemon through shared Christian values. According to McKnight, this rhetorical approach contributes significantly to the effectiveness of the letter.

further, Nijay K. Gupta highlights Paul's use of rhetorical devices such as wordplay, emotional appeal, personal identification with Onesimus, and strategic argumentation.⁷ Gupta maintains that these rhetorical techniques serve the broader goal of facilitating reconciliation between the parties involved.

These studies demonstrate the literary sophistication of the letter and contribute significantly to understanding Paul's persuasive methods. However, they often focus on rhetorical analysis for its own sake rather than examining how rhetoric functions as a practical tool for conflict resolution. This study seeks to explore the relationship between rhetorical strategy and reconciliation within Philemon 1:8–21.

1.10.4 Contextual Perspectives

The transformation of Onesimus occupies a central place in contemporary discussions of Philemon. Many scholars argue that Paul's appeal depends heavily upon the recognition of Onesimus as a changed individual whose identity has been reshaped through faith in Christ.

Douglas J. Moo argues that Paul deliberately redirects attention away from Onesimus' past actions toward his present status as a believer.⁸ According to Moo, Onesimus' conversion provides the theological foundation upon which reconciliation becomes possible.

Further, Longenecker (2016), emphasizes Paul's redefinition of Onesimus not as a mere name but a "beloved brother" rather than merely a slave.⁹ Longenecker contends that this new identity fundamentally alters the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus and serves as the basis for Paul's appeal.

While these scholars rightly emphasize personal transformation, relatively little attention has been given to the practical implications of transformed identity for contemporary conflict resolution.

⁷ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians and Philemon: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 210–218.

⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 391–401.

⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 112–116

This study sought to demonstrate how Paul's understanding of transformation contributes to a broader framework for reconciliation within Christian communities.

1.10.5 Mediation and Restorative Justice

Recent scholarship increasingly interprets Paul's role in Philemon through the lens of mediation and restorative justice. Rather than focusing on punishment or legal rights, Paul seeks the restoration of relationships through dialogue, accountability, and forgiveness.

Skinner (2029) argues that Paul functions as a mediator who works to rebuild trust between Philemon and Onesimus.¹⁰ Skinner notes that Paul's willingness to assume responsibility for any financial loss reflects a restorative approach that prioritizes healing over retribution.

Similarly, Michael Wolter maintains that the letter demonstrates a balance between accountability and grace.¹¹ According to Wolter, Paul neither ignores the possibility of wrongdoing nor allows it to prevent reconciliation. Instead, he seeks a solution that promotes justice while restoring fellowship.

Although these studies offer valuable insights into the restorative dimensions of the letter, few have systematically examined how the principles found in Philemon 1:8–21 can be applied to contemporary church conflicts. This dissertation therefore contributes to scholarship by identifying and analyzing conflict resolution principles that emerge from the text and considering their relevance for Christian communities today.

1.10.6 Research Gap

The reviewed literature demonstrates substantial scholarly interest in the historical context, rhetorical structure, theological themes, and social implications of Philemon. Scholars generally agree that reconciliation is central to Paul's appeal. Onesimus' transformation plays a significant role in the restoration process. However, existing studies tend to focus on historical reconstruction, rhetorical analysis, slavery, or theological interpretation separately.

Limited scholarly attention has been devoted to a comprehensive exegetical examination of Philemon 1:8–21 specifically as a model of conflict resolution. Furthermore, few studies integrate

¹⁰ Christopher W. Skinner, *Reading Philemon Intertextually* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2020), 88–95

¹¹ Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 301–305

these perspectives to identify practical conflict resolution principles applicable to contemporary Christian communities. This study sought to address that gap by conducting a detailed exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21 and examined the conflict resolution principles that emerge from the text.

1.11 Methodology

1.11.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative library-based research design. This approach means was appropriate because the study sought to investigate and interpret the biblical text of Philemon 1:8–21 and explore its relevance for contemporary Christian leadership. The study relied on documentary sources rather than numerical data, enabling an in-depth analysis of conflict resolution within the biblical text and its implications for present-day Christian communities.

1.11.2 Research Approach

The study adopted the Tripolar Exegetical Model as its guiding methodological framework. This model provides a holistic approach to biblical interpretation by bringing the biblical text into dialogue with the contemporary context of the reader. It operates through three interrelated poles: distantiation, contextualisation, and appropriation.

The first pole, distantiation, focuses on the world behind the text. This stage seeks to establish the historical, social, cultural, political, literary, and rhetorical circumstances that shaped the biblical text. Through this pole, the study examined the historical background of Philemon 1:8–21, including Roman slavery, patron-client relationships, honour-shame dynamics, early Christian understandings of reconciliation, and the literary and rhetorical features of the epistle. This pole is primarily reflected in Chapter Three of the study.

The second pole, contextualisation, focuses on the world of the reader. This stage seeks to identify the contemporary realities, experiences, concerns, and challenges that make engagement with the biblical text necessary and meaningful. In this study, contextualisation involved an examination of contemporary Christian leadership and the conflicts that characterise modern church and ministry settings, including leadership disputes, interpersonal conflicts, reconciliation challenges, and relationship breakdowns within Christian communities. This pole is developed in Chapter Four of the study.

The third pole, appropriation, brings the Biblical text and the contemporary context into dialogue. At this stage, insights derived from the study of the text are related to contemporary realities in order to generate relevant theological and practical responses. In this study, appropriation involved drawing principles of conflict resolution from Philemon 1:8–21 and applying them to contemporary Christian leadership contexts. This pole is developed in Chapter Five of the study.

The three poles function as complementary stages within a single interpretive process. Distantiation establishes an understanding of the biblical text within its original context, contextualisation examines the realities of the contemporary reader, and appropriation facilitates a dialogue between the two in order to derive relevant principles for Christian leadership and conflict resolution.

1.11.3 Sources of Data

The study relied on secondary data obtained from scholarly and academic sources. These included the Holy Bible, Biblical commentaries, journal articles, books, dissertations, theses, theological dictionaries, and other relevant scholarly publications addressing Philemon, conflict resolution, reconciliation, Christian leadership, and biblical hermeneutics. Particular emphasis was placed on recent scholarly literature while also consulting selected foundational works that remain significant within Biblical studies and theological scholarship.

1.11.4 Data Collection Procedure

Data were collected through library research. Relevant materials were obtained from university libraries, theological libraries, academic journals, electronic databases, and reputable online repositories. Sources were selected based on their relevance to the research objectives, scholarly credibility, and contribution to understanding conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21 and contemporary Christian leadership. The researcher systematically reviewed literature relating to conflict resolution, leadership, reconciliation, Pauline studies, and biblical hermeneutics to generate data relevant to the study.

1.11.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using the Tripolar Exegetical Model.

Under the distantiation pole, the study examined the historical, social, cultural, literary, and rhetorical context of Philemon 1:8–21. Attention was given to the circumstances surrounding the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, the institution of slavery in the Roman Empire, and Paul's approach to reconciliation and conflict resolution. The findings of this stage are presented in Chapter Three.

Under the contextualisation pole, the study examined the realities of contemporary Christian leadership and conflict management. Particular attention was given to leadership conflicts, interpersonal disputes, church divisions, reconciliation challenges, and the need for effective conflict-resolution strategies within contemporary Christian communities. The findings of this stage are presented in Chapter Four.

Under the appropriation pole, the insights derived from the biblical text and the contemporary context were brought into dialogue. Principles emerging from Philemon 1:8–21 were identified and applied to contemporary Christian leadership in order to propose biblically informed approaches to conflict resolution, reconciliation, mediation, forgiveness, and relationship restoration. The findings of this stage are presented in Chapter Five.

1.11.6 Ethical Considerations

The study observed accepted standards of academic integrity. All sources consulted were properly acknowledged through footnotes and references to avoid plagiarism. The researcher sought to represent scholarly views accurately and to interpret the biblical text responsibly within its historical and theological context.

Since the study was library-based and did not involve human participants, issues relating to informed consent, confidentiality, and anonymity were not applicable. Nevertheless, the study maintained objectivity, honesty, and scholarly responsibility throughout the research process.

1.12 Dissertation Structure

The dissertation is organised into six chapters.

Chapter One presents the introduction to the study, including the background, problem statement, objectives, significance of the study, scope, literature review, and methodology.

Chapter Two discusses the historical, social, economic, literary, and rhetorical background of the Epistle to Philemon and the broader context of conflict resolution in the ancient world.

Chapter Three constitutes the distantiation pole of the Tripolar Exegetical Model and examines Philemon 1:8–21 within its historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological contexts. The chapter identifies the conflict resolution principles emerging from the passage.

Chapter Four represents the contextualisation pole and analyses the nature and dynamics of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership, focusing on the realities and challenges that characterise modern Christian communities.

Chapter Five constitutes the appropriation pole of the study. It appropriates the conflict resolution principles identified from Philemon 1:8–21 to contemporary Christian leadership and proposes biblically informed approaches to conflict resolution, reconciliation, and leadership practice.

Chapter six consists of the conclusions, summary and recommendations.

1.13 Conclusion

This chapter introduced the study by presenting the background, statement of the problem, purpose, objectives, research questions, justification, significance, limitations, delimitations, literature review, and methodology. The chapter established the need for an exegetical investigation of Philemon 1:8–21 in order to understand the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus and the principles that contributed to its resolution. The reviewed literature revealed significant scholarly interest in the historical and theological dimensions of the letter while also identifying a gap regarding its application as a model for conflict resolution. The methodology outlined the qualitative, library-based, and exegetical approach adopted in the study. The next chapter examines the historical background of conflict resolution in the first-century world together with the historical, literary, and rhetorical features of Philemon 1:8–21.

CHAPTER TWO

BACKGROUND OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN THE FIRST-CENTURY WORLD AND THE HISTORICAL, LITERARY, AND RHETORICAL FEATURES OF PHILEMON 1:8–21

2.1 Introduction

The Epistle to Philemon presents one of the most practical demonstrations of conflict resolution in the New Testament. Although the letter is brief, it addresses a complex interpersonal conflict involving Philemon, a Christian householder, and Onesimus, a slave who had become estranged from his master. At the centre of the narrative stands Paul, whose intervention seeks not merely to resolve a dispute but to restore a broken relationship through the transforming power of the gospel. The letter therefore provides valuable insight into how conflict was understood and addressed within the social, cultural, and religious environment of the first century.

The interpretation of Philemon 1:8–21 requires careful consideration of the context within which the letter was written. Contemporary biblical scholarship increasingly recognizes that the meaning of the text cannot be fully appreciated apart from the historical realities of the Roman Empire, the literary structure of the letter, and the rhetorical strategies employed by Paul. These contextual dimensions' illuminate both the nature of the conflict and the methods through which reconciliation was pursued. Consequently, an examination of the background of conflict resolution in the first-century world provides an important foundation for understanding Paul's appeal to Philemon.

This chapter reviews literature related to conflict resolution in Jewish, Greco-Roman, and early Christian contexts before examining the historical, literary, and rhetorical features of Philemon 1:8–21. Particular attention is given to scholarly discussions concerning mediation, reconciliation, forgiveness, and relationship restoration. The chapter further explores how conflict was resolved within the text and how Paul's approach reflects broader first-century practices while simultaneously embodying distinctively Christian principles. This contextual analysis establishes the foundation for the exegetical discussion that follows in the subsequent chapter.

2.2 Conflict Resolution in the First-Century World

Conflict was an unavoidable feature of life in the ancient world. Differences in social status, economic interests, political affiliations, family relationships, and religious convictions frequently

generated disputes within communities. While conflict itself was common, societies developed various mechanisms for managing disagreements and restoring social harmony. Understanding these mechanisms is essential for interpreting the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus because the letter emerged within a world where mediation, reconciliation, and social restoration were deeply embedded in communal life. The approaches to conflict resolution found within Jewish tradition, Greco-Roman society, and early Christianity each contributed to the broader environment in which Paul's appeal was made.

2.2.1 Conflict Resolution in Jewish Tradition

The Jewish understanding of conflict resolution was rooted in covenant theology and communal responsibility. Unlike purely legal approaches that focused primarily on punishment or compensation, Jewish traditions often emphasized restoration of relationships and the preservation of community harmony. The Hebrew Scriptures present reconciliation as an essential aspect of faithful living before God, with justice and mercy functioning together in the resolution of disputes.¹²

Within ancient Israel, conflicts were frequently addressed through established communal structures. Elders, judges, and religious leaders played significant roles in mediating disagreements and ensuring that justice was administered fairly. According to recent scholarship, these practices reflected a worldview in which interpersonal relationships were inseparable from one's relationship with God.¹³ Consequently, unresolved conflict was not merely a social problem but also a spiritual concern that threatened communal wellbeing.

The Old Testament repeatedly encourages individuals to pursue peace and reconciliation. Levitical laws emphasized restitution where harm had occurred, while wisdom literature consistently praised peacemaking and self-control. The prophetic tradition further stressed the importance of justice, forgiveness, and restoration within the covenant community. These themes provided a

¹²John Goldingay, *Old Testament Theology: Israel's Gospel* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2017), 412–417.

¹³Joshua Berman, *Created Equal: How the Bible Broke with Ancient Political Thought* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 168–174.

theological framework that shaped Jewish attitudes toward conflict management during the Second Temple period.

Recent scholars have argued that Jewish reconciliation practices extended beyond legal adjudication to include moral and relational dimensions.¹⁴ Forgiveness, repentance, confession, and restoration were regarded as necessary components of genuine reconciliation. Such principles would later influence the teachings of Jesus and the practices of the early church. Consequently, when Paul addressed the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus, he did so within a tradition that already valued the restoration of broken relationships as an expression of faithfulness to God.

Furthermore, Second Temple Jewish literature reveals a growing emphasis on communal responsibility in conflict resolution. Members of the covenant community were expected to seek reconciliation actively and to prevent disputes from escalating into divisions that threatened communal unity.¹⁵ This concern for community cohesion finds important parallels in the New Testament, where reconciliation becomes a defining characteristic of Christian fellowship.

Although Jewish approaches to conflict resolution emphasized justice, they also recognized the transformative power of mercy. Scholars note that the balance between accountability and forgiveness remained a central feature of Jewish ethical thought during the first century.¹⁶ This balance would later become evident in Paul's handling of the situation between Philemon and Onesimus, where accountability is acknowledged but restoration ultimately becomes the primary goal.

2.2.2 Conflict Resolution in the Greco-Roman World

The Greco-Roman world of the first century was characterized by complex social relationships structured around status, patronage, family honour, and civic responsibility. Within such a society, conflict was inevitable. Disputes arose from economic transactions, political rivalries, family

¹⁴ Matthew Thiessen, *Jesus and the Forces of Death: The Gospels' Portrayal of Ritual Impurity within First-Century Judaism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2020), 93–98.

¹⁵ Loren T. Stuckenbruck and Daniel M. Gurtner, eds., *T&T Clark Encyclopedia of Second Temple Judaism* (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 154–158.

¹⁶ John Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 523–529.

disagreements, social obligations, and violations of expected social norms. Consequently, Greco-Roman communities developed various mechanisms for resolving conflicts and preserving social stability. While formal legal institutions existed, many disputes were settled through informal means such as mediation, arbitration, negotiation, and patronage intervention.¹⁷

One of the most significant features of Greco-Roman conflict resolution was the role of mediation. Respected members of society often intervened in disputes to facilitate reconciliation between opposing parties. These mediators were valued not only because of their social standing but also because they possessed the ability to restore harmony without the public embarrassment that often accompanied legal proceedings. Recent scholarship suggests that mediation was frequently preferred because it preserved relationships and protected the honour of those involved.¹⁸ In societies where reputation was highly valued, avoiding public disgrace was often as important as resolving the dispute itself.

Closely related to mediation was the patron-client system, which permeated nearly every aspect of Roman social life. Patrons provided protection, resources, and opportunities to their clients, while clients responded with loyalty, service, and public recognition. Within this framework, patrons frequently acted as intermediaries during conflicts involving members of their social networks.¹⁹ The influence of patronage is particularly relevant to the study of Philemon because Paul's relationship with both Philemon and Onesimus exhibits certain features associated with mediation and advocacy. However, unlike conventional patrons who often acted to reinforce social hierarchies, Paul employed his influence to encourage reconciliation grounded in Christian fellowship.

Another important aspect of Greco-Roman conflict resolution was the concept of honour and shame. Honour functioned as a measure of social worth and public reputation, while shame represented social disapproval or loss of status. These values significantly influenced how disputes were managed. Individuals often sought to defend their honour, restore damaged reputations, and

¹⁷ Bruce W. Winter, *Divine Honours for the Caesars: The First Christians' Responses* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), 87–91.

¹⁸ Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, eds., *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric: Theory and Practice in the Hellenistic Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 122–128.

¹⁹ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 119–136.

avoid actions that could result in public humiliation.²⁰ Consequently, conflict resolution frequently involved efforts to restore social equilibrium and preserve communal respect.

Recent studies have demonstrated that honour-shame dynamics are particularly important for understanding the social background of Philemon. If Onesimus had wronged Philemon in some manner, the conflict would not have been viewed solely as a private disagreement. Rather, it would have affected Philemon's social standing, household authority, and public reputation.²¹ The restoration of the relationship therefore required more than legal settlement; it demanded the restoration of honour and trust within the community.

Despite the availability of legal mechanisms, Greco-Roman philosophers often encouraged alternative approaches to conflict management. Stoic thinkers, for example, emphasized self-control, rational dialogue, and the pursuit of social harmony. Likewise, moral philosophers frequently advocated reconciliation as a means of preserving civic unity and fostering healthy relationships.²² Although these approaches were not identical to Christian teachings, they reveal a broader cultural appreciation for peaceful conflict resolution.

Nevertheless, the Greco-Roman approach to reconciliation remained largely shaped by social status and hierarchical relationships. Individuals were often treated according to their rank, wealth, citizenship, or position within society. Scholars note that while reconciliation was valued, it did not necessarily challenge existing social structures.²³ This distinction becomes particularly significant when examining Philemon, where Paul appeals for a form of reconciliation that transcends conventional social categories and is rooted instead in a shared identity in Christ.

²⁰ Jayson Georges and Mark D. Baker, *Ministering in Honor-Shame Cultures: Biblical Foundations and Practical Essentials* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 31–45.

²¹ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians and Philemon: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 214–218.

²² Troels Engberg-Pedersen, *John and Philosophy: A New Reading of the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 58–63.

²³ Lynn H. Cohick and Amy Brown Hughes, *Christian Women in the Patristic World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2017), 44–48.

The literature therefore suggests that Greco-Roman society possessed sophisticated mechanisms for managing conflict, including mediation, patronage intervention, and honour restoration. However, these mechanisms primarily served to maintain social order and preserve existing relationships within established hierarchies. Paul's approach in Philemon reflects certain similarities to these practices but simultaneously introduces a theological vision that redefines relationships through the gospel. Understanding this broader cultural background provides an important bridge to examining conflict resolution within the early Christian community.

2.2.3 Conflict Resolution in Early Christian Communities

The emergence of Christianity in the first century introduced a distinctive approach to conflict resolution that was shaped by both Jewish theological traditions and the teachings of Jesus Christ. While early Christians lived within the broader social structures of the Roman Empire, they were called to embody values that often challenged prevailing cultural assumptions concerning power, status, and interpersonal relationships. Consequently, conflict resolution within Christian communities was not viewed merely as a practical necessity for maintaining social order but as an expression of the reconciling work of God in Christ.²⁴

At the centre of early Christian teaching was the conviction that reconciliation lies at the heart of the gospel. The ministry of Jesus consistently emphasized forgiveness, restoration, and the healing of broken relationships. The Gospels portray Jesus encouraging reconciliation before worship, teaching forgiveness without limit, and calling his followers to pursue peace even in difficult circumstances.²⁵ These teachings provided the ethical foundation upon which the early church developed its understanding of conflict management.

Recent scholarship highlights that the early Christian community understood itself as a new family formed through faith in Christ.²⁶ Membership within this community transcended traditional divisions based on ethnicity, social status, economic position, and gender. As a result, conflicts among believers were not merely individual disputes but challenges that threatened the unity and

²⁴ Michael J. Gorman; 201–208.

²⁵ Patrick Schreiner, *The Kingdom of God and the Glory of the Cross* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 145–152.

²⁶ Nijay K. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 176–182.

witness of the entire community. Maintaining fellowship therefore became a significant concern for church leaders and congregations alike.

The writings of Paul provide some of the clearest evidence of how conflict was addressed in early Christian communities. Throughout his letters, Paul repeatedly encourages believers to pursue peace, mutual edification, patience, humility, and forgiveness. For Paul, reconciliation was not optional but an essential implication of participation in Christ.²⁷ Since believers had been reconciled to God through Christ, they were expected to pursue reconciliation with one another. This theological conviction transformed conflict resolution from a purely social activity into a spiritual responsibility.

Furthermore, early Christian communities often preferred mediation and dialogue over litigation. Paul's instruction to the Corinthian church concerning disputes among believers demonstrates a clear preference for resolving conflicts within the faith community rather than through secular courts.²⁸ Scholars argue that this preference reflected the belief that Christian communities possessed both the moral responsibility and spiritual resources necessary for addressing internal disputes. Community leaders, respected elders, and apostolic figures frequently played mediatory roles when conflicts emerged.

The role of mediation becomes particularly relevant when examining Philemon. Paul's intervention in the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus reflects a broader pattern evident throughout early Christianity. Rather than imposing a solution through authority alone, mediators sought to facilitate understanding, encourage forgiveness, and restore fellowship.²⁹ The objective was not merely the settlement of disagreement but the renewal of relationships consistent with the values of the gospel.

Another distinguishing feature of early Christian conflict resolution was its emphasis on forgiveness. While forgiveness was recognized within Jewish tradition and appreciated in certain

²⁷ Michael F. Bird, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 622–625.

²⁸ Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 287–291.

²⁹ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 154–162.

philosophical circles, Christianity grounded forgiveness in the example of Christ's sacrificial love. Recent scholars observe that forgiveness in early Christian thought was not understood as ignoring wrongdoing but as creating the possibility for restored relationships and renewed community life.³⁰ Consequently, conflict resolution involved both accountability and grace.

Humility also occupied a central place within Christian approaches to reconciliation. Unlike many Greco-Roman models that reinforced social hierarchy and honour competition, Christian teaching encouraged believers to place the interests of others above their own and to exercise leadership through service rather than domination.³¹ This emphasis on humility fundamentally shaped the manner in which disputes were addressed and resolved within the church.

Moreover, early Christian conflict resolution was deeply communal. The church functioned not simply as an association of individuals but as the body of Christ, where the actions of one member affected the entire community. Scholars note that reconciliation therefore carried both personal and corporate significance.³² Restored relationships contributed to the unity, witness, and spiritual health of the church as a whole.

The literature reviewed demonstrates that early Christian conflict resolution shared certain similarities with Jewish and Greco-Roman practices, particularly regarding mediation and community involvement. However, it also introduced distinctive theological principles rooted in the gospel of Christ. Reconciliation, forgiveness, humility, and transformed relationships became defining characteristics of Christian conflict management. These principles provide the immediate context for understanding Paul's approach in Philemon 1:8–21, where conflict resolution is pursued not merely through social convention but through a theological vision of restored fellowship in Christ.

2.3 Historical Background of Philemon 1:8–21

Understanding the historical background of Philemon 1:8–21 is essential for interpreting both the nature of the conflict and Paul's approach to its resolution. The letter emerged within a complex

³⁰Matthew S. Harmon, *The Servant of the Lord and His Servant People* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 206–213.

³¹Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 312–316.

³²Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 98–104.

social environment shaped by Roman political authority, household structures, slavery, and the expansion of the early Christian movement. While the epistle is highly personal in character, it also reflects broader realities that influenced interpersonal relationships in the first century. Consequently, an examination of its authorship, recipients, historical setting, and social context provides an important foundation for understanding Paul's appeal for reconciliation.

2.3.1 Authorship, Date, and Destination

The Epistle to Philemon is widely regarded as one of the undisputed letters of Paul. Unlike some Pauline writings whose authorship has been questioned, Philemon enjoys near-universal acceptance among contemporary scholars due to its personal nature, theological consistency, and strong historical connections with other Pauline letters.³³ The opening verse explicitly identifies Paul as the author and Timothy as a co-sender, while the contents of the letter correspond closely with what is known about Paul's ministry and relationships from other New Testament sources.

Most scholars date the letter between AD 60 and 62 during one of Paul's periods of imprisonment. Although debate continues regarding whether the letter was written from Rome, Caesarea, or Ephesus, many recent scholars favour a Roman imprisonment because of the close relationship between Philemon, Colossians, and the other Prison Epistles.³⁴ Regardless of the precise location, there is broad agreement that Paul wrote the letter while experiencing confinement and relying upon correspondence to maintain pastoral oversight of Christian communities.

The letter was addressed primarily to Philemon, together with Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in Philemon's house. The inclusion of these additional recipients suggests that the matter under discussion was not entirely private. Rather, the resolution of the conflict possessed implications for the wider Christian community.³⁵ This communal dimension is significant because it indicates that reconciliation was understood not merely as a personal concern but as an issue affecting the health and unity of the church.

³³ Richard N. Longenecker; 11–18

³⁴ Michael F. Bird, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 761–768.

³⁵ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 33–39.

2.3.2 Historical Circumstances of the Conflict

At the centre of Philemon 1:8–21 stands a conflict involving Philemon and Onesimus. Although scholars generally agree that a serious breakdown had occurred in their relationship, the exact circumstances remain a subject of debate. Traditionally, Onesimus has been viewed as a runaway slave who fled from his master and subsequently encountered Paul during the apostle's imprisonment. This interpretation has dominated scholarship for many centuries and continues to receive support from numerous contemporary commentators.³⁶

However, recent studies have challenged aspects of the traditional understanding. Some scholars argue that the text does not explicitly describe Onesimus as a runaway slave and that alternative explanations remain possible. For example, it has been suggested that Onesimus may have sought Paul's assistance voluntarily in order to facilitate reconciliation with Philemon following a dispute.³⁷ Others propose that the conflict may have involved financial loss, damaged trust, or failure to fulfil expected responsibilities within the household.

Despite these differing interpretations, there is broad scholarly agreement that the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus had become sufficiently strained to require mediation. Paul's involvement therefore reflects the seriousness of the situation and the potential consequences if reconciliation failed. The letter demonstrates that interpersonal conflicts were present even within early Christian communities and required deliberate efforts toward restoration.

Recent scholarship has increasingly emphasized that the precise details of Onesimus' offence may be less important than the transformation that occurred following his encounter with Paul.³⁸ The focus of the narrative is not primarily on the wrongdoing itself but on the possibility of reconciliation through the gospel. This perspective shifts attention from punishment to restoration and highlights the theological significance of Paul's appeal.

³⁶ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2022), 377–382.

³⁷ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians and Philemon: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 205–210.

³⁸ Matthew S. Harmon; 204–208.

2.3.3 Slavery and Social Relations in the Roman Empire

The institution of slavery forms one of the most important historical realities underlying the letter to Philemon. Slavery was deeply embedded within Roman society and affected virtually every aspect of economic, social, and domestic life. Estimates suggest that a substantial percentage of the population within major urban centres consisted of slaves who performed a wide variety of functions ranging from domestic service to skilled professional labour.³⁹

Unlike modern race-based slavery, Roman slavery was not primarily determined by ethnicity. Individuals could become slaves through warfare, debt, piracy, abandonment, or birth into slave households. Nevertheless, Roman slavery remained a system characterized by significant inequality, limited personal freedom, and the concentration of power in the hands of slave owners.⁴⁰

Within this social framework, masters possessed extensive authority over their slaves. Although legal protections existed in certain circumstances, the balance of power remained overwhelmingly in favour of the owner. Consequently, any conflict involving a slave carried serious implications for household order, economic interests, and social reputation.

The relationship between slavery and honour was particularly significant in the Roman world. A slave who absconded, disobeyed instructions, or caused financial loss could bring embarrassment upon the household and challenge the authority of the master.⁴¹ For this reason, conflicts involving slaves often extended beyond personal grievances and became matters of public concern. Understanding these dynamics helps explain why Paul's appeal required both sensitivity and wisdom.

Recent scholars have argued that Philemon should not be interpreted merely as a discussion about slavery but as a reflection on transformed relationships within the Christian community.⁴² While

³⁹ Kyle Harper, *Slavery in the Late Roman World, AD 275–425* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 41–49.

⁴⁰ Craig S. Keener, *Christobiography and the New Testament World* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 224–230.

⁴¹ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 127–133.

⁴² Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 298–302.

Paul does not directly attack the institution of slavery in this letter, he introduces principles that fundamentally challenge the assumptions upon which social hierarchy was constructed. By encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother, Paul redefines their relationship according to Christian identity rather than social status.

This development is significant for understanding conflict resolution within the letter. The conflict is addressed not through legal rights or social privilege but through reconciliation grounded in shared faith. Paul's approach demonstrates how the gospel creates new possibilities for relationship restoration even within structures characterized by inequality and division.

2.4 Literary Features of Philemon 1:8–21

The interpretation of Philemon 1:8–21 requires careful attention to the literary features of the passage. Although the Epistle to Philemon is the shortest of Paul's letters, it is widely regarded as one of the most carefully constructed pieces of correspondence in the New Testament. Scholars have increasingly recognized that the effectiveness of Paul's appeal lies not only in its theological content but also in its literary design. The arrangement of ideas, characterization of key figures, and development of major themes work together to support the process of reconciliation and conflict resolution. Consequently, understanding the literary dimensions of the text provides valuable insight into how Paul sought to persuade Philemon to receive Onesimus and restore their broken relationship.

2.4.1 Genre and Structure of Philemon 1:8–21

The Epistle to Philemon is generally classified as a personal letter within the broader tradition of Greco-Roman epistolary literature. However, contemporary scholarship suggests that the letter combines several literary forms, including elements of recommendation, mediation, friendship correspondence, and pastoral instruction.⁴³ This combination makes the letter unique among Pauline writings and contributes to its enduring significance for studies of reconciliation and conflict management.

⁴³ Richard N. Longenecker; 23–31

Within the overall structure of the epistle, verses 8–21 constitute the central body of Paul's appeal and serve as the literary climax of the letter. Most scholars identify this section as the point at which Paul directly addresses the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus.⁴⁴ The preceding verses establish rapport and affirm Philemon's Christian character, while the concluding verses express confidence in his response. Consequently, verses 8–21 function as the heart of the narrative and contain the primary arguments supporting reconciliation.

Recent literary studies observe that the structure of the passage follows a deliberate progression. Paul begins by acknowledging his authority, then chooses to appeal rather than command. He introduces Onesimus in a positive light, emphasizes the transformation that has occurred in his life, and finally presents a request for restored fellowship.⁴⁵ This movement from authority to appeal, from conflict to reconciliation, and from separation to restored relationship creates a coherent literary flow that supports the overall purpose of the letter.

The organization of the passage demonstrates Paul's sensitivity to the emotional and relational dimensions of conflict. Rather than confronting Philemon abruptly, he gradually guides him toward a new perspective on Onesimus. This literary strategy reflects an understanding that lasting reconciliation often requires changes in perception before changes in behaviour can occur.

2.4.2 Characterization in Philemon 1:8–21

Characterization plays a significant role in the development of the narrative. Through carefully chosen language and descriptions, Paul presents himself, Philemon, and Onesimus in ways that advance his appeal for reconciliation.

Philemon is portrayed as a faithful Christian leader whose love and generosity have positively influenced the church. Earlier in the letter, Paul commends him for refreshing the hearts of believers and for his commitment to the Christian community.⁴⁶ This characterization is important because it establishes a moral framework within which the appeal is made. By reminding Philemon

⁴⁴ Scot McKnight; 61–67.

⁴⁵ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians and Philemon: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 211–216.

⁴⁶ Nijay K. Gupta; 211–216.

of his demonstrated Christian virtues, Paul encourages him to act consistently with the values he already professes.

Onesimus undergoes the most dramatic literary transformation within the narrative. At the beginning of the conflict, he is associated with estrangement and broken relationships. However, as the letter progresses, Paul presents him as a changed individual whose identity has been transformed through faith in Christ. Recent scholars note that Paul intentionally shifts attention away from Onesimus' past actions and toward his present status as a fellow believer.⁴⁷ This literary redefinition encourages Philemon to evaluate Onesimus according to Christian identity rather than social position.

Paul himself emerges as a mediator who combines authority, compassion, and personal involvement. Rather than remaining distant from the conflict, he identifies closely with both parties and assumes responsibility for facilitating reconciliation. Scholars observe that Paul's self-presentation is carefully crafted to establish credibility and demonstrate his commitment to the wellbeing of both Philemon and Onesimus.⁴⁸ Through this portrayal, the letter presents a model of leadership that seeks restoration rather than domination.

The interaction among these three characters creates the narrative tension that drives the passage. Their relationships illustrate the challenges of reconciliation while simultaneously demonstrating the possibility of restored fellowship through Christian faith.

2.4.3 Major Literary Themes in Philemon 1:8–21

Several interrelated themes emerge throughout the passage and contribute to its message concerning conflict resolution.

The first and most prominent theme is reconciliation. The entire section is structured around the restoration of a damaged relationship. Rather than focusing on blame or punishment, Paul directs

⁴⁷ Douglas J. Moo; 389–392.

⁴⁸ Matthew S. Harmon; 205–210.

attention toward healing and renewed fellowship. Recent scholarship consistently identifies reconciliation as the central theme of the letter and the primary objective of Paul's appeal.⁴⁹

Closely connected to reconciliation is the theme of transformation. Onesimus is presented as someone whose life has been fundamentally changed. This transformation serves as the basis for Paul's request that Philemon view him differently. The narrative suggests that genuine reconciliation becomes possible when individuals are willing to recognize and respond to evidence of personal change.

A third theme is Christian fellowship. Throughout the passage, Paul emphasizes the shared identity of believers within the community of faith. The language of partnership, brotherhood, and mutual participation reflects a vision of relationships grounded in Christ rather than social distinctions.⁵⁰ This theme challenges conventional assumptions about status and power while promoting unity within the church.

Another important theme is voluntary obedience. Although Paul possesses the authority to issue commands, he deliberately appeals to Philemon's willingness to act out of love. Scholars argue that this emphasis reflects Paul's conviction that authentic Christian obedience arises from transformed hearts rather than external compulsion.⁵¹ Consequently, reconciliation is presented not as a forced outcome but as a voluntary response to the demands of Christian faith.

The passage also develops the theme of restorative justice. Unlike approaches that focus exclusively on punishment or compensation, Paul's appeal seeks to restore relationships while acknowledging the reality of past wrongdoing. This balance between accountability and grace contributes significantly to the letter's enduring relevance for contemporary discussions of conflict resolution.

2.4.4 Literary Significance for Conflict Resolution

⁴⁹ Michael F. Bird, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 768–772.

⁵⁰ Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 301–305.

⁵¹ Lynn H. Cohick, *The Letter to the Ephesians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 314–317.

The literary features of Philemon 1:8–21 are not merely decorative elements of the text; they function strategically to facilitate reconciliation. The structure of the passage, the portrayal of the characters, and the development of key themes all work together to create a persuasive narrative that encourages restoration.

Recent scholars have noted that Paul's literary strategy reflects a sophisticated understanding of human relationships.⁵² Rather than attacking Philemon's position or minimizing the seriousness of the conflict, Paul reshapes the narrative through which the conflict is understood. By emphasizing transformation, fellowship, and shared identity in Christ, he creates a new framework within which reconciliation becomes possible.

The literary artistry of the passage therefore serves a practical purpose. It demonstrates how language, narrative, and characterization can be employed to promote healing and restore broken relationships. In this respect, Philemon 1:8–21 offers not only theological insight but also a literary model for addressing conflict within Christian communities.

2.5 Rhetorical Features of Philemon 1:8–21

The effectiveness of Paul's appeal in Philemon 1:8–21 cannot be fully understood without examining the rhetorical strategies that shape the passage. Although the letter is brief, it demonstrates remarkable persuasive skill. Rather than issuing a direct command, Paul carefully constructs an argument designed to influence Philemon's attitudes, emotions, and actions. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that the rhetorical dimension of the letter is central to understanding both its message and its approach to conflict resolution.⁵³

Rhetoric in the ancient world was concerned with persuasion. It involved the strategic use of language to influence audiences and encourage particular responses. While Paul adapted certain rhetorical conventions familiar within Greco-Roman society, he employed them in ways that reflected Christian values and theological convictions. In Philemon 1:8–21, rhetorical techniques are not used merely to win an argument but to restore a broken relationship and strengthen the unity of the Christian community.

⁵² Richard N. Longenecker; 162–168.

⁵³ Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, eds., *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric: Theory and Practice in the Hellenistic Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 115–122.

2.5.1 Authority and Persuasion

One of the most striking rhetorical features of the passage is Paul's deliberate choice to appeal rather than command. In verse 8, Paul acknowledges that he possesses sufficient authority in Christ to instruct Philemon concerning the appropriate course of action. However, instead of exercising this authority directly, he chooses to make his request on the basis of love.⁵⁴

This rhetorical move is significant because it establishes the tone of the entire appeal. By refraining from coercion, Paul creates space for Philemon to respond voluntarily. Scholars observe that the effectiveness of this strategy lies in its ability to preserve Philemon's dignity while simultaneously encouraging him toward the desired outcome.⁵⁵ Rather than compelling obedience through power, Paul invites participation through persuasion.

Recent studies suggest that Paul's approach reflects a broader understanding of Christian leadership. Leadership within the early church was not intended to be authoritarian but relational and transformative.⁵⁶ Consequently, Paul's rhetorical strategy demonstrates how authority can be exercised responsibly in situations involving conflict and reconciliation. His appeal seeks not simply compliance but genuine commitment to the principles of Christian fellowship.

Moreover, Paul's decision to appeal from a position of humility enhances his credibility. By referring to himself as an elderly prisoner for Christ, he presents himself not as a powerful authority figure but as one who has sacrificed greatly for the gospel. This self-presentation strengthens the moral force of his request and increases the likelihood of a positive response.

2.5.2 Mediation as a Rhetorical Strategy

A second major rhetorical feature of the passage is Paul's role as mediator. Mediation was a recognized method of conflict resolution in both Jewish and Greco-Roman societies, and Paul

⁵⁴ Richard N. Longenecker; 96–101.

⁵⁵ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 81–86.

⁵⁶ Michael F. Bird, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 770–772.

employs this practice effectively in his efforts to restore the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.⁵⁷

Throughout the passage, Paul positions himself between the two parties and seeks to facilitate reconciliation. He neither ignores the conflict nor imposes a unilateral solution. Instead, he advocates on behalf of Onesimus while simultaneously respecting Philemon's position and concerns. This balanced approach reflects the essential characteristics of effective mediation.

Scholars have noted that Paul's mediation extends beyond conventional social practices because it is grounded in theological conviction.⁵⁸ His concern is not merely to settle a disagreement but to restore fellowship within the body of Christ. Consequently, reconciliation is presented as both a relational and spiritual necessity.

An important aspect of Paul's mediation involves personal identification with Onesimus. He describes Onesimus as his own child and even suggests that Philemon should receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself. Through this rhetorical move, Paul strengthens the connection between the parties and encourages Philemon to reconsider his perception of Onesimus. The strategy effectively bridges the gap created by the conflict and promotes the possibility of restored trust.

2.5.3 Kinship Language and Christian Identity

Another significant rhetorical feature of Philemon 1:8–21 is the use of kinship language. Throughout the letter, Paul employs familial terminology that redefines relationships within the Christian community. Such language plays a crucial role in his attempt to transform the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

In the ancient world, family relationships were among the strongest social bonds known to society. By describing believers as brothers and sisters in Christ, early Christians created a new framework

⁵⁷ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians and Philemon: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 223–228.

⁵⁸ Matthew S. Harmon, *The Servant of the Lord and His Servant People* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 208–214.

for understanding identity and belonging.⁵⁹ Within this framework, spiritual relationships transcended traditional distinctions based on ethnicity, social status, or economic position.

Paul's description of Onesimus as a beloved brother represents a deliberate rhetorical strategy. Rather than allowing Philemon to view Onesimus solely through the lens of social hierarchy, Paul encourages him to recognize their shared identity in Christ. Recent scholarship emphasizes that this redefinition of identity lies at the heart of Paul's appeal.⁶⁰

The rhetorical force of kinship language emerges from its ability to reshape perceptions. Conflict often persists because individuals remain trapped within old narratives and assumptions. By introducing a new relational framework grounded in Christian fellowship, Paul creates conditions that make reconciliation both possible and desirable.

2.5.4 Emotional Appeals in the Letter

The appeal to emotion constitutes another important dimension of Paul's rhetorical approach. Ancient rhetoricians recognized that effective persuasion involved not only logical argumentation but also engagement with the emotions of the audience. In Philemon 1:8–21, Paul carefully employs emotional language to strengthen his appeal without becoming manipulative.⁶¹

One example is his reference to Onesimus as his own child. This description communicates affection, care, and personal investment. Similarly, Paul's references to his imprisonment and advancing age evoke sympathy and remind Philemon of the sacrifices associated with Paul's ministry.

Recent scholars argue that emotional appeals in the letter serve a relational rather than merely persuasive function.⁶² They help create empathy, foster understanding, and encourage compassionate responses. Rather than relying solely on authority or logical reasoning, Paul seeks to engage the whole person, including the moral and emotional dimensions of decision-making.

⁵⁹ Nijay K. Gupta, *Paul and the Language of Faith* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2020), 185–189.

⁶⁰ Douglas J. Moo; 394–399.

⁶¹ Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 303–306.

⁶² Richard N. Longenecker; 149–156.

The effectiveness of this strategy is enhanced by Paul's established relationship with Philemon. Because the appeal emerges within a context of mutual respect and shared faith, emotional language contributes positively to the process of reconciliation rather than appearing coercive.

2.5.5 Theological Appeals and Gospel-Centred Persuasion

The most important rhetorical feature of Philemon 1:8–21 is Paul's use of theological reasoning. While social conventions, personal relationships, and emotional considerations all contribute to the appeal, the ultimate foundation of Paul's argument is theological.⁶³

Paul consistently frames the conflict within the larger narrative of God's redemptive work in Christ. Onesimus is no longer presented merely as a servant but as a brother in the Lord. Likewise, Philemon is encouraged to respond in a manner consistent with his identity as a follower of Christ. The appeal therefore moves beyond social obligation and enters the realm of spiritual responsibility.

Recent scholarship emphasizes that Paul's theology of reconciliation shapes every aspect of the letter.⁶⁴ The gospel functions not simply as a set of beliefs but as a transformative reality capable of reshaping relationships. Because believers have experienced God's grace, they are called to extend grace to others. Because they have been reconciled to God, they are expected to pursue reconciliation with one another.

This theological foundation distinguishes Paul's approach from many forms of conflict resolution found in the ancient world. While mediation, persuasion, and honour restoration were common social practices, Paul's appeal ultimately rests upon the new relationships created through Christ. The rhetoric of the letter therefore serves the broader purpose of embodying the gospel within a concrete interpersonal conflict.

2.5.6 Significance of the Rhetorical Features for Conflict Resolution

The rhetorical features examined above demonstrate that Paul's approach to conflict resolution was neither accidental nor simplistic. Authority, mediation, kinship language, emotional appeals, and

⁶³ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon*, 91–96.

⁶⁴ Michael J. Gorman; 211–215.

theological reasoning function together as complementary elements within a carefully constructed strategy of reconciliation.

Rather than seeking victory over an opponent, Paul seeks restoration between members of the Christian community. His rhetoric is therefore fundamentally relational and redemptive. Scholars increasingly recognize that the persuasive power of the letter derives from its integration of social wisdom and theological conviction.⁶⁵

The passage consequently provides an important model for understanding conflict resolution within Christian contexts. By combining persuasion with compassion, authority with humility, and mediation with theological reflection, Paul demonstrates a holistic approach to reconciliation that remains relevant for contemporary discussions of conflict management and church leadership.

2.6 How Conflict Was Resolved in Philemon 1:8–21

The question of how conflict was resolved in Philemon 1:8–21 lies at the centre of this study. While the preceding sections have examined the historical setting, literary structure, and rhetorical features of the passage, this section synthesizes these findings in order to understand the actual process through which reconciliation was pursued. Contemporary scholarship generally agrees that the letter represents one of the clearest examples of conflict resolution in the New Testament.⁶⁶ More importantly, it provides insight into how Christian principles were applied within a complex interpersonal dispute involving social inequality, damaged relationships, and competing expectations.

The conflict between Philemon and Onesimus appears to have arisen from a breakdown in their relationship, although the precise circumstances remain uncertain. Whether Onesimus had fled from his master, failed in his responsibilities, or become involved in some form of dispute, the relationship had clearly deteriorated to the point where intervention became necessary.⁶⁷ The existence of the letter itself indicates that reconciliation could not be assumed and required deliberate action. Paul's involvement therefore became a crucial factor in the process of restoring the relationship.

⁶⁵ Stanley E. Porter and Bryan R. Dyer, *Paul and Ancient Rhetoric*, 128–132.

⁶⁶ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 97–103.

⁶⁷ Douglas J. Moo; 382–387.

One of the first steps in the resolution of the conflict was the recognition of the problem rather than its avoidance. Conflict resolution scholars frequently emphasize that genuine reconciliation begins with acknowledging the existence of broken relationships.⁶⁸ Paul does not ignore the tension between Philemon and Onesimus, nor does he minimize its significance. Instead, he addresses the issue directly while creating an atmosphere that makes reconciliation possible. By bringing the matter into the open, he initiates a process aimed at healing rather than further division.

A second element in the resolution process was the role of mediation. Throughout the letter, Paul functions as an intermediary between the two parties. In both Jewish and Greco-Roman contexts, mediators often assisted disputing individuals by facilitating communication and encouraging mutual understanding.⁶⁹ However, Paul's mediation differs from many contemporary models because it is grounded in Christian theology. His objective is not merely to negotiate a settlement but to restore fellowship between believers.

The effectiveness of Paul's mediation is evident in the manner in which he identifies with both parties. He acknowledges Philemon's position and rights while simultaneously advocating for Onesimus. Rather than choosing sides, Paul seeks a solution that promotes restoration and preserves the dignity of all involved. Recent scholars observe that this balanced approach reflects a mature understanding of reconciliation and contributes significantly to the persuasive force of the letter.⁷⁰

Another important stage in the resolution process involved the transformation of perceptions. Conflicts often persist because individuals continue to view one another through the lens of past grievances. Paul therefore seeks to reshape Philemon's understanding of Onesimus. Instead of emphasizing his previous status or failures, Paul highlights his conversion, spiritual growth, and new identity in Christ.⁷¹

⁶⁸ John Paul Lederach, *Reconcile: Conflict Transformation for Ordinary Christians* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2018), 31–37.

⁶⁹ David A. deSilva, *Honor, Patronage, Kinship and Purity: Unlocking New Testament Culture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2022), 133–137.

⁷⁰ Richard N. Longenecker, *The Epistle to Philemon* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 146–152.

⁷¹ Nijay K. Gupta, *Reading Philippians and Philemon: A Literary and Theological Commentary* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2018), 226–231.

This transformation of perspective is one of the most significant aspects of the letter. By presenting Onesimus as a beloved brother rather than merely a servant, Paul encourages Philemon to evaluate the relationship according to Christian values rather than social conventions. Scholars frequently identify this redefinition of identity as a turning point in the reconciliation process.⁷² It creates a new relational framework within which forgiveness and restoration become possible.

Closely connected to this shift in perception is Paul's appeal for voluntary rather than forced reconciliation. Although Paul possesses apostolic authority, he intentionally avoids coercion. Instead, he appeals to Philemon's love, faith, and commitment to the gospel.⁷³ This approach reflects an important principle of Christian conflict resolution: authentic reconciliation cannot be imposed from outside but must be embraced willingly by those involved.

The emphasis on voluntary action also reveals Paul's confidence in the transformative power of the gospel. He assumes that Christian faith should influence behaviour and relationships. Consequently, his appeal is not based primarily on social pressure or legal obligation but on the expectation that Philemon's response will reflect his identity as a follower of Christ. Recent studies suggest that this reliance upon internal transformation distinguishes Paul's approach from many ancient conflict-resolution practices that depended more heavily upon authority and social control.⁷⁴

Forgiveness constitutes another crucial component of the reconciliation process reflected in the passage. While the letter does not explicitly describe Philemon's response, Paul's request clearly implies the need for forgiveness and acceptance. Forgiveness in this context does not mean ignoring wrongdoing or denying the reality of past injuries. Rather, it involves choosing restoration over retaliation and fellowship over estrangement.⁷⁵

⁷² Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 213–217.

⁷³ Matthew S. Harmon, *The Servant of the Lord and His Servant People* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2021), 209–214.

⁷⁴ Michael F. Bird, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 771–773.

⁷⁵ Craig S. Keener, *The Mind of the Spirit: Paul's Approach to Transformed Thinking* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 304–308.

The significance of forgiveness is further reinforced by Paul's willingness to assume responsibility for any financial loss that may have occurred. His offer to repay any debt associated with Onesimus demonstrates a practical commitment to reconciliation and removes potential barriers that could hinder restoration.⁷⁶ Scholars often view this gesture as a powerful example of sacrificial mediation because it mirrors the broader Christian understanding of reconciliation through self-giving love.

Another key aspect of the conflict-resolution process is the restoration of community. The dispute between Philemon and Onesimus was not purely a private matter. Since the letter was addressed to members of the house church, the outcome carried implications for the wider Christian community.⁷⁷ Reconciliation therefore served not only the interests of the individuals involved but also the unity and witness of the church.

This communal dimension reflects a broader pattern within early Christianity. Relationships among believers were understood to affect the wellbeing of the entire body of Christ. Consequently, unresolved conflicts threatened communal harmony, while restored relationships strengthened fellowship and demonstrated the practical implications of the gospel. Paul's appeal recognizes this reality and seeks a resolution that benefits both the individuals involved and the broader faith community.

Ultimately, the resolution proposed in Philemon 1:8–21 is grounded in a theology of reconciliation. At every stage of the process, Paul frames the conflict within the context of God's reconciling work in Christ. Onesimus is no longer viewed merely according to social status, and Philemon is encouraged to respond not according to cultural expectations but according to gospel values.⁷⁸ The relationship is redefined through a shared identity in Christ that transcends existing divisions and creates the possibility of genuine fellowship.

The literature reviewed therefore indicates that conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21 occurred through a combination of mediation, transformed perception, voluntary forgiveness, relational restoration, and theological reflection. Rather than pursuing punishment or asserting social rights,

⁷⁶ Richard N. Longenecker; 153–158.

⁷⁷ Scot McKnight, *The Letter to Philemon*, 104–108.

⁷⁸ Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ*, 217–220.

Paul sought to restore a broken relationship through the application of Christian principles. His approach demonstrates that reconciliation involves more than resolving disagreements; it requires the transformation of relationships and the restoration of community. This model of conflict resolution remains one of the most significant contributions of the Epistle to Philemon and continues to offer valuable insights for contemporary Christian leadership and ministry.

2.7 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the background of conflict resolution in the first-century world and explored the historical, literary, and rhetorical features of Philemon 1:8–21. The review of literature has demonstrated that Paul's approach to conflict resolution was deeply rooted in the social realities of his time while simultaneously shaped by the transformative values of the gospel. Through mediation, persuasion, forgiveness, and the redefinition of relationships in Christ, Paul sought to restore fellowship between Philemon and Onesimus. The chapter has further shown that reconciliation in Philemon was not merely the resolution of a dispute but the restoration of a Christian relationship within the faith community. These insights provide the contextual and theoretical foundation for the exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21 in the following chapter.

CHAPTER THREE

EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS OF PHILEMON 1:8–21

3.1 Introduction

Having examined the historical, social, literary, and rhetorical contexts of Philemon in the preceding chapter, attention now shifts to the Distantiation Pole of the Tripolar Exegetical Model. Distantiation focuses on the text itself as an independent literary and theological entity. The purpose is to allow the text to speak on its own terms through a close examination of its language, structure, argument, and theological message. This approach avoids merely repeating historical background and instead seeks to uncover the meaning embedded within the text.⁷⁹

Philemon 1:8–21 constitutes the central section of the letter and contains Paul's appeal concerning Onesimus. Within these verses, Paul carefully develops a persuasive argument aimed at restoring a fractured relationship. The passage reveals not only Paul's pastoral wisdom but also his theological understanding of reconciliation, forgiveness, and Christian fellowship. Rather than relying on authority, Paul appeals to transformed relationships grounded in Christ. Consequently, this section provides one of the clearest New Testament models of conflict resolution.

The present chapter undertakes a detailed exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21. Particular attention is given to the literary movement of the text, key Greek expressions, theological motifs, and the internal logic of Paul's argument. The goal is to establish the original meaning of the passage before considering its contemporary significance in subsequent chapters.

3.2 Delimitation and Literary Structure of Philemon 1:8–21

Philemon 1:8–21 forms a self-contained unit within the letter. The section begins with Paul's declaration that although he possesses authority to command, he prefers to appeal on the basis of love (vv. 8–9). It concludes with Paul's confidence that Philemon will respond positively to his request (v. 21). The entire passage revolves around a single concern: the reconciliation of Philemon and Onesimus within the framework of Christian fellowship.

The literary movement of the passage may be outlined as follows:

⁷⁹ Gordon D. Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 27–31.

Text	Main Theme
vv. 8–9	Appeal based on love rather than authority
vv. 10–11	Introduction of Onesimus as a transformed person
vv. 12–14	Paul's sacrificial decision to return Onesimus
vv. 15–16	Reinterpretation of separation through divine providence
v. 17	Appeal based on Christian partnership
vv. 18–19	Assumption of responsibility and debt
v. 20	Anticipated benefit of reconciliation
v. 21	Confidence in Philemon's response

This progression demonstrates a carefully crafted argument that moves from persuasion to restoration. Each section contributes to Paul's overall objective of securing reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus.

3.3 Verse by verse Analysis

3.3.1 Philemon 1:8–9: Love as the Basis for Reconciliation

Paul begins the main body of his appeal with a carefully balanced statement:

"Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to command you to do your duty, yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love" (Philemon. 8–9).ESV

These verses establish the foundation upon which the entire argument of the letter rests. Before addressing the issue of Onesimus directly, Paul first clarifies the manner in which he intends to approach Philemon. The apostle consciously chooses persuasion over command and love over authority. This opening strategy is significant because it introduces the principles that will govern the reconciliation process throughout the passage.

Paul begins by acknowledging the authority that he possesses. The noun *παρρησία* (boldness, confidence, freedom of speech) conveys the idea of speaking openly and authoritatively. In the present context, the term points to Paul's apostolic authority and his legitimate right to direct Philemon's actions. Fitzmyer argues that *παρρησία* reflects the confidence that derives from Paul's

commission as an apostle of Christ, enabling him to issue instructions with authority when circumstances require it.⁸⁰ Paul therefore makes it clear that he is not lacking authority, nor is he uncertain about what Philemon ought to do.

However, the significance of the verse lies not in Paul's authority but in his decision not to exercise it. Instead of commanding, he chooses to appeal. The verb παρακαλῶ (*I appeal, urge, encourage*) introduces a different mode of communication. Unlike a command, an appeal invites a response rather than demanding one. Moo observes that Paul's use of παρακαλῶ reveals his desire to secure a willing and heartfelt response rather than mere external compliance.⁸¹ In other words, Paul is concerned not only with the outcome but also with the manner in which that outcome is achieved.

The contrast between commanding and appealing reveals Paul's understanding of Christian relationships. Although hierarchical structures existed within the early church, Paul does not view authority as the primary means of resolving interpersonal conflict. Rather, he believes that reconciliation is most effective when individuals act from conviction and love. This explains why the apostle places authority in the background and brings love to the forefront of the discussion.

The phrase "on the basis of love" introduces the central motivation for the appeal. The term ἀγάπη (*love*) occupies a foundational place in Pauline theology and refers to self-giving concern for the well-being of others. In this context, Paul is not appealing to sentimentality or emotional affection. Instead, he appeals to the Christian love that arises from one's relationship with Christ and is expressed through concern for fellow believers. Barth and Blanke note that Paul's appeal to love shifts the discussion from legal obligation to covenantal relationship, where actions are motivated by Christian commitment rather than external pressure.⁸²

Paul further strengthens his appeal by identifying himself as "an old man and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus." The description serves several rhetorical purposes. First, it reminds Philemon of Paul's longstanding relationship with him. Second, it highlights the sacrifices Paul has made in

⁸⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 109.

⁸¹ Douglas J. Moo; 386.

⁸² Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 339.

service to the gospel. Third, it adds moral weight to the appeal without becoming coercive. Wright suggests that Paul's reference to imprisonment subtly reinforces the seriousness of the request while simultaneously demonstrating the authenticity of his commitment to Christ.⁸³

Significantly, Paul does not use his age or imprisonment to manipulate Philemon emotionally. Instead, these references function as part of his personal testimony. The apostle presents himself as one who has suffered for the gospel and who therefore understands the demands of Christian discipleship. His appeal emerges from experience rather than mere theory.

From an exegetical perspective, verses 8–9 reveal an important theological principle concerning conflict resolution. Paul demonstrates that genuine reconciliation cannot be forced upon individuals. While authority may compel outward obedience, it cannot create inward transformation. By choosing persuasion over command, Paul recognizes that lasting reconciliation must arise from a willing heart shaped by Christian love.

The literary significance of these verses should also be noted. They establish the tone for everything that follows in the letter. Every subsequent argument concerning Onesimus is framed by the principle introduced here. Paul is not attempting to win a legal case or secure a favourable verdict. Rather, he seeks the restoration of relationships within the Christian community. The appeal to love therefore becomes the interpretive lens through which the remainder of the passage should be understood.

Consequently, Philemon 1:8–9 serves as more than a simple introduction. It functions as a theological statement about the nature of Christian leadership and reconciliation. Paul's example demonstrates that spiritual authority is exercised most effectively when it is guided by love and directed toward the restoration of relationships. The apostle's decision to appeal rather than command reflects his conviction that Christian obedience is most meaningful when it is freely offered in response to God's transforming grace.

3.3.2 Philemon 1:10–11: Onesimus and the Reality of Transformation

Having established love as the basis of his appeal, Paul now introduces the individual who lies at the centre of the conflict:

⁸³ N. T. Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters* (London: SPCK, 2004), 177

"I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me" (Philemon. 10–11). ESV

These verses mark a significant transition in Paul's argument. Up to this point, the apostle has focused on the manner of his appeal. He now shifts attention to Onesimus himself. Significantly, Paul introduces Onesimus not as a slave, a runaway, or an offender, but as a person whose life has been transformed through the gospel. The way Paul presents Onesimus reveals that reconciliation must begin with a fresh understanding of human identity.

Paul refers to Onesimus as "my child." The Greek term τέκνον (*child, son*) is commonly used by Paul to describe spiritual relationships formed through faith. The expression does not imply biological kinship but indicates that Onesimus came to faith under Paul's ministry. Fitzmyer observes that the term reflects the intimate bond created through spiritual nurture and discipleship.⁸⁴ By using such language, Paul immediately establishes Onesimus as a member of God's family rather than merely a participant in a social dispute.

This introduction is rhetorically significant. Rather than beginning with Onesimus' past actions, Paul begins with his new identity. The apostle intentionally directs Philemon's attention away from what Onesimus has done and toward what God has done in Onesimus' life. Such a perspective reflects a fundamental aspect of Pauline theology: believers are not ultimately defined by their past but by their relationship with Christ.

Paul further explains that Onesimus became his spiritual child "during my imprisonment." This detail reinforces the authenticity of Onesimus' conversion. The conversion did not occur under favourable circumstances but within the context of Paul's suffering and confinement. As Witherington notes, the mention of imprisonment highlights the power of the gospel to transform lives even in the most restrictive situations.⁸⁵ The prison that limited Paul's physical movement could not limit the transformative work of God.

⁸⁴ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 111.

⁸⁵ Ben Witherington III, *The Letters to Philemon, the Colossians, and the Ephesians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on the Captivity Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 31.

The apostle then employs a striking wordplay involving Onesimus' name:

"Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me."

The name Onesimus literally means "useful" or "beneficial." Paul deliberately exploits this meaning to emphasize the transformation that has taken place. The contrast between "formerly" and "now" creates a clear distinction between Onesimus' past and present condition.

The adjective translated as "useless" points to a previous state in which Onesimus failed to fulfil the purpose expected of him. Whether Paul is referring specifically to his departure from Philemon or more broadly to his life before conversion, the emphasis remains on a condition that has now changed. The gospel has transformed what was once unproductive into something beneficial.

Moo argues that the wordplay serves a theological purpose beyond mere literary creativity.⁸⁶ It illustrates the practical effects of conversion in a person's life. The transformation experienced by Onesimus is not abstract or merely spiritual; it has tangible consequences that affect relationships and conduct. Thus, Paul's appeal rests upon evidence of genuine change.

The phrase "useful both to you and to me" is equally important. Paul does not claim Onesimus exclusively for himself. Instead, he emphasizes that the transformed Onesimus is valuable to both parties. This observation subtly prepares the way for reconciliation. If Onesimus has become beneficial to Paul, then Philemon should also be able to recognize his renewed value.

From a theological perspective, these verses highlight the transformative power of grace. Paul's argument assumes that conversion produces real change in human character. The apostle does not deny Onesimus' past failures, nor does he pretend that previous wrongs never occurred. Instead, he insists that God's work in Onesimus' life must be taken seriously when evaluating the present situation.

The passage therefore challenges approaches to conflict that permanently define individuals by their mistakes. According to Paul, Christian reconciliation requires recognition of God's redemptive activity in people's lives. Onesimus may have had a troubled past, but his present identity is determined by the transforming work of Christ.

⁸⁶ Douglas J. Moo; 388.

Furthermore, these verses reveal an important aspect of Christian anthropology. Human beings are not static creatures imprisoned by former actions. Through the gospel, individuals can experience genuine renewal and become instruments of blessing within the community of faith. McKnight notes that Paul's presentation of Onesimus reflects his broader conviction that the gospel creates new people capable of participating meaningfully in God's mission.⁸⁷

The literary function of verses 10–11 within the passage is therefore clear. Before requesting forgiveness or restoration, Paul establishes the reality of Onesimus' transformation. The appeal that follows is built upon this foundation. Philemon is being asked to receive not merely the Onesimus who left, but the Onesimus who has been changed by the grace of God.

Consequently, these verses contribute significantly to Paul's overall argument for reconciliation. By presenting Onesimus as a transformed believer and spiritual family member, Paul creates a new framework within which the conflict must be understood. The issue is no longer simply a matter of social obligation or personal grievance; it has become a matter of responding appropriately to God's transforming work in the life of a fellow Christian.

3.3.3 Philemon 1:12–14: Voluntary Goodness and the Cost of Reconciliation

Paul continues his appeal by writing:

"I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced" (Philemon. 12–14).

These verses deepen the emotional and theological dimensions of Paul's appeal. While the previous section emphasized the transformation of Onesimus, the present section highlights the sacrifices required for reconciliation and the importance of voluntary participation in the process.

Paul begins with a striking expression:

"I am sending him, that is, my own heart."

⁸⁷ Scot McKnight; 167.

The phrase "my own heart" translates the Greek expression τὰ ἐμὰ σπλάγχνα (*my own heart, my deepest affection*). In the ancient world, σπλάγχνα referred to the inner organs and metaphorically denoted the seat of deep emotions and compassion. By using this expression, Paul communicates the profound affection he has developed for Onesimus.

Barth and Blanke observe that this description reveals the extraordinary closeness of the relationship between Paul and Onesimus.⁸⁸ The apostle is not returning a casual acquaintance but someone who has become deeply significant to him. The statement therefore highlights the personal cost involved in the decision to send Onesimus back.

Rather than retaining Onesimus for his own benefit, Paul chooses a course of action that prioritizes reconciliation. This decision illustrates a crucial principle within the passage: genuine reconciliation often requires sacrifice. Personal interests must sometimes be surrendered for the sake of restoring damaged relationships.

Paul openly admits that he would have preferred to keep Onesimus with him. The transformed slave had become a valuable companion and helper during his imprisonment. Yet despite this desire, Paul refuses to act independently of Philemon.

The significance of this decision should not be overlooked. Paul could have justified keeping Onesimus by appealing to practical necessity or ministerial convenience. Instead, he deliberately respects the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. Wright argues that Paul's refusal to act unilaterally reflects his commitment to reconciliation that honours all parties involved rather than benefiting only one side.⁸⁹

The heart of the passage appears in verse 14:

"I preferred to do nothing without your consent."

This statement reveals Paul's understanding of Christian ethics. The apostle recognizes that actions possess greater moral value when they arise from willing commitment rather than external pressure. Consequently, he refuses to manipulate circumstances in order to secure the outcome he desires.

⁸⁸ Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 357.

⁸⁹ N. T. Wright; 181.

His reason follows immediately:

"In order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced."

The contrast between voluntary action and compulsion echoes the distinction already introduced in verses 8–9 between appealing and commanding. Throughout the passage, Paul consistently seeks a response that flows from inward conviction rather than external obligation.

This emphasis on voluntary goodness reflects a broader theological principle within Pauline thought. Christian obedience is not intended to be mechanical compliance with external demands. Rather, it is the free and joyful response of individuals whose hearts have been transformed by grace. This shows that Paul understands authentic Christian conduct as behaviour that emerges from an internal commitment to Christ rather than mere submission to authority.

Thus, verses 12–14 move the argument beyond the transformation of Onesimus to address the disposition required of Philemon. Reconciliation requires not only a changed offender but also a willing recipient of restoration. Paul therefore creates the conditions under which genuine reconciliation can occur by encouraging a response grounded in freedom, love, and Christian maturity.

3.3.4 Philemon 1:15–16: Reinterpreting Separation through Divine Providence

Paul now introduces a theological reflection that reframes the entire conflict:

"Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord" (Philemon. 15–16).

These verses represent one of the most significant theological statements in the letter. Paul shifts from describing the practical circumstances of Onesimus' departure to interpreting those circumstances within the framework of divine providence. The separation that caused conflict is now presented as having a purpose beyond human understanding.

The verse begins with the word *τάχα* (*perhaps*). This term introduces a note of humility into Paul's theological interpretation. Although the apostle is confident that God works through human circumstances, he does not claim to possess complete knowledge of divine purposes. As Fitzmyer observes, the use of *τάχα* reflects Paul's pastoral sensitivity and his recognition that human beings

cannot fully comprehend God's ways.⁹⁰ By using such language, Paul avoids imposing a definitive interpretation while still offering a perspective that encourages reconciliation.

The separation is described as having occurred *πρὸς ὥραν* (*for a while, for an hour*). This expression emphasizes the temporary nature of the separation in contrast to the permanence of the restored relationship. Paul is inviting Philemon to view the past not as a permanent rupture but as a temporary interruption that has been redeemed by God's purposes.

The purpose of the separation is stated positively: *ἵνα αὐτὸν ἀπέχῃς* (*so that you might have him back*). The verb *ἀπέχω* (*to have back, to receive fully*) suggests complete restoration. Paul envisions a reconciliation that goes beyond mere tolerance to embrace full acceptance.

The permanence of the restored relationship is emphasized by the phrase *εἰς τὸν αἰῶνα* (*forever, for eternity*). This expression moves the discussion beyond temporal considerations and grounds the reconciliation in eternal realities. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is no longer to be determined by social conventions or temporary circumstances but by the enduring reality of their shared life in Christ.

The most dramatic statement appears in the transition from slave to brother:

"No longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother."

The Greek phrase *οὐκέτι ὡς δοῦλον* (*no longer as a slave*) does not necessarily mean that Onesimus ceases to be a slave in the legal sense. Rather, it indicates that his identity is no longer defined primarily by his social status. Moo notes that Paul is not abolishing the institution of slavery but is redefining the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus on the basis of their shared identity in Christ.⁹¹

The phrase *ὑπὲρ δοῦλον* (*more than a slave*) introduces a comparative relationship. Paul is not merely replacing one identity with another; he is adding a new dimension that transcends the old. The relationship has been transformed so fundamentally that the former categories are no longer adequate to describe it.

⁹⁰ Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 34C (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 116.

⁹¹ Douglas J. Moo; 397.

The designation ἀδελφὸν ἀγαπητόν (*a beloved brother*) carries profound theological weight. Within the Pauline tradition, believers are understood as members of God's family, united through faith in Christ. By applying this designation to Onesimus, Paul insists that Christian fellowship must take precedence over social distinctions. Longenecker argues that this transformation of identity provides the theological foundation for Paul's entire appeal.⁹²

The phrase καὶ ἐν σαρκὶ καὶ ἐν κυρίῳ (*both in the flesh and in the Lord*) further emphasizes the comprehensive nature of the new relationship. Philemon is called to receive Onesimus as a brother both in practical, everyday relationships and in spiritual fellowship. The reconciliation is not merely spiritual but touches every dimension of human interaction.

From an exegetical perspective, these verses introduce a crucial theological principle: God can work through separation and conflict to accomplish redemptive purposes. Onesimus' departure, however difficult, becomes the means through which he encounters Christ and is transformed. Paul invites Philemon to recognize that what appeared to be a loss has become an opportunity for something greater.

The passage also reveals Paul's understanding of Christian identity as transcending social categories. While the structures of Roman society remained intact, the community of faith was called to embody a new form of relationship grounded in Christ. This theological vision provides the basis for reconciliation even in situations marked by inequality and injustice.

Furthermore, verses 15–16 demonstrate Paul's pastoral skill in framing the conflict within a theological narrative. Rather than dwelling on past wrongs, he redirects attention to future possibilities. The separation is not minimized but is reinterpreted as part of God's larger purposes. This reframing creates space for forgiveness and restoration by shifting focus from blame to redemption.

3.3.5 Philemon 1:17: Partnership in the Gospel

Paul now introduces the concept of partnership as the basis for his request:

"So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me" (Philemon. 17).

⁹² Richard N. Longenecker; 130.

This verse functions as the logical climax of Paul's appeal. Having established love as the basis of his approach, transformed Onesimus as the subject of his request, and divine providence as the framework for interpretation, Paul now calls upon Philemon to act consistently with their shared relationship in Christ.

The verse begins with the conditional phrase εἰ οὖν (*so if, therefore if*). This construction indicates that Paul is drawing a conclusion from what has preceded. The entire argument of the preceding verses leads to this moment of decision.

The key term is κοινῶνός (*partner, sharer, participant*). The word denotes a relationship of shared commitment and mutual participation. Within Pauline usage, κοινῶνία (*partnership, fellowship*) refers to the deep connection that exists among believers through their common life in Christ. By calling Philemon his partner, Paul appeals to a relationship that transcends personal convenience or social obligation.

Scholars have noted that the concept of partnership in Paul's writings carries both relational and practical dimensions. It involves not only shared beliefs but also mutual support, common mission, and practical commitment to one another's welfare. McKnight observes that Paul's use of κοινῶνός evokes the broader understanding of Christian community as a fellowship characterized by mutual obligations and shared purpose.⁹³

The appeal to welcome Onesimus ὡς ἐμέ (*as myself, as me*) is one of the most remarkable statements in the letter. Paul is asking Philemon to receive Onesimus with the same acceptance, respect, and affection that he would extend to the apostle himself. This request effectively places Onesimus on an equal footing with Paul in terms of Philemon's response.

The rhetorical force of this statement is considerable. By identifying Onesimus with himself, Paul challenges Philemon to see beyond social status and personal grievance. Barth and Blanke argue that this identification reflects Paul's understanding of Christian solidarity, where the distinction between believers is transcended by their shared life in Christ.⁹⁴

⁹³ Scot McKnight; 192.

⁹⁴ Markus Barth and Helmut Blanke, *The Letter to Philemon: A New Translation with Notes and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 369.

From a theological perspective, verse 17 grounds the appeal in the reality of Christian fellowship. Reconciliation is not merely a private matter between Philemon and Onesimus but a visible expression of the partnership that exists among believers. By receiving Onesimus as he would receive Paul, Philemon would demonstrate the practical implications of his participation in the Christian community.

The verse also reveals Paul's understanding of Christian identity as fundamentally relational. Believers are not isolated individuals but members of a community bound together by faith, love, and shared commitment to the gospel. This relational understanding shapes the way conflicts are addressed and resolved within the community.

Furthermore, the appeal to partnership creates a context for accountability without coercion. Paul is not threatening Philemon or demanding compliance. Instead, he is inviting him to act in a manner consistent with the relationship they already share. The appeal therefore respects Philemon's freedom while clearly articulating the expectations that accompany Christian fellowship.

3.3.6 Philemon 1:18–19: Assumption of Responsibility and Debt

Paul now makes a dramatic offer that demonstrates his personal commitment to reconciliation:

"If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self" (Philemon. 18–19).

These verses represent Paul's most concrete expression of sacrificial commitment to reconciliation. Rather than leaving the financial and practical consequences of the conflict unresolved, Paul assumes personal responsibility for any loss Philemon may have suffered.

The verse begins with a conditional statement: εἰ δέ τι ἡδίκησέν σε (*if he has wronged you in any way*). The verb ἀδικέω (*to wrong, to do injustice*) suggests that Onesimus may have caused actual harm or financial loss. By using this language, Paul acknowledges the reality that wrongdoing may have occurred. He does not deny the possibility of offence or minimize its significance.

The phrase ἢ ὀφείλει (*or owes you anything*) addresses potential financial obligations. In the context of Roman slavery, a slave who caused damage or incurred debt created legal liability for

the owner. By raising this possibility, Paul demonstrates his awareness of the practical dimensions of the conflict.

Paul's response is both generous and decisive: τοῦτο ἐμοὶ ἐλλόγα (*charge that to my account, put that on my account*). This expression has commercial connotations and suggests that Paul is willing to accept financial responsibility for any debt. The phrase ἐλλογάω (*to charge to one's account*) is rare in the New Testament and emphasizes the legal and financial nature of the commitment.

The personal nature of the offer is reinforced by verse 19:

"I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it."

The reference to writing with his own hand is significant. Paul typically employed an amanuensis for his letters, but here he adds this statement in his own handwriting to give it legal weight. The Greek phrase ἐγὼ Παῦλος (*I, Paul*) emphasizes the personal responsibility Paul is assuming. He is not speaking through an intermediary but is personally guaranteeing the repayment.

The phrase ἀποτίσω (*I will repay, I will pay back*) is a legal and financial term that confirms Paul's commitment to full restitution. He is not making a vague promise but a specific commitment to address any financial loss.

The verse concludes with a rhetorical appeal:

"I say nothing about your owing me even your own self."

This statement introduces a new dimension to the argument. While Paul is willing to assume financial responsibility for Onesimus, he also reminds Philemon of a much greater debt. Philemon owes his salvation—his "own self"—to Paul's ministry. Moo observes that Paul is not attempting to manipulate Philemon through guilt but is pointing to the reality that their relationship exists within a context of mutual obligation and grace.⁹⁵

The exegetical significance of these verses lies in their demonstration of Paul's commitment to practical reconciliation. He does not merely offer theological reflection or emotional appeal; he is willing to sacrifice his own resources to remove barriers to restoration. This willingness to assume responsibility reflects the broader Christian understanding of reconciliation as costly and sacrificial.

⁹⁵ Douglas J. Moo; 403.

Furthermore, these verses reveal Paul's understanding that reconciliation must address tangible consequences. While forgiveness addresses relational forgiveness, practical issues such as financial loss or restitution must also be addressed. Paul's offer demonstrates that genuine reconciliation involves more than words; it requires practical commitment to the well-being of others.

The verses also illustrate the principle of substitution that runs throughout Paul's theology. Just as Christ assumed the debt of human sin, Paul is willing to assume the debt of Onesimus. This parallel is not accidental but reflects Paul's conviction that Christian relationships should be characterized by sacrificial love that mirrors the example of Christ.

3.3.7 Philemon 1:20: Anticipated Benefit of Reconciliation

Paul expresses his expectation for the outcome:

"Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ" (Philemon. 20).

This verse captures the personal and spiritual dimensions of reconciliation. Having offered to assume responsibility for any debt, Paul now appeals to Philemon for a positive response. The verse is characterized by emotional warmth, theological depth, and pastoral sensitivity.

The verse begins with the exclamation *ναί* (*yes, indeed*). This word conveys strong affirmation and urgency. Paul is not merely making a suggestion but expressing a heartfelt desire. The tone suggests confidence that Philemon will respond positively.

The term *ἀδελφέ* (*brother*) reinforces the familial relationship that exists between Paul and Philemon. By using this designation, Paul appeals to the bonds of Christian fellowship that unite them. The relationship is not merely formal or professional; it is a relationship of spiritual kinship.

The key phrase is *ἐγὼ σοῦ ὀναίμην* (*let me have this benefit from you*). The verb *ὀνίνημι* (*to benefit, to gain enjoyment*) is rare in the New Testament and carries a sense of personal satisfaction and spiritual refreshment. Paul is not merely asking for compliance with a rule but for the personal joy that comes from restored relationships.

The phrase *ἐν κυρίῳ* (*in the Lord*) indicates that the benefit is experienced within the context of Christian fellowship. McKnight notes that Paul's use of this expression emphasizes that the

reconciliation is not merely a human arrangement but a spiritual reality that reflects the work of Christ.⁹⁶

Paul continues with the request: ἀνάπαυσόν μου τὰ σπλάγχνα (*refresh my heart*). The verb ἀναπαύω (*to refresh, to give rest*) suggests renewal and restoration. The noun σπλάγχνα (*heart, deep affection*) again refers to the deepest emotions. By using these terms, Paul expresses the profound personal significance of the anticipated reconciliation.

The phrase ἐν Χριστῷ (*in Christ*) grounds the appeal in the reality of Christian faith. The refreshment that Paul seeks is not merely emotional satisfaction but spiritual renewal that occurs through shared faith and restored fellowship.

Exegetically, this verse demonstrates that reconciliation has profound personal significance for those involved. Paul's appeal is not abstract or detached; it is deeply personal. The restoration of the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus will bring joy, refreshment, and spiritual benefit to Paul as well.

The verse also reveals Paul's pastoral heart. He does not simply administer church affairs from a distance but is personally invested in the relationships within the community. His appeal for refreshment reflects his understanding that the wellbeing of the church and the wellbeing of its leaders are interconnected.

Furthermore, verse 20 illustrates the theological significance of reconciliation. The phrase "in the Lord" and "in Christ" indicate that the reconciliation is not merely a social or practical matter but a spiritual reality that reflects the work of Christ. When believers are reconciled, they participate in the reconciling work of God.

3.3.8 Philemon 1:21: Confidence and Anticipated Obedience

Paul concludes his appeal with an expression of confidence:

"Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say" (Philemon. 21).

⁹⁶ Scot McKnight; 203.

This verse brings the appeal to a hopeful conclusion. Paul expresses his confidence that Philemon will respond positively to his request. The tone is one of trust rather than suspicion, encouragement rather than coercion.

The verse begins with the phrase *πεποιθώς τῇ ὑπακοῇ σου* (confident of your obedience). The verb *πείθω* (to persuade, to be confident) indicates a settled conviction. Paul is not uncertain about Philemon's response but expresses confidence that he will act appropriately.

The term *ὑπακοή* (obedience) has been interpreted in various ways. Some scholars suggest that it refers to obedience to Paul's apostolic authority. Others argue that it denotes a more general sense of responsiveness to Christian teaching. Longenecker suggests that the term reflects Paul's confidence that Philemon will act consistently with his Christian commitment.⁹⁷

The phrase *γράψας σοι* (I am writing to you) refers to the entire letter. Paul is suggesting that his confidence in Philemon's response is the reason he undertook the writing. He does not write because he doubts Philemon but because he believes Philemon will respond appropriately.

The most striking statement is the final clause: *εἰδὼς ὅτι καὶ ὑπὲρ ᾧ λέγω ποιήσεις* (*knowing that you will do even more than I say*). This expression goes beyond mere compliance. Paul anticipates that Philemon's response will exceed his request. Wright observes that this statement reflects Paul's expectation that Christian faith produces generosity and compassion that go beyond minimal obligation.⁹⁸

The phrase "even more than I say" has been the subject of considerable scholarly discussion. Some suggest that Paul is hinting that Philemon should free Onesimus. Others argue that it refers to receiving Onesimus with the full honour due to a brother in Christ. While the exact meaning remains uncertain, the phrase clearly indicates that Paul expects a response characterized by grace and generosity.

Exegetically, this verse demonstrates Paul's trust in the transforming power of the gospel. He does not need to issue commands or impose sanctions because he believes that Philemon's Christian

⁹⁷ Richard N. Longenecker; 156.

⁹⁸ N. T. Wright; 189.

commitment will lead him to act appropriately. The confidence expressed reflects Paul's conviction that authentic Christian faith produces practical obedience.

The verse also reveals Paul's pastoral wisdom in concluding the appeal. By expressing confidence rather than doubt, he encourages Philemon to live up to positive expectations. The statement functions as a gentle challenge that assumes Philemon will respond in a manner consistent with his faith.

Furthermore, the anticipation that Philemon will do "even more" creates space for a generous response. Paul is not prescribing the exact nature of Philemon's action but trusting that he will act in a manner that exceeds the minimum requirements. This openness reflects Paul's understanding that genuine reconciliation is not a matter of legal compliance but of generous grace.

3.4 Principles of Conflict Resolution Derived from Philemon 1:8–21

The exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21 reveals several principles of conflict resolution that are central to Paul's appeal for reconciliation. These include love-based leadership, mediation, personal transformation, voluntary reconciliation, forgiveness, Christian fellowship, accountability, and relationship restoration. Together, these principles demonstrate a Christ-centred approach to resolving conflicts that prioritizes reconciliation, mutual respect, and the restoration of broken relationships within the Christian community. These principles form the basis for the appropriation of the text to contemporary Christian leadership in Chapter Five.

3.5 Conclusion

This chapter has undertaken a detailed exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21, examining the passage within its literary, historical, and theological contexts. The verse-by-verse analysis demonstrates that Paul deliberately chose persuasion rather than apostolic authority, appealing to love instead of command in order to facilitate genuine reconciliation. The study further reveals the remarkable transformation of Onesimus from a former slave to a beloved brother in Christ, showing that Christian identity supersedes social status. Paul's role as mediator is also evident as he identifies with Onesimus, accepts responsibility for any loss incurred, and seeks the restoration of the broken relationship between the two parties.

The exegetical analysis further highlights Paul's emphasis on voluntary forgiveness, partnership in the gospel, restored fellowship, personal responsibility, and confidence in the transforming power

of Christian obedience. His appeal demonstrates that reconciliation is not merely the settlement of a dispute but the restoration of relationships grounded in the new life believers share in Christ.

From these exegetical findings, the chapter has appropriated several key principles of conflict resolution, namely love over coercion, personal transformation, voluntary participation, theological re-framing of relationships, partnership in ministry, practical responsibility, mediation, forgiveness, and confident expectation of reconciliation. These findings provide the biblical foundation for the next chapter, which examines the nature and dynamics of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership before these principles are applied in the final appropriation chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE NATURE AND DYNAMICS OF CONFLICT IN CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

4.1 Introduction

Having examined the world behind the text through the distantiation pole in the preceding chapter, this chapter turns to the second pole of the Tripolar Exegetical Model, namely contextualisation. As explained in Sections 1.11.2 and 1.11.5, contextualisation focuses on the world of the reader by examining the contemporary realities, experiences, and challenges that make engagement with the biblical text necessary and meaningful.⁹⁹

In the context of this study, contextualisation involves an examination of contemporary Christian leadership and the conflict situations that characterise many churches and Christian organisations today. Although Philemon 1:8–21 emerged from a first-century context, issues such as interpersonal disagreements, leadership tensions, broken relationships, forgiveness, reconciliation, and the exercise of authority remain significant concerns within contemporary Christian communities.

This chapter therefore explores the nature, causes, and effects of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership and identifies the contextual challenges that necessitate dialogue with the biblical text. By examining the experiences and realities of present-day Christian leaders, the chapter establishes the reader's context that will later be brought into conversation with the findings from the biblical text during the appropriation stage of the study in Chapter Five.

4.2 The Nature and Prevalence of Conflict in Contemporary Christian Leadership

Conflict is an inevitable reality within human communities because it arises wherever individuals and groups interact. The church, despite its divine calling and spiritual identity, remains composed of imperfect human beings whose relationships are often affected by differences in personality,

⁹⁹ Justin S. Ukpong, "Developments in Biblical Interpretation in Africa: Historical and Hermeneutical Directions," in *The Bible in Africa: Transactions, Trajectories and Trends*, ed. Gerald O. West and Musa W. Dube (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 18–23.

interests, values, and expectations. Consequently, Christian leadership cannot be understood apart from the reality of conflict.¹⁰⁰

While conflict itself is not inherently sinful, the manner in which it is handled often determines whether it becomes destructive or transformative.¹⁰¹ As Augsburgers observe, conflict has the potential either to deepen relationships through reconciliation or to destroy them through alienation and hostility.¹⁰² The challenge facing Christian leaders is therefore not the elimination of conflict but the cultivation of biblical approaches to managing and resolving it.

4.2.1 The Scope of the Problem

Recent studies indicate that conflict remains a significant challenge within Christian communities worldwide. Research conducted by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research found that a substantial majority of churches reported experiencing internal conflict or serious disagreement within recent years. Such conflicts often involve leadership disputes, doctrinal disagreements, governance concerns, and interpersonal tensions.¹⁰³

The consequences of these conflicts are far-reaching. Pastors and church leaders frequently experience emotional exhaustion, burnout, and discouragement. Congregations become divided, ministry programmes are disrupted, and public confidence in church leadership is weakened. In severe cases, churches split into rival factions or become involved in prolonged legal disputes.

Within the African context, these challenges are equally visible. Mugambi argues that many contemporary African churches have inherited patterns of leadership that sometimes emphasise authority and control more than servant leadership and reconciliation. As a result, leadership conflicts frequently escalate into institutional crises that affect entire congregations.

Ugandan church history provides numerous examples. Leadership disagreements within dioceses, disputes concerning episcopal succession, and controversies regarding administrative authority

¹⁰⁰ Andrew Root, *The Church in a Age of Secular Mysticism: Why Spiritualities Without God Fail to Transform Us* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2021), 148–152.

¹⁰¹ Ken Sande, *The Peacemaker: A Biblical Guide to Resolving Personal Conflict*, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2022), 29–35.

¹⁰² David Augsburgers, *Conflict Mediation Across Cultures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), 17.

¹⁰³ Scott Thumma, Warren Bird, and the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, *The State of Churches 2025* (Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2025), 34–39.

have periodically generated tensions within Christian communities. While such conflicts differ in their specific causes, they reveal a common struggle concerning power, authority, and accountability.

Katongole contends that the persistence of conflict within African institutions reflects deeper crises of identity and community.¹⁰⁴ In his view, reconciliation must address not only visible disputes but also the underlying narratives and structures that perpetuate division. This observation is particularly relevant for Christian leadership, where unresolved tensions often stem from deeper issues than those immediately apparent.

4.2.2 Sources and Types of Conflict

Conflict within Christian leadership emerges from a variety of interconnected factors that affect relationships, governance structures, and ministry practice. While disagreements are a natural aspect of human interaction, the nature of leadership conflict in Christian communities often reflects deeper issues concerning authority, identity, accountability, and the exercise of power. Understanding these sources is essential for developing biblically grounded approaches to conflict resolution.

One major source of conflict concerns leadership authority and governance. Questions regarding leadership succession, decision-making processes, and the distribution of authority frequently generate tension within church institutions. In many cases, disputes arise not because leadership structures are absent but because stakeholders perceive decision-making processes as lacking transparency, fairness, or inclusiveness. Recent studies on church leadership in Uganda indicate that disagreements over leadership participation and governance continue to contribute significantly to organisational tensions within Christian communities.¹⁰⁵

Power struggles also remain a significant source of conflict. Although Christian leadership is fundamentally intended to be an expression of service, leadership positions may become associated with influence, prestige, and institutional control. Alexander Paul Isiko's study of Pentecostal

¹⁰⁴ Emmanuel Katongole, *Mirror to the Church: Resurrecting Faith after Genocide in Rwanda* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 62.

¹⁰⁵ Koboi Emmanuel and Julius Basake, "Bridging Generational Gaps: Conflict Management Between Youth and Church Elders in Uganda" (2025).

churches in Uganda found that many inter-church and intra-church conflicts are driven less by doctrinal differences than by struggles for influence, recognition, and dominance within the religious sphere. He argues that competition among church leaders often transforms ministry relationships into arenas of rivalry rather than cooperation.¹⁰⁶

The issue of power is particularly relevant within contemporary African Christianity. Emmanuel Katongole argues that one of the central challenges facing African Christian communities is the tendency to reproduce social and political patterns of domination rather than embodying the reconciling vision of the gospel. According to Katongole, Christian leadership becomes transformative only when it moves beyond competition for influence and embraces practices of reconciliation, mutual accountability, and servant leadership.¹⁰⁷

Generational differences have also emerged as an increasingly important source of conflict within Ugandan churches. Recent research by Kobo Emmanuel and Julius Basake highlights growing tensions between younger church members and older church leaders concerning participation, communication styles, technology, and decision-making processes. Their study demonstrates that conflicts frequently arise when younger generations perceive church leadership structures as resistant to participation and innovation, while older leaders view younger members as challenging established traditions and authority.¹⁰⁸

Financial accountability and resource management constitute another significant source of leadership conflict. Church leaders are often entrusted with responsibility for financial resources, property, and institutional development projects. Disagreements concerning the use of resources, transparency, and accountability mechanisms can create suspicion and division within Christian communities. In contexts where financial reporting systems are weak or unclear, leadership conflicts frequently become intensified by allegations of favouritism, mismanagement, or unequal distribution of resources.

¹⁰⁶ Alexander Paul Isiko, "Religious Conflict among Pentecostal Churches in Uganda: A Struggle for Power and Supremacy," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 14 (2020): 616–644

¹⁰⁷ Emmanuel Katongole, "The Gospel as Politics in Africa," *Theological Studies* 77, no. 3 (2016): 704–720.

¹⁰⁸ Kobo Emmanuel and Julius Basake, "Bridging Generational Gaps: Conflict Management Between Youth and Church Elders in Uganda" (2025).

Political and social influences further contribute to leadership tensions. Uganda's religious landscape exists within a broader political environment where questions of authority, legitimacy, and public influence remain highly contested. Studies examining the relationship between religion and public life in Uganda have demonstrated that political affiliations and public controversies sometimes shape ecclesiastical relationships and leadership dynamics.¹⁰⁹ Consequently, leadership conflicts may be influenced not only by internal church concerns but also by wider social and political realities.

These various factors reveal that leadership conflict is rarely the result of a single issue. Rather, it emerges from a complex interaction of organisational, relational, cultural, spiritual, and institutional dynamics. Effective conflict resolution therefore requires approaches capable of addressing both the visible manifestations of conflict and the deeper realities that sustain division.

4.2.3 Common Responses to Conflict

The ways in which Christian leaders respond to conflict significantly influence whether disagreements become opportunities for transformation or sources of long-term division. Although the church proclaims reconciliation as a central aspect of its mission, practical responses to conflict often vary considerably.

One common response is conflict avoidance. Leaders may choose to ignore tensions, postpone difficult conversations, or minimise disagreements in the hope that problems will eventually disappear. While such approaches may preserve temporary stability, they seldom address the underlying causes of conflict. Research on church conflict management in Uganda indicates that unresolved tensions frequently re-emerge in more destructive forms when opportunities for early intervention are missed.¹¹⁰

Avoidance is often reinforced by cultural and institutional factors. In many African societies, maintaining social harmony is highly valued, and open disagreement may be perceived as disrespectful or disruptive. While these values contribute positively to community cohesion, they

¹⁰⁹ Henni Alava and Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, "Religious (De)politicisation in Uganda's 2016 Elections," *Journal of Eastern African Studies* 10, no. 4 (2016): 677–692.

¹¹⁰ Emmanuel Koboi and Julius Basake; (2025).

may also discourage honest engagement with difficult issues. As a result, important concerns remain unaddressed until relationships deteriorate significantly.

Another common response involves the use of positional authority to impose solutions. In situations where leaders possess significant institutional power, conflict may be addressed through directives, disciplinary measures, or administrative decisions. Although such actions may restore organisational order in the short term, they do not necessarily produce genuine reconciliation. Compliance achieved through authority differs fundamentally from reconciliation achieved through restored relationships.

This observation is particularly significant when viewed in light of Paul's approach in Philemon 1:8–21. Rather than commanding Philemon, Paul deliberately appeals to him on the basis of love and Christian fellowship. His approach demonstrates that authentic reconciliation cannot be reduced to institutional control but must involve voluntary participation and transformed relationships.

Recent Ugandan scholarship similarly emphasises the importance of dialogue-based approaches to conflict management. Koboi and Basake argue that sustainable conflict resolution within churches requires participatory engagement, active listening, and the creation of spaces where diverse voices can be heard. Their research suggests that collaborative approaches are more likely to strengthen relationships than purely hierarchical interventions.¹¹¹

Mediation has also emerged as an increasingly important response to conflict within Christian communities. Mediation seeks to facilitate communication between conflicting parties, promote mutual understanding, and identify pathways toward restoration. Church-based mediation efforts have been employed in various contexts across Uganda, particularly where conflicts threaten organisational unity or community stability. Research examining church-led conflict resolution initiatives in Uganda demonstrates that mediation can contribute significantly to rebuilding trust and fostering peaceful relationships when supported by genuine commitment from all parties involved.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Eluzai Lemi Emmanuel Lomoro, *Church-led Strategies and Political Conflict Resolution in Uganda: A Case Study of Uganda Joint Christian Council* (Nkumba University, 2025).

Perhaps the most constructive response is restorative reconciliation. Unlike approaches that focus solely on ending disputes, restorative reconciliation seeks to repair damaged relationships, acknowledge wrongdoing, and rebuild community. Elias Opongo's study of reconciliation practices in Northern Uganda demonstrates that effective reconciliation involves not only forgiveness but also truth-telling, acknowledgement of harm, healing, and the restoration of social relationships. Christian and cultural approaches to reconciliation converge in their recognition that lasting peace requires more than the absence of conflict; it requires the rebuilding of trust.¹¹³

The challenge facing contemporary Christian leadership is that responses to conflict often remain reactive rather than transformative. Avoidance, coercion, and factionalism continue to characterise many leadership disputes. Consequently, there remains a significant need for biblical models capable of guiding Christian leaders toward reconciliation that is relational, restorative, and grounded in the gospel. The example of Paul in Philemon 1:8–21 provides such a model and offers important insights for addressing contemporary leadership conflicts.

4.3 The African Context: Distinctive Challenges and Opportunities

Having examined the nature and prevalence of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership, it is necessary to consider the particular context within which the present study is situated. The realities of leadership conflict are not experienced uniformly across all regions of the world. Social structures, cultural values, historical experiences, and ecclesiastical traditions shape both the causes of conflict and the methods employed to address it. Consequently, understanding the African context, and specifically the Ugandan context, is essential for appreciating the contemporary relevance of Philemon 1:8–21.

African Christianity has experienced remarkable growth over the past several decades. According to recent studies, Africa is now one of the most vibrant centres of global Christianity, with Christian populations continuing to increase across many countries.¹¹⁴ However, this numerical growth has not eliminated challenges relating to leadership, governance, accountability, and

¹¹³ Elias O. Opongo, "Reconciliation in Complex Spaces: Christian-Cultural Approaches to Reconciliation in Post-conflict Northern Uganda," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46, no. 2 (2022): 169–177.

¹¹⁴ Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, "Christianity 2025: Religious Diversity and Personal Contact," *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 49, no. 1 (2025): 14–27.

reconciliation. On the contrary, the rapid expansion of Christian communities has often intensified leadership pressures and exposed weaknesses in institutional structures.

As Katongole observes, African Christianity stands at a critical crossroads where numerical success must be accompanied by moral, relational, and institutional transformation.¹¹⁵ The challenge facing Christian leaders is therefore not merely to manage growing congregations but to cultivate communities that embody the reconciling mission of Christ. This reality becomes particularly significant when conflicts arise among leaders whose actions profoundly influence the spiritual wellbeing of their communities.

4.3.1 Cultural Dynamics and Conflict

African societies are generally characterised by a strong emphasis on community, relational interconnectedness, and collective identity. Unlike highly individualistic cultures where personal autonomy is often prioritised, many African communities understand human identity primarily through relationships with others. These communal values have important implications for both leadership and conflict resolution.

Recent African theological scholarship continues to affirm the significance of communal identity in shaping social relationships. Ezra Chitando argues that African Christian communities often draw upon traditional values of solidarity, mutual responsibility, and collective wellbeing in addressing contemporary social challenges.¹¹⁶ Such values can provide a fertile foundation for reconciliation because they encourage individuals to prioritise relationships over personal interests.

From a conflict-resolution perspective, this communal orientation offers important opportunities. Christian leaders operating within such contexts can appeal to shared identity, collective responsibility, and communal harmony when addressing disputes. Reconciliation is often understood not simply as the resolution of a disagreement between individuals but as the restoration of relationships within the wider community.

¹¹⁵ Emmanuel Katongole, *Who Are My People? Love, Violence, and Christianity in Sub-Saharan Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2022), 67.

¹¹⁶ Ezra Chitando, "Religion and Reconciliation in Contemporary Africa," *Exchange* 47, no. 3 (2018): 219–234.

At the same time, communal cultures may also create challenges for conflict management. The desire to preserve social harmony can sometimes discourage open discussion of difficult issues. Individuals may avoid confronting wrongdoing for fear of causing embarrassment or disrupting relationships. Consequently, conflicts may remain hidden beneath a surface appearance of peace until they eventually erupt in more damaging forms.

Recent research on church leadership in East Africa indicates that respect for authority remains a significant cultural value within many Christian communities.¹¹⁷ While respect for leaders contributes positively to organisational stability, it can also discourage constructive criticism and accountability. Leaders may become insulated from feedback, while subordinates may hesitate to raise legitimate concerns. Such dynamics can allow tensions to accumulate over time, increasing the likelihood of serious conflict.

Another important factor concerns the role of identity. Ethnic, regional, clan, and family affiliations continue to influence social relationships throughout many African societies. Although Christian faith seeks to establish a common identity in Christ, these social identities often remain influential in shaping perceptions of leadership decisions and organisational processes. Consequently, leadership appointments, resource allocation decisions, and governance issues may sometimes be interpreted through ethnic or communal lenses.

Katongole argues that one of the greatest challenges facing African Christianity is the need to cultivate a new social imagination rooted in the gospel rather than in competing ethnic or political identities.¹¹⁸ For Christian leaders, this challenge is particularly significant because leadership conflicts often become intensified when broader identity concerns become intertwined with organisational disagreements.

Nevertheless, the communal nature of African societies provides significant opportunities for restorative approaches to conflict resolution. Traditional mechanisms of mediation, dialogue, and community participation continue to influence many African communities and offer valuable resources for contemporary Christian leadership. Rather than viewing reconciliation merely as a

¹¹⁷ Joseph Wandera and James Kiyimba, "Leadership, Accountability and Church Governance in East Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 64, no. 2 (2022): 131–148.

¹¹⁸ Emmanuel Katongole;104.

legal or administrative process, these traditions often emphasise the restoration of relationships and communal harmony. Such emphases resonate strongly with the biblical vision of reconciliation evident in Paul's appeal to Philemon.

4.3.2 The Ugandan Context

Uganda provides a particularly important context for examining conflict resolution among Christian leaders because Christianity occupies a central place in the social, cultural, and political life of the nation. According to the most recent national demographic data, Christians constitute the majority of Uganda's population, with the Church of Uganda, the Roman Catholic Church, Pentecostal churches, and various evangelical denominations exerting significant influence on public life and community development. Consequently, leadership conflicts within churches often have implications that extend beyond ecclesiastical boundaries and affect broader society.

The Ugandan church has historically played a significant role in education, healthcare, peacebuilding, and social transformation. Religious institutions continue to enjoy considerable public trust and moral authority. However, this influential position has also exposed church leaders to challenges associated with power, governance, succession, and public accountability. Recent developments within various Christian denominations demonstrate that leadership conflicts remain a persistent concern requiring careful theological and practical attention.

One of the recurring sources of conflict within Ugandan churches concerns leadership succession and ecclesiastical appointments. Disputes surrounding episcopal elections, diocesan administration, and leadership transitions have periodically generated tensions within church communities. In several instances, disagreements over leadership selection processes have resulted in public controversy, litigation, and prolonged uncertainty within affected dioceses. Such disputes often reveal competing understandings of authority, representation, transparency, and participation within church governance structures.

The Church of Uganda has not been immune to these challenges. Public discussions surrounding episcopal elections in recent years have highlighted concerns regarding electoral processes, perceptions of fairness, and the influence of competing interest groups within church structures. While these challenges are not unique to Uganda, they demonstrate the extent to which leadership conflicts can affect the unity and witness of Christian communities. Scholars have observed that

disputes surrounding leadership appointments often become intensified when issues of identity, institutional influence, and regional interests intersect with ecclesiastical decision-making.¹¹⁹

Another significant challenge concerns the relationship between church leadership and political engagement. Uganda's political history has frequently brought religious leaders into public debates concerning governance, justice, human rights, and national development. While prophetic engagement with social issues remains an important aspect of Christian witness, political involvement can also create tensions within church communities when leaders are perceived as aligning themselves with particular political interests.

Ssentongo argues that contemporary Ugandan religious leadership operates within a complex environment where spiritual authority and public influence are closely interconnected.¹²⁰ Consequently, church leaders often face pressure from multiple constituencies whose expectations may not always align with biblical principles of servant leadership and reconciliation. These realities can contribute to internal conflicts when differing political perspectives emerge among church members and leaders.

The rapid growth of Pentecostal and charismatic movements has introduced additional leadership challenges. Over the past two decades, Uganda has witnessed significant expansion in independent churches and Pentecostal ministries. While this growth has contributed positively to evangelisation and spiritual renewal, it has also generated concerns regarding leadership accountability, governance structures, and ministerial oversight. Research by Isiko demonstrates that competition for membership, influence, and public visibility has sometimes contributed to tensions among church leaders, particularly within rapidly growing Pentecostal movements.¹²¹

Furthermore, generational dynamics have emerged as an increasingly important issue within Ugandan churches. Younger Christians frequently express a desire for greater participation in

¹¹⁹ Joseph Wandera and James Kiyimba, "Leadership, Accountability and Church Governance in East Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 64, no. 2 (2022): 131–148.

¹²⁰ Jimmy Spire Ssentongo, *Religion and Politics in Contemporary Uganda* (Kampala: Uganda Martyrs University Press, 2021), 87–103.

¹²¹ Alexander Paul Isiko, "Religious Conflict among Pentecostal Churches in Uganda: A Struggle for Power and Supremacy," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 14 (2020): 616–644.

leadership, decision-making, and ministry innovation. At the same time, many senior leaders seek to preserve established traditions and structures that they believe have served the church well. Recent studies indicate that tensions between generations are becoming a growing source of conflict within some Christian communities, particularly where communication channels and participatory structures remain limited.¹²²

Economic pressures also influence leadership relationships within Ugandan churches. Many congregations operate in contexts characterised by poverty, unemployment, and financial uncertainty. Such conditions can intensify disputes concerning resource allocation, development priorities, and financial accountability. Leaders often face difficult decisions regarding the management of limited resources, and disagreements over such decisions can easily become sources of conflict if transparency and trust are lacking.

Despite these challenges, the Ugandan context also presents significant opportunities for reconciliation-oriented leadership. Uganda possesses rich traditions of community dialogue, mediation, and restorative justice that have historically been employed to address social conflicts. Studies of peacebuilding initiatives in Northern Uganda demonstrate the continued relevance of relational approaches that prioritise healing, restoration, and communal participation.¹²³ These approaches resonate strongly with biblical principles of reconciliation and provide valuable resources for contemporary Christian leadership.

Moreover, Ugandan theological scholarship increasingly emphasises reconciliation as a central dimension of Christian witness. Katongole argues that the future of African Christianity depends not merely on numerical growth but on the ability of Christian communities to embody alternative social relationships rooted in forgiveness, justice, and reconciliation.¹²⁴ This perspective is particularly relevant for Christian leaders who are called not only to preach reconciliation but also to model it through their leadership practices.

¹²² Emmanuel Kobo and Julius Basake; 8–15.

¹²³ Elias O. Opongo, “Reconciliation in Complex Spaces: Christian-Cultural Approaches to Reconciliation in Post-Conflict Northern Uganda,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46, no. 2 (2022): 169–177.

¹²⁴ Emmanuel Katongole; 142–148.

The Ugandan context therefore presents a paradox. On one hand, Christian leaders face significant challenges arising from governance disputes, political pressures, generational tensions, and institutional competition. On the other hand, the cultural, theological, and communal resources available within Ugandan Christianity provide substantial opportunities for developing restorative approaches to conflict resolution. These realities make Uganda an appropriate context for exploring the contemporary relevance of Paul's model of reconciliation in Philemon 1:8–21.

4.3.3 The Leadership Crisis in African Christianity

The discussion thus far has demonstrated that Christian leadership in Africa operates within a context marked by both significant opportunities and considerable challenges. While African Christianity continues to experience remarkable growth and influence, concerns regarding leadership effectiveness, accountability, integrity, and conflict management remain persistent. These concerns have led many scholars and church leaders to speak of a leadership crisis within African Christianity. The term does not suggest the absence of leaders but rather highlights the gap between the transformative vision of Christian leadership presented in Scripture and the realities often observed within contemporary ecclesiastical practice.

Recent scholarship indicates that leadership challenges constitute one of the most significant obstacles to the church's mission in Africa. Despite the numerical expansion of Christianity, many church communities continue to struggle with internal conflicts, governance disputes, ethical failures, and divisions that weaken their witness in society. According to Katongole, one of the greatest challenges facing African Christianity is the need to move beyond institutional growth toward the cultivation of communities that genuinely embody the reconciling character of the gospel.¹²⁵ The issue, therefore, is not simply one of organisational management but of theological and spiritual formation.

A significant dimension of the leadership crisis concerns the understanding and exercise of authority. In many church contexts, leadership is still viewed primarily in hierarchical terms, where authority flows from position rather than from service. While organisational structures are necessary for effective administration, problems arise when leadership authority becomes disconnected from accountability, humility, and relational responsibility. Such situations often

¹²⁵ Emmanuel Katongole; 121–126.

create environments in which leaders are perceived as untouchable, criticism is discouraged, and conflicts remain unresolved.

Recent studies on church governance in Africa suggest that tensions frequently emerge when leadership structures prioritise institutional control over participatory engagement.¹²⁶ Leaders may possess considerable decision-making authority while ordinary members have limited opportunities to contribute to discussions affecting the life of the church. Consequently, frustrations may accumulate beneath the surface until they eventually manifest in open conflict, resistance, or institutional fragmentation.

Another aspect of the leadership crisis relates to inadequate preparation for conflict management and reconciliation. Many church leaders receive substantial theological training in biblical studies, doctrine, preaching, and pastoral ministry. However, training in conflict resolution, mediation, negotiation, and restorative leadership is often limited. As a result, leaders may find themselves ill-equipped to address the complex interpersonal and organisational conflicts that arise within contemporary ministry settings.

This challenge is particularly significant in Uganda, where church leaders frequently operate within environments shaped by diverse social, political, economic, and cultural pressures. Leadership disputes may involve not only theological concerns but also issues relating to governance, ethnicity, generational differences, resource management, and community expectations. Without adequate skills and theological frameworks for reconciliation, leaders may resort to avoidance, authoritarian intervention, or institutional discipline rather than restorative engagement.

The growing influence of personality-centred leadership models has also contributed to leadership challenges within some sectors of African Christianity. Contemporary scholarship has increasingly questioned leadership approaches that concentrate excessive authority in individual leaders while weakening institutional accountability mechanisms.¹²⁷ In such contexts, disagreements may

¹²⁶ Joseph Wandera and James Kiyimba, "Leadership, Accountability and Church Governance in East Africa," *African Ecclesial Review* 64, no. 2 (2022): 131–148.

¹²⁷ Ezra Chitando and Lovemore Togarasei, "Leadership, Accountability and Pentecostal Christianity in Africa," *Exchange* 47, no. 4 (2018): 327–343.

become personalised, and organisational stability may depend heavily upon the influence of a single individual rather than on healthy systems of governance and shared responsibility.

Research on Pentecostal and charismatic movements in East Africa indicates that rapid church growth can sometimes outpace the development of effective leadership structures and accountability systems.¹²⁸ While many such ministries contribute significantly to evangelisation and social transformation, leadership conflicts occasionally emerge when questions of succession, financial accountability, or organisational authority are not adequately addressed. These challenges underscore the importance of leadership models grounded in transparency, accountability, and mutual responsibility.

The leadership crisis is also evident in the persistence of divisions within Christian communities. Although churches proclaim unity in Christ as a foundational theological principle, practical realities often reveal deep fractures along denominational, ethnic, generational, and institutional lines. Katongole argues that African Christianity must develop a stronger theology of reconciliation capable of addressing these divisions at both personal and structural levels.¹²⁹ Without such a theological vision, churches risk becoming reflections of the conflicts present in wider society rather than witnesses to God's reconciling work.

At the same time, it would be inaccurate to portray African Christianity solely in terms of crisis. Alongside these challenges, there are numerous examples of effective leadership, faithful ministry, and successful reconciliation initiatives across the continent. Churches have played important roles in peacebuilding, community development, education, healthcare, and social transformation. In Uganda, religious leaders have frequently contributed to national conversations concerning peace, justice, and reconciliation. These positive developments demonstrate that the church possesses significant resources for addressing leadership challenges when biblical principles are intentionally applied.

Nevertheless, the existence of successful examples does not diminish the reality of ongoing leadership struggles. Rather, it highlights the need for models of leadership capable of promoting

¹²⁸ Alexander Paul Isiko, "Religious Conflict among Pentecostal Churches in Uganda: A Struggle for Power and Supremacy," *Technium Social Sciences Journal* 14 (2020): 616–644.

¹²⁹ Emmanuel Katongole; 178–182.

reconciliation, restoring broken relationships, and strengthening ecclesial unity. The leadership crisis facing African Christianity is therefore not merely a managerial problem but a theological challenge that calls for renewed reflection on the nature of Christian leadership itself.

It is at this point that Philemon 1:8–21 becomes particularly relevant. Paul's interaction with Philemon and Onesimus offers an alternative vision of leadership that differs markedly from models based on coercion, competition, or institutional power. His approach emphasises persuasion rather than domination, reconciliation rather than punishment, relationship rather than status, and voluntary participation rather than compulsion. These characteristics address many of the weaknesses evident in contemporary leadership practice and provide a foundation for reimagining conflict resolution within Christian leadership.

The leadership crisis in African Christianity therefore creates an important context for this study. The challenges identified above reveal a pressing need for biblically grounded approaches to conflict resolution that can strengthen relationships, promote accountability, and foster genuine reconciliation among Christian leaders. Understanding these realities prepares the way for the next section, which examines more directly the gap between contemporary leadership practices and the model of reconciliation presented in Philemon 1:8–21.

4.4 The Gap Between Contemporary Practice and the Biblical Model

Having examined both the exegetical findings of Philemon 1:8–21 and the realities of contemporary Christian leadership, it is now possible to bring text and context into critical conversation. This stage represents a crucial movement within the Contextualization pole of the Tripolar Exegetical Model because it identifies areas where contemporary leadership practices diverge from the biblical model of reconciliation presented in the text.

The preceding sections revealed that leadership conflicts within contemporary Christian communities frequently involve struggles over authority, governance, identity, accountability, and the exercise of power. While churches often profess reconciliation as a core Christian value, practical responses to conflict do not always reflect the relational and transformative vision evident in Scripture. Consequently, a significant gap exists between the ideals of Christian leadership and the realities experienced in many ecclesiastical contexts.

The purpose of this section is not merely to criticise contemporary leadership practices but to identify areas where the example of Paul in Philemon offers corrective insights. Through this comparison, the study seeks to establish a foundation for developing practical principles of conflict resolution in the subsequent appropriation phase.

4.4.1 Authority and Its Exercise

One of the most striking features of Paul's approach in Philemon 1:8–21 is his understanding and exercise of authority. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, Paul possessed sufficient apostolic authority to command Philemon regarding the reception of Onesimus. Nevertheless, he consciously chose not to exercise his authority coercively. Instead, he appealed to Philemon on the basis of love, fellowship, and shared Christian commitment.

This approach presents a significant challenge to contemporary leadership practices. In many church contexts, authority is often exercised through directives, regulations, institutional procedures, and hierarchical structures. While such mechanisms are necessary for organisational functioning, they can become problematic when authority is viewed primarily as the power to control rather than the responsibility to serve.

Recent studies on church governance in East Africa indicate that leadership conflicts frequently emerge when members perceive decision-making processes as authoritarian or insufficiently consultative.¹³⁰ Leaders may rely on positional authority to secure compliance while overlooking the relational dimensions necessary for sustainable reconciliation. Such approaches often produce outward conformity without addressing underlying grievances.

Paul's example suggests a different understanding of leadership authority. Rather than using authority to compel obedience, he uses it to facilitate reconciliation. His appeal demonstrates that Christian authority should be exercised in ways that encourage voluntary participation and personal conviction rather than mere compliance.

Katongole argues that Christian leadership becomes transformative when authority is understood as service rather than domination.¹³¹ This perspective aligns closely with Paul's approach in

¹³⁰ Joseph Wandera and James Kiyimba; 131–148.

¹³¹ Emmanuel Katongole; 154–158.

Philemon. Leadership is not abandoned, nor is authority rejected. Rather, authority is redefined through the lens of love, humility, and concern for the wellbeing of others.

The gap between contemporary practice and the biblical model therefore lies not in the existence of authority but in its exercise. Where modern leadership may sometimes prioritise institutional control, Paul's example prioritises relational restoration. This distinction has important implications for conflict resolution because reconciliation achieved through persuasion is often more enduring than reconciliation imposed through coercion.

4.4.2 The Transformation of Identity

A second area of divergence concerns the way individuals involved in conflict are perceived and treated. Central to Paul's appeal is his presentation of Onesimus as a transformed person. Although Onesimus had previously been regarded as a slave and perhaps as a wrongdoer, Paul insists that he must now be viewed through the lens of his new identity in Christ.

The apostle's argument rests on the conviction that the gospel fundamentally transforms human relationships. Onesimus is no longer merely a servant; he is now a "beloved brother" (Philemon. 16). His past actions are not denied, but neither are they allowed to define his future. Paul's appeal demonstrates a profound commitment to the redemptive possibilities created by the gospel.

Contemporary leadership conflicts often reveal a contrasting tendency. Individuals are frequently identified by their failures, mistakes, or past offences. Leaders who have been involved in conflict may find themselves permanently labelled according to previous actions, regardless of evidence of repentance, growth, or transformation. Such attitudes can hinder reconciliation because they deny the possibility of genuine change.

Recent studies on restorative justice and reconciliation in African contexts emphasise the importance of recognising personal transformation as an essential component of peacebuilding. Opongo argues that sustainable reconciliation requires communities to create space for renewed relationships and restored identities.¹³² Without such opportunities, conflict resolution remains incomplete because individuals continue to be imprisoned by their past.

¹³² Elias O. Opongo; 169–177.

The contrast between Paul's approach and contemporary practice is therefore significant. Whereas modern leadership conflicts often focus on blame and punishment, Paul focuses on restoration and renewal. His treatment of Onesimus demonstrates that Christian reconciliation must be rooted in the belief that God continues to transform human lives.

This principle is particularly relevant within church leadership contexts. If Christian leaders are unwilling to recognise evidence of repentance and transformation in others, they risk undermining the very gospel they proclaim. Paul's example challenges contemporary leaders to see individuals not merely as offenders but as persons capable of renewal through God's grace.

4.4.3 The Cost of Reconciliation

Another important difference between contemporary practice and the biblical model concerns the willingness to bear the cost of reconciliation. In Philemon 1:18–19, Paul offers to assume responsibility for any financial loss associated with Onesimus. This gesture reveals that reconciliation is not merely a matter of words or intentions; it often requires sacrifice.

Paul's willingness to bear another person's burden reflects the self-giving nature of Christian love. Rather than remaining a neutral observer, he becomes personally involved in the process of restoration. His commitment demonstrates that genuine reconciliation frequently demands personal investment, risk, and sacrifice.

Contemporary approaches to conflict resolution sometimes seek reconciliation without acknowledging its cost. Leaders may encourage forgiveness while avoiding personal responsibility. Institutions may pursue peace while neglecting the practical consequences of injustice or broken relationships. In such cases, reconciliation becomes superficial because underlying wounds remain unaddressed.

Recent African scholarship on reconciliation emphasises that lasting peace requires more than verbal agreement. According to Katongole, reconciliation involves costly practices of forgiveness, truth-telling, accountability, and restoration.¹³³ Communities cannot simply move beyond conflict without confronting the realities that produced division in the first place.

¹³³ Emmanuel Katongole; 178–185.

This insight resonates strongly with Paul's example. His offer to repay any debt illustrates that reconciliation often requires concrete action rather than abstract sentiment. The restoration of relationships may involve restitution, apology, sacrifice, or the assumption of responsibility.

The gap between contemporary practice and the biblical model is therefore evident in the tendency to seek inexpensive reconciliation. Paul's example challenges Christian leaders to recognise that reconciliation often carries personal and institutional costs. Genuine peace requires a willingness to invest in the restoration of relationships even when such investment demands sacrifice.

4.4.4 Voluntary Participation and Freedom

A further area in which contemporary leadership practices often diverge from the biblical model concerns the role of voluntary participation in the reconciliation process. As demonstrated in Chapter Three, Paul's appeal to Philemon is characterised by a remarkable respect for personal freedom and moral agency. Although Paul strongly desired a favourable outcome regarding Onesimus, he deliberately avoided coercion. Instead, he sought a response arising from Philemon's own conviction and willingness.

This principle is explicitly expressed in Philemon 14, where Paul states that he did not want Philemon's good deed to be done under compulsion but of his own free will. Such language reveals an important theological conviction. For Paul, authentic Christian obedience cannot be reduced to external compliance. Genuine transformation occurs when individuals willingly align their actions with the values of the gospel.

The significance of this principle extends beyond the immediate situation involving Philemon and Onesimus. Paul's approach reflects a broader understanding of Christian discipleship in which believers respond freely to God's grace rather than acting merely under external pressure. Christian leadership, therefore, should seek to nurture conviction rather than enforce conformity.

Contemporary leadership conflicts often reveal a different pattern. In many ecclesiastical settings, efforts to resolve disputes may rely heavily on institutional authority, disciplinary procedures, or administrative directives. While such measures sometimes become necessary to maintain order, they may not necessarily produce genuine reconciliation. Individuals may comply with decisions while continuing to harbour resentment, distrust, or unresolved grievances.

Recent studies on conflict transformation in African religious communities emphasise the importance of participation, dialogue, and ownership in reconciliation processes. According to Opongo, sustainable reconciliation requires the active involvement of all parties rather than the imposition of solutions from external authorities.¹³⁴ Individuals are more likely to embrace reconciliation when they perceive themselves as participants in the process rather than merely recipients of decisions made by others.

This insight is particularly relevant within Christian leadership contexts where hierarchical structures often influence decision-making processes. Leaders may feel pressure to resolve conflicts quickly in order to preserve institutional stability, public reputation, or organisational effectiveness. Such pressures can encourage approaches that prioritise immediate outcomes over relational transformation. However, Paul's example suggests that reconciliation achieved through voluntary commitment is ultimately more enduring than reconciliation imposed through institutional power.

Recent Ugandan scholarship on church conflict management similarly highlights the importance of inclusive participation. Koboi and Basake argue that effective conflict resolution requires creating spaces where individuals can express concerns, contribute to discussions, and participate meaningfully in decision-making processes.¹³⁵ Such approaches promote ownership of outcomes and strengthen communal trust.

Furthermore, voluntary participation reflects an important theological truth concerning the nature of Christian community. The church is not merely an organisation governed by regulations; it is a fellowship of believers united by their shared relationship with Christ. Relationships within such a community cannot be restored solely through administrative procedures. They require willing engagement, mutual respect, and personal commitment to reconciliation.

The contrast between Paul's approach and contemporary practice therefore reveals a significant gap. Whereas modern leadership responses sometimes prioritise control and efficiency, Paul

¹³⁴ Elias O. Opongo; 169–177

¹³⁵ Emmanuel Koboi and Julius Basake; 12–18.

prioritises freedom and personal conviction. His example challenges Christian leaders to cultivate reconciliation processes that encourage genuine participation rather than mere compliance.

Ultimately, the restoration of relationships depends not only on the resolution of external disputes but also on the transformation of hearts. Paul's appeal demonstrates that Christian conflict resolution should seek outcomes grounded in voluntary commitment because such commitment reflects the very nature of the gospel itself.

4.4.5 Theological Grounding

Perhaps the most significant gap between contemporary leadership practices and the biblical model presented in Philemon concerns the theological foundation upon which reconciliation is built. Throughout the epistle, Paul's appeal is deeply rooted in theological convictions concerning God's redemptive work, Christian identity, and the nature of the church. Reconciliation is not presented merely as a practical strategy for maintaining harmony but as a direct implication of the gospel.

As the exegetical analysis demonstrated, Paul's appeal rests upon the transformed relationship created by Christ. Onesimus is to be received not simply because reconciliation is socially desirable but because he has become a brother in the Lord. Likewise, Philemon's response is grounded not in personal preference but in the obligations arising from his own participation in the Christian community. The entire appeal is framed within the realities of grace, fellowship, forgiveness, and shared identity in Christ.

This theological orientation distinguishes Paul's approach from many contemporary conflict-resolution models. In modern church settings, reconciliation is often pursued for pragmatic reasons. Leaders may emphasise the need to preserve institutional stability, maintain public credibility, protect membership, or ensure organisational effectiveness. While such concerns are not inherently wrong, they become problematic when they replace theological motivations as the primary basis for reconciliation.

Recent African theological scholarship has repeatedly emphasised the need for reconciliation efforts to remain firmly grounded in Christian theology. Katongole argues that reconciliation must be understood as participation in God's ongoing work of restoring creation rather than merely a

human effort to resolve disputes.¹³⁶ According to this perspective, reconciliation derives its meaning and power from the gospel itself.

Similarly, contemporary studies of peacebuilding in African Christian contexts suggest that reconciliation efforts lacking theological depth often struggle to achieve lasting transformation.¹³⁷ Practical solutions may address immediate disagreements, but without a deeper theological vision, the underlying causes of division frequently remain unresolved. Genuine reconciliation requires not only behavioural change but also renewed understanding of identity, community, and God's purposes.

The situation in many contemporary churches illustrates this challenge. Leadership conflicts are often approached primarily through organisational mechanisms such as committees, disciplinary hearings, mediation processes, or constitutional procedures. While these mechanisms serve important functions, they may become insufficient if disconnected from theological reflection. Reconciliation risks becoming a managerial exercise rather than a spiritual practice rooted in God's reconciling activity.

Paul's appeal in Philemon offers a corrective to such tendencies. Rather than separating theology from practice, he integrates them completely. His understanding of Onesimus's new identity, his appeal to Christian fellowship, his willingness to bear costs, and his confidence in reconciliation all emerge from theological convictions concerning the gospel. For Paul, conflict resolution is fundamentally an expression of Christian discipleship.

This theological grounding is particularly important within African Christianity, where churches continue to exercise significant influence in shaping social values and community relationships. Christian leaders are called not merely to manage organisations but to embody and proclaim the reconciling work of Christ. Their responses to conflict therefore carry theological significance because they communicate something about the nature of the gospel itself.

The gap between contemporary practice and the biblical model is therefore most evident when reconciliation is detached from its theological foundations. Where reconciliation becomes merely

¹³⁶ Emmanuel Katongole; 183–188.

¹³⁷ Elias O. Opongo; 44–62.

a technique, Paul presents it as a gospel imperative. Where modern approaches may prioritise institutional interests, Paul prioritises transformed relationships grounded in Christ.

Consequently, any attempt to develop an effective model of conflict resolution for Christian leaders must begin with theology. The practices of reconciliation can only be sustained when they are rooted in a robust understanding of God's reconciling work through Christ. Philemon 1:8–21 demonstrates that reconciliation is not an optional aspect of Christian leadership but an essential expression of the gospel itself.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter examined the contemporary context of Christian leadership through the contextualisation pole of the Tripolar Exegetical Model. The discussion highlighted the prevalence of conflict within churches and Christian organisations, identifying various forms, causes, and effects of leadership-related conflicts. The chapter also demonstrated that issues such as interpersonal disagreements, power struggles, communication breakdowns, lack of forgiveness, and relational tensions continue to challenge Christian leaders and threaten the unity and effectiveness of ministry.

The findings reveal that contemporary Christian leadership operates within a context that increasingly requires effective approaches to conflict management, reconciliation, and relationship restoration. By exploring these realities, the chapter established the reader's context and identified the challenges that necessitate engagement with the biblical text. This contextual foundation now provides the basis for the appropriation pole in the next chapter, where insights from Philemon 1:8–21 will be brought into dialogue with contemporary Christian leadership in order to develop biblically informed principles for conflict resolution.

CHAPTER FIVE

APPROPRIATING PRINCIPLES OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION FROM PHILEMON 1:8–21 FOR CONTEMPORARY CHRISTIAN LEADERSHIP

5.1 Introduction

The previous chapter examined the nature and dynamics of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership and demonstrated, that leadership conflicts remain a persistent challenge within churches and Christian organisations. Issues such as power struggles, interpersonal tensions, doctrinal disagreements, competition for leadership positions, tribalism, financial disputes, and failures in communication continue to threaten the unity and witness of the church. Chapter Three, on the other hand, revealed that Philemon 1:8–21 presents a practical model of conflict resolution in which Paul intervenes as a mediator between Philemon and Onesimus and seeks the restoration of a broken relationship through reconciliation, forgiveness, and Christian fellowship.

This chapter constitutes the appropriation pole of the Tripolar Exegetical Model. Appropriation seeks to bring the world behind the text into dialogue with the contemporary world in order to derive relevant theological and practical insights for Christian life and ministry. The chapter therefore identifies key conflict-resolution principles emerging from Philemon 1:8–21 and explores their implications for contemporary Christian leadership. The objective is not merely to repeat Paul's actions but to translate the theological and relational principles embodied in the text into practical approaches that can assist contemporary Christian leaders in addressing conflict within churches and Christian institutions.

5.2 Conflict Resolution as a Ministry of Reconciliation

One of the most significant insights emerging from Philemon 1:8–21 is that conflict resolution is fundamentally a ministry of reconciliation. Paul's concern was not simply to settle a disagreement between Philemon and Onesimus but to restore a damaged relationship within the Christian community. His appeal reflects the broader Pauline understanding that God has reconciled humanity to Himself through Christ and has entrusted believers with the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18–19).¹³⁸

¹³⁸ Michael J. Gorman, *Participating in Christ: Explorations in Paul's Theology and Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2019), 201–208.

Emmanuel Katongole argues that Christian reconciliation is far more than resolving disagreements or restoring social harmony. It is participation in God's redemptive work through Christ, where broken relationships are healed and communities are transformed by the power of the Gospel. According to Katongole, reconciliation involves justice, truth-telling, forgiveness, and the rebuilding of relationships that have been damaged by sin and injustice. This understanding resonates strongly with Paul's approach in Philemon 1:8–21. Paul does not merely seek to end the dispute between Philemon and Onesimus; rather, he calls for a new relationship grounded in their shared identity in Christ. Onesimus is to be received no longer simply as a slave but as a beloved brother (Philemon 16). Paul's mediation therefore reflects the Christian vision of reconciliation described by Katongole, where genuine peace is achieved through restored relationships and transformed identities rather than through the mere settlement of conflict. This perspective provides an important model for contemporary Christian leaders, who are called to pursue reconciliation that heals individuals, restores communities, and reflects the reconciling work of God in Christ.¹³⁹

In contemporary Christian leadership, conflicts are often approached primarily from administrative, legal, or organisational perspectives. While such approaches may provide temporary solutions, they frequently fail to address the relational wounds that underlie many disputes. The example of Paul demonstrates that Christian leaders should view conflict resolution as a spiritual responsibility aimed at restoring relationships rather than merely ending disagreements.

For church leaders in Uganda and elsewhere, this principle calls for leadership approaches that prioritise healing, forgiveness, and restoration. Conflicts involving church members, clergy, diocesan leaders, or congregational groups should be addressed with the goal of rebuilding relationships rather than identifying winners and losers. Reconciliation must therefore become a central objective of Christian leadership.

5.3 Servant Leadership and the Responsible Use of Authority

The exegetical analysis revealed that Paul possessed apostolic authority and could have commanded Philemon to act in a particular way. However, he deliberately chose persuasion over

¹³⁹ Emmanuel Katongole, and Chris Rice; 2008.

coercion and appealed to love rather than authority (Philemon. 8–9). This approach illustrates a model of servant leadership that contrasts sharply with authoritarian leadership styles.

Many contemporary church conflicts arise from the misuse of authority. Leaders sometimes employ power to suppress dissent, silence criticism, or enforce compliance. Such approaches may achieve short-term control but often create resentment and deepen divisions within Christian communities.¹⁴⁰

Paul's example demonstrates that effective Christian leadership involves humility, persuasion, and respect for the dignity of others. Leaders are called to exercise authority responsibly, recognising that leadership within the church is fundamentally a ministry of service rather than domination. As Greenleaf observes, authentic leadership seeks first to serve others before seeking to exercise power.¹⁴¹

For contemporary Christian leadership, this principle suggests that conflicts should be addressed through dialogue, consultation, and mutual respect. Leaders who cultivate servant leadership are more likely to create environments in which reconciliation and cooperation can flourish.

5.4 Mediation as a Tool for Conflict Resolution

A central feature of Philemon 1:8–21 is Paul's role as mediator. He stands between Philemon and Onesimus, seeking to facilitate understanding and restore trust. His mediation is characterised by impartiality, compassion, and personal involvement.

The relevance of mediation for contemporary Christian leadership cannot be overstated. Many church conflicts escalate because the parties involved become unable to communicate effectively. Misunderstandings multiply, emotions intensify, and relationships deteriorate. In such situations, trusted mediators can play a crucial role in facilitating dialogue and promoting reconciliation.¹⁴²

Christian leaders should therefore cultivate mediation skills and encourage the use of neutral and respected individuals when conflicts arise. Church elders, bishops, senior clergy, and mature Christians can often provide the guidance necessary to help disputing parties move toward reconciliation.

¹⁴⁰ Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 87–95.

¹⁴¹ Robert K. Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership* (New York: Paulist Press, 2002), 21–35.

¹⁴² Christopher W. Skinner, *Reading Philemon Intertextually* (London: T&T Clark, 2020), 88–95.

The example of Paul further demonstrates that mediation requires personal investment. Effective mediators do not remain detached observers; rather, they actively seek the wellbeing of all parties involved while maintaining fairness and integrity.

5.5 The Importance of Restored Identity in Christ

One of the most transformative elements in Paul's appeal is his redefinition of Onesimus. Rather than viewing him merely as a slave, Paul presents him as a beloved brother in Christ (Philemon. 16). Through this language, Paul challenges social categories and introduces a new identity rooted in Christian fellowship.

Contemporary conflicts often persist because individuals continue to define one another according to past mistakes, social differences, ethnic identities, political affiliations, or institutional positions. Such labels frequently become barriers to reconciliation.¹⁴³

The theology of Philemon invites Christian leaders to view people primarily through the lens of their identity in Christ. This perspective does not deny past wrongdoing, but it recognises that God's grace has the power to transform individuals and create new relationships.

In contexts where tribalism, denominational rivalry, and social inequality contribute to conflict, Christian leaders must intentionally emphasise the unity of believers in Christ. Reconciliation becomes possible when individuals recognise that their shared identity in Christ is greater than the differences that divide them.

5.6 Forgiveness as a Foundation for Reconciliation

Forgiveness occupies a central place in Paul's appeal to Philemon. Although the letter does not explicitly command forgiveness, the entire argument assumes a willingness to move beyond past grievances and embrace restored fellowship.

Contemporary Christian communities often struggle with forgiveness. Hurt, betrayal, mistrust, and disappointment can create barriers that prevent reconciliation. Yet the gospel consistently presents forgiveness as an essential characteristic of Christian discipleship (Eph. 4:32; Col. 3:13).¹⁴⁴

¹⁴³ Richard N. Longenecker; 154–162.

¹⁴⁴ Scot McKnight; 98–104.

The conflict between Philemon and Onesimus demonstrates that reconciliation requires more than acknowledgement of wrongdoing; it requires a willingness to release resentment and embrace restoration. Christian leaders must therefore model forgiveness in their own relationships and encourage congregations to cultivate a culture of grace.

Forgiveness does not imply the absence of accountability. Rather, it creates the possibility of moving beyond past failures toward renewed relationships. In this sense, forgiveness becomes both a spiritual discipline and a practical strategy for conflict resolution.

5.7 Balancing Justice and Grace

Paul's willingness to assume responsibility for any debt owed by Onesimus (Philemon 18–19) illustrates the balance between accountability and grace. He does not ignore the possibility that Onesimus may have caused harm, yet neither does he allow the offence to become an obstacle to reconciliation.

This balance is particularly important for contemporary Christian leadership. Some approaches to conflict resolution focus exclusively on justice and punishment, while others emphasize forgiveness without accountability. Both extremes can undermine genuine reconciliation.

The model presented in Philemon suggests that effective conflict resolution requires both truth and grace. Leaders must address wrongdoing honestly while simultaneously creating opportunities for restoration and healing.¹⁴⁵ Such an approach reflects the character of God, who combines justice with mercy in His dealings with humanity.

In church contexts, this principle encourages disciplinary processes that seek restoration rather than exclusion. Accountability should not be abandoned, but it should be exercised within a framework of compassion and reconciliation.

5.8 Building Communities of Reconciliation

Another significant implication of Philemon 1:8–21 is the communal nature of reconciliation. The letter was addressed not only to Philemon but also to Apphia, Archippus, and the church that met in his house. This suggests that the conflict possessed communal implications and that reconciliation was expected to strengthen the unity of the wider Christian community.

¹⁴⁵ Michael Wolter, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2021), 301–305.

Katongole further emphasizes that the Church is called to become a community of reconciliation that demonstrates God's kingdom in a fractured world. Christian leaders therefore have the responsibility of cultivating environments where forgiveness, justice, mutual respect, and restored relationships are practised consistently. This insight complements Paul's vision in Philemon, where reconciliation extends beyond two individuals to the entire Christian community meeting in Philemon's house. Contemporary churches can similarly become centres of healing by promoting dialogue, mediation, accountability, and grace whenever conflict arises.¹⁴⁶

Contemporary Christian leadership must therefore recognise that conflicts rarely affect only the individuals directly involved. Disputes often influence entire congregations, ministry teams, dioceses, and Christian organisations. Unresolved conflicts can damage communal relationships and weaken the church's witness to society.

Church leaders should intentionally cultivate cultures of reconciliation by promoting open communication, mutual accountability, forgiveness, and respect. Educational programmes, discipleship initiatives, and pastoral care ministries should equip believers with skills for resolving conflict in healthy and biblical ways.¹⁴⁷

When reconciliation becomes part of the culture of a Christian community, conflicts are less likely to escalate into destructive divisions.

5.9 A Proposed Model for Contemporary Christian Leadership

Drawing from the principles identified in Philemon 1:8–21, this study proposes a biblical model of conflict resolution for contemporary Christian leadership consisting of five interrelated stages:

First, leaders should seek to understand the conflict fully before attempting to resolve it.

Second, where necessary, trusted mediators should facilitate dialogue between the parties involved.

Third, leaders should encourage recognition of shared identity in Christ and promote mutual respect.

Fourth, opportunities for confession, forgiveness, and restoration should be provided.

¹⁴⁶ Emmanuel Katongole, and Chris Rice; 2008.

¹⁴⁷ Emmanuel Katongole, *Born from Lament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2017), 119–130.

Finally, reconciliation should be reinforced through ongoing accountability, support, and community involvement.

This model reflects the movement evident in Philemon from conflict to mediation, from mediation to reconciliation, and from reconciliation to restored fellowship.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter has appropriated the conflict-resolution principles identified in Philemon 1:8–21 and applied them to contemporary Christian leadership. The study has demonstrated that Paul's approach to conflict resolution remains highly relevant for addressing modern leadership challenges within churches and Christian organisations.

Key principles emerging from the passage include reconciliation as a ministry, servant leadership, mediation, transformed identity in Christ, forgiveness, the balance between justice and grace, and the cultivation of communities of reconciliation. Together, these principles provide a biblically grounded framework for addressing interpersonal and organisational conflicts in contemporary Christian settings.

The findings suggest that effective Christian leadership requires more than administrative competence; it requires a commitment to the gospel values of reconciliation, humility, forgiveness, and restored fellowship. By embodying these principles, contemporary Christian leaders can contribute to healthier relationships, stronger communities, and a more faithful witness to the reconciling work of Christ in the world.

CHAPTER SIX

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

6.1 Introduction

This study examined conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21 and explored its implications for contemporary Christian leadership. The research was motivated by the increasing prevalence of interpersonal and organizational conflicts within churches and Christian institutions and the need for biblically grounded approaches to conflict management. While contemporary leadership often relies on administrative and secular conflict-resolution models, this study sought to investigate how Paul's handling of the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus provides theological and practical principles for resolving conflict within Christian communities.

Using the Tripolar Exegetical Model, the study explored the historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological dimensions of Philemon 1:8–21, analyzed the realities of conflict in contemporary Christian leadership, and appropriated principles from the text for present-day ministry contexts. This chapter presents a summary of the findings, conclusions drawn from the study, recommendations, and suggestions for further research.

6.2 Summary of Findings

The study was guided by four specific objectives and corresponding research questions.

6.2.1 Historical and Contextual Background of Conflict Resolution in the First Century

The first objective sought to examine the background of conflict resolution in the first-century world and the historical, literary, and rhetorical features of Philemon 1:8–21.

The study established that conflict was a common reality within Jewish, Greco-Roman, and early Christian societies. Jewish traditions emphasized justice, restoration, forgiveness, and communal harmony. Greco-Roman society employed mediation, patronage systems, and honour-shame mechanisms to resolve disputes and preserve social order. Early Christianity adopted certain aspects of these traditions while introducing a distinctive theological emphasis on reconciliation rooted in God's work through Christ.

The study further found that the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus occurred within a social environment shaped by Roman slavery, patron-client relationships, and honour-shame values.

These realities significantly influenced the nature of the conflict and the complexity of its resolution. Paul's intervention therefore addressed not only a personal disagreement but also broader social and relational tensions.

The literary and rhetorical analysis demonstrated that Philemon is a carefully constructed appeal in which Paul employs persuasion, mediation, emotional appeal, kinship language, and theological reasoning to encourage reconciliation. Rather than commanding Philemon, Paul appeals to love, Christian fellowship, and shared identity in Christ.

6.2.2 Exegetical Analysis of the Conflict Between Philemon and Onesimus

The second objective focused on the exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8–21.

The study found that Paul deliberately positions himself as a mediator between Philemon and Onesimus. He neither ignores the conflict nor imposes an authoritarian solution. Instead, he seeks to facilitate reconciliation through persuasion, personal involvement, and theological reflection.

The analysis further revealed that Paul redefines Onesimus' identity from that of a slave to that of a beloved brother in Christ. This transformation forms the theological foundation of the reconciliation process. Paul challenges Philemon to view Onesimus not according to social status but according to their shared relationship in Christ.

The study also found that Paul's willingness to assume responsibility for any debt owed by Onesimus reflects a restorative approach to conflict resolution. His concern is not merely legal settlement but relational restoration. Reconciliation, forgiveness, accountability, and Christian fellowship emerge as central themes throughout the passage.

6.2.3 Nature and Dynamics of Conflict in Contemporary Christian Leadership

The third objective examined the nature and dynamics of conflict within contemporary Christian leadership.

The study established that conflict remains a significant challenge within churches and Christian organisations. Common sources of conflict include leadership struggles, doctrinal disagreements, poor communication, competition for authority, financial disputes, cultural differences, tribalism, and personality clashes.

The study further found that many church conflicts are intensified by inadequate leadership skills, misuse of authority, lack of effective communication, and failure to address grievances at an early stage. In some instances, leaders adopt secular conflict-management approaches that prioritise organisational stability while neglecting the relational and spiritual dimensions of conflict.

The findings revealed that unresolved conflicts often result in church divisions, weakened ministry effectiveness, damaged relationships, reduced trust in leadership, and diminished Christian witness within society.

6.2.4 Conflict Resolution Principles for Contemporary Christian Leadership

The fourth objective sought to appropriate conflict-resolution principles from Philemon 1:8–21 for contemporary Christian leadership.

The study identified several key principles emerging from the passage.

First, reconciliation should be understood as a central ministry of the church rather than merely a conflict-management technique.

Second, Christian leaders should practice servant leadership characterised by humility, persuasion, and respect for others rather than authoritarian control.

Third, mediation remains an important tool for resolving disputes and restoring broken relationships.

Fourth, Christian identity should take precedence over social, cultural, ethnic, or institutional divisions.

Fifth, forgiveness is essential for genuine reconciliation and long-term restoration.

Sixth, effective conflict resolution requires balancing accountability with grace.

Finally, churches should intentionally cultivate communities of reconciliation where peace-making, dialogue, and mutual support are encouraged.

6.3 Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study, several conclusions can be drawn.

First, Philemon 1:8–21 presents one of the clearest New Testament models of conflict resolution. Although the letter addresses a specific first-century conflict, the principles embedded within Paul's appeal possess enduring relevance for contemporary Christian leadership.

Second, the study concludes that Paul's approach to conflict resolution is fundamentally theological. Reconciliation is not presented merely as a social necessity but as a practical expression of the gospel. The restoration of relationships reflects God's reconciling work in Christ and demonstrates the transformative power of Christian faith.

Third, the study concludes that effective Christian leadership requires more than administrative competence and organisational skills. Leaders must cultivate spiritual maturity, humility, compassion, and a commitment to reconciliation. Paul's example illustrates that leadership is most effective when exercised through persuasion, service, and relationship-building rather than coercion and domination.

Fourth, the study concludes that conflict itself is not necessarily destructive. When approached constructively and addressed through biblical principles, conflict can become an opportunity for growth, healing, transformation, and strengthened relationships.

Finally, the study concludes that the conflict-resolution principles identified in Philemon 1:8–21 remain highly relevant for contemporary churches facing challenges such as leadership disputes, congregational divisions, tribal tensions, interpersonal conflicts, and organisational disagreements. The passage provides a valuable framework for promoting unity and restoring broken relationships within Christian communities.

6.4 Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed.

6.4.1 Recommendations for Church Leaders

There is a need for church leaders to give greater attention to biblical approaches to conflict resolution that emphasize reconciliation, forgiveness, and relational restoration.

Consideration may be given to strengthening leadership capacities in mediation, communication, negotiation, and pastoral conflict management so that disputes within Christian communities can be addressed more effectively.

The servant leadership model reflected in Philemon 1:8–21 presents a valuable framework that could be integrated more intentionally into contemporary Christian leadership practice, particularly in contexts characterized by leadership tensions and interpersonal disagreements.

Greater emphasis on dialogue, listening, and relationship-building may contribute significantly to the peaceful resolution of conflicts before they escalate into more serious divisions.

6.4.2 Recommendations for Churches and Christian Organisations

Churches and Christian organisations may benefit from establishing structures that facilitate reconciliation and peaceful conflict resolution, such as mediation committees, counselling ministries, and reconciliation teams.

Incorporating regular teaching on forgiveness, reconciliation, Christian fellowship, and healthy relationships into discipleship programmes could strengthen the capacity of congregations to manage conflict constructively.

The cultivation of church cultures that encourage openness, mutual respect, accountability, and constructive engagement with disagreements may enhance unity and reduce the likelihood of destructive conflict.

6.4.3 Recommendations for Theological Institutions

Theological institutions may consider strengthening the integration of conflict resolution and reconciliation studies within leadership formation programs.

Additional attention to biblical models of conflict management, including the example found in Philemon 1:8–21, could enrich the preparation of future church leaders.

Opportunities for practical training in mediation, negotiation, counselling, and reconciliation may further enhance the effectiveness of graduates serving in pastoral and leadership contexts.

6.4.4 Recommendations for Christian Communities in Uganda

Given the realities of tribalism, political differences, social inequalities, and leadership competition within some Christian communities, greater emphasis on Christian identity and unity in Christ may contribute positively to conflict transformation and reconciliation.

Denominational and diocesan leadership structures could explore mechanisms that promote peaceful conflict management while maintaining biblical principles of justice, accountability, and restoration.

The church's role as a witness to reconciliation within society suggests the importance of nurturing leaders and congregations that embody the values of peace-making, forgiveness, and restorative relationships.

6.4.5 Recommendations for Policy and Church Governance

Consideration may be given to developing clear conflict-resolution policies within churches and Christian organisations to guide leaders and members in addressing disputes consistently and constructively.

The integration of reconciliation principles into church governance structures could strengthen institutional responses to conflict while preserving unity and organisational effectiveness.

Furthermore, collaboration between church leaders, theological educators, and Christian counsellors may contribute to the development of more sustainable and contextually relevant approaches to conflict resolution.

6.5 Areas for Further Research

This study focused specifically on conflict resolution in Philemon 1:8–21 and its implications for contemporary Christian leadership. Future studies may explore related areas such as:

1. Reconciliation and restorative justice in the wider Pauline corpus.
2. Comparative studies of conflict resolution in Philemon and Matthew 18:15–20.
3. The role of forgiveness in church leadership and pastoral ministry.
4. Conflict resolution in African Christian contexts: challenges and opportunities.
5. The contribution of biblical mediation models to contemporary organisational leadership.
6. An empirical investigation into conflict-resolution practices within Ugandan churches.

Such studies would contribute further to understanding the relationship between biblical theology and practical leadership within contemporary Christian communities.

6.6 Final Conclusion

This dissertation has argued that a close historical, literary, rhetorical, and theological analysis of Philemon 1:8–21 reveals a profound model of conflict resolution rooted in reconciliation, forgiveness, mediation, servant leadership, and transformed relationships in Christ. Paul's handling of the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus demonstrates that Christian leadership is most effective when it seeks restoration rather than domination; healing rather than punishment.

In chapter two, the work dealt with conflict resolution in the first century and explored the historical, literary, and rhetorical features of Philemon 1:8-21, reviewed the literature that demonstrated that Paul's approach to conflict resolution is deeply rooted in social realities that simultaneously shaped the transformative values of the gospel.

In chapter three, the work dealt with exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:8-21, verse by verse analysis demonstrated that Paul deliberately chose persuasion rather than apostolic authority, appealed to love instead of command, and the exegetical findings highlight Paul's emphasis on voluntary forgiveness, partnership in the gospel and personal responsibility in the transformative power of Christian obedience.

In chapter four, the work examined the contemporary context of Christian leadership and revealed that contemporary leadership requires effective approach to conflict management, reconciliation, and relationship restoration.

In chapter five, the work appropriated principles of conflict resolution to the enduring significance of Philemon 1:8–21 that lies in its testimony that through Christ, broken relationships can be restored, conflicts can be transformed, and communities can be renewed for the glory of God. The Epistle remains relevant for today's Christian action.

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