

Research Article

Reconciliation Through Bearing Another's Debt: an Exegetical Study of Philemon 1:17–19 and its Implications for the Contemporary Church

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Abstract. This study examines the theological concept of reconciliation through the bearing of another's debt in Philemon 1:17–19 as a biblical foundation for the ministry of reconciliation in the contemporary church. Although previous studies have explored the historical relationship between Philemon and Onesimus and Paul's persuasive rhetoric, limited attention has been given to the theological significance of Paul's willingness to assume Onesimus' debt as a model of Christian reconciliation. Therefore, this study aims to analyze the exegetical meaning of Philemon 1:17–19 and to explore its implications for the contemporary church. Employing a qualitative method with a New Testament exegetical approach, the study examines the grammatical, syntactical, literary, and theological dimensions of the text. The findings reveal that reconciliation in this passage extends beyond interpersonal conflict resolution to the restoration of relationships grounded in shared identity in Christ. Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt represents substitutive solidarity that reflects the redemptive pattern of Christ's sacrificial work and demonstrates that genuine reconciliation requires personal responsibility, sacrificial love, and active participation in restoring broken relationships. The study concludes that Philemon 1:17–19 offers a robust theological framework for reconciliation that is both spiritually transformative and socially restorative, providing a relevant paradigm for the contemporary church in addressing relational conflicts and fostering authentic Christian community.

Keywords: Debt-Bearing; Forgiveness; Pauline Theology; Philemon; Reconciliation.

1. Introduction

Reconciliation is a central theme in Christian theology because it is inseparably linked to God's redemptive work through Jesus Christ. In the New Testament, reconciliation encompasses not only the restoration of humanity's relationship with God but also the renewal of broken human relationships. Thus, reconciliation possesses both vertical and horizontal dimensions, expressed through forgiveness, acceptance, solidarity, and restored fellowship within the Christian community (Morris, 1965). In the contemporary church, reconciliation remains an urgent concern as conflicts involving leadership, denominational divisions, interpersonal disputes, and social inequality continue to threaten ecclesial unity. Consequently, reconciliation should be understood not merely as a theological doctrine but as an active practice of Christian discipleship that requires intentional participation in restoring broken relationships (Volf, 1996).

Among Paul's writings, the Epistle to Philemon provides one of the clearest practical expressions of reconciliation. Unlike Paul's doctrinal epistles, this brief letter focuses on the interpersonal conflict between Philemon and Onesimus and demonstrates how gospel principles are applied to restore fractured relationships (Witherington, 2007). The theological climax of the letter appears in Philemon 1:17–19, where Paul asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as he would receive Paul himself and voluntarily offers to repay any debt Onesimus may owe. This remarkable statement suggests that reconciliation involves

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not only forgiveness but also personal responsibility, sacrificial love, and the willingness to bear another person's burden (Moo, 2008).

The Epistle to Philemon has attracted extensive scholarly attention. Previous studies have employed various methods, including historical-critical, socio-historical, socio-legal, socio-rhetorical, and theological approaches. Historical-critical and socio-historical studies primarily reconstruct the social context of Roman slavery and Onesimus' identity (Callahan, 1997), whereas socio-legal research examines Roman legal traditions and master-slave relationships (Harrill, 2006). Other scholars adopt theological and socio-rhetorical approaches to emphasize divine grace, Christian identity, and community formation within the Pauline churches (Barclay, 2015). More recent studies further explore Philemon through the perspectives of social identity, kinship, reconciliation, and power relations, highlighting the transformative nature of Christian community (Gupta, 2022; Thiessen, 2022; Peppiatt, 2023; Uzukwu, 2024).

These approaches have significantly advanced the interpretation of Philemon by illuminating its historical background, rhetorical strategy, and ecclesial implications. However, they share a common limitation. Most studies focus primarily on slavery, social identity, rhetorical persuasion, or community transformation, while giving relatively little attention to Paul's explicit willingness to bear Onesimus' debt in Philemon 1:17–19 as a theological paradigm of reconciliation. Consequently, the significance of debt-bearing as an expression of sacrificial solidarity within Pauline theology remains insufficiently explored.

This gap raises the following research question: How should Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt in Philemon 1:17–19 be understood within Pauline theology of reconciliation, and what implications does this interpretation offer for the contemporary church? To answer this question, this study employs a qualitative method using a New Testament exegetical approach. The analysis focuses on the grammatical, syntactical, literary, and theological dimensions of the Greek text of Philemon 1:17–19 and interprets its findings within the broader framework of Pauline reconciliation theology.

This article argues that Paul's willingness to assume Onesimus' debt should be understood not merely as a rhetorical strategy or pastoral mediation but as an expression of substitutive solidarity that reflects the reconciling pattern of Christ's self-giving love. Through this perspective, reconciliation is understood as involving forgiveness, ethical responsibility, sacrificial participation, and the restoration of relationships within the Christian community.

This study contributes to Pauline scholarship in four ways. First, it shifts attention from slavery and rhetorical analysis to the theological significance of Paul's assumption of Onesimus' debt. Second, it develops the concept of substitutive solidarity as a constructive framework for interpreting Philemon 1:17–19. Third, it demonstrates that reconciliation in Pauline theology integrates spiritual, ethical, and social dimensions. Finally, it offers a biblical paradigm that is relevant for addressing relational conflicts and strengthening communal unity in the contemporary church.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews previous studies and the theoretical framework of reconciliation. Section 3 explains the research methodology. Section 4 presents the exegetical analysis of Philemon 1:17–19 and discusses its theological implications. Finally, Section 5 concludes the study by summarizing the main findings, contributions, limitations, and recommendations for future research.

2. Literature Review

Previous Studies on Reconciliation in Philemon

The Epistle to Philemon has received considerable scholarly attention, particularly regarding slavery, social identity, and Paul's rhetorical strategy. Earlier studies predominantly interpret Philemon within its socio-historical context, emphasizing the relationship between Philemon as master and Onesimus as slave. Callahan (1997) argues that Onesimus should not automatically be understood as a runaway slave but rather within the broader complexities of first-century Roman society. Likewise, Harrill (2006) examines Philemon from the perspective of Roman legal and social structures, concluding that Paul's appeal does not directly abolish slavery but introduces a transformed pattern of interpersonal relationships grounded in Christian faith.

Subsequent studies shift attention from slavery to theological and communal identity. Barclay (2015) interprets Philemon through the theology of divine grace, arguing that Paul's appeal reflects reciprocal grace and communal solidarity among believers. Similarly, Witherington (2007) emphasizes Paul's pastoral and socio-rhetorical strategy, showing that persuasion rather than apostolic authority becomes the primary means of restoring the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus.

Recent scholarship has increasingly explored Philemon from the perspectives of community formation and social transformation. Gupta (2022) argues that Paul's letter reconstructs social identity by redefining relationships within the Christian community. Thiessen (2022) likewise demonstrates that kinship language functions as a theological foundation for community formation, while Peppiatt (2023) understands reconciliation in Pauline communities as an instrument of social transformation rather than merely conflict resolution. More recently, Uzukwu (2024) analyzes Philemon through African cosmology and power relations, highlighting how the gospel challenges hierarchical social structures. Likewise, Arinder (2024) contends that Paul's argument implicitly supports the transformation of Onesimus' status from slave to beloved brother.

Although these studies significantly contribute to understanding Philemon, they largely concentrate on slavery, social identity, rhetorical persuasion, or community transformation. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to Paul's explicit willingness to assume Onesimus' debt (Phlm. 18–19) as a theological model of reconciliation. In many cases, Paul's commitment to bear another's debt is interpreted merely as a rhetorical device to persuade Philemon rather than as an expression of Pauline reconciliation theology. This unresolved issue constitutes the primary research gap addressed in the present study. Therefore, this article proposes that Paul's assumption of Onesimus' debt should be interpreted as a model of substitutive solidarity that reflects the reconciling pattern of Christ's redemptive work.

Theological Perspectives on Reconciliation and Debt-Bearing

In Pauline theology, reconciliation (*katallagē*) signifies more than the restoration of broken interpersonal relationships; it represents God's initiative in restoring humanity through Jesus Christ (Morris, 1965). According to Paul, reconciliation possesses both vertical and horizontal dimensions: believers are reconciled to God through Christ and are consequently called to embody reconciliation within the community of faith (2 Cor. 5:18–20). Volf (1996) further explains that authentic reconciliation requires forgiveness, acceptance, and the willingness to embrace the "other," thereby overcoming hostility and exclusion.

Within the Epistle to Philemon, reconciliation is expressed through Paul's appeal for Philemon to receive Onesimus "as you would receive me" (Phlm. 17). The Greek terms *koinōnos* (partner) and *proslambanō* (receive or welcome) indicate that reconciliation is grounded in shared identity in Christ rather than in existing social hierarchies (Moo, 2008). Paul's request therefore transcends legal reconciliation by redefining the relationship between master and slave as one of Christian brotherhood.

The theological climax of the letter appears in Philemon 18–19, where Paul voluntarily assumes Onesimus' financial obligation. The expressions *elloga* ("charge it to my account"), *opheilei* ("owes"), and *apotisō* ("I will repay") demonstrate that reconciliation is not achieved by ignoring wrongdoing but by assuming responsibility for restoring broken relationships (Danker, 2000). This action illustrates what this article describes as substitutive solidarity the willingness of an innocent party to bear another person's burden in order to achieve reconciliation. Although Paul's action is not equivalent to Christ's atoning work, it reflects the same theological pattern evident in Paul's doctrine of reconciliation in Romans 5:6–11 and 2 Corinthians 5:18–21, where Christ bears the consequences of human sin to restore humanity's relationship with God.

Based on these theoretical and empirical discussions, this study positions Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt as the central theological contribution of Philemon 1:17–19. Unlike previous studies that primarily emphasize social identity, slavery, or rhetorical persuasion, this research argues that debt-bearing functions as a theological paradigm of reconciliation that integrates forgiveness, sacrificial solidarity, ethical responsibility, and the restoration of Christian community.

3. Proposed Method

This study employed a qualitative research method using a New Testament exegetical approach to examine Philemon 1:17–19. An exegetical approach was selected because the study seeks to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the theological meaning of reconciliation through a careful interpretation of the biblical text within its historical, grammatical, syntactical, literary, and theological contexts. Rather than relying solely on the literal meaning of the passage, exegesis enables a systematic investigation of the author's intended meaning and its theological implications (Osborne, 2006).

The object of this study is Philemon 1:17–19, the section of Paul's letter in which he asks Philemon to receive Onesimus as a partner in Christ and expresses his willingness to assume any debt or loss caused by Onesimus. This pericope was selected because it constitutes the theological climax of the epistle and provides a distinctive biblical foundation for understanding forgiveness, reconciliation, responsibility, and the restoration of relationships.

The primary source of data is the Greek text of the New Testament, specifically the Nestle–Aland Novum Testamentum Graece, 28th Edition (NA28). The Greek text was employed to facilitate a precise analysis of Paul's lexical choices, grammatical constructions, and syntactical structures. Secondary data were obtained through library research, including New Testament commentaries, Greek lexicons, Pauline theological studies, and recent scholarly publications addressing Philemon, reconciliation, forgiveness, and social relationships within the early Christian community (Fee, 2002).

Data analysis was conducted through four interconnected stages. The analysis began with a historical and literary examination of the relationship among Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus in order to understand the social, cultural, and literary setting of the Epistle to Philemon within the Pauline corpus. Subsequently, the Greek text of Philemon 1:17–19 was examined through grammatical and syntactical analysis, with particular attention given to the expressions *koinōnos* (κοινωνός), *proslambanō* (προσλαμβάνου), *elloga* (ἐλλόγα), *opheilei* (ὀφείλει), and *apotisō* (ἀποτίσω). These terms were analyzed according to their lexical meanings, grammatical forms, and syntactical functions in order to determine their contribution to Paul's theological argument (Mounce, 2019).

The exegetical findings were then interpreted within the broader framework of Pauline theology, particularly Paul's teachings on reconciliation in Romans and 2 Corinthians. This theological synthesis sought to explain how Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt reflects the broader biblical understanding of reconciliation, forgiveness, and restored fellowship in Christ. Finally, the theological implications of the passage were critically evaluated to assess their relevance for the contemporary church, particularly in addressing interpersonal conflicts, fostering forgiveness, and strengthening communal reconciliation.

The overall research procedure is summarized as follows: selection of Philemon 1:17–19 as the research object; historical and literary analysis; grammatical and syntactical analysis of the Greek text; theological synthesis within Pauline theology; and formulation of implications for the contemporary church. This sequence is presented in Figure 1.

Through this methodological framework, the study demonstrates that Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt should be understood not merely as a rhetorical strategy or pastoral mediation but as an expression of substitutive solidarity that reflects the reconciling pattern of Christ's self-giving love. By integrating textual analysis with theological interpretation, this method provides a coherent basis for understanding reconciliation in Philemon 1:17–19 and its significance for contemporary Christian communities.

4. Results and Discussion

Reconciliation as the Restoration of Relationships in Christ

Philemon 1:17 marks the beginning of Paul's theological argument for reconciliation between Philemon and Onesimus. The verse states, “*So if you consider me your partner (κοινωνός, koinōnos), receive him as you would receive me.*” Rather than exercising his apostolic authority to command Philemon, Paul grounds his appeal in the fellowship that already exists between

them. This rhetorical strategy demonstrates that reconciliation in Pauline theology is rooted in a shared identity in Christ rather than in moral obligation or hierarchical authority (Moo, 2008).

The Greek term *koinōnos* (κοινωνός) fundamentally denotes a “partner,” “companion,” “participant,” or “one who shares in fellowship” (Danker, 2000). Throughout Paul's letters, the concepts of *koinōnia* and *koinōnos* signify more than social association; they express participation in Christ and in the mission of the gospel. By employing this term, Paul reminds Philemon that their relationship has been transformed through their common faith in Christ, transcending conventional social ties. Consequently, Paul's appeal is grounded not in his apostolic status but in the shared identity established through the gospel.

This theological emphasis is reinforced by Paul's use of the verb *proslambanō* (προσλαμβάνω), meaning “to receive,” “to welcome,” or “to accept wholeheartedly” (Spicq, 1994). Paul does not merely ask Philemon to permit Onesimus to return but urges him to receive Onesimus with the same acceptance and honor that he would extend to Paul himself. Such reception is not merely administrative or legal; it recognizes Onesimus' dignity and status as a fellow member of the Christian community.

Paul's request carries radical implications within the social context of the Roman world. Legally, Philemon possessed the right to punish Onesimus if he had fled or caused financial loss. Nevertheless, Paul calls for a transformation of the master-slave relationship into one characterized by Christian brotherhood. Reconciliation, therefore, is presented not simply as the resolution of interpersonal conflict but as the transformation of social relationships through the gospel.

This perspective is consistent with Paul's broader theology, particularly Galatians 3:28, which affirms that in Christ distinctions based on ethnicity, social status, or gender no longer determine a person's value or identity. Instead, believers share a new identity that transcends social boundaries and establishes a community of equality and mutual acceptance. Consequently, Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus becomes the logical expression of his new identity in Christ (Wright, 2013).

Furthermore, Paul demonstrates that genuine reconciliation cannot be separated from recognizing the dignity of others. Conflicts often persist because individuals continue to define one another by past failures and offenses. In contrast, Paul urges Philemon to view Onesimus through the lens of his renewed identity as a brother in Christ. This perspective illustrates that Christian reconciliation involves more than overlooking past wrongs; it requires acknowledging God's transforming work in another person's life.

Therefore, Philemon 1:17 reveals that reconciliation in Pauline theology begins with the restoration of one's perception of others. Broken relationships are healed when individuals are regarded according to their shared identity in Christ rather than by the conflicts that once divided them. The passage thus demonstrates that reconciliation extends beyond resolving interpersonal disputes to the formation of a Christian community characterized by acceptance, fellowship, and mutual recognition as members of the body of Christ.

Bearing Debt as a Model of Substitutionary Reconciliation

The theological climax of the Epistle to Philemon appears in verses 18–19, where Paul declares, “If he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account. I, Paul, write this with my own hand: I will repay it.” This statement demonstrates that Paul does more than mediate the conflict between Philemon and Onesimus; he voluntarily assumes responsibility for the consequences of Onesimus' actions. Consequently, Paul's appeal extends beyond pastoral mediation and carries profound theological significance (Wright, 2013).

Grammatically, Paul employs the verb *ἐλλόγα* (*ellogō*), derived from *ellogēo*, meaning “to charge to one's account” or “to reckon as a debt” (Danker, 2000). As a legal and commercial term in the Greco-Roman world, it indicates the formal transfer of financial liability. By using this expression, Paul explicitly requests that any debt incurred by Onesimus be transferred to himself. Thus, reconciliation is not achieved by ignoring wrongdoing but by acknowledging its reality while providing a concrete means for restoring the broken relationship.

Paul further employs the verb *ὀφείλει* (*opheilei*), meaning “to owe” or “to be under obligation” (Kittel & Friedrich, 1967), indicating that reconciliation does not eliminate moral responsibility. Rather than denying the existence of debt, Paul addresses it through voluntary solidarity. This commitment reaches its climax in the declaration *ἐγὼ ἀποτίσω* (*egō apotiso*) “I

myself will repay it" where the emphatic pronoun *egō* underscores Paul's personal commitment to bear a liability that did not originate from himself (Moo, 2008).

Paul's action therefore transcends conventional mediation. Instead of merely facilitating dialogue, he assumes part of the burden necessary to restore the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. This study argues that such an act should be understood as substitutive solidarity, whereby an individual voluntarily bears another person's burden for the sake of reconciliation. While recent studies primarily interpret Paul's appeal through the lenses of social identity, power relations, and rhetorical persuasion (Walsh, 2022; Jipp, 2021), they pay comparatively little attention to the theological significance of Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt. Accordingly, this article proposes that Philemon 18–19 should be interpreted not merely as a rhetorical strategy but as a theological model of reconciliation grounded in sacrificial responsibility.

This interpretation is consistent with Paul's broader theology of reconciliation. In 2 Corinthians 5:18–19, Paul teaches that God reconciled the world to Himself through Christ and entrusted believers with the ministry of reconciliation. Likewise, 2 Corinthians 5:21 presents Christ as the one who bore the consequences of human sin in order to restore humanity's relationship with God (Harris, 2005). Although Paul's action cannot be equated with Christ's atoning work, it reflects the same theological pattern of self-giving love and sacrificial solidarity. Similarly, Romans 5:6–11 emphasizes that reconciliation originates from God's gracious initiative rather than human effort (Schreiner, 2018). Paul's willingness to assume Onesimus' debt therefore embodies this reconciling pattern within the life of the Christian community.

The exegetical analysis demonstrates that reconciliation in Philemon is neither passive nor merely emotional. Genuine reconciliation requires acknowledging wrongdoing, accepting responsibility, and actively participating in restoring broken relationships. By voluntarily bearing Onesimus' debt, Paul presents a paradigm of reconciliation that integrates justice, forgiveness, and sacrificial solidarity. Consequently, Philemon 1:18–19 contributes significantly to Pauline theology by demonstrating that restored relationships often require the active involvement of those willing to bear the cost of peace.

Social Relationship Transformation within the Community of Faith

One of the most significant theological contributions of the Epistle to Philemon is its demonstration that the gospel transforms not only the spiritual relationship between God and humanity but also social relationships within the Christian community. The reconciliation described in Philemon 1:17–19 extends beyond resolving an interpersonal conflict between Philemon and Onesimus; it redefines social relationships on the basis of a shared identity in Christ. Through Paul's appeal, Onesimus is no longer viewed primarily according to his social status but as a brother in the faith.

Understanding this transformation requires attention to the social context of the Roman Empire. Slavery constituted an essential institution of Roman society, in which slaves were legally regarded as the property of their masters and remained under their complete authority (Harrill, 2006). Within this hierarchical structure, an equal relationship between master and slave was virtually unimaginable. If Onesimus had indeed caused financial loss or abandoned his master, Philemon possessed the legal right to punish him in accordance with Roman customs (Lampe, 2011). Consequently, Paul's request that Philemon receive Onesimus again was not merely a personal favor but a theological challenge to prevailing social conventions.

This transformation is anticipated in Philemon 1:16, where Paul describes Onesimus as "no longer as a slave, but more than a slave, a beloved brother." As Witherington (2007) argues, although Paul does not explicitly call for the abolition of slavery, he fundamentally reorients the relationship between master and slave by grounding it in Christian brotherhood rather than social hierarchy. Likewise, Wright (2013) maintains that the gospel creates a new communal identity in which social distinctions no longer determine a person's value before God.

The same theological principle appears in Galatians 3:28, where Paul declares that in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, because all believers are one in Christ Jesus. This statement does not eliminate social distinctions immediately but redefines their

significance within the Christian community. Accordingly, Philemon's acceptance of Onesimus becomes a practical expression of the new identity created through the gospel. Recent scholarship increasingly supports this relational interpretation. Arinder (2024) argues that Paul's appeal implicitly supports the transformation of Onesimus' social status by emphasizing his identity as a fellow believer rather than merely a slave. Similarly, Soon (2023) and Glancy (2023) contend that the Epistle to Philemon illustrates the reconfiguration of early Christian community through new patterns of relationship grounded in shared faith rather than social hierarchy.

This perspective demonstrates that reconciliation in Pauline theology possesses an inherently communal dimension. As Barclay (2015) explains, reconciliation is not limited to resolving personal disputes but creates a community shaped by grace, reciprocity, and mutual participation in Christ. Likewise, Gorman (2017) argues that the church embodies God's reconciling work by becoming a community in which restored relationships testify to the transforming power of the gospel.

Therefore, Philemon 1:17–19 presents reconciliation as the transformation of social relationships through a renewed identity in Christ. Rather than abolishing existing social structures directly, Paul transforms the theological foundation upon which those structures operate. The relationship between Philemon and Onesimus is redefined from one of master and slave to one of brothers in Christ, demonstrating that genuine reconciliation not only restores broken relationships but also reshapes the life of the Christian community.

Implications for the Contemporary Church

The exegetical findings of Philemon 1:17–19 demonstrate that reconciliation in Pauline theology is not merely a theological doctrine but a practical reality that should shape the life of the Christian community. Reconciliation, expressed through acceptance, solidarity, and the willingness to bear another's burden, remains highly relevant for contemporary churches facing interpersonal, institutional, and organizational conflicts. Accordingly, the theological message of this passage extends beyond its historical context and provides practical guidance for ecclesial reconciliation today.

The Church as a Reconciling Community

One of the primary implications of Philemon 1:17–19 is that the church is called to embody God's ministry of reconciliation. Paul affirms in 2 Corinthians 5:18–19 that believers have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation, indicating that reconciliation is not an optional activity but an essential aspect of the church's identity (Harris, 2005). Contemporary churches frequently experience conflicts arising from theological disagreements, leadership disputes, organizational interests, and interpersonal tensions. Such conflicts often damage ecclesial unity and weaken the church's witness. Philemon 1:17–19 demonstrates that reconciliation should aim not at securing victory for one party but at restoring broken relationships. As Volf (1996) argues, genuine reconciliation requires forgiveness, mutual acceptance, and the rebuilding of relationships rather than merely resolving disputes. This perspective is reinforced by Igboin (2024), who argues that the message of Philemon extends beyond personal forgiveness to address injustice, unequal power relations, and social exclusion. Consequently, reconciliation should be understood as both a theological and an ethical responsibility of the contemporary church. Churches are therefore called to cultivate communities characterized by forgiveness, dialogue, accountability, and the restoration of trust.

Leadership as a Ministry of Reconciliation

A second implication concerns the role of Christian leadership. Rather than acting as a judge who determines winners and losers, Paul functions as a mediator who seeks to restore relationships between conflicting parties. As Moo (2008) observes, Paul's pastoral approach is characterized by persuasion, mutual respect, and Christian fellowship rather than coercive authority. This model remains highly relevant for contemporary church leadership. Church leaders may either avoid conflict altogether or attempt to resolve it through institutional power. Philemon offers an alternative model in which reconciliation is pursued through moral influence, pastoral care, and personal example. According to Clarke (2008), Pauline leadership is fundamentally relational and pastoral, requiring leaders to listen carefully, understand the roots of conflict, facilitate dialogue, and promote reconciliation within the community.

Effective Christian leadership therefore involves active participation in restoring relationships rather than merely preserving organizational stability.

Sacrificial Solidarity as the Foundation of Reconciliation

A third implication concerns the necessity of sacrificial solidarity. Paul's willingness to assume Onesimus' debt illustrates that reconciliation often requires personal sacrifice. Broken relationships cannot always be restored through dialogue alone; genuine reconciliation frequently demands concrete actions that demonstrate commitment to peace.

Within the contemporary church, sacrificial solidarity may be expressed through forgiveness, practical assistance, the willingness to bear personal costs for others, and prioritizing communal unity over individual interests. As Gorman (2001) explains, such self-giving reflects the cruciform pattern that lies at the heart of Pauline spirituality. This perspective challenges the individualistic tendencies of modern society, where personal rights frequently take precedence over communal responsibility.

Philemon 1:17–19 instead presents reconciliation as a process in which believers willingly place the restoration of relationships above personal advantage. Such an approach is particularly relevant for churches facing leadership conflicts, generational differences, organizational tensions, and other challenges to communal life. Overall, Philemon 1:17–19 provides a theological paradigm for the contemporary church. Reconciliation is inseparable from the church's identity as a reconciling community, from leadership committed to mediation, and from sacrificial solidarity that seeks the restoration of broken relationships. Together, these dimensions demonstrate that reconciliation in Pauline theology is not merely an ideal doctrine but an essential practice through which the church embodies the reconciling work of Christ in the world.

5. Comparison

The findings of this study both complement and extend existing scholarship on the Epistle to Philemon. Previous studies have made significant contributions by examining the letter from historical, socio-rhetorical, legal, and theological perspectives. Nevertheless, the theological significance of Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt in Philemon 1:17–19 has not been sufficiently explored as a paradigm of Christian reconciliation.

Historical and socio-cultural studies, such as those by Callahan (1997) and Harrill (2006), primarily focus on reconstructing the social world of slavery and the legal relationship between Philemon and Onesimus. These studies provide an important historical foundation for interpreting the letter by explaining the social realities of the Roman world. However, their analyses pay relatively little attention to the theological implications of Paul's personal commitment to assume Onesimus' debt.

Likewise, socio-rhetorical interpretations proposed by Witherington (2007) and Moo (2008) emphasize Paul's persuasive strategy and pastoral approach in encouraging Philemon to receive Onesimus. Their studies successfully demonstrate Paul's rhetorical skill and pastoral sensitivity but generally interpret his promise to repay Onesimus' debt as part of his persuasive technique rather than as the theological center of reconciliation.

More recent scholarship has shifted toward questions of identity, community, and social transformation. Barclay (2015) interprets Philemon within the framework of divine grace, while Gupta (2022), Thiessen (2022), Peppiatt (2023), Soon (2023), and Arinder (2024) emphasize community formation, kinship, social identity, and the transformation of power relations within the early Christian community. These studies broaden the understanding of reconciliation by highlighting its communal and social dimensions. However, they devote limited attention to Paul's willingness to bear another person's obligation as the theological basis of reconciliation.

The present study differs from these previous approaches by placing Philemon 1:17–19 at the center of Pauline reconciliation theology. Through a qualitative exegetical analysis of the Greek text, this study argues that Paul's assumption of Onesimus' debt should not be understood merely as a rhetorical device or pastoral mediation but as an expression of substitutive solidarity. Although Paul's action is not equivalent to Christ's atoning sacrifice, it reflects the same theological pattern of self-giving love that characterizes Christ's reconciling work. This interpretation demonstrates that reconciliation in Pauline theology requires active participation, ethical responsibility, and voluntary sacrifice in restoring broken relationships.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the current state of research by integrating grammatical, syntactical, lexical, literary, and theological analyses of the Greek text with the broader framework of Pauline theology, particularly the concepts of reconciliation developed in Romans and 2 Corinthians. This integrated exegetical approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between reconciliation, responsibility, and communal restoration than studies that focus primarily on historical reconstruction or rhetorical analysis.

Therefore, the principal contribution of this study lies in proposing substitutive solidarity as a theological framework for interpreting Philemon 1:17–19. This perspective expands existing Pauline scholarship by demonstrating that reconciliation is not merely the resolution of interpersonal conflict but a transformative process grounded in sacrificial love, ethical responsibility, and restored relationships. Consequently, the findings provide a theological paradigm that is both academically significant and practically relevant for contemporary churches seeking to embody Christ's ministry of reconciliation.

6. Conclusions

This study examined the theological meaning of reconciliation in Philemon 1:17–19 through a qualitative New Testament exegetical approach. The grammatical, syntactical, and theological analysis of the Greek text demonstrates that reconciliation in this passage extends beyond interpersonal conflict resolution. Rather, it is presented as the restoration of relationships grounded in a new identity in Christ and expressed through acceptance, responsibility, and sacrificial solidarity.

The exegetical analysis of the key terms *κοινωνός* (*κοινωνός*), *προσλαμβάνου* (*προσλαμβάνου*), *ελλογα* (*ἐλλόγα*), *οφείλει* (*ὀφείλει*), and *ἀποτίσω* (*ἀποτίσω*) supports the research objective by showing that Paul's appeal is based not on apostolic authority but on Christian fellowship. Paul's willingness to bear Onesimus' debt demonstrates that reconciliation neither ignores wrongdoing nor eliminates moral responsibility; instead, it restores broken relationships through voluntary participation in another person's burden.

A major finding of this study is that Paul's commitment to assume Onesimus' debt should be understood as an expression of substitutive solidarity. Although Paul's action is not equivalent to Christ's atoning work, it reflects the same theological pattern of self-giving love that characterizes Christ's ministry of reconciliation. This interpretation broadens contemporary Pauline scholarship by identifying substitutive solidarity as a significant theological dimension that has received relatively limited attention in previous studies, which have largely emphasized slavery, rhetoric, or social identity.

The study also demonstrates that reconciliation in Philemon produces the transformation of social relationships within the Christian community. By calling Philemon to receive Onesimus as a beloved brother, Paul redefines relationships on the basis of shared identity in Christ rather than social hierarchy. These findings highlight the ecclesial and ethical implications of reconciliation, showing that the gospel transforms not only individuals but also the structure of community life.

Theoretically, this study contributes to Pauline scholarship by proposing substitutive solidarity as a constructive framework for interpreting Philemon 1:17–19 and enriching contemporary discussions of reconciliation theology. Practically, it offers a biblical paradigm for churches in addressing interpersonal conflict, promoting restorative leadership, and cultivating communities characterized by forgiveness, responsibility, and mutual acceptance.

This study is limited by its focus on Philemon 1:17–19 and therefore does not comprehensively examine the relationship between this passage and the broader Pauline theology of reconciliation. Future research may undertake comparative exegetical studies of Philemon alongside Romans, 2 Corinthians, and other Pauline letters to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the relationship between reconciliation, solidarity, and participation in Paul's theological thought.

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