

## PHILEMON AND ONESIMUS.

"Not very fortunately, we think, for the cause of the oppressor, has the Epistle to Philemon been brought into view, in connection with this discussion. Where is the evidence that Onesimus was a slave at all? The whole epistle is as easily explained on the assumption, that he was a kinsman to Philemon, or a hired servant, who had first robbed his master and then run away from him, as on any other. At the very least, it must be admitted, that the Greek word, by which his relation to Philemon is designated, says nothing specific on this point; and the distinctive word for slave is neither found in this epistle, nor anywhere else in the New Testament, although its derivative, which is commonly rendered 'enslaver,' or 'kidnapper,' or 'manstealer,' has a niche of infamy assigned to it in one of the passages quoted above.

"But suppose that Onesimus was a slave, and suppose farther, if it likes you, that slavery at Colosse was, in his days, as bad as the American slavery of our day, what does Paul do in the case? Does he make himself a slave-catcher? Does he do a single thing, or say a single word, which has the slightest tendency to invest slavery with an atom of respectability? The very reverse. He says to Philemon, receive Onesimus back; but how? 'Not now as a servant, but above a servant;' or, if you will, 'not now as a slave, but above a slave,' 'a brother beloved, specially to me; but how much more to thee, both in the flesh,' as a reclaimed relative, or a fellow-creature, 'and in the Lord as a fellow Christian.' He adds, 'if thou count me, therefore, a partner,' a sharer with thee in the grace of the gospel, then 'receive him,' not as thou wouldst receive back a runaway slave, but as thou wouldst receive 'myself.' Is this like an abettor of slaveholding, even in its mildest form? But the apostle goes on to let Philemon know, that although, in Christian courtesy, he chose to use the language of entreaty, he was entitled to assume a high tone. For, says he, 'I might be much bold in Christ to enjoin thee,' that is, the authority I have from Christ would bear me out in commanding thee not to treat this man as a slave, although, 'for love's sake, I rather beseech thee,' knowing that with thee this is enough. Now let the American churches take the words of Paul to Philemon, and act them out—let them see to it, that all their ministers, and overseers, and members, shall take them, and act them out. Let them do this in honest sincerity, and without the artifice, or evasion, to which they have been so long accustomed, and by one *fiat* of their united will, the connection between Christianity and their slavery is entirely severed—it is gone—it is numbered with the dead, there to rot, and be forgotten in the grave of the detested.

"But some one will say, 'you are reasoning just now on the supposition, that prior to his escape, Onesimus was the slave of Philemon, and, on this supposition does it not follow, that Philemon had been both a Christian and a slaveholder?' This objection is at once plausible and futile. It is, I believe, the very thing which misleads a few in perusing the epistle on which I am commenting. But if by a slaveholder you mean one who treats his fellow creature as a slave, neither Philemon, nor any other man, could be both a Christian and a slaveholder, without committing sin, unless we were to adopt the monstrous alternative, that Christians are at liberty to abuse the unbelievers, and only bound to love one another. Surely Philemon, the Christian, was bound to treat Onesimus according to Christian law, although the latter had never been converted; and Christian law, as we have already seen, and are just about to see further, is utterly at war with practical slaveholding. Again, if by a slaveholder you mean a man who has a servant, whom the law of his country regards as a slave, but whom he treats as a freeman, you remain guilty of misusing a term, but the force of your objection is entirely gone. Take the case of Onesimus, then, any way you please—take him as a free servant, or take him as a slave; the epistle which refers to him says nothing for, but everything against that odious thing called a Christian slaveholder; and I cannot but regard the tenacity with which this case has been seized upon, as indicating a conscious lack of support from the oracles of the living God.