



Date: May 18th, 2014

Title: Transformed Individuals Transform Society

1. Introduction and Greetings (v. 1-3)

- a. Occasion of the letter
- b. Paul claims here to be a prisoner of Christ and repeats it 3 more times in this letter. (vv.9, 13, 23) It is notable that Paul does not call himself a prisoner of Rome, of his circumstances, or even of the religious leaders who started his legal troubles.
- c. Paul calls his readers "*beloved brothers and sisters*" and "*coworkers and fellow soldiers*," that can only increase the impact of his request and enhance the prospect of its compliance. Paul views Philemon as a trusted and dear colleague and treats him as a peer and friend. This attitude undergirds Paul's request that Philemon view the slave Onesimus as a brother and partner in faith. Paul does not call upon his office as apostle, but as a friend.
 - i. Only 4 of the 13 letters (Philemon, Philippians and 1 and 2 Thessalonians) does not include this title in the introduction.
- d. Most scholars speculate that Apphia is Philemon's wife and in the custom of that day she would have been the supervisor of the slaves in the household.
- e. Archippus is mentioned in Colossians 4:17, and the reference as a fellow soldier designates him as one who has "*played an important part in assisting Paul in his missionary labors, and has faithfully stood at his side through persecution and trial – perhaps even imprisonment.*" (O'Brien)
- f. By referencing the church that meets in their home, Paul establishes a critical contrast between a secular household, where slaves are an underclass and often exploited, and the Christian household or church, where slaves are loved and treated as equal partners in the faith. (*cf. Gal. 3:28*)
- g. We should not suppose that living rooms are somehow better places to worship God than downtown sanctuaries. In John's vision of the New Jerusalem, he wrote that he saw no temple during his tour of the city because "*God and the Lamb are its temple...*" (Rev. 21:22). Worship is not determined by places or buildings but by the spiritual vitality of the relationships between a people, God and the Lamb.
- h. Paul's greeting is directed towards to Philemon as an individual which makes this letter unique.

2. Paul's prayer (v. 4-7)

- a. Paul may not always have prayed long, intricate prayers for Philemon, but he did often make mention of him in his prayers with thanksgiving. Paul's prayers serve three purposes:
 - i. Establish good rapport between Paul and his first readers, so that they will respond positively to the advice that follows.
 - ii. Set forth in the context of thanksgiving the religious ideals or moral virtues toward which the congregation should aspire.

- iii. Introduce the spiritual crisis that threatens the readership's spiritual advance.
- b. In the case the letter to Philemon, Paul sets the ideals as faith and love that he would like to see in Philemon's life. The implied question is whether his faith will be shared in a sufficiently active way and whether his love will continue to refresh the hearts of the saints, including Onesimus.
- c. "*All the saints*" means all, not just a few exceptional ones we feel best about.
- d. "*...every good thing which is in you in Christ Jesus.*" The foundation for all effective evangelism is the overflow of a life touched and changed by God. God had done every good thing in the life of Philemon, now it was a matter of it being acknowledged by both Philemon. As these good things are understood, other people will come to Jesus.
- e. "*...the sharing of your faith...*" Paul is primarily focused on the kind of fruit that God harvests in the relations between believers. Paul implies that Philemon ought to welcome Onesimus gladly as an equal partner, *koinonos*, as a part of the Christian community, *koinonia*, in the sense of sharing a faith and missionary purpose.
 - i. *Koinonia* requires a particular understanding of the church's corporate life. God calls each believer into a congregation and provides each with certain gifts and opportunities to minister to other believers, so that all may be brought to maturity together in Christ Jesus (*cf.* 1 Cor. 12; Eph. 4:1-16). This sense of partnership marks out a congregation's *koinonia* and is found where persons view one another as equals in worth and importance. It aims at partnership, *koinonos*, with Christ in God's salvation, so that with Him we are able to find those resources necessary to enable us to minister, to love, to view one another as important and valuable. Christianity is about a transformation of the way we see and think about other people. When we begin to view others as those with whom life and faith are shared equally in Christ, arrogance and bigotry are finished. (Wright)
 - ii. Paul's reference to Philemon's faith Paul is his public demonstration of Christian faith rather than his personal faith in Jesus Christ. While the immediate result of Philemon's faith is *koinonia*, the ripple effect in society is extraordinary. Our experience of divine grace moves us toward unity with Christ and His Church.
- f. "*For we have great joy and consolation in your love...*" This verse complements the core idea of *koinonia*, and reveals Paul's incentive for prayer that the essential characteristic of and the incentive for *koinonia* is love. Compassion is not a detached emotion; rather, it is an experience of lovers who are moved by and toward someone else in order to love and care for that person.
- 3. Paul's plea. (v. 8-22) The body of this letter is about newness of life in Christ and transformed relationships.
 - a. Paul begins by drawing upon his relationship to Philemon. Paul appeals for love's sake instead of making a command. Of course, under the surface Paul made it clear that he had the right to command you what is fitting – yet he appealed in love.
 - i. "*...being such a one as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ.*" Paul's advancing age and imprisonment have literally cost him dearly. The difficulty of his circumstances now obliges Philemon to come to his aid by granting his request. Paul's appeal

is made within a culture where the request of an elderly person ought to be granted; not to do so would have been considered shameful.

- ii. *"I appeal to you for my son Onesimus..."* Onesimus was an escaped slave who escaped from his master Philemon and fled to Rome. Intentionally or not, he met with Paul who, though under house arrest by the Romans, led Onesimus to faith in Jesus Christ.
- iii. *"...who once was unprofitable to you, but now is profitable to you and to me."* Perhaps Onesimus served Paul during his house arrest, so that Philemon's runaway slave who was longer profitable to him had become profitable to Paul. Thus Onesimus now becomes profitable to Philemon because Philemon loved Paul and if Onesimus helped Paul he was helping Philemon also.
 - 1. Paul is making a word play by speaking of Onesimus as being unprofitable and profitable. The name Onesimus means *"profitable,"* so now that he was a Christian he could live up to his name
- b. *"I am sending him back. You therefore receive him..."* Onesimus had done something wrong by running away from his master and it was time to set that right. Paul was willing to send him back, but he obviously wanted Philemon to deal gently with Onesimus. The story of Philemon and Onesimus tells us that our common status in Christ is more than simply a spiritual or eschatological reality. When Paul writes that there is neither slaves nor masters in Christ, since all are equal (see Col. 3:11), he is articulating a principle that is sociological as well as Christological. (cf. Gal. 3:28; Eph. 2:11-22) The social dimension of the gospel should not replace the call to a saving relationship with the Lord, but we must understand that God's grace rearranges the various conventions and hierarchies that order society's status quo. Many of the social-transformative movements, such as women's suffrage, abolitionism, human rights and prolife movements are deeply rooted in Christian teaching and indebted to the work of faithful Christians (Dayton 1990). The letter to Philemon provides a concrete illustration of this important element of Pauline teaching and we need to remind ourselves that Christian discipleship includes both a personal and a public outworking.
 - i. Onesimus was obligated to return to his master. When we do something wrong, we must do our best to set it right.
 - ii. Paul wanted Onesimus to stay, because he had become a big help but he would not trample the rights Philemon had over Onesimus. Philemon's good deed could not be compulsive but voluntary. If Onesimus stayed with Paul:
 - 1. He would serve Paul on Philemon's behalf.
 - 2. He would help a man in chains.
 - 3. He would help a man in chains for the sake of the gospel.
 - iii. *"...perhaps he departed for a while for this purpose..."* Onesimus and Philemon are now brothers and partners in Christ which they share for an eternity so Paul asks him to re-view his perception of his slave. Our convictions about God ought to prompt our decisions about

- the social order. As Philemon trusts that God purposes good ends for God's people, he will make a natural, free decision about Onesimus that will result in good.
- iv. The spiritual well-being of the congregation will always be demonstrated publicly by the well-being of its social relationships.
 - v. Paul gave Philemon the freedom to do what was right in love before the Lord.
 - vi. Paul laid the foundation for the eventual legal abolition of slavery. If a man is a stranger, I might make him my slave. But how can my brother be my slave? The transformation of the individual is the key to the transformation of society and the moral environment.
- c. *"If then you count me as a partner, receive him as you would me."* Paul returns to his relationship with Philemon to restate his request for Onesimus' emancipation in terms of four demands. Paul addresses Philemon in a forcefully personal way, and each demand is tied to the idea of an exchange illustrating Paul's Christology: *"Christ became what we are so that we might become what he is."* Because Philemon and Onesimus are brothers in Christ and spiritual children of Paul, then they are also partnered with Christ to participate together in God's salvation. Each demand helps Philemon understand that Christ's exchange for him must be concretely demonstrated by welcoming his slave home as an equal *koinonos* in the *koinonia* of the congregation's life.
- i. *"...receive him as you would me."* As a theological abstraction and spiritual reality, this substitution is may not be too difficult to swallow. But Onesimus is a crisis that Philemon cannot avoid; his conversion to being a *koinonos* in Philemon's *koinonia* cannot be acknowledged from afar. It must be dealt with in person by first recognizing and honoring him as Paul's substitute, but then welcoming him as though he were a spiritual partner within the very household he once served as a slave.
 - 1. Religious conversions have very public results. They are not events that just happen to us and are then privatized and compartmentalized so they do not intrude on our other activities. Conversion joins the believer with Christ in the cosmic salvation of God, whose grace transforms every aspect of human life. We must realize that in the crisis of a difficult reunion how we relate to one another has changed because of the changes that have taken place in us.
 - 2. Philemon is no longer his lord but a brother; they are partnered together with the Lord Jesus for their mutual salvation.
 - ii. *"...if he has wronged you or owes anything, put that on my account."* While Paul owes Philemon nothing, even as Christ owes us nothing, he involves himself in Onesimus' affairs in order to pay his debt, whether financial or interpersonal, even as Christ who knew no sin took upon himself the sins of us all. (cf. Rom. 5:6-11) Paul's offer to pay Onesimus' costs is canceled by Philemon's own debt to Paul for his very life in Christ. Paul's main concern is reconciliation, not mere the settling of debts; reconciliation will result in Onesimus' freedom.
 - iii. *"...refresh my heart in the Lord."* The believer's participation in Christ transforms his capacity to act in refreshing ways that build *koinonia*. Earlier in the letter, Paul said that Philemon was

a man who refreshed the heart of the saints, now he can refresh Paul's own heart which Paul fully believes he will do.

- iv. *"...prepare a guest room for me..."* Paul visits people to test and empower them for ministry. The reason for Paul's visits implies the hope of dispensing the gift of his apostleship. Paul wants to visit Philemon and the others in person to fortify their resolve with regard to Onesimus. The intent of his anticipated visit is not merely friendly and casual but apostolic and official. Through an official visit, the apostle makes certain that his request is acted on by Philemon and that the results in the congregation's life are positive. Otherwise, Paul's ministry will enable Philemon to become more mature to the point of granting Paul's request. Paul's mention of his travel plans is *"no courtesy gesture"* but a convention of his writing used to *"drive home a point."*

4. Paul's benediction (v. 23-25)

- a. The names listed are the same as those in the letter to the Colossians leading us to conclude that Philemon lived in Colosse.
- b. Paul's participatory Christology: God's salvation-creating grace transforms the believer who actively collaborates with Christ in the ongoing work of God.
- c. In 110AD, the bishop of Ephesus was named Onesimus who may have been this same man. If Onesimus was in his late teens or early twenties when Paul wrote this letter, he would then be about 70 years old in 110AD and that was not an unreasonable age for a bishop in those days. There is also some historical evidence that the letters of Paul were first gathered as a group in the city of Ephesus. One commentator has written that perhaps Onesimus first compiled the letters, and wanted to make sure his letter, his charter of freedom, was included.

5. Take-aways

- a. Paul never called for an overthrow of the system of slavery, yet the principles in the letter to Philemon destroy slavery. The greatest social changes come when people are changed, one heart at a time.
- b. Onesimus was obligated to return to his master. When we do something wrong, we must do our best to set it right. Being made a new creation in Christ (*cf. 2 Cor. 5:17*) does not end our responsibility to make restitution; it increases our obligation, even when restitution is difficult.
- c. Onesimus was morally responsible for his wrongs. The letter demonstrates that we are not primarily directed by economics, rich or poor, we are to be directed by the Spirit of God.
- d. Spiritual well being leads to social well being
- e. Conversions has public impacts