

A Study from Philemon
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New series Philemon

From the Book of Philemon. THE ELEVATION OF FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST ABOVE TIME.
PART 1: THE SUPERNATURAL LANGUAGE COMMONS, v.1-3.

#1. The apostle was addressing a certain and potentially disruptive circumstance in this book. It could have been any general kind of situation that led to disunity among Christians.

#2 In order to help shape perceptions and perspectives of the particular circumstance, "Paul" employed what one may refer to as A LANGUAGE COMMONS. A "commons" is a space set aside and devoted to shared interests. That shared basis, in this case, was one of shared language.

#3. The LANGUAGE COMMONS he used RECALCULATED and by that, ELEVATED the meaning and significance of FELLOWSHIP between believers and that between God and men.

#4. "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (v.1), argued that his "imprisonment" (v.10) was a direct result of his fellowship with the Lord. That language elevated the meaning of his circumstance above the temporal.

- "...and Timothy our brother" (v.1) means that brotherhood does not rest anymore on mere temporal physical relations; it is a spiritual relation.
- "To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker" (v.1) implies COMMONALITY OF PURPOSE.
- "and to Apphia our sister", "Archippus our fellow soldier", imposed a greatly enhanced meaning on their relation in Christ.
- "...the church in your house" (v.2), brings a revealed eternal dimension to their FELLOWSHIP.
- "...God our Father" (v.3), is a term marking A COMMON DESCENT FROM A COMMON ORIGIN. "...the Lord Jesus Christ" (v.3) signals a non-temporal regulating power behind time and circumstance.

#5. In order to create a SPIRITUAL FELLOWSHIP and allow for a proliferation of revealed understanding to flourish, we must have A SUPERNATURAL LANGUAGE COMMONS.

#6. There is an inherent contradiction between the language commons fed to us from cultural, social, traditional sources and THE REVEALED LANGUAGE COMMONS supplied to us by the Word of God!

#7. From the first century to this day, churches have suffered internal dissension and worse, for lack of the development of A SUPERNATURAL INSPIRED LANGUAGE COMMONS. Without that, how shall we prepare new generations of leaders, brothers, sisters, fellow workers and fellow soldiers?

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PART 2: THE EFFECTIVE FAITH, v.4-6.

#1. "...and I pray that the fellowship of your faith may become effective through the knowledge of every good thing which is in you for Christ's sake", v.6.

#2. What then is the STRUCTURE OF EFFECTIVE FAITH? One's faith must act upon revealed truth. By that willful and discriminating action then, THE EFFECTIVE FAITH IS CONSTRUCTED and put into action.

#3. This means, necessarily, that there is a spiritual condition that answers to the descriptive terms of INEFFECTIVE FAITH. That is a kind of faith that changes nothing, corrects nothing, means nothing.

#4. In the condition of INEFFECTIVE FAITH, one remains largely on the plane of the unspiritual. Therefore, THERE IS A KIND OF FAITH THAT IS SPIRITUALLY USELESS IN THE WORLD.

#5. A personal EFFECTIVE FAITH transcends the singular and takes on aggregate proportions. One immediate product of such a strong personal faith is "THE FELLOWSHIP OF YOUR FAITH"-- that shared by others.

#6. Just such a result was always the purpose of the apostolic teaching brought to bear upon "the church in your house". This is more than aspiration; it is a way of life.

#7. Paul intends for believers to understand that the church holds up against world pressures by standing upon the foundation of EFFECTIVE FAITH.

#8. Faith is not merely ASCRIPTION TO PARTICULAR DOCTRINES. EFFECTIVE FAITH is a way of dealing with the world; whether it is worldly influence within the church or that which always imposes upon people of faith, from without.

#9. Inarguably, EFFECTIVE FAITH functions to exert SPIRITUAL LEVERAGE upon individual thought, speech and behavior. Beyond that, it must accordingly exercise disciplinary influence upon the collective of the body of believers.

#10. Every church will exhibit internal tensions between those who have grown into EFFECTIVE FAITH and those who linger in the ranks of INEFFECTIVE FAITH.

#11. The church could serve as an example of dealing with divisive SOCIAL ISSUES (like political slavery and others like abortion, same-sex marriage) provided the avowed and determined purpose is pursuing EFFECTIVE FAITH.

#12. The motive is "for Christ's sake", well beyond our own.

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PART 3: ABSOLUTE RESPONSES, v.7-9.

#1. Issues both trivial and non-trivial are always going to surface within the body of Christ. Believers are not free to respond to those eventualities by the measures of human lived experience. Quite to the contrary, the believer's reactions are to be drawn from the revealed Word of God. These ways of dealing with circumstances we may refer to as ABSOLUTE RESPONSES.

#2. "Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do what is proper, yet for love's sake I rather appeal to you--since I am such a person as Paul, the aged, and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus--", v.8, 9.

#3. That which is "proper" is posted by the revealed truth. This is not just the apostle's idea; it is apostolic because it is ABSOLUTE. Anything, everything stipulated by the Almighty is ABSOLUTE. He requires ABSOLUTE RESPONSES TO HUMAN TEMPORAL CIRCUMSTANCES.

#4. So, it must be the case that our every ABSOLUTE RESPONSE to situations garners the approval of the Lord. And that, we may call SPIRITUAL CAPITAL. In any and every situation we can and should function on that SPIRITUAL CAPITAL! Philemon is admonished to respond to circumstance in terms of the "proper"; meaning the ABSOLUTE.

#5. This is not the modus operandi of "problem solving". Highly counterintuitive, Christians are not primarily motivated to solve problems. We, as was Philemon, are exercised by the pursuit of the "proper"; the ABSOLUTE RESPONSE. We so respond and it is the Lord who corrects the problem.

#6. Paul was in a position to "order" Philemon to comply. But he preferred a wholehearted ABSOLUTE RESPONSE coming forth from the ELEVATED CHARACTER ("for love's sake") of Philemon and the brethren in that place.

#7. ABSOLUTE RESPONSES are not rationalized; they are revealed. It is safe to presume that every kind of temporal circumstance, situation and historical condition is an opportunity (a test) to put/force ABSOLUTE RESPONSES into temporal experience. THIS MAGNIFICENT REVEALED TRUTH CHANGES ALL THE RULES OF INTERACTION! THINK OF IT!

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PART 4: SYMBOLISM SUPPLANTS RATIONALIZATION, v.10-17.

#1. "I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment", v.10. At the point of encounter between the two, Onesimus was not a Christian. The conversion of this man to Christ reversed general circumstances.

#2. MOST NOTABLE: The Christianity of Onesimus could not be fitted within his previous historical setting. To the contrary, his immediate circumstances had to be fitted within the spiritual context of his turn to Christ.

#3. Philemon and the "the church in (his) house" (v.2) were expected to respect that principle of THE DISPLACEMENT OF THE PAST.

#4. And there was something else. THE APOSTLE PRESENTED THE CONVERTED ONESIMUS AS A SYMBOL. He was "my child Onesimus"... "begotten in my imprisonment". Philemon then knew that he was about to receive back "Onesimus", THE SPIRITUAL PERSONA, (one who functions through revealed truth).

#5. Philemon was getting back more than he lost; "Onesimus" was "formerly... useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me", v.11.

#6. "Onesimus" was, by apostolic preference, to be understood as a SYMBOL OF THE ENTIRE APOSTOLIC MISSION TO PROCLAIM THE GOSPEL. "I have sent him back to you in person, that is sending my very heart", v.12.

#7. THE PROVIDENCE OF GOD HAD TURNED THIS POLITICAL SLAVE INTO A VESSEL OF SYMBOLISM. "For perhaps he was for this reason separated from you for a while, that you would have him back forever", v.15.

#8. The church on earth is to be a redemptive collective. To be that kind of people, we must relate to each other as symbols and not according to human rationalistic standards of personal judgment.

#9. Spiritual biblical symbolism is intended to SUPPLANT RATIONALISTIC IMPRESSIONS OF ONE ANOTHER. In turn believers must strive to live up to that symbolism. "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", v.16.

#10. Biblical symbolism is a way of reasoning. It allows for significant distinction between that and rationalism. THE FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST cannot be preserved without it. Churches, marriages, families and brotherhood cannot derive their meaning nor maintain their integrity without the SUPPRESSION OF RATIONALIZATION THROUGH THE POWERS OF SUPERNATURAL SYMBOLISM.

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PART 5: THE REMARKABLE, INSUPERABLE CONTEXT OF FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST, v.17-25.

#1. The FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST, about which the apostle wrote to Philemon and to all of us as well, is presented as A KIND OF CONTEXT.

2. "Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say", v.21. Obedience to the word of God is the baseline, but more is better!

#3. Philemon was admonished to "accept him (Onesimus) as you would me" (v.17); to "charge" Paul "if he (Onesimus) has wronged you in any way" (v.18); "I will repay it", (v.19).

#4. The apostolic point in all of this is to build up FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST AS A FULL CONTEXT THAT IS, IN EFFECT, STRONGER THAN POLITICAL SLAVERY, PERSONAL DIFFERENCES, RACIAL BIASES and STRONGER THAN THE HAPLESS TEMPORAL PRESSURES TENDING TO DISSOLUTION OF THE BODY OF CHRIST!

#5. Example: If slave owner and slave both become Christians, then the social foundation of slavery simply dissipates. Why? Because FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST acts as a controlling context over the thought, speech and behavior of every believer. That is the power of obedience plus more (v.21).

#6. "Epaphras", "Mark", "Aristarchus", "Demas", "Luke", "Paul", "Philemon", "Onesimus", "the church in your house" were all to live within THE RULING CONTEXT OF FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST.

#7. Fellowship is not strictly a sharing of commonly held doctrines. We do not deprecate biblical doctrine; however FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST must assume the dimensions of A RULING CONTEXT. Suppose marriages, families, personal relations of all kinds and brotherhood were all reconfigured from within the FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST?

#8. Such a kind of fellowship is not of this world; it is a SUPERNATURAL ARRANGEMENT. THE RULING CONTEXT OF FELLOWSHIP IN CHRIST, OVERRULES THE PERSONAL DRIVE FOR HUMANISTIC SATISFACTION.

#9. As the apostle hoped, "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit", v.25.