



CAPITOL COMMISSION

A Connected Life (Philemon 1-2)

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Philemon 1-2b – [1] Paul, a prisoner for Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved fellow worker— [2] and Apphia our sister and Archippus our fellow soldier—and the church in your house:

WHY THE CHURCH?

This personal letter opens with Paul's greeting to his close friend Philemon; it is the only one as such that we have from the hand of Paul. It is interesting to note how he changes the opening from the formal one used in his other letters; more will be said on this later. The letter opens by identifying its two authors, Paul and Timothy. While Paul's personal interactions with both Philemon and Onesimus are noted throughout this letter, one may wonder why Timothy was included as an author. The reason for this may be two-fold. First, it is likely that Timothy ministered with Paul in Ephesus, since this is the probable location where Paul introduced Philemon to Christ; a relationship with the two quite possibly was formed. ⁽¹⁾ Second, including Timothy as an author, Paul is communicating to Philemon that Timothy is aware of the contents of the letter and is in agreement with its thrust. Since, Paul is making a personal appeal; it only makes sense to include another friend in the appeal to add weight to this request.

Normally Paul would include a title, such as "apostle" because this carried with it the authority needed to address the demands of a given situation. In the book of Philippians, he introduced himself as "slave" which seems to be the title he preferred (Phil 1:1). However, in this situation he did not use either title. Neither would have been appropriate since Philemon was a dear friend and invoking any such title would have been out of place in their relationship. Paul did describe his current situation; he was a "prisoner for Christ Jesus." It is best to understand this as a description of his location and possibly the reason he was unable to travel with Onesimus and present his request for Onesimus' forgiveness in person. ⁽¹⁾

After introducing himself and Timothy his coauthor, Paul turns his attention to the recipients of this letter. This correspondence is addressing Philemon directly, yet we find the letter contains three other readers. The first addressee was Philemon and it appears he was a man of some wealth because he possessed at least one slave and owned a house large enough for the church to meet. "In the major cities, most people lived in rooms, rather than houses, and the fact that he had room enough for a meeting suggests he had above average means." ⁽¹⁾

Philemon is also called a dear friend and fellow worker. These terms reveal a closeness and affection between Paul and Philemon which makes this request all the more remarkable. In this letter, Paul was willing to risk his friendship with Philemon to request the reconciliation of Onesimus, his runaway slave. The second addressee is Apphia, who is referred to as "our sister."

The name is distinctively Phrygian and occurs often in extra-biblical writings. She was obviously a Christian who was well known to Paul. Many commentators surmise Apphia is the wife of Philemon, with Archippus, the third person mentioned in the letter, as their son.

What is curious is the final recipient of this letter; Paul addresses it to "the church in your house." Here, we see a personal situation that directly involved Paul, Philemon and Onesimus. Yet, we find the letter is addressed to these four readers. If scholars are correct that Apphia is possibly Philemon's wife and Archippus, also mentioned in the letter to the Colossians (Col 4:17), as possibly his son, then it is understandable why Paul includes members of Philemon's family as recipients of this letter. However, this letter is also addressed to the church that meets in your home. This letter while personal in nature was to be read by Tychicus in front of the whole church. Why does Paul include the church in a personal matter involving Philemon, his family and a runaway slave? Before we answer this question, it might be helpful to gather some background information concerning the word "church."

WHAT IS THE CHURCH?

In today's colloquial language, the word church is often used to describe an organization or a building. However, this was not the concept communicated throughout the NT. The word for church (V2) in Greek is *ekklesia*. The noun *ekklesia* is derived etymologically from ἐκ and καλέω; accordingly it was used to designate "(the totality of) those who are called out." ⁽²⁾ In the NT, the way the word *ekklesia* is used varies considerably. 1) It is sometimes used to refer to a church meeting, as when Paul says, "...when you assemble as a church (ekklesia)" (1 Cor 11:18). 2) It can also refer to the totality of the Christians living in a specific area, as in the phrases, "the church" (*ekklesia*) of Jerusalem (Acts 8:1). 3) In other texts, local house assemblies of Christians are called churches, such as the one that met in the home of Philemon (Phm 1:2). ⁽³⁾

When considering Paul's writings, he uses the term *ekklesia* to speak about individual congregations, as seen in the passage above. However, in some of his later writings, Paul begins to flesh out the fundamental nature of the term *ekklesia*. This is seen clearly in Paul's letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians where he links Christology and ecclesiology in such a way, that every statement about the Church is a statement about Christ. This takes place as Paul elaborates on the concept that the Church is the body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:27 - Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

The relationship between Christ and the Church is seen in two ways. First it should be understood that Church is founded upon Christ's sacrificial death on the cross. Jesus sets for His body the pattern of one's life in this world. We see this described in

Pennsylvania

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Col 1:24, Paul tells the church of Colossae, the city in which Philemon lived, he rejoices over the suffering that he is experiencing for them. His joy comes from the fact that in suffering for his brothers and sisters in Colossae, he is really suffering for Jesus himself. We see that suffering was not only the way the body of Christ, the Church, was brought into existence. It was also through suffering that the Church was established by Paul and will continue to be established in our day.

Second, we find that not only is the Church founded on Christ, he is also the head of the Church. Col 1:17ff states, Jesus is before all things, and in him, all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church. This hymn had its concern about Christ's lordship over all creation. Again we find Paul tying what is true for Christ to be true for the Church. He is showing us that the lordship of Christ over the world is presently visible only when the Church has its orientation by faith on the head. Because the Church is his body, it alone has the capability and mission to call the world back to Christ's lordship and thus become obedient to its creator. As Eph 3:10 says, through the Church, the manifold wisdom of God is declared to the principalities and power in the heavenly places.

From these passages, we understand the fundamental nature of the church. The church as defined and established in the Bible is not to be primarily understood as an organization, let alone a building. The foundational understanding of the church must be realized as a living and breathing organism - it is the body of Christ; it is the fullness of the Son of God. In understanding these two foundational truths concerning the Church, we begin to glimpse Paul's reasoning for including the Church in the greeting of his letter to Philemon. For Paul, all matters that arose in an individual's life were framed in his understanding of the Church, in respect to these two key principles. First, the Church of Jesus Christ was founded and will be established on the basis of sacrifice. Second, the Body of Jesus Christ is exalted and draws the world to itself when it reflects the character of its head.

LIFE AS THE CHURCH!

THE CHURCH-COMMUNITY HAS, THEREFORE, A VERY REAL IMPACT ON THE LIFE OF THE WORLD. IT GAINS SPACE FOR CHRIST. FOR WHEREVER IS "IN CHRIST" IS NO LONGER UNDER THE DOMINION OF THE WORLD, OR SIN, OR THE LAW. WITHIN THE NEWLY CREATED COMMUNITY, ALL THE LAWS OF THIS WORLD HAVE LOST THEIR BINDING FORCE. THIS SPHERE IN WHICH BROTHERS AND SISTERS ARE LOVED WITH CHRISTIAN LOVE IS SUBJECT TO CHRIST; IT IS NO LONGER SUBJECT TO THE WORLD.

BONHOEFFER, COST OF DISCIPLESHIP

So, getting back to the question, Why does Paul include the Church in the opening of this letter to Philemon? For Paul, this matter went to the very heart of what the body of Christ was to accomplish in this world. It was never enough for Paul to bring reconciliation of a sinner to their Savior; this reconciliation always had implications in the real world. If a person was brought into a relationship with Jesus, he was also brought into community with those in the body of Christ. For in this way, the body of Christ advances on this world, it changes the world when we make decisions that are best for the body, and in so doing, we sacrifice ourselves for Jesus Christ.

For us today, we face the same situation. Our lives matter to other people; what we do can either encourage Christian character in others, or allow people to settle for what they see happening around them. How many times have we excused our own actions because we have seen other believers do something similar? While we are called to be like Christ and to measure our lives based on the example he sets, we still look at other's actions. If we do not have examples of people standing for Jesus and obeying him regardless of the costs, we will find it easy to compromise. Paul was making it clear to Philemon, this was bigger than a personal matter between a couple individuals, it affected the church-community. What he did had kingdom implications; it is no different for us today. People are watching; our choices matter because what we do can either inspire them to sacrifice themselves for the body of Christ or allow their interests to rule the day. In reflecting the character of Jesus, we claim for him a piece of the world, in living as He would live we are advancing His kingdom.

THE WHOLE FABRIC OF CHRISTIANITY STANDS OR FALLS WITH ITS DIVINE-HUMAN FOUNDER; AND IF IT CAN NEVER PERISH, IT IS BECAUSE CHRIST LIVES THE SAME YESTERDAY, TODAY, AND FOREVER.

PHILIP SCHAFF

He lives in this world on the basis of His body, the Church, who is called to reflect his nature in this world.

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