

Philemon

In the New Testament, Philemon comes at the end of a major section of the apostle Paul's writings. This section begins with 1 Timothy and concerns the practice of God's New Testament economy,¹ which is carried out in the church as the house of the living God (3:15). "First Timothy unveils to us God's economy concerning the church, 2 Timothy inoculates us against the decline of the church, and Titus is concerned with maintaining the order of the church" (Recovery Version, 1 Tim. 1:1, note 1). As the concluding book of this section, Philemon reveals a particular and crucial aspect of this practice.

Among the basic and crucial matters that Paul stresses in the books of 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus, life, the eternal life of God, is critical (1 Tim. 1:16; 6:12, 19; 2 Tim. 1:1, 10; Titus 1:2; 3:7). The other basic matters—the faith (objective, referring to the items in which we believe), the truth (or reality), healthy teaching, words, and speech, godliness, faith (subjective, referring to our act of believing), and the conscience²—all depend upon the eternal life, because it is the means and the power to carry out these divine realities of the faith. In Philemon the operation of the divine life is vividly portrayed. Apparently, Paul wrote this Epistle to restore a runaway slave to his master. Actually, "this short Epistle serves the special purpose of showing us the equality, in God's eternal life and divine love, of all the members in the Body of Christ" (Recovery Version, Philem. 16, note 1). In Philemon the power of the divine life lived out in love enables the believers to overcome such a great institutional evil as slavery in order that there could be equal fellowship among the members of the church, the Body of Christ.

Such a life with such a love in equal fellowship is well able to maintain good order in the church (in Titus), carry out God's economy concerning the church (in 1 Timothy), and stand against the tide of the church's decline (in 2 Timothy). (Note 1)

Philemon was a wealthy free man who lived in the city of Colossae (Philem. 2, cf. Col. 4:17). It seems most likely that he and his family, including his wife Apphia and son Archippus (Philem. 2), had been saved though Paul (v. 19), and they had subsequently become intimate associates of the apostle (vv. 1-2, 17). Now Paul was imprisoned in Rome³ (v. 9), many hundreds of miles away

from Colossae. One of Philemon's slaves, Onesimus (v. 10), had run away from his master. Eventually, Onesimus had come to Rome, where he met the prisoner Paul, who preached the good news of Jesus Christ to him. Onesimus believed and through faith was born of the eternal life of God. He became both a brother in Christ (Col. 4:9, Philem. 16) and a child in faith to the prisoner Paul (v. 10).

In the Lord's sovereignty this miraculous turn of events provided Paul with the opportunity to write this short Epistle that eventually became part of the New Testament. Paul, the aged apostle (v. 9), wanted Onesimus to remain with him to minister to him in his imprisonment (vv. 11, 13), but he had no liberty to do so without Philemon's willing consent (v. 14). Correspondence alone would not have been adequate for this, because Paul wanted Philemon's decision to be entirely voluntary (v. 14). So he sent Onesimus back to his master with this tender and intimate letter.

As a runaway, Onesimus faced an uncertain reception on his return, possibly even severe punishment. Roman law at that time gave masters absolute rights over their slaves, even to the extent of taking their lives. It seems that Onesimus may have defrauded his master (v. 18), and the amount he had stolen may not have been small. However, Paul assured Philemon that whatever Onesimus owed, he, Paul, would repay (vv. 18-19). "In caring for Onesimus, Paul did exactly what the Lord Jesus does for us"; he was willing to pay everything for Onesimus "just as the Lord pays everything for His redeemed" (Recovery Version, v. 18, note 2; v. 19, note 1). Now Paul expected that Philemon would receive Onesimus back, no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother (v. 16), even as he would receive Paul himself (v. 17). Paul was confident that Philemon would obey his charge and do beyond what he said with regard to Onesimus (v. 21).

The significance of this letter lies, first, in the change of Onesimus's status from that of a slave to a brother (vv. 4-16) and, second, in the way that Paul recommended Onesimus to Philemon for his acceptance (vv. 17-22). Onesimus's change of status occurred as a result of Paul's begetting him through the gospel (v. 10; 1 Cor. 4:15). When Onesimus believed the word of the gospel preached

by Paul, he was born anew (John 3:3). By believing into Christ, he received the eternal life of God. This was a divine birth, through which the divine life was imparted into him, causing him to be regenerated as a child of God, born of God (vv. 6, 15; 1:12-13).

Regeneration is accomplished in the human spirit by the Holy Spirit of God with God's life, the uncreated eternal life. Thus, to be regenerated is to have the divine, eternal life (in addition to the human, natural life) as the new source and new element of a new person. (Recovery Version, John 3:6, note 2)

“Regeneration enlivens us with God's life, bringing us into a relationship of life, an organic union, with God” (Recovery Version, 1 Pet. 1:3, note 4).

Through regeneration, Onesimus entered into a relationship in the divine life with God, whom he could now genuinely call “Father” (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Moreover, he also had a relationship with the other believers in Christ. He had become their brother, born of the same divine Father (1 Pet. 1:3), sharing the same divine life (1 John 1:2-3), and a member of the same household (Eph. 2:19; Gal. 6:10). In particular, to Paul he had become a child, because Paul was the one who had begotten him. This indicates that Paul had not merely instructed him in certain teachings concerning Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 4:15) but had imparted the divine life to him through the Spirit. For this begetting Paul had suffered (“in my bonds”—Philem. 10) like a mother in the travail of childbirth in order that Christ might be born into Onesimus (Gal. 4:19).

Paul's recommendation of Onesimus for acceptance by Philemon and all the saints was a matter of love. Merely to charge Philemon what was fitting (Philem. 8) in a legal way would have been inadequate. Rather, “because of love” (v. 9) Paul urged Philemon to receive Onesimus back as his brother. In this Epistle the matter of love is invoked repeatedly (vv. 5, 7, 9). Indeed, Paul uses many intimate terms—a *beloved brother* (v. 16), *the sister* (v. 2), *our beloved and fellow worker* (v. 1), *our fellow soldier* (v. 2), *my fellow workers* (v. 24), *my fellow prisoner* (v. 23), *a partner* (v. 17)—all of which indicate “the apostle's intimate sentiment concerning his relationship with the members in the new man” (Recovery Version, Philem. 16, note 3). Furthermore, Philemon was an outstanding believer in the matter of love and faith (v. 5). His faith toward the Lord had become a fellowship that was effective in all the saints, and his love refreshed their inward parts (vv. 6-7). Yet his love to which Paul appealed (v. 9) would be sorely tested by the need to receive Onesimus. The one who had previously been his possession, his chattel, and who had also wronged him several times over, was now his brother in the Lord, needing his

forgiveness and loving acceptance as a fellow member of the Body of Christ.

The love among the members of Christ's Body for one another far exceeds the capacity of human virtue alone, even when inspired by the love of Christ in His redemption. This divine love comes from the divine life that is in all the believers, and it is the expression of God whose element is life (1 John 4:8; John 1:1, 4; Eph. 4:18). Love is the first item of the fruit of the Spirit who is of life and who gives life (Gal. 5:22; Rom. 8:2; 2 Cor. 3:6; John 6:63). In 1 Corinthians 13:1 Paul contrasts love with lifeless things, such as sounding brass or a clanging cymbal, implying that love is the expression of life. Moreover, when the Lord charges us to love one another in John 15:17, it is in the context of His divine life, in which we participate by virtue of our organic union with Him as branches in the vine (vv. 1-2, 5, 16).

However, more was involved in Paul's Epistle to Philemon than the reconciliation of two individual believers in Christ. Paul was a member of the church in Rome and Philemon of the church in Colossae. Paul included the church in Colossae in his opening address (v. 2, cf. Col. 4:17), and he also made mention of a number of his co-workers, who participated with him in his apostolic ministry among the churches (Philem. 1, 23-24). These factors indicate that Onesimus's acceptance involved the testimony of the churches at that time as the corporate and universal new man. Paul had written in Colossians 3:10-11 that there is no place in the new man for different persons—for Greek and Jew, circumcision and uncircumcision, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man; there is only place for Christ, who is all and in all, that is, all persons and in all persons. Hence, the differences that existed in the old man (v. 9) because of race, religion, and social distinction have no place in the new man. All the members in the new man are equal in status, for all the members of the new man are Christ (v. 11; 1 Cor. 12:12). The Epistle to Philemon provides a clear illustration of this equal status. A slave had been reborn to be a brother and needed to be recommended as a brother for the new man's acceptance. Onesimus could be accepted as an equal member in the new man, even by his master Philemon, because the divine life expressed in the divine love dissolves all the divisive differences of the old man. Even the difference as great as that between a slave and his master could be removed, producing equality among all the members of the new man:

In the semisavage age of Paul, the life of Christ had annulled, among the believers, the strong institution of slavery. Since the sentiment of the love of the Christian fellowship was so powerful and prevailing that the evil social order among fallen mankind was spontaneously ignored, any need for institutional emancipation was

obviated. Because of the divine birth and because they were living by the divine life, all the believers in Christ had equal status in the church, which was the new man in Christ and in which there was no discrimination between free and bond (Col. 3:10-11). This was based on three facts: (1) Christ's death on the cross abolished the ordinances of the different ways of life, for the creating of the one new man (Eph. 2:15); (2) we all were baptized into Christ and were made one in Him without any differences (Gal. 3:27-28); and (3) in the new man Christ is all and in all (Col. 3:11). (Recovery Version, Philem. 16, note 1.)

Thus, in the churches in the New Testament, as the expression of the corporate new man, there was no place for race, religion, or social distinction. This is strong evidence that the believers experienced the divine life in reality and lived this life in their love for all the members of the new man.

The divine life, the divine birth, and the divine love also speak of the sonship of God. Ephesians 1:4-5 says that God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world "to be holy and without blemish before Him in love, predestinating us unto sonship." "To be holy," both positionally through Christ's redemption (Heb. 13:12) and dispositionally through the Spirit's sanctification (Rom. 6:19, 22), is the procedure of God's eternal economy. "Unto sonship," God's corporate expression in His many sons who share His life and nature, is the goal. The Epistles of 1 and 2 Thessalonians, as the conclusion of Paul's writings on the Christian life, show us the procedure, namely, to live a sanctified life through God's sanctification of our entire being.⁴ Philemon, Paul's concluding writing on the practice of God's economy, points us to the goal—God's corporate expression in His sonship through the divine life lived out in the divine love.

by Jim Batten

Notes

¹The other major section of the apostle Paul's writings, from Romans to 2 Thessalonians, concerns the Christian life for the church life. See *Affirmation & Critique* IX.2 (Oct. 2004): 96-100.

²For the faith, see 1 Timothy 1:4, 19; 2:7; 3:9, 13; 4:1, 6; 5:8; 6:10, 12, 21; 2 Timothy 3:8; 4:7; Titus 1:1, 4, 13; for truth, see 1 Timothy 2:4, 7; 3:15; 4:3; 6:5; 2 Timothy 2:15, 18, 25; 3:7-8; 4:4; Titus 1:1, 14; for healthy teaching, words, and speech, see 1 Timothy 1:10; 6:3; 2 Timothy 1:13; 4:3; Titus 1:9; 2:1, 8; for godliness, see 1 Timothy 2:2, 10 (*godly*); 3:16; 4:7-8; 5:4 (*respect*); 6:3, 5, 6, 11; 2 Timothy 3:5, 12 (*godly*); Titus 1:1; 2:12 (*godly*); for faith (subjective), see 1 Timothy 1:2, 5, 14, 19; 2:15; 4:12; 6:11; 2 Timothy 1:5, 13; 2:22; 3:10, 15; Titus 2:2; 3:15; and for the conscience, see 1 Timothy 1:5, 19; 3:9; 4:2; 2 Timothy 1:3; Titus 1:15.

³Some commentators think that it was in a prison in Ephesus that Paul wrote this Epistle. However, there is no record in Acts that he was imprisoned in Ephesus. The details of his travel given in 1 Timothy and Titus (1 Tim. 1:3; Titus 1:5; 3:12) and his anticipation of release (Phil. 1:25; 2:24; Philem. 22) indicate that Paul was released from prison in Rome for a short period. During his release he wrote 1 Timothy and Titus. He was then imprisoned once more in Rome and wrote his second letter to Timothy shortly before his martyrdom (2 Tim. 4:6). It was during his first imprisonment in Rome that Paul wrote to Philemon.

⁴See *Affirmation & Critique* IX.2 (Oct. 2004): 96-100.

Works Cited

Lee, Witness. Footnotes. The Recovery Version of the Bible. Anaheim: Living Stream Ministry, 2003.

Footnotes from the Recovery Version of the Bible

"Abolishing in His flesh the law of the commandments in ordinances, that He might **create** the two **in** Himself **into** one new man, so making peace" (Eph. 2:15).

create: Christ created the one new man, the church, by working God's divine nature into humanity. The working of the divine nature into humanity was something new. Hence, it was a creating. In the old creation God did not work His nature into any of His creatures, not even into man. In the creating of the one new man, however, God's nature was wrought into man to make His divine nature one entity with humanity.

in: Christ is not only the Creator of the one new man, the church, but also the sphere in which and the means by which the one new man was created. He is the very element of the new man, making God's divine nature one entity with humanity. The Greek word rendered *in* here can also have an elemental significance, meaning also *with*, implying that the new man was created with Christ as its divine essence.

into: The Jews and the Gentiles were separated to the uttermost by the separating ordinances. But both were created in Christ with the divine essence into one new entity, which is a corporate man, the church.