The New Shofar

If being hurt by the Church causes you to lose faith in God, then perhaps your faith was in people and not in God.

September 7

Living in Christ transforms who we are

This Letter to Philemon is only 25 verses long but packs a powerful and contemporary message. It is about the way faithfulness to Christ turns all social norms and demands on their ear. Baptism comes with a much greater array of responsibilities and expectations. God first. The world and its social and cultural demands second. Ourselves third. When we remember that this letter was meant to be read aloud in church, we can understand just how much pressure was being applied to all considered.

Philemon was a wealthy man well and truly woven into the tapestry of his local community. A leader, a man who knew what was expected of him and who did not rock the cultural boat. That was, until he met Paul and became a part of the Body of Christ.

The Christian 'cult" vs the Social pagan cults

Philemon would have been very aware that the world, pagan and Christian was listening in, wondering how he would respond. It would not have escaped their notice that Onesimus was suddenly gone, and they would have cared little about the exact circumstances under which he did so. Likewise, everyone would have heard the news that he had returned. He must have known that his slave-owning peers in the merchant class were "listening in," eager to hear how Philemon would respond. Philemon's slave-owning peers had clear expectations about how a slave-owner should respond to a slave who returned of his own accord expecting him to mete out proper punishment to his slave. If he failed in this, they would all have problems

We find Paul implicitly replacing a core conviction of the ancient world with a new one he expects the community of Christ followers in Colossae to live by. His goal is to move the church away from the worldly ethic to a Christian conception of koinonia (community) which entails sharing the very life of the Messiah and striving for messianic unity across traditional boundaries. What now binds them is life in Jesus Christ.

In Christ we have new responsibilities

Those who acknowledge Jesus's death on the cross and confess him as Lord (Phil 2:8, 11) owe ***him*** their obedience (Phil 2:12). Believers were to render honour and obedience to Christ and to imitate him by regarding others as better than themselves (Phil 2:3). How did Paul envision this playing itself out? It was not simply a matter of Philemon releasing Onesimus from slavery. It is now about their relationship.

Paul uses familial language far more frequently than other early Christian writers, and in his letter to Philemon he resorts to it more frequently than in any other letter (relative to its length). The following list makes this clear: no longer slave master but **Verse 1**:

Timothy is “the brother” **Verse 2**: Apphia is “the sister”; **Verses 7, 20**: Philemon is Paul’s “brother”; **Verse 10**: Onesimus is “my child”; **Verse 16**: Philemon should receive Onesimus as a “beloved brother”. He wants to replace the old categories with new ones; Christ followers are no longer masters and slaves, but brothers and sisters (v. 16).

Paul, it seems, is working toward the reconfiguration of all social relationships based on a new principle. Paul wants members of the Christ association in Colossae to understand that they are now part of Messiah’s family and reimagine their relationships accordingly. Specifically, Paul wants Philemon to receive Onesimus “no longer as a slave, but as more than a slave, a beloved brother” (v. 16).

Paul Replaces the Concept of Fate with Election

If we were to ask Philemon why he was a landowner and slaveowner or Onesimus why he was a slave, they would all have chalked it up to fate. Social order was fixed and what little movement up and down the social scale did occur was all a function of the caprices of fate. Fate smiled, and one’s lot improved. Fate frowned, and one landed on the auction block in the slave market. Paul’s appeal to the purposes of God behind the twists and turns of fate is consequential. The interactions between Philemon and Onesimus before their respective conversions were based on a well-known script that prescribed clearly defined roles for slaves and their masters in a deeply entrenched social hierarchy. In the meantime, however, God had adopted both into his family. He was their father, and they were now brothers through no choice of their own, whether they liked it or not. Paul’s subtle stress on God’s election clearly implies that he expects a *thoroughgoing change in their interactions*. *On all levels.*

This is because he views election as much more than simply the mechanism by means of which individuals come to faith. It grounds the narrative of God’s relationship with his people into which individuals are taken up. Paul encouraged Onesimus and Philemon to see themselves as a part of Israel’s broader story (see 1 Cor 10:1–11).

What Did Paul Want?

First, and more importantly, he wants to help Philemon to reimagine the church in Colossae. It is certainly not a guild; it is not even just another cultic association, though outsiders would have viewed it as such. It is—or should be—a community where true *koinonia* (vv. 6, 17) is practiced. For Paul this entails a “new way of life” that demands “new patterns of thinking,”. Paul wants Philemon and Onesimus to see themselves as a part of the ongoing scriptural drama; to allow their former pagan thought-forms to be transformed by a biblically based renewal of the mind.

Paul replaces the language of social hierarchy with that of family. We noted that if Philemon begins to regard Onesimus as his brother, it becomes impossible to hold him as a slave He replaces the concept of fate with that of election. He wants Philemon and Onesimus to understand that God chose them to be part of his people. They have been taken up into Israel in such a way that they now share in Israel’s covenant privileges and obligations, responsibilities with God and others. And is this not exactly what Jesus is saying in today’s Gospel? In Christ, everything has changed.