

The Letter to Philemon  
“Conversing Like a Christian”  
By Doug Hamilton

Though there could have been many others, the Letter to Philemon is the only private correspondence that we have record of Paul writing. From this letter we will learn that it is not always what you say, but how you say it that can make all the difference for an outcome to a problem.

A Friendly Greeting

1-3 Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our beloved brother and fellow worker, 2 and to Apphia our sister, and to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

- Paul wrote this letter during his first imprisonment in Rome around 62 AD. Apparently Timothy was with him at the time of the writing.
- It is a letter written to a Christian man named Philemon who had past gospel dealings with Paul. Apparently Philemon was one of Paul’s own converts as mentioned in verse 19 “...not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well...”
- Who is Apphia and Archippus? We don’t know for sure but there is speculation that they were the wife and son of Philemon. Archippus was believed to also have been a missions worker in Laodicea (Colossians 4:17), the possible location of the home of Philemon.
- Not only was the greeting for those three, but for all of the church family that was meeting in their house. Naturally the greeting would have been passed on to the others by Philemon.
- It should be noted that Paul does not include his standard greeting title of “apostle”. That is because the nature of this letter is not that of apostolic authority, but of a personal friendly appeal concerning an issue that will be discussed shortly.

Communication Point #1: Always start out with a friendly greeting.

Warm Appreciation

4-7 I thank my God always, making mention of you in my prayers, <sup>5</sup> because I hear of your love and of the faith which you have toward the Lord Jesus and toward all the saints; <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> For I have come to have much joy and comfort in your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

- From the onset Paul communicates appreciation for Philemon’s presence in his life. Philemon is reminded that he is on the prayer list of Paul. He specifically prayed that the fellowship qualities of Philemon’s faith be based on the knowledge that is in Christ.
- Paul admits the joy and comfort that Philemon has brought to the hearts of the other Christians that are around him, causing them to be refreshed.
- He concluded that section of the letter by calling him the most endearing word in Christianity, Brother. That communicated a deep love for Philemon that would have softened him for what was coming next.

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Communication Point #2: Always lead off with warm appreciation.

### Direct Appeal

8-11 Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you *to do* what is proper,<sup>9</sup> 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—<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you for my child Onesimus, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment,<sup>11</sup> who formerly was useless to you, but now is useful both to you and to me.

- We finally reach the true point of the letter, the issue of an escaped slave. Apparently Philemon had a slave named Onesimus that had stolen from him and then run off to Rome. While in Rome he hears about Paul the apostle in prison and decides to visit him. It was there that Onesimus was converted, making him a new brother in Christ.
- This was a serious issue back in those days, for a slave to run away would be like stealing someone’s valuable property. When and if the slave was caught and returned, they would minimally have an “F” burned onto their forehead. It stood for *fugitives*, meaning fugitive or runaway. This was done so that if the slave tried to escape again he would be already be labeled as a person of fugitive history.
- The most serious punishment that the master could exact would be crucifixion. They could also confine to chained labor the rest of their lives. It was a tough situation for Onesimus to be in.
- As an apostle, Paul could easily order Onesimus what to do, but he rather made an appeal for Philemon to do the right thing. This is the nature of an appeal, for it allows the person to do the right thing instead of having to be commanded to do the right thing. The foremost has a better tone to it. He even used the term “aged” to make the appeal from a seniority perspective.
- The name Onesimus meant “useful or profitable”. When Paul said that Onesimus was formerly not living up to his name, but now he was now profitable to both himself and Philemon.

### Special note on slavery in the first-century:

- Slavery was part of the everyday culture in the Roman Empire. They numbered 60 million at the time of the writing. There are those that have put forth the argument that Paul should have used this opportunity to frame an argument against slavery, but did not. It most certainly crossed his mind for the other two letters that went out when Paul was being ministered to by Onesimus contained references to the slave/master relationship (Eph 6:5-9 and Colossians 3:22-4:1). He probably figured that being a Christian slave was already tough without adding insurrection to the equation.

Communication Point #3: Always be willing to make a direct appeal.

### Logical Persuasion

12-17 I have sent him back to you in person, that is, *sending* my very heart,<sup>13</sup> whom I wished to keep with me, so that on your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel;<sup>14</sup> but without your consent I did not want to do anything, so that your goodness would

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not be, in effect, by compulsion but of your own free will. <sup>15</sup> For perhaps he was for this reason separated *from you* for a while, that you would have him back forever, <sup>16</sup> 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. <sup>17</sup> If then you regard me a partner, accept him as *you would me*

- Apparently while Paul was in prison, Onesimus ministered to him in prison, proving to be a good worker for the Lord. It was then that Paul decided that Onesimus needed to go back and face his master Philemon and deal with the consequences of his actions.
- He makes the appeal, not to emotion, but to sound logic. Before Onesimus was a slave, but now he is a beloved brother in Christ. It was in the running away that ultimately led to the conversion, resulting in profit for the kingdom of God.
- He closed that portion of the letter by using the logical conclusion that if Philemon regarded Paul as a brother and Paul regarded Onesimus as a brother, then Philemon must also consider Onesimus a brother as well. Paul’s feelings on the subject were made obvious in his other writings.
  - Galatians 3:27-28 For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. <sup>28</sup> There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.
  - Colossians 3:11 “...*a renewal* in which there is no *distinction between* Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and freeman, but Christ is all, and in all.”
  - 1 Corinthians 12:13 For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

Communication Point #4: Be willing to use logical persuasion.

### Firm Commitment

18-20 But if he has wronged you in any way or owes you anything, charge that to my account; <sup>19</sup> I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand, I will repay it (not to mention to you that you owe to me even your own self as well). <sup>20</sup> Yes, brother, let me benefit from you in the Lord; refresh my heart in Christ.

- When Onesimus ran away, he seemingly did what most of the slaves of that era did, he stole. How else could he fund the trip to Rome unless he had some funds? Paul did not want this to be an obstacle to Philemon; therefore he offered to repay any losses that were incurred by Onesimus. The letter now becomes a promissory note written by Paul’s own hand. When a person is willing to put their money where their mouth is, then you know they are committed.
- He further showed his commitment to the safety and well-being of Onesimus by reminding Philemon that even he benefitted from Paul’s teachings as well. If Philemon would honor the request, Paul would also have his soul refreshed like the others.

Communication Point #5: Be willing to demonstrate a firm commitment.

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Assumptive Conclusion

21-25 Having confidence in your obedience, I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say.<sup>22</sup> At the same time also prepare me a lodging, for I hope that through your prayers I will be given to you.<sup>23</sup> Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you,<sup>24</sup> *as do* Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke, my fellow workers.<sup>25</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

- Paul concludes the letter with the assumption that Philemon would do the right thing concerning the treatment of Onesimus. He even went as far to confirm reservations for him and the mission team once he was released from prison. With the conclusion of grace from Christ, the letter was placed into Onesimus’ hand and sent from Rome to Philemon. This put Philemon in a position to make the right choice for the godly treatment of Onesimus.

Communication Point #6: Communicate an assumptive conclusion.

- Just imagine Philemon’s emotions when he saw Onesimus arrive back at the house. His initial reaction before reading the letter from Paul might have been bad. His anger toward Onesimus might have been great. I am persuaded that the communication style of the letter that Paul communicated was what was needed.
  - friendly greeting
  - warm appreciation
  - logical persuasion
  - direct appeal
  - firm commitment
  - assumptive conclusion
- An apostolic father and martyr named Ignatius wrote concerning an elder of the church in Ephesus and what a wonderful job he was doing. That elder was named Onesimus, the former slave to Philemon. Ignatius made the exact same pun that Paul made concerning the meaning of his name, “he is the Onesimus by name and Onesimus by nature, the profitable one for Christ.” Things turned out well for the man, largely due to the communication skills of an apostle named Paul.
- What would happen if we attempted to solve our differences in such a way? How many more great decisions might be made if we took the time to use the communication skills of Paul to Philemon?