

Means of Grace
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Nov 9, 2020

Phile 1 – 2

(NA 28th ed.)

(NCV)

Παῦλος δέσμιος Χριστοῦ Ἰησοῦ
καὶ Τιμόθεος ὁ ἀδελφός

From Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus,
and from Timothy, our brother.

Φιλήμονι τῷ ἀγαπητῷ καὶ συνεργῷ ἡμῶν

To Philemon, our dear friend and worker with us;

καὶ Ἀπφία τῇ ἀδελφῇ

to Apphia, our sister;

καὶ Ἀρχίππῳ τῷ συστρατιώτῃ ἡμῶν

to Archippus, a worker with us;

καὶ τῇ κατ' οἶκόν σου ἐκκλησίᾳ

and to the church that meets in your home

The first and second lines are pretty straightforward Greek. Note *agape* in “dear friend.” Also, *sun+ergon* = with-us-worker. This letter is *not* written just to Philemon, however. It is written to him, *and* to (note here the prominent place by listing her immediately after the prime recipient) Apphia, *and* to Archippus, *and* to the whole house church. This is not a private letter. This essay is based largely on the 2017 article by Nicholas Quient.

Interesting that just after naming Philemon he names Apphia, isn't it? Quient suggests that it would be quite androcentric of us to assume Apphia is Philemon's wife. She is actually called a sister and seems unmarried. (She is the only woman named in the introduction of any Pauline letter.)

In this era, prominent people were named in the address, and she has the honor of being addressed that way. She is not listed last, and thus may be the more important addressee. Think of her as Philemon's social equal. She is given a voice then to deal with the Onesimus matter.

Okay. Now think about the significance that this letter is not only to Philemon, but to her and Archippus and the whole home church. Quiet argues that the letter is designed to bring social pressure on Philemon. The way that Philemon proceeds with Onesimus is not just between him, Paul, and Onesimus. It is to be handled before the eyes of the whole church—as if it is a church discipline matter.

There is an interpretation that has become attached to the book of Philemon, and that is to regard Onesimus as a runaway slave. Nowhere in Scripture is this asserted. He is called a *doulos*, so he did serve Philemon in some capacity. But apparently he absconded with some money or property. Before the whole church, Paul says to Philemon, “Confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say” (v21). I imagine that the public way this was handled helped Philemon to listen to his better angels and respond graciously, forgivingly, and in a Christlike way.

This reminds me of standard Reformed theology teaching on the subject of the Means of Grace. Question 88 of the Shorter Catechism lists the word, the sacraments, and prayer, as means by which saints are communicated the benefits of redemption. But in addition to these is also fellowship. The communion of the saints. *Koinonia*. Godly peer pressure.

Many times in my Christian life, I have acutely felt the social pressure of being part of a community of faith as a positive restraint against sin. One wise man put it this way: we are *not* who we really are when alone. We are the most ourselves when we are in community. It is how you act and speak when around

fellow Christians that you are the most yourself. Not when you are alone and that means of grace is distant.

Thank the Lord Jesus Christ that he has so ordered the church such that spiritually we are fully alive when united with common purpose: to worship, to come together in agreement, to confess the gospel.

The church as a corporate body is one of the great blessings on the lives of individual Christians—especially when we are tempted to certain kinds of sin—the kind that involves other people who could blab about us.

What a blessing!