



Forward thinking from Philemon ...

Thanks and Closing Remarks

In order to work properly and positively with people, including Christians, there are certain important factors in beginning conversations, and certain factors in ending conversations that are critical. To be effective in leading personal Bible studies, for example, the Bible teacher has to be able to segue [pronounced *seg-way*] into the Bible study from the important initial personal conversations. Similarly, telephone conversations need to be opened carefully, and those who have good people skills know how to do this. And when the dialogue is over, it is important to finish the call adroitly. This is true of all interaction with people, whether in face-to-face communication, or

whether by letter. The apostle Paul used all these skills in his letter to Philemon.

- ◆ **Beginning the close** — Paul opens this letter very positively, honestly addressing Philemon with respect and in love. He then makes his segue into his appeal for Onesimus. Having made his appeal — having gotten his business conducted — then he segues into his exit from the epistle. “Having confidence in your obedience,” he avers, “I write to you, since I know that you will do even more than what I say” (Philemon 1:21). This is a great transition; it is positive, it ties up any loose ends in the letter, and sets the stage for closing comments.
- ◆ **Personal connection** — All effective motivation makes a personal connection. On a broad scale, the Law of Moses was not motivational — it was impersonal. The gospel, on the other hand, is very personal, bringing the individual face to face with the loving, forgiving — yet commanding respect — Christ! The apostle takes the next step in his close with this personal connection to Philemon: “At the same time,” he proceeds, “also prepare for me a lodging; for I hope that through your prayers I shall be given to you” (Philemon 1:22). He is building the bridge in this relationship, so that his appeal will be honored. Most likely Paul was never going to get back to Colossae, but this is how he closes out this section with his fellowship with Philemon intact.
- ◆ **Fellow greeters** — The first century congregations, though independent and separated by distance and travel difficulties, still had many ties to each other. “Epaphras,” Paul begins his list, “my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, greets you” (Philemon 1:23). Epaphras was from Colossae, and featured in the letter to the brethren in that city. He continues, “as do Mark [the author of the gospel of Mark, mentioned in the letter to the Colossians], Aristarchus [Paul’s traveling companion from Macedonia, mentioned in the letter to the Colossians], Demas [who later was pulled back into this present world, mentioned in the letter to the Colossians], Luke [Paul’s faithful companion, who also eventually accompanied him to Rome, mentioned also in the book of Colossians], my fellow workers” (Philemon 1:24). These men were working with Paul in Rome, yet were known to the brethren in Colossae. There was obviously a lot of movement between congregations for these types of relationships to exist.
- ◆ **Closing** — Paul’s close is typical for him, “The grace of our Lord Jesus be with your spirit” (Philemon 1:25). These are sincere words, appealing for the grace of Christ to be strengthening and encouraging the spirit of Philemon as he faced his personal challenges in dealing with a returning runaway and continuing his leadership in the congregation in Colossae.

In this small book of Philemon, the personal nature of Christianity stands out. Here the intimate connection between Paul and Philemon is manifest, as well as the connection between Paul and Onesimus. Here the barrier between slave and free is clearly torn down, and the slave owner now has a “beloved brother” in the man who is in earthly bondage. Here the personal interactions between various workers in various congregations show, as well as the teamwork between autonomous but sister congregations. Praise God who through His Holy Spirit orchestrated the circumstances between Onesimus, Paul, and Philemon, and who saw fit to have this epistle included in the eternal record!

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