

PAUL'S LETTERS

1st Thessalonians, Galatians, 1st & 2nd Corinthians, Philemon, Philippians, and Romans

When were Philemon and Philippians written

These two letters are believed to be written during one of Paul's prison stays, possibly in Ephesus in the mid-to-late 50's, although there is no confirmation that Paul was ever imprisoned in Ephesus. All we know is that Paul was imprisoned several times, according to his letters, and continued his work of supporting and encouraging the congregations he had started.

Evangelism

The term 'evangelist' is a Greek term meaning "Bringing of Good News"; this is why the names assigned to Gospel writers are referenced as 'Evangelist' by many traditions.

The term is not used in the Christian scriptures, but Paul gives an example of what it can look like. Philippians 1:18 says false witness also has its place because any sharing of the Gospel is valid.

Philemon and Onesimus

Paul's letter to Philemon is the only authentic letter written to a person rather than a community, and it concerns another person - Onesimus - of whom Paul is quite familiar. It is also the shortest letter from Paul, and has been used and misused for 2000 years to justify slavery and returning runaway slaves.

One of the characteristics of the first generations of early Christians was their disregard for social order and their treatment as free and slave as equal. Here we have a man, Onesimus, who has been serving or supporting Paul (we don't know the capacity or the reason), and Paul is returning him to Philemon with the letter. It has been assumed that he was a slave, but a careful reading of the letter never confirms that assumption. Was Paul referring to legal slavery or spiritual slavery?

Legal Slavery

Slavery was an existing and accepted part of Roman culture as well as Hebrew culture throughout the Holy Lands. Early Christians were slaves and owned slaves. There were no efforts to end this practice as a condition of faith in Christ.

Those of us familiar with the African-European-American version of slavery often trip over the concept of slavery and struggle to see it in any other context. But we must to understand what it meant in the Roman Empire.

Slavery was not racially based in the earliest centuries of the common era. Slaves were not always owned for life. They could gain Roman citizenship over time. Slaves were primarily people conquered during wars, birthed to slave mothers, or sold into

slavery due to economic hardship. In the last situation with enough service, slaves could 'purchase' their own freedom.

It was not idyllic, by any measure. Families could be and were torn apart, abuse was rampant, many of the children born to slave women were fathered by the Paterfamilias or other prominent men in the family, and might have been acknowledged but never inherited wealth. It was accepted that anyone beneath one's social order was acceptable for sexual engagement, male or female. (Women of higher social standing had stricter rules around sexual aggression publicly, but privately enjoyed more or less freedom depending on the attitudes of the senior men in the household.)

Spiritual Slavery/Servanthood

Slavery was so common that Paul was easily able to use it as a metaphor for belonging to Christ. He saw no conflict in the concept of slavery, instead seeing it as a path towards freedom in our faith. Paul's approach seemed to be two-fold:

Paul was raised with the law of the Hebrews, and after his conversion he saw that law as too restrictive. The slavery of adherence to rules was a problem. Christ did not require slaves, but a family of the faithful.

However, it was understood that Christ followers served each other, so there was a level of obedience that was expected. In a classic manner of inversion, free people were encouraged to see themselves as slaves to Christ, while legal slaves were treated as equal to all other citizens. Spiritual slavery did not challenge the wider social order.

In the flesh (v. 16)

This letter was meant to be read out loud in worship, forcing Philemon to follow Paul's expectations. In an honour/shame society, Philemon would have had no choice. Why Paul forced Philemon's hand, however, is one of the mysteries.

Scholars think one possibility is that instead of Onesimus being Philemon's actual slave, he was his

brother, either a situation like the parable of the Prodigal Son, or as someone who left for further training and education and was now ready to serve with Philemon. Whichever it was, Paul reminds Philemon he owes Paul a favour, and accepting Onesimus is that favour.



Organization structure of the first generations

Historians who study how the church worked and worshiped find quite a bit of information in the Letter to the Philippians. Immediately upon opening, Paul recognizes two groups with authority: deacons and bishops.

In the first generations, these were positions, not titles. Women and men had these positions, then either moved to the other position or were replaced by members of the congregation.

Bishops were the teaching elders. Originally there was one or more per church (congregation), who instructed new believers and has some involvement with worship, though historians are not sure how much.

Deacons were the ones who ran all the practical aspects of the congregations, from managing money, to overseeing baptism, to presiding at worship.

Notice how the position of 'priest' was not mentioned. In the first generations, 'priest' was the term used in the temples by either pagan or Hebrew followers. The early Christians did not have a dedicated place of worship so they had no 'priests' to oversee the care of that worship space.

Eventually congregations got bigger and more plentiful, bishops had several churches under their umbrella of

Philippians

Philippi was in northern Greece and named after the Macedonian King Philip II, father of Alexander the Great. It is considered one of the oldest Christian communities in Europe.



Early Christian hymn

Along with giving us some idea about the organizing structure of the first communities, beginning Philippians 2:6 is a possible early hymn. At this point the Christian church did not have a developed sense of Christology (a theology of Christ) nor did they have Trinitarian Theology worked out. One of the oldest challenges for the Christian community was how to worship Jesus and God, but continue the monotheistic tradition. It would take centuries before the church developed the Trinitarian argument. This hymn suggests God pouring out God's essence into a lowly human who would then be exalted. As yet there was no tradition of incarnation or birth through Mary.

Against Circumcision

Again readers have to be wary of any anti-Jewish sentiment placed on the reading. In Philippians 3:2, Paul tells those in Philippi to be aware of 'dogs' and 'evil workers'. Paul's overarching message is that salvation, ie. being part of God's community, is through faith alone, not actions. There was still disagreement between early converts about the place of circumcision for new Gentile male members of the community. That Paul used the intensity of the conversation to include an

Organization structure Cont'd

responsibility, and priests were required.

The first priests, or presbyters, were in the class of bishop - leaders of their local churches. Over time the two groups separated, with the priests taking more of the role of the original bishops, and bishops becoming more ceremonial and representing Christ visiting with the people.

Over time the positions of bishop, priest and deacon became male-only positions, although there is evidence to show women did sometimes continue to hold these positions. For the early church of Paul's time, women were represented in the roles of bishop and deacon. To a lesser extent they are found as priests, but that is influenced by the term priest being a later addition.

The later term 'pope' came from the Greek "papas" or patriarch, another term for the bishop

insult about dogs, suggests this was an ongoing challenge for Paul's vision of including Gentiles, and one he was getting tired of facing.

In no way does Paul consider his own background as a Hebrew to make him of lesser value, he is not dismissing his heritage. He is simply arguing for a broader sense of community and inclusion and sees his ministry working with those who were not first Hebrews. Circumcision was an act of inclusion, and Paul held firm the belief that following Jesus was enough. The faithful were not determined by actions.

Paul's and early Christian social order

If nothing else, readers should appreciate Paul's style. He regularly named names and thank generosity. This was the style of engaging throughout the Roman Empire, to ensure continued financial and public support. Paul was extremely political in this manner. His humble acceptance of gifts placed him in the role of recipient of patronage, and thus socially inferior to those he was addressing.

Paul also continued to refer to believers in all communities as 'saints'. This follows the patterns of other terms used in the early church that had yet to be defined as titles for specific people. Paul as 'father' of communities was superior in relationship to Christ, inferior through the patronage system, and equal through the terms 'brothers and sisters' and 'saints'.

