

Unity—An Offer You Cannot Refuse! (vv. 8-11)

“Therefore, though I have enough confidence in Christ to order you to do that which is proper, 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—I appeal to you for my child, whom I have begotten in my imprisonment. Onesimus who formerly was useless to you but now is useful to both you and to me” (vv. 8-11).

The Godfather was a movie that introduced a phrase into American English. Soon a common part of our vocabulary was, “I’m gonna make you an offer you can’t refuse!” The unspoken threat in the movie was that one dared not refuse or else tragic consequences would follow. In Philemon 8-11 we find Paul making Philemon an offer that the Colossian brother just could not refuse. Philemon’s acceptance was assured, not because of any underlying threat of personal injury but because of his passion for Christian brotherhood!

The text presents Paul persuading Philemon to take Onesimus back. The urgent desire of Paul was for Onesimus to be warmly welcomed lest the unity of Christian brotherhood be destroyed. Paul’s desire was for unity, and the arguments he made to Philemon were so logical that they formed an offer Philemon could not refuse!

There are generally two ways by which we accomplish behavioral changes—stern commands or strong appeals. Stern commands often succeed in gaining obedience because a strict adherence to the commands is demanded (v. 8). But it is far better to modify behavior through the use of strong

appeals, for these strike at the person’s will. A desire to change is generated, and often the person voluntarily submits to the commands (v. 9).

God has tried to persuade man to follow divine directives by using strong appeals (cf. Isaiah 1:18, 19; Revelation 3:5; 22:17; etc.). As Christ walked and taught upon this earth, He usually sought to move men by appeals of love rather than compulsion (cf. John 14:15; 15:14, 15). In the present text Paul follows the example of Christ and uses strong appeals to persuade Philemon to accept Onesimus back as a brother in Christ. “Therefore” is a summary word calling attention to past demonstrations of Philemon’s love (vv. 4-7). Because of Philemon’s past love, Paul now appeals for the total acceptance of Onesimus.

The issue Paul addressed was unity between brothers. This unity was not possible because of past feelings. The unity that should have existed between these brethren needed to be restored. Bitter emotions and hurt feelings hindered the blessed fellowship. There was an urgent need to correct this problem.

Paul had the right to issue a stern command (cf. Romans 1:1; 1 Corinthians 5:3; 9:1; 2 Corinthians 10:13; Galatians 1:1; etc.), but he waived that right and humbly requested that the change be made. The verses contain a charming plea for Philemon to act on the highest level of Christian brotherhood (John 13:34)—to accept Onesimus from the heart.

Examine the paragraph and observe how Paul’s appeal to Philemon was an appeal for unity which Philemon could not refuse!

THE APPEAL'S FIVE BASIC POINTS

Let all do what is "proper" (v. 8). The word "proper" refers to an ethic of action that presents the ideal, what is fitting, one's duty, or that which becomes moral obligation. Paul began by appealing to Philemon to act as a Christian is obligated to act! If Philemon would behave according to this ethic, there would be no question about unity being healed.

Let "love" govern all things (v. 9a). Paul presents here the fertile soil of healthy unity—it is a love that controls and governs all actions (Colossians 3:14). Philemon was to trust Onesimus because of "love." This grand and sacred principle is the standard by which the Master rules His slaves. This "love" would abolish the harsh and hard attitudes that destroy unity between brethren (Colossians 3:11; 1 Corinthians 13:13—14:1a). Paul's counsel was to act "for love's sake" because such motive eliminates division and guarantees unity!

Let a consistent lifestyle back up the appeal (v. 9a). Paul could appeal for unity between Philemon and Onesimus because of the apostle's manner of living. He pleaded with Philemon as brother to brother. He spoke of himself as the "aged." This term referred to the toll that years of hard labor had taken on his physical body. Through trials and toils in spreading the gospel, Paul had reached an advanced level of maturity. This maturity deserved respect. He also spoke of himself as the "prisoner." Paul was a captive because he followed God's will. If Philemon followed the will of God and accepted Onesimus back, it would never cost him as much as following God's will had cost Paul! (Cf. Ephesians 6:20; Colossians 4:18.)

Here was an appeal from one in prison, one who understood the marvelous "love" that God had for a runaway slave, one who had every right to be bitter and resentful. *But* Paul did not harbor and nurse the bitter. Paul urged Philemon to act from love!

Whatever Philemon said about Paul's appeal, he could not fault Paul because of hypocrisy! No, unity was mandated because it was urged by one with a consistent lifestyle!

Let your concern for "others" dominate your thoughts (v. 10). The term "my child" is a tender phrase referring to the fact that Paul had converted Onesimus. It reveals the earnest and loving regard of Paul for Onesimus. The thoughts of

Paul were those of consideration and kindness. Onesimus was poor, ignorant, hated, and repugnant because of his past deeds and status. It may have startled Philemon to hear that his slave had obeyed the gospel, but if he was truly concerned about the soul of another, he would know that Christianity knows nothing of "hopeless" cases. Onesimus was willing to listen to the gospel and this demonstrated that he was not hopeless!

Unity was mandated because it was urged by one with a consistent lifestyle!

Paul's appeal for Philemon to become conscious of "others" was founded upon the apostle's character. Previously, Paul had been a bigot, self-righteous, and exclusive in his thinking that unity with a Gentile was unacceptable. But he had changed. He had become conscious of "others" and now he even spoke of a Gentile slave as "my child." It was a startling change and provided an appeal for Philemon to change in a similar manner.

Let others know of positive results that can lead to unity (v. 11). Paul wanted Philemon to know that Onesimus had truly changed. Phrygian slaves were infamous for laziness, and they were often called "Useful" (the Greek word is "Onesimus") in hope of a change. Onesimus had failed to live up to his name until he became a Christian. After his conversion, he was transformed and became truly "useful" (cf. 2 Corinthians 5:17; Romans 6:21). Onesimus had run from Philemon only to run to Christ, and what he once was, he could be no longer! A similar situation existed with John Mark, who had deserted Paul and Barnabas but later proved his usefulness to Paul (cf. Colossians 4:10; 2 Timothy 4:11). Philemon was asked to consider this change in "Onesimus" and accept him so he could prove the change!

THE APPEAL APPLIED TO THE CHURCH

The Lord's church needs to hear this appeal for unity. There is a constant need to bolster unity and deepen harmony among brethren.

Consider how each of these five basic points of Paul's appeal apply to the church today.

First, we need to conduct ourselves in ways that are "proper." It is essential that certain attitudes be nurtured so that we will be ever alert to the need of unity. Is it "proper" to encourage, support, pray for our brethren? If so, we must do it! (Cf. Hebrews 3:13.) The "proper" rule, if applied, would do much to develop harmony. In all we do, let us ask first, "Is this proper?" If it passes the "proper" test, we will contribute to unity!

Second, we must yield to the attitude of "love" in dealing with brethren. When we allow the "love" of 1 Corinthians 13 to control our associations, we will find unity enhanced, not destroyed! (Cf. Colossians 3:12-14.)

Third, we need to live a lifestyle that will help us appeal for unity in the church. If others observe us living and acting in ways that unity is encouraged, they will follow our example and spread harmony (Ephesians 4:22-32).

Fourth, we need to focus our attention upon "others" around us and less upon "self." When we become concerned with helping others we will do much to encourage unity (Philippians 2:4).

Fifth, we should point out the positive changes in others. If division has occurred because of past actions and the offender has changed, we need to note the changes so unity can be restored. Too many are unwilling to forget the past and recognize that in Christ we all become "new." The old adage, "Once a thief, always a thief," has prevented many from enjoying the blessings of unity. The adage was not true with Onesimus, and it is not true with many others!

The strong appeal for unity must not miss its application to the Lord's church today! How are you responding to Paul's appeal to establish and maintain unity? Your response to this appeal will be in one of three ways: (1) You may ignore or refuse this appeal. The ostrich has wings but never uses them to fly. Some people have God's appeal for unity but never acknowledge it! (2) You can accept it grudgingly. A small girl was going to the store with her father in the car but refused to put on her safety belt. "If you do not sit now and put that seat belt on, you will get a spanking!" The little girl sat down and put it on. A few minutes later she said, "I'm still standing up in my mind." Some people will "go along" with the idea of unity in a similar way—they begrudge every

minute of it. (3) You can accept it happily (v. 21).

CONCLUSION

The prospect of unity with all brethren who share the like precious faith is God's great dream (John 17:20-23). But this is often hindered. We need to listen to Paul's appeal because it is truly an offer we cannot refuse! May all saints respond in a positive way to contribute to peace and harmony so the great brotherhood of Christ will be as God desires (Hebrews 13:1).

A loving decision must be invited, not compelled. Let all realize how much we need to obey the appeal of Paul and maintain unity—the consequences of failing to do so are too serious. Obedience to God's will must be demonstrated. If a boy at school is told to do math and he chooses to do writing, the correctness of his writing will not save him from censure. In much the same way we must obey God's will regarding unity. If we are correctly obeying God in some areas and yet fail to obey Him in unity, we are wrong!

Let all see the urgency of responding to God's dream of unity. By examining the five basic points in Paul's appeal we, as Philemon did, will find an offer we just cannot refuse!

—John Kachelman

The Benefits of Evangelism (Philemon 6)

This wisdom of teaching the lost and winning their souls is a given fact (Proverbs 11:30). In Paul's words to Philemon we are given further insight into the wisdom of winning souls.

1. The *need*—"be active," "become effectual." Paul is urging Philemon to be active in teaching the gospel.
2. The *reason*—"full understanding." As we reach and teach others about Christ, we will gain a greater knowledge of what God's will for us is. We will come to know "every good thing" that is in Christ.
3. The *result*—"love for all the saints" (v. 5b). The church will grow and brotherly affection will deepen.

As these benefits are considered, one quickly sees why God says one who wins souls is "wise."