

Brotherly Fellowship Features (vv. 12-16)

“And I have sent him back to you in person, that is, sending my very heart, whom I wished to keep with me, that in your behalf he might minister to me in my imprisonment for the gospel; but without your consent I did not want to do anything, that your goodness should not be as it were by compulsion, but of your own free will. For perhaps he was for this reason parted from you for a while, that you should have him back forever, 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” (vv. 12-16).

A missionary in Africa told of a rite he observed among a tribe. Two men wanted to take upon themselves what they called the “brother rite.” To do this they sat face to face, with legs crossed, holding in their legs instruments of war. A sheep or goat was killed, its heart was roasted, and each took half. They cut a vein and allowed blood to be caught and rubbed on a similar wound of the other. This rite signified that henceforth they were halves, or parts, of the other. Each through his own blood was absorbed into the other. From then on if either should be in any trouble, the other was to think, “It is myself that is in trouble,” and do whatever he could to assist the other.

What a good illustration of the beauty and blessings of brotherly fellowship! In Christ we become a part of one another. This is the principle stressed by Christ (Matthew 25:40). This wonderful fellowship is a bond drawing us closer than flesh and blood (Matthew 10:34-39). This wonderful fellowship is a union of heart, soul,

goals, and dreams. This marvelous fellowship is open to all and will unite all in a perfect “oneness” with Christ (cf. Ephesians 2:21, 22; 1 Corinthians 12:27).

This marvelous fellowship in the New Testament church was a trait that distinguished it early in its history.

The heathen are wont to exclaim with wonder, “See how these Christians love one another!” for they [the heathen] hate one another; “and how they are ready to die for one another!” for they [the heathen] are more ready to kill one another.¹

The fellowship associations of the early Christians presented radical changes in the usual practices of that time (cf. Galatians 3:28, 29; Colossians 3:10, 11).

The present paragraph provides a good illustration of the radical nature of this brotherly fellowship. A Jewish scholar is writing to a Gentile businessman and pleading the cause of a runaway slave? Ordinarily, these three would have had no unnecessary contact with one another, but now, because of brotherly fellowship ties, they are all “brothers”! Such a wonderful situation deserves a close study.

THE MARVELOUS GOAL OF FELLOWSHIP

The book of Philemon was written to explain to Philemon the goals of fellowship in Christ and encourage him to accept them. The church at Colossae shared the joys of brotherly fellowship (Colossians 2:2). But when Onesimus returned, a

special problem would arise, and Paul wanted that problem solved immediately. The great love of Philemon (vv. 4-7) could be ruined by bitterness resulting from past personal injuries. In offering counsel on the situation, Paul identifies the singular goal of fellowship in Christ.

This singular goal toward which all brotherly fellowship is directed, can be summed up with one word—*unity!* (Cf. Romans 12:15, 16a; Revelation 21:24-27.) This blessed unity is often referred to in the hymns we sing—“Blest Be the Tie,” “How Sweet, How Heavenly,” etc. Philemon needed to remember the beautiful goal of Christian fellowship—unity and harmony with *all* brethren!

THE MAJOR FEATURES OF FELLOWSHIP

This fellowship bond that exists between all believers is distinguished by specific features. In verses 8 through 11, five features help us understand the manner in which fellowship is to be practiced so that unity will result.

A binding affection—“very heart” (v. 12)—is the first feature of brotherly fellowship. “Heart” was used to refer to the place of deepest emotions, strongest feelings, and most tender attachments. The runaway slave, after obeying the gospel, had become so endeared to Paul that his departure was like tearing his heart out. The separation from a brother in the Lord caused great anguish for Paul. Such is the way we should be affected by the affection of brotherly fellowship. It endears us to one another and binds us to each other with cords of loving strength. Although these cords are invisible, they unite and compel us to be longsuffering and forbearing.

When the fellowship tie is threatened, it causes us to feel a deep pain and loss (1 Corinthians 12:26; Philippians 4:18). Such an affection is a key trait of all who are in fellowship with God and who share the divine desire of Christian unity (Psalms 16:3; Romans 12:10; 2 Corinthians 7:13-16; 1 Thessalonians 2:8).

Mutual strength shared with one another—“minister” (v. 13)—is the second feature of brotherly fellowship. Fellowship in Christ brings about a sharing of strength; each part relies upon the other for support. The Scriptures often state that the Christian’s strength is not found in isolation and solitude, but in its community of unity. (Cf.

Ephesians 2:19ff.; Romans 14:19; 1 Corinthians 12:23; Romans 1:12; etc.)

Paul’s fellowship with Onesimus resulted in the apostle gaining strength. Paul needed him because the company of a brother in the Lord would bring the essential strength to overcome trials. Paul was suffering. As a captive and a stranger, he needed the strength that Christian fellowship could provide. This strength through fellowship was a priceless treasure for him. Paul’s desire for Onesimus to remain with him was due to this feature of brotherly fellowship! (Cf. Ecclesiastes 4:9-12.)

Consideration for one another—“without your consent” (v. 14)—is the third feature of brotherly fellowship. One of the most visible aspects of the fellowship binding believers is the consideration shown for one another (cf. 1 Corinthians 8:1-13). Paul was being considerate of Philemon. He wanted Onesimus to stay with him, but he did not want to impose on or “run roughshod over” Philemon’s feelings. Paul shows himself the perfect Christian gentleman, putting aside personal considerations and conveniences in favor of another.

This considerate attitude is responsible for promoting the unity among believers desired by God. If we are to find this wonderful brotherly fellowship in the church today, we *must* demonstrate a like sensitivity and consideration for one another! (Cf. Romans 14:15b, 20, 21; 15:1, 2.)

The eternal scope of Christian fellowship—“forever” (v. 15)—is the fourth feature. The temporary loss of Onesimus had led to everlasting gain. Now both were eternally related. Philemon and Onesimus could enjoy an affectionate fellowship on earth and anticipate an even greater delight in the fellowship of eternity’s heaven! The glorious benefits of this fellowship are delightful to contemplate (1 Thessalonians 4:17). Such eternal joy awaits only those who share in the glorious brotherly fellowship shared by Philemon and Onesimus (Psalm 119:63).

The enhancement of personal worth and value—“much more” (v. 16)—is the final feature of brotherly fellowship. Onesimus was returning to Philemon not as a mere slave, but “much more” than a slave! He was returning as a “brother beloved.” He was in a different class altogether! He had gained new dignity as Philemon’s equal because he was a brother in Christ. All of this happened when he was placed “in Christ.”

This renewed personal value awaits all who obey God (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; Ephesians 2:11-13; 1 Timothy 2:13-16; etc.). In today's society, all are not reckoned "valuable" by the world; some are counted "worthless." But "in Christ" all come to possess value that is priceless! (Galatians 2:20).

THE MANDATORY DUTY OF FELLOWSHIP

As Paul discussed the marvelous fellowship that he, Philemon, and Onesimus shared, he observed that a duty was involved. If this fellowship tie is to bind as tightly as God desires, we must *do* something.

*"In Christ" all
come to possess value that
is priceless!*

This imperative duty is summed up in the phrase "of your own free will" (v. 14b). If our brotherly fellowship is to possess all five features just discussed, it is critical that we choose to make it exist! This kind of affectionate relationship does not just "happen"!

The duty to choose because of willful decision, to commit myself in a steadfast way to making this kind of fellowship exist, involves the following specifics.

First, I must become involved with my brethren! I cannot isolate myself, and I cannot ignore my brethren. Years ago, some church buildings were built with individual closets, and the worshipers would not be distracted as they assembled for worship. Each would sit in his closet, shut off from all others. Although church buildings are no longer built that way, many people still practice isolation in the assembly! In order to find the fellowship Paul described, we must become involved with our brethren!

Second, I must reorder my priorities so that "eternity" becomes a realistic term in my vocabulary. How depressing to observe the way some Christians live with apparently no concept or desire for eternity! The consequences of such are seen in the lack of spiritual priorities, especially in maintaining and developing fellowship!

Third, I must demonstrate genuine "affection" to all my brethren. This does not mean that I will have the same feelings of "love" for everyone, for I will be closer to some than others. This does mean that I will guard my attitudes so I will not fail to support and encourage brethren (cf. Galatians 5:22; Colossians 3:10, 11).

Fourth, I must see each Christian as possessing a priceless value. In reality we often see some brethren as more "important" than others. But this kind of biased view is contrary to God's Word (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:20-25).

CONCLUSION

Philemon 12 contains a most interesting phrase—"send back." Literally, this referred to a legal case that was being referred back to the courts for a decision. In using this, Paul was presenting Philemon with a hard question—"What about brotherly fellowship?" Philemon would decide the answer in the way he judged Onesimus. The verdict was up to Philemon—either he would fellowship Onesimus and thus demonstrate the brotherly fellowship that Christ died for, or he would not. It could have been difficult for him to decide.

What about you? How is your practice of "brotherly fellowship" going? Philemon 12 is a charge to all of us—the case is referred to us and we must render a verdict. The defendants will all be different. Your "Onesimus" will be different than mine! But the consequences of our judgment will be the same—either we further brotherly fellowship, or we contribute to the division and destruction of brotherly fellowship!

Do you judge brotherly fellowship so important that you will do anything commanded by Scripture to preserve and deepen it? Is brotherly fellowship so important to you that you can forgive personal injury to protect it?

Look back at the opening illustration. Believers today are "blood brothers" in a far different sense than that practiced by the African savages. All who are "in Christ" are united with blood. We consequently share "with" one another and are "in" one another. Let us be thankful for this blessed fellowship. Let us adhere to the Scriptures' teaching so this fellowship will be protected!

—John Kachelman

ENDNOTE

¹Tertullian, *Apol.*, 39.