

Titus and Philemon: Putting Things in Order

TITLES

Titus is named after the recipient (1:4). Even though Titus is not mentioned in Acts, it is obvious from Paul's letters that he was a valued co-worker (2 Cor. 2:13; 7:6, 13, 14; 8:6, 16, 23; 12:18; Gal. 2:1, 3; 2 Tim. 4:10). Titus was a Greek (Gal. 2:3), whom Paul converted (Tit. 1:4). Since Paul seemed always to send Titus into hard situations, he has been called "Paul's trouble-shooter."

Philemon is also named after the recipient (v. 1). Since Onesimus, the subject of the book (v. 10), was from Colossae (Col. 4:9), we may assume Philemon lived in that city (cf. Col. 4:7-9 and Philem. 10-12).

BACKGROUND

The Book of Philemon was written during Paul's first imprisonment at Rome (see notes in the article "Ephesians: Christ and His Church"). The purpose of this personal letter was to "set in order" the relationship between Philemon and Onesimus, his run-away slave who had been converted by Paul in Rome. It seems that Paul expected to be released soon (see v. 22).

Apparently Paul *was* released from his first imprisonment at Rome and did additional traveling and preaching not recorded in Acts (see notes in the article "1 Timothy: A Handbook for Preachers"). During this period, Paul and Titus made a trip to Crete, where Paul left Titus to "set in order" the things lacking in the congregation (Tit. 1:5).

Crete was an island located southeast of Greece in the Mediterranean Sea. Representatives from Crete were in Jerusalem when the gospel was first preached (Acts 2:11); perhaps some were converted and took the gospel back to their island. The inhabitants of Crete were descendants of the Philistines. They were daring sailors and bowmen, but they had a reputation as "liars, evil beasts, lazy gluttons" (Tit. 1:12). It was not the best soil for planting the seed of the gospel, but God is concerned about all men (Acts 10:34, 35).

When Paul wrote to Titus, he apparently was on his way to Nicopolis (Tit. 3:12), a city in western Greece; perhaps he was passing through Macedonia. Paul wrote to tell Titus *how* to set in order the things that were lacking, but he probably also wrote for other reasons: (1) to *encourage* Titus in the difficult task before him, (2) to *back up* Titus by giving him an

authoritative apostolic letter.

Titus is written in an authoritative style which the Cretans could understand. However, in addition to the no-nonsense instructions to the members, the book also contains a sobering charge to all preachers (Tit. 2:7, 8) and two of the greatest doctrinal passages of the New Testament (Tit. 2:11-14; 3:3-7).

Some think that after Titus met Paul at Nicopolis, Paul was arrested there and taken to Rome; Titus may have gone with him (2 Tim. 4:10).

OUTLINE OF TITUS

- I. PUTTING THINGS IN ORDER BY APPOINTING STRONG LEADERSHIP (1).
 - A. Men who are strong Christian husbands and fathers should be selected (vv. 5-9).
 - B. Men who are able to deal with false teachers should be selected (vv. 10-16; see 3:9-11).
- II. PUTTING THINGS IN ORDER BY TEACHING SOUND DOCTRINE (2; note vv. 1, 15).
 - A. Sound doctrine commanded (vv. 1, 7, 8, 15).
 - B. Sound doctrine applied to all ages (vv. 2-8) and servants (vv. 9, 10).
 - C. Sound doctrine explained (vv. 11-14).
- III. PUTTING THINGS IN ORDER BY ENCOURAGING GOOD WORKS (3; note vv. 1, 8, 14).
 - A. The need for good works (see 1:16; 2:7, 14).
 1. As citizens (vv. 1, 2).
 2. As evangelists (vv. 8, 14).
 - B. The motive for good works: God's love (vv. 3-7).

LESSONS FROM TITUS

The principal thing lacking in the church at Crete was *strong leadership* (1:5). Good leadership is essential for the church to be what it should be. If a congregation has existed for a reasonable period of time but has no elders, generally something is lacking. A congregation should never appoint elders if there are no qualified men. ("It's better to be scripturally unorganized than unscripturally organized.") Every effort should be put forth to develop as quickly as possible men with the necessary qualifications (1:5-9).

Some teach that the responsibility of appointing elders (1:5) proves that Titus (an evangelist) had

authority over the elders (“evangelistic authority”). Acts 6:1-6 indicates that the selection of leaders should be done by the congregation. All the evangelist does is “install” them (“set them in place”). The official who administers the oath of office to the President of the United States does not then have authority over the President. Neither does the preacher who is involved

in appointing elders have authority over them.

Meditate on 2:11-14 and 3:3-7. Consider what God has done for us and how this should affect our lives!

OUTLINE OF AND LESSONS FROM PHILEMON

See sermon outline.

Reading Between the Lines (Philemon)

You get a letter in the mail. You glance at the return address; it is from a friend. You open the envelope, expecting a cheerful “How-are-you?-I’m-fine” note. Instead, your friend pours out his heart to you. Maybe the words make you glad . . . or sad . . . or even mad. Emotionally stirred, you drop the letter and pace the floor. After you have control of your emotions, you pick up the pages and read them again, slowly, carefully. This time you discover things you did not see originally. You put the letter down again, but the words stay with you. Gradually, you see even more implications in the message.

The brief letter to Philemon is like that. Philemon was a leader in the church at Colossae. He may have been converted by Paul (v. 19b); certainly Paul counted him as a close friend. Imagine the scene as Tychicus (Col. 4:7) one day shows up on Philemon’s doorstep saying, “I have a letter for you from Paul all the way from Rome.” Philemon steps forward with a smile to take the scroll. As he does so, he sees with Tychicus someone who wronged him, someone he thought he would never see again: Onesimus (Col. 4:7-9), a slave who had burglarized his house, then fled into the night. Philemon’s smile changes to a frown; anger flushes his cheeks. Bitter words flood his mind, and he opens his mouth to speak. “Don’t say a word, Philemon,” Tychicus cautions, “until you read the letter from Paul.” Breathing heavily, Philemon sits and begins to read.

This letter is unique in the New Testament. At first reading, it is a bit of personal correspondence, allowing a glimpse into the age Paul lived in. As we read, re-read, and ponder it, there are lessons here for any age.

I. SLAVERY AND SOCIAL PROBLEMS.

A. The letter must be studied in light of the slavery of that day.

1. Onesimus was a slave, Philemon’s *property*. It would be hard for a slave to commit a worse offense than running away, compounded by theft. Philemon would be within his right to inflict the gravest of punishments. (Paul did not minimize Onesimus’ crime.)
2. Slavery goes against what we stand for as Christians, but the New Testament gives special instructions to masters and slaves (Eph. 6:5-9; Col. 3:22—4:1). We do not see slavery condemned outright, not even in the book we are studying. *Why?*
 - a. Priorities. Christianity is more concerned about the soul that will spend eternity somewhere than about the body that will return to the dust in a few years.
 - b. Procedure. This was an explosive situation that had to be handled with care.

(1) The Christian approach has never been revolution.

(a) We are to respect those in authority, even if they are not Christians (Rom. 13:1ff.).

(b) We are to pray for our leaders, that there might be peace (1 Tim. 2:1ff.).

(2) The Christian approach is to teach Christian principles, changing lives by changing hearts.

(3) This approach *worked*. Where Christian principles have been taught and practiced, slavery has ultimately been abolished.

B. We need this lesson today. Christians should be concerned about social ills. Our primary goal, however, should not be social change, but the salvation of souls. We are solving social problems as we faithfully teach and preach the gospel of Christ and the wondrous principles Jesus gave us!

II. BRETHERN AND FORGIVENESS.

A. It is hard for us to appreciate fully Philemon’s dilemma. Onesimus *deserved* the most severe punishment. Philemon would not want to offend Paul or lose the respect of his household. It was one of the stickiest “forgiveness problems” anyone ever faced. Note how delicately Paul handled it.

1. Paul began in a positive way by commending his friend, Philemon (vv. 4-7).
2. Paul did not demand; he beseeched (vv. 8, 9, 14).
3. Paul gently brought to mind his sacrifices by referring to himself as “the aged” and as “a prisoner” (v. 9), adding, “Accept him as you would *me*” (v. 17).
4. He stressed that Onesimus had become an active, serving Christian (vv. 11-13) and would be useful to Philemon (v. 16).
5. He introduces some humor with a play on words (v. 11). “Onesimus” means “profitable” or “useful.” In the past, “Good For Something” was “good for nothing”; as a Christian, he really would be “good for something.”
6. He implied that the hand of God may have been in all that had happened (v. 15).
7. Without minimizing the crime, he offered to pay for the damages (vv. 18, 19a; *v. 18 is the key to the book*).
8. Paul reminded Philemon of what he owed him (v. 19b, 20).
9. He expressed confidence in Philemon’s deci-

sion (v. 21).

B. Touchy situations arise in the church, as brother is pitted against brother. Most could be resolved if everybody would “act like Christians”! We need to learn to forgive, not merely because it is commanded, but because of the great debt we owe the Lord (Eph. 4:32)!

III. CHRIST AND THE CROSS.

A. What Paul was suggesting went against the society of his day. How could Paul even suggest that Philemon forgive a slave? Paul was saturated with *Jesus* (Gal. 2:20). What Paul suggested parallels what Jesus did for us.

1. We were born “good for something”; when sin came into our lives, we became “good for noth-

ing.” Like Onesimus, when we come into contact with the gospel, we realize our condition.

2. Jesus said, “I will pay the debt.” Then He said to the Father on your behalf and mine, “Receive this one even as you receive Me”!

3. We are “good for something” again, useful both to God and man!

B. That is what Jesus had done for Paul, so he did not hesitate to suggest that Philemon do it for Onesimus. If we can realize what the Lord did for us, it will change our outlook on everything!

CONCLUSION

Powerful lessons can be found in this little book that is tucked away between Titus and Hebrews. We need to read it, re-read it, ponder on it, and even read between the lines.

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