

Scripture Reading: Paul’s Letter to Philemon

¹Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother, To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ²to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow soldier, and to the church in your house: ³Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵because I hear of your love for all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷I have indeed received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother.

⁸For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹²I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶no 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.

¹⁷So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me. ¹⁸If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account. ¹⁹I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

²⁰Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ. ²¹Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

²²One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you. ²³Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers. ²⁵The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Sermon Text:

Have you heard of “the Rules?” When I was in university I shared a flat with a girl who had them on a poster. She hung them in our bathroom. They begin “*The female always makes the rules. The rules are subject to change at any time without prior notification. No male can possibly know all the rules. If the female suspects the male knows all the rules, she must immediately change some or all the rules. The female is never wrong....The female can change her mind at any given point in time for any reason. The male must never change his mind without express written consent from the female.*” And so-on they go.... The rules are not meant to be serious, but they trade on a well-recognised characterization of women as the changeable ones. I question that a bit, and I question the tendency in older theological writing always to call the church “She.” But certainly it’s true that the church from time to time has changed “her” mind. And Christians have had different reactions to this: some deplore it and see any change as tantamount to faithlessness; some despair at the church’s slowness, it’s stoginess, and failure to keep pace with the times. Today as part of our summer series on touchy issues in the church, I want to step back from any one particular issue or challenge and name the underlying thing, which inclines us on many of these controversial matters to line up either with the conservatives or with the liberals, and that’s *our attitude toward change*, or the principles by which we justify change in the church.

Any institution which is going to survive over thousands of years *must* change. I marvel sometimes when I consider the institution of McDonald’s. Founded in 1940, McDonald’s has grown from a single restaurant in California, into the world’s largest restaurant chain, and its success is largely grounded in its ability to adapt. It serves gyros in Greece, falfels in Lebanon and in India, no beef at all! Here in North America, McDonald’s has morphed from its traditional identity as a hamburger joint into something more chic, with its salads and its wraps and its deli sandwiches. The most recent transformation has to do with its line

of premium coffee. I was reading a McDonald’s business report recently in which the CEO was quoted as saying that McDonald’s wishes to be known not only as a restaurant that serves coffee, but as “a coffee destination.” McDonald’s run of 68 years hardly compares to the church’s run of thousands, and some of you are probably thinking its sacrilege even to be comparing our stock in trade, which is the gospel, to a hamburger. What I’m saying is that all successful institutions adapt – all successful institutions need a strategy for how to integrate change – but different principles govern the adaptation of the church, than apply to corporations. So what are these principles and where do they come from?

As it happens, different branches of the Christian church have developed different strategies for integrating change. Eastern Orthodoxy has put a cap on change, round about the 8th century. If you worship in Greece today, you will be using roughly the same liturgy that Christians in Greece used 13 hundred years earlier. For the Orthodox, tradition is more important than looking and sounding contemporary.

The Roman Catholic church has a very interesting attitude toward change. Officially speaking, it has never actually changed its mind about anything. Rather it speaks of having “developed its doctrine.” This means that every new statement of the church is justified in terms of former statements, citing Scripture and tradition. But Catholics, unlike us, have never assumed that the revelation of God is complete with Scripture. The statements of the popes over the years and of the church councils, get added in, so there is this body of doctrine that, like a glacier, keeps rolling along and picking up things along the way, and evolving and getting bigger all the time.

Charismatics represent another division in Christianity. We associate them with the 20th century which is when a lot of the charismatic denominations emerged, like Pentecostalism, the Vineyard and thousands of independent churches, but there were charismatics in the early church, and at the time of the reformation too. Basically they are distinguished by their belief that the Holy

Spirit continues the work of revelation. Theirs is not unlike the Catholic position, really, except that the Catholic church has one authoritative prophet: the pope, whereas charismatic Christianity has many. A word of prophecy can come from any Christian who has been so anointed by the Spirit, and so the church can go in new directions based on these new words from God.

Finally you have us: We represent a perspective that is called “Reformed.” The Reformed position on revelation is that it is complete within Scripture. We put much more store on what has been said in Scripture than on what anyone has said since. That would not be true of the Catholic church which supplements the sayings of Scripture with the teachings of “the church,” (meaning the councils and the popes). It would not be true of the charismatic churches, which are looking for what new thing God is saying today through the gift of prophecy, and it would not even be true of the Orthodox church which looks back not only to scripture, but to the church tradition that developed within those first 8 centuries.

The goal of the reformation was to peel away the “traditions of men” and get back to the purity of Scripture alone. Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism have a very high view of the church. The Catholic Church has even said that the church, while it often errs in practice, is preserved by God from erring in its teaching (the *Lumen Gentium* of Vatican II (110-112). At the Reformation, we took as our slogan, “Reformed and ever reforming” which might sound as if we were a people who welcomed and loved change, but what it really is, is an expression of our lack of confidence *in the church*. We believe that sin has marked the church in every age, so in every age, the church must reform anew (Living Faith 7.1.6). It must be called back to obedience by the unchanging Word. All our confidence is placed in God and in the Word of God, and not in the church.

While the emphasis for Reformed people has always been on the Word of Scripture, we do not, as the charismatics sometimes accuse us of doing, exclude the role of the Spirit altogether. But

The position of the Roman Catholic church on the church's infallibility in matters of doctrine as elaborated in the Lumen Gentium of Vatican II.

“The entire body of the faithful, anointed as they are by the Holy One,(111) cannot err in matters of belief. They manifest this special property by means of the whole peoples' supernatural discernment in matters of faith when "from the Bishops down to the last of the lay faithful" (8*) they show universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. That discernment in matters of faith is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth. It is exercised under the guidance of the sacred teaching authority, in faithful and respectful obedience to which the people of God accepts that which is not just the word of men but truly the word of God.(112)...Although the individual bishops do not enjoy the prerogative of infallibility, they nevertheless proclaim Christ's doctrine infallibly whenever, even though dispersed through the world, but still maintaining the bond of communion among themselves and with the successor of Peter, and authentically teaching matters of faith and morals, they are in agreement on one position as definitively to be held.(40*) This is even more clearly verified when, gathered together in an ecumenical council, they are teachers and judges of faith and morals for the universal Church, whose definitions must be adhered to with the submission of faith.(41*). And this infallibility with which the Divine Redeemer willed His Church to be endowed in defining doctrine of faith and morals, extends as far as the deposit of Revelation extends, which must be religiously guarded and faithfully expounded.”

we don't believe that the Spirit leads us off in new directions, not indicated in Scripture. We believe that, as Jesus said in John, the role of the Holy Spirit is to remind us of *Jesus' words* (Jn. 14.26), to write them, as it were, on our hearts, and show us how they apply in the day to day dilemmas of our lives.

Our positioning between, on the one hand, the Catholics and Orthodox with their emphasis on *the church*, and on the other hand the charismatics with their emphasis on *the Spirit*, tells you something about our attitude toward change. In one sense we are much more open to change than, for instance, the Catholic church, because we do not have to believe that the church has never made a mistake, and can never change its mind.

In another sense, we are much more conservative when it comes to change than our charismatic brothers and sisters. Charismatics can say: that's what God was saying *then* through *the Word*, but this is what God is saying *today* through *the Spirit*. We can't say that. For us, the Word and the Spirit always confirm one another, so every movement which claims to be of the Spirit must be tested for faithfulness to the Word. That then, is our particular way of integrating change: The bottom line is that for us, change must always be guided by Scriptural interpretation.

The Reformed View of the Church as articulated in The Presbyterian Church in Canada's subordinate standard, *Living Faith*

7.1.5 The church is apostolic. It is founded on Christ and the apostles and is in continuity with their teachings.

7.1.6 The church is in constant need of reform because of the failure and sin which mark its life in every age. The church is present when the Word is truly preached, the sacraments rightly administered, and as it orders its life according to the word of God.

I need to say a word about interpretation. Today that word has entered our vocabulary in the church almost as a synonym for “opinion.” When I was going to school the popular saying was: “well everyone has a right to their opinion.” I hear that kind of thing in the church now, only the way that people express it is this: “well, we all have our own interpretation.” What that really means is “I don’t have to worry too much about what the Scriptures say, because I can twist the Scriptures to say anything I want them to, or I can buy books by so-called Christian authorities which will do the twisting for me.” It’s certainly true that there is a bewildering array of opinion out there, but use your discernment. Some of the opinions are more justifiable than others. You don’t have to be a Biblical scholar to discern when someone is feeding you their opinion under the guise of a Scriptural interpretation. You can usually tell when feelings, or personal agendas or cultural pressures are the driving the car. True interpretation, on the other hand, asks first “what does the text say” and then secondly “how does it apply.”

Now, as I was saying last week, what the scriptures say on some issues is perfectly clear. On some issues, scripture speaks across the testaments with a unified voice, and no dissenting voice is to be found anywhere within scripture. Our problem with some of the things that Scripture says is not that we cannot understand; it’s that we understand all too well, and don’t happen to like it. We often resort to “interpretation” in these cases, to try and find a way of negating Scripture’s straight-forward Word, but again, this is not true interpretation; it is instead our opinion – our foregone conclusion – seeking a justification.

Other times, though, you’ll find what is called “a dialectic” within Scripture itself. One part of scripture says one thing, another part gives you the other side, and maybe the move from the Old to the New Testament transforms the whole discussion. The Bible was written over thousands of years by

5.4 The Bible is to be understood in the light of the revelation of God’s work in Christ. The writing of the Bible was conditioned by the language, thought, and setting of its time. The Bible must be read in its historical context. We interpret Scripture as we compare passages, seeing the two Testaments in light of each other, and listening to commentators past and present. Relying on the Holy Spirit, we seek the application of God’s word for our time. (Living Faith 5.4)

many different authors. It is divided into 66 different books. Of the all-important events which comprise the life and times of Jesus alone, we have not one account but four. This is what makes interpretation interesting. The interpreter has to discern the singular Word of God, from the many words and many voices that are there in the Scriptures.

I thought I'd look with you at the Paul's letter to Philemon as a kind of case study in how the church changes its mind. The issue on which it has changed its mind is the issue of slavery. Those of you who attended the retreat we had in May got to see the film *Amazing Grace*, the story of William Wilberforce. Wilberforce was a parliamentarian in 18th century Britain, and by conviction, a strong and evangelical Christian. He struggled for over 25 years to get his contemporaries to see the inherent godlessness of the slave trade, and eventually succeeded in its abolition. Incredible from where we stand that they couldn't see it, but it was one of history's great blind spots, (which makes you wonder...what are our blindspots today?) Incredible from where we stand that any Christian could ever have justified the keeping of slaves, but 300 years ago almost all Christians did. Slavery is one of those things on which the church has changed its mind.

I believe that in the course of writing his letter to Philemon, Paul is already beginning to change *his* mind. We said that the effect of many voices in Scripture, not always agreeing, is that on some matters we find “a dialectic,” well here we have one short letter, written by one man, and there is a dialectic *within it!* I don't know about you but I sometimes have a dialectic within myself – an argument within myself. The great thing about those kinds of arguments is that you are always sure to win! Paul is writing this letter to Philemon, a man whom he has had a role in converting, a man who is an owner of slaves. One of Philemon's slaves, a man called Onesimus, has run away, and in the ancient world that was an extremely serious offense. Run-away slaves when they were recaptured, were often put to death. Onesimus has run away and has somehow connected up with Paul. And he has been serving

Paul, while Paul is under house arrest. Over the course of his contact with Paul, Onesimus has also become a Christian. So Paul is writing this letter to Philemon to convince him to take Onesimus back, and not to punish him severely for his act of running away.

On the face of it, the letter *supports* the institution of slavery. Paul does not *command* Philemon, but tries to *persuade* him to show mercy. In other words, it seems to acknowledge that a slave-owner is well within his rights, to punish, maybe even to kill, an insubordinate slave. During the time Paul and Onesimus are together, Onesimus has served Paul, which makes Paul himself a kind of slave-owner or at least a slave-borrower. And then there is that bit in verse 11 about Onesimus formerly being useless, but now being useful, both to Philemon and to Paul. This is Paul making a playful use of Onesimus’ name, which actually means “Useful.” Can you imagine how dehumanizing it would be to have a name like “Useful” – it would be a constant reminder of your enslaved position, especially when it became the stuff of jokes: “Here *Useful*, come and shine my shoes, you’re always dallying at something – don’t be such a *Useless* fellow.” It seems that the effect of becoming a Christian upon Onesimus has not been to empower him to rebel against his enslavement. He was a runaway and a rebel and a “useless” slave *before* his conversion. Christianity has made him submissive and eager to serve – and Paul is talking about this like it’s a good thing – making jokes about how he now, finally, lives up to his name. You can see how the letter to Philemon could be used hundreds of years later by British slave owners on the West Indian plantations to say “you see, Christianity supports slavery. If all my slaves are the good Christians they claim to be, then they’ll cease to grumble about their ill-treatment and want to serve.”

But the dynamics of relationship between those who are “in Christ” are also part of what Paul discusses in this letter. Paul says to Philemon in verses 15 and 16: “¹⁵Perhaps this is the reason Onesimus was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶*no longer as a slave but more than a*

slave, a beloved brother...in the Lord.” Paul is not yet ready to say in this early letter, what he will say later in Colossians and in Galatians, that “in Christ there *is* neither slave nor free,” but you can see here how his thoughts are tending. And what does it mean for the institution of slavery, once you allow that men are equal in Christ? Once slave owners across the empire really start doing what Paul here is counselling Philemon to do: to have Onesimus back “no longer as a slave, but as a brother.” Revolutionary! It’s not in the Bible, but Christian tradition tells us the end of the story. Philemon apparently did have Onesimus back, at least long enough to free him, and Onesimus eventually became a bishop in the early church – a “useful servant” in the house of God.

The first Christians were not revolutionaries. The great fire of Rome was blamed on them, but revolution was never their style. They were too busy keeping their heads down, trying to avoid the lions. Yet it is true what is said of them in the book of Acts: “these men are turning the world upside down.” When Christians really started thinking through and living out the implications of Christ’s teaching, change happened, and little by little, it amounted to a revolution.

As Reformed Christians revolution is not really our style either. One of our favourite sayings about ourselves is that “the wheels of change grind slow but exceeding fine.” (Sometimes indeed they grind so slowly that one suspects they have ground to a halt). But if our call is really to exercise a Christian mind, then surely our attitude toward change should not be governed by our *temperamental* leanings – be they toward conservatism or toward the radical. *Our attitude toward change should be governed by the issue*: does *Scripture* prompt us on a given issue to turn our current approach on its head? Or does *Scripture* prompt us on a given issue to hold firm and resist the revolutions that are going on around us in the culture. As a church, our disregard for the indications of Scripture will be judged by future generations as the most enormous blind spots. But an ability to discern the indications of Scripture correctly will always place us on the side

“How does the church change its mind?”

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of the angels. So...Is there any more important prayer today, than that as a church, we might be able to discern what God is saying to us through the Word and through the Spirit?

Now unto him who loved us and who guides us through each perplexing path of life, be all glory and honour in the church both now and forever.