

PAUL AND PHILEMON: A CASE STUDY IN PASTORAL INFLUENCE

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Leadership is influence, the ability of one person to influence others.¹

Pastor Joe was frustrated. He felt strongly that Ken, a gifted young man in his church, was ready to take the next step into spiritual leadership. Pastor Joe had been meeting regularly with him for several years now, and Ken had grown rapidly both in his knowledge of the Word and his commitment to Christ. Ken was a gifted young man who could help the church grow. However, Bob was unconvinced. Bob was a key leader in the church. What he said often carried the day at business meetings because he was highly respected. Bob was a successful businessman whose donations were critical to the financial health of the church. What is more, Bob was a man of integrity. He loved and served the Lord with his whole heart which is what made his reluctance to accept Ken all the harder for Pastor Joe to handle.

It was true. Bob had gone out on a limb some years earlier and given Ken a job. Ken quit abruptly leaving Bob holding the bag. Bob felt that Ken was unreliable, but Ken had changed. He was a new man. Pastor Joe was worried that Ken would leave the church and use his gifts elsewhere if Bob could not accept Ken in leadership. How could Pastor Joe convince Bob to support Ken in his desire to serve as a leader in the church without manipulating or pressuring Bob? After all, President Harry Truman famously said, “A leader is a man who has the ability to get other people to do what they don’t want to do, and like it.”² Maybe that meant that he just wasn’t a leader if he couldn’t get Bob to change his mind!

The Apostle Paul’s letter to Philemon is closer to a business or personal letter than any other of Paul’s epistles. Business letters developed apart from the formal rhetorical handbooks on style so prevalent in the Greco-Roman world,³ yet we see from this letter how Paul exercised persuasive rhetoric to influence Philemon to accept his young slave Onesimus back. Therefore, this letter becomes an excellent case study in pastoral influence. Pastor Joe can follow the model set for him by the Apostle Paul to exercise healthy spiritual influence with Bob in the matter of Ken.

RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK

We must first speak the language of the recipient to influence his decisions. Businessmen like Philemon understood the rhetorical styles of their day, so Paul conforms his writing to the structure of the first century world of Philemon. The letter can be classified as deliberative rhetoric following examples such as Quintilian. There are five elements of a speech in classical rhetoric, and we can see three of them in Paul’s letter. We see the Exordium (vs.4-7), the Confirmatio (vs.8-16), and the Peroration (vs.7-22).⁴ Paul chooses to write in the style Philemon would understand.

EXORDIUM OR BEGINNING (4-7)

The purpose of the exordium is to gain the goodwill of the reader by evoking a warm response and establishing a positive foundation for the appeal. Paul is about to ask Philemon for a favor, and so he begins by establishing the loving generosity of Philemon to set the stage for his later request (v.7). Philemon’s generosity was a rich source of comfort and joy for Paul who commends him for refreshing the hearts of the saints. Words like “joy,” “comfort,” “love,” and especially “hearts” are highly emotive words designed to establish a personal connection between Paul and Philemon. A man who brings such love, joy, and refreshment to many could hardly refuse the coming request.⁵

CONFIRMATIO OR PROOF (8-16)

Paul begins his proof by waiving his right to exercise authority over Philemon (v.8). Paul could have chosen to command Philemon, but instead, he appeals to him in love. One of the mistakes we often make in pastoral persuasion is that we seek compliance by exercising our authority. Such an approach rarely works for true change. As the saying goes, “a person convinced against his will is of the same opinion still.” Persuasion by authority yields short-term results. Long-term change never comes by coercion. The bully pulpit is not a biblical pulpit.

Paul throws in a highly personal, and openly emotional appeal (*pathos*), based upon his chains in Christ (v.9). Such appeals were designed to evoke powerful emotions as a means of gaining the goodwill of the audience.⁶ Paul was not against such methods and appears to have viewed his chains to be his credentials (*ethos*) which open the door to bold requests.⁷ He follows this statement of his credentials with another appeal (v.10). In this way, Paul beautifully balances *ethos*, character, and credentials, with *pathos*, the emotional appeals intended to tug at the heart of Philemon.⁸ Paul communicates all of this before he even introduces the request. Real pastoral persuasion cannot be rushed. We must set the stage for our appeals if we want real change to happen.

Deliberative rhetoric dealt with two primary motives for change. The first motive was honor (*honestas*) and the second motive was benefit (*utilitas*).⁹ Paul’s use of the well-known pun regarding the name Onesimus (useful) along with his affirmation regarding his usefulness establish the second motive (vs.10-11). Then Paul appeals to Philemon’s honor when he refuses to do anything without Philemon’s consent so that his goodness would not be under constraint (v.14).¹⁰ Paul is using common commercial language and style to reach Philemon, the businessman, without making him feel like he is being forced to do anything. Throughout his letter, Paul uses the very touching term “inward parts” (hearts) three times (v.7, 12, 20) to establish a warm relationship with Philemon. Paul masterfully weaves together *ethos* and *pathos* as motives for his appeal. He is very careful to stress that Philemon is free to make his own decision. Still, as yet, Paul has not made his actual request. He implies the request, but he does not state the request until he has fully paved the way for it.

PERORATION OR CONCLUSION (17-22)

Finally, Paul makes his request to Philemon (v.17). “Welcome him as you would me.” Paul bases his request on his partnership with Philemon by saying, “if you have me as a partner.” Our relationships in Christ are the foundation for all true influence in Christ’s church. Fellowship, partnership in Christ, is like a bank account. We make deposits and withdrawals in our relationships so if we want to make a withdrawal, we better have a relational account to draw upon. No partnership means no influence.

We can see all the elements of Aristotle’s explanation of persuasion in Paul’s conclusion. Paul asks Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul himself. According to Aristotle, the substitution of one’s self was a common rhetorical technique intended to create goodwill among those who must decide a case. Emotional appeal (*pathos*) was a significant element of rhetorical conclusions. Paul employs two commercial terms – to owe and to charge – which were very familiar to the Hellenistic culture in which Philemon lived. Paul is willing that Philemon charge to his account all bills which Onesimus might owe. His signature, writing in his own hand, guarantees the payment. This is a powerful example of an “appeal to pity” spoken about by Aristotle, Quintilian, and Cicero as an essential part of a rhetorical conclusion.¹¹

The capstone of Paul’s emotional plea comes when he calls in Philemon’s indebtedness as a motive for fulfilling Paul’s request. Paul writes, “not that I say to you that you even owe yourself to me” (v.19). Philemon is a debtor to Paul, and Paul is calling in his debt with this request. The most

likely understanding is that Paul was instrumental in Philemon's conversion.¹² He owes Paul his life; the least he can do is give Onesimus his life back. We make deposits in the lives of people as pastors. Our influence depends on those deposits. Every time we make an appeal, we are calling in our marker with that person. Like Paul, we sometimes say to a church member, "you owe me." Perhaps we don't say it as baldly as Paul does here, but all persuasion seeks to withdraw from the goodwill we have built up with the person being persuaded. We must use the goodwill wisely because, if we are always withdrawing, we will lose our persuasive ability. We only have so many markers to call. Eventually, we bankrupt our influence.

Paul plays the reciprocity card with great power. The reciprocity principle is embedded in human nature and reinforced by human culture. The rule says that we should try to repay what another does for us. The reciprocity principle is so powerful and so universal that every society down through human history has employed it in some form.¹³ Paul appeals to the powerful stimulus of reciprocity to move Philemon to do what Paul asks. He follows that plea with an expression of confidence that Philemon will do what Paul wants and accept Onesimus back (v.21). Such expressions of confidence in the audience were common rhetorical devices according to Quintilian.¹⁴ Paul has masterfully struck all the right chords in his pastoral influence of Philemon.

ETHICAL MODEL

According to E.L.M. (see "Healthy Pastoral Persuasion" on this website), when elaboration likelihood is high, the recipient will focus significant resources on the central issues to be decided. The pastor seeks to develop elaboration on the central issues by helping the recipient "over learn" the ideas and internalize the message. Paul develops his main request to Philemon first through implication and issue relevant information. He eventually makes his request explicit and then anticipates the possible objections to the decision he advocates. Paul makes sure that Philemon knows that he, Paul, will make good on whatever financial debt remains. This promise removes the objection Paul anticipates from Philemon. This process is the central route to persuasion.

The central and peripheral routes to persuasion exist on a continuum, so they occur coextensively. They are not mutually exclusive concepts as we can see from Paul's letter. When elaboration likelihood is low, the pastor seeks to use peripheral triggers or cues to secure further elaboration of the issue. These "short cut" methods are legitimate within certain ethical boundaries especially if they lead back to the elaboration of the central issue. Common peripheral routes include liking or similarity, cognitive consistency, reciprocity, scarcity, authority, fear, guilt, minimax, and conformity.

Paul does not assume that Philemon is highly motivated to elaborate on his request. He employs a wide variety of peripheral triggers designed to stimulate Philemon to take this issue seriously. Paul uses the liking or similarity principle when he based his appeal on their partnership (v.17), the personal relationship they have enjoyed (v.7) and hope to enjoy in the future (v.22). Paul employs the reciprocity principle (v.19) as well as minimax – a method of minimizing the cost to Philemon (v.18) and maximizing the benefit (v.11, 16). He appeals to cognitive consistency when he cites God's providence (v.16) as the reason for the situation. Philemon already believes that God is providentially at work in human lives, so this fits within a consistent theological framework. Philemon will feel cognitive dissonance as he tries to reconcile his "love for all the saints" (v.5, 7) with his rejection of Onesimus if he should refuse Paul's request. Paul uses an ancient form of "attribution theory" when he expresses his confidence in Philemon (v.21) and commends him for his Christian character (vs. 4-7). He is attributing to Philemon what he expects of Philemon, a powerful tool for influence that pastors frequently use.

Yet Paul stops short of many peripheral triggers that less ethical persuaders might use in these circumstances. He avoids the use of authority to command Philemon's obedience (vs.8-9). He does not appeal to guilt or fear as a motive. Paul makes no threats and implies no recriminations. He avoids the use of any compliance conditioning techniques. There are no signs of unethical sequential influence. He does not introduce a lesser decision to ratchet up to a bigger decision often known as the "foot in the door" technique.

Truth is Paul's primary concern. He does not withhold information from Philemon. He avoids deceptive or ambiguous words nor does Paul insult or intimidate Philemon. He is open and honest about his intentions, not hiding his feelings. Paul exercises his influence in the context of love. The letter exudes love. Furthermore, Paul gains no personal advantage in this situation. He can powerfully influence precisely because self-interest does not motivate him. Selfishness does not taint His persuasion. Paul is advocating for someone who has no legal right to advocate for himself much like a public defender in a modern court. The result is healthy persuasion, for Paul gains no benefit other than the joy from Philemon's decision. In fact, his offer to pay the debt of Onesimus could cost him dearly, demonstrating the love motive tangibly behind the influence.

Relationships are openly acknowledged. There are no secret agendas or connections. Paul does not deny the existing framework of relationships, both legal and personal. Onesimus is a slave. Philemon is an owner. Wrongs have been committed. Paul has no judicial power and, indeed, does not even ask for pardon anywhere in the letter. There is a striking difference between Paul and Pliny, an ancient writer in a similar circumstance, regarding pardon. Pliny wrote a letter to Sabinianus on behalf of one of his servants who had run away from him. Pliny makes a plea for a pardon based on repentance while Paul avoids any discussion of repentance and forgiveness.¹⁵

Paul advocates a welcoming embrace of love (v.17) rather than the merciful act of forgiveness. We would expect a Christian to stress repentance and forgiveness and a pagan to stress love, but the exact opposite takes place in this letter. A possible rhetorical reason for this difference might be that a plea for pardon activates a different motive than a plea for love. The clue is found in Pliny's letter after he has made his case for a pardon. Pliny writes, "I'm afraid you will think I am using *pressure, not persuasion*" (italics added), which indicates his discomfort with the argument he has just made for pardon. The motive for pardon is often guilt from an angry response as Pliny's letter makes clear. Issues of justice and appeasement, guilt and forgiveness, are central to Pliny making forgiveness a pressure point in the relationship.

We, pastors, are quick to play the forgiveness card in our influence but Paul avoids such motives in his letter. There are certainly repentance and forgiveness issues in the matter of Onesimus and Philemon, but Paul does not come at the matter from that side. He illustrates an ethical boundary for the Christian by avoiding such motives. The Christian persuader should be careful not to pressure others based upon a guilt response which leads to an obligatory pardon. Forgiveness can be used as a pressure point because Christians know they must forgive. They feel coerced to forgive much like a child is forced to hug another after the other child has said, "I'm sorry." The whole process feels contrived as the forgiver feels pressured. Paul avoids these kinds of guilt-based pressure points in his persuasion.

Paul has a relationship of authority over Philemon which he implies but refuses to invoke (v.8). Paul as an Apostle has power that he does not use. As a pastor, Paul could exercise his spiritual authority over a man he disciplined in Christ, but he chooses to appeal to Philemon as an equal partner rather than one who is over another (v.17). The very fact that Paul could invoke his authority and chooses not to do so demonstrates an ethical limitation which pastors would do well to emulate. Authority makes a poor basis for real elaboration. Power plays in the church do not bring lasting change.

Paul backs off from any direct pressure on the decision. He leaves Philemon with the choice (v.14). Paul wanted him to make his decision voluntarily. Coercion is outside the boundaries of Christian persuasion. He could have manipulated the situation by keeping Onesimus for himself (v.13) which he would have dearly loved to do (v.12). He could have coerced Philemon by sending a messenger instead of Onesimus. Philemon would have been in the awkward, although legally correct situation, of using legal resources to take Onesimus back from Paul. Paul does not want to place his friend in such a situation, so he sends Onesimus back to him, thus placing the choice freely in Philemon's hands. Paul might never see either of them again. Philemon could easily have disregarded the letter and done as he pleased. Paul chose to place the entire decision in Philemon's hands. One wonders how much influence Paul used on Onesimus to get him to go back to his master!

We often seek to retain control in persuasive situations so that we can achieve the results we want. How can Paul let go of his control and leave the decision in Philemon's power? Paul places his trust in the providence of God and the power of the Holy Spirit to change minds. The Holy Spirit is the unseen force behind the ethical persuader which frees him to let the decision go into the hands of another. It is the Holy Spirit who gives the pastor the confidence to "lose control" of the situation without fear. The ethical persuader does not need to coerce and control the other party because he is confident that he can leave the ultimate decision in the hands of the Holy Spirit. The letter to Philemon breathes that confidence, particularly at the end (v.21-25). Paul does not fear refusal because can trust God to accomplish His will.

BACK TO PASTOR JOE

The seeds of unbelief were sprouting in Pastor Joe. The temptation was to make it happen despite Bob's reluctance. Pastor Joe knew that he could bypass Bob and push Ken's nomination through the church. He believed he had the power to get it done. Furthermore, Pastor Joe was confident that he could take the dispute public with the other leaders of the church and put Bob in a difficult position. He knew Bob well and thought that Bob would give in rather than fight it out with the other leaders. Pastor Joe felt that waiting for the process to work out was wasting the church's time and might lead Ken to leave. If Ken left, it would reflect badly on Pastor Joe and his lack of leadership. The truth is that Pastor Joe trusted his power more than God's plan. He lacked faith in God the Holy Spirit to work it out in God's time. Pastor Joe was tempted to manipulate the situation to get his way, but he sensed that when we manipulate others, we prove our unbelief in God.

Pastor Joe has good options to use his influence with Bob. It will take some time and care. An open and honest conversation is the best approach. He will need to invest wisdom and effort in his relationship with Bob. Pastor Joe can follow the model of Paul with Philemon. He can talk with Bob. He can lay out carefully the reasons why Ken should be in leadership so that Bob can focus on the central issue. If Pastor Joe has built up a good account in his relationship with Bob, he can use that goodwill to influence him. If Pastor Joe has helped Bob in the past, he can even remind Bob of that help. He can acknowledge the value of Bob's contributions to the church. He can express his love and respect for Bob if he is genuine in his remarks. Pastor Joe can put his own faith in Ken on the line with Bob. He knows that Ken has wronged Bob, but he believes that Ken is a changed man. He can ask Bob to trust him on this one, and he will see the difference in time. He can offer to make any wrongs right with Bob. Pastor Joe can present his best case to Bob and ask Bob to seriously consider his request for the good of both Ken and the church. He should use all these methods of influence and then back off. He must leave it with Bob to make his choice without recriminations from Pastor Joe. He must love Bob enough to let it go. He must trust God enough to lose control.

Will it work? God's got the best plan. We can trust Him.

¹ Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership*, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1967; reprint edition, 1994), 31.

² Cited by Henry and Richard Blackaby, *Spiritual Leadership: Moving People on to God's Agenda*, revised and expanded, (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2011), 33.

³ Hans Dieter Betz, *2 Corinthians 8 and 9: A Commentary on Two Administrative Letters of the Apostle Paul*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 136.

⁴ Clarice J. Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language in Paul's Letter to Philemon" in *Persuasive Artistry: Studies in New Testament Rhetoric in Honor of George A. Kennedy*, Duane F. Watson Editor, (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1991), 322-323. Forrester F. Church, "Rhetorical Structure and Design in Paul's Letter to Philemon," *Harvard Theological Review*, 71, 1978, 21-22.

⁵ Eduard Lohse, *A Commentary on the Epistles to the Colossians and Philemon*, translated by William R. Poehlmann and Robert J. Karris. Edited by Helmet Koester. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1971), 195.

⁶ Duane F. Watson, "A Rhetorical Analysis of 3 John: A Study in Epistolary Rhetoric," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 51 (1989), 487.

⁷ Gene R. Smillie, "Ephesians 6:19-20: A Mystery for the Sake of Which the Apostle is an Ambassador in Chains," *Trinity Journal*, 18:2 (Fall 1997), 212-213.

⁸ Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 25.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Martin, "The Rhetorical Function of Commercial Language," 327.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 321-335; Church, Rhetorical Structure, 28-30.

¹² Peter T. O'Brien, *Colossians, Philemon*, Vol. 44 in the *Word Biblical Commentary* (Waco: Word Books Publisher, 1990), 301. H.C.G. Moule, *Studies in Colossians and Philemon*, (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1977), 176.

¹³ Robert Cialdini, *Influence: The New Psychology of Modern Persuasion* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), 29-31.

¹⁴ Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 30.

¹⁵ Pliny, *Epist.* 9.21 cited by Church, "Rhetorical Structure," 31.