

THE HEALTHY CONSTITUTION OF A BLESSED CHURCH

By Titus Chu

THE EXPERIENCES IN THE EPISTLE OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

INTRODUCTION

The Epistle to Philemon is a very sweet one, concerning how to have a blessed church life in a certain locality. The first time I read it I didn't know why there was such an Epistle in the Bible, because I felt it was too short and without any revelation. Not until about twenty years after I got saved did I see that there were so many riches even in the beginning of this Epistle: Christ Jesus, Paul the prisoner, Timothy the brother, Philemon the beloved and fellow worker, his wife Apphia, and his son Archippus who was a fellow soldier of Paul (Philem.1).

This Epistle was written to a church meeting in a home. Verse 2 says, "to the church which is in your house," indicating that a church can meet in a home, but not that the church belongs to the home. It means that the church meetings are in one's house. Philemon was probably a wealthy man who had an especially big house with a large hall accommodating a lot of people, so the meetings of the church in Colossae were in his home. When Paul says, "the church which is in your house," he means the brothers and sisters who were in their meetings; these saints were the church in Colossae.

This Epistle talks about three important elements in a blessed church life: the healthy constitution, the healthy content, and the healthy acceptance.

THE HEALTHY CONSTITUTION IN A BLESSED CHURCH

In a healthy church, there are always four constituents: the experienced brother “Philemon,” the serving “Apphia,” the fighting “Archippus,” and the saints in that locality. There is also the fellowship between the Lord’s servant and all the local churches.

The Experienced Philemon

Philemon in this Epistle had been saved probably for a long time. In that church he was more experienced than others. The word “Philemon” is related to *philia* (love). In the Scriptures there are mainly two Greek words for “love.” One is *agape*, the noble love based on appreciation. *Agape* is the love with which God loves us. The other word is *philia*, the love based on a relationship connected to each other. Therefore, the name Philemon shows us that he is loving and related to his companions. In this we see that one who leads the church must be loving and connected with others as a companion.

Being Full of Visions and Commitment, and Being Firm

Concerning this experienced brother Philemon, what characteristics can we find? He is a man with visions, revelations and commitment. Just as parents have commitment toward their children, Philemon knows what the commitment in the church life is. More than this, his living matches what the Lord desires and corresponds to what the Lord wants to do. With such an experienced brother in a local church, brothers and sisters will be preserved and protected in their growth of life and operation.

It’s always a matter of time before a church in a locality goes through some spiritual storms. If there are experienced brothers in the church life, then when the church is undergoing some spiritual storms it can still remain very firm, just like a house upon a rock. On the contrary, without experienced brothers the church is like a house built on the sand, which can fall and be washed away.

A Philemon in the church is not only firm but also has commitment. Because of his firmness, and under his leading, saints will not be anxious for the increase of number or the spiritual ups - and downs when they are serving. Also, because of his commitment, his presence there brings the steady growth in every aspect of the whole church. Today in the church life we have to learn to be a Philemon, putting ourselves completely into laboring, fighting desperately for the Lord's testimony in our locality, and becoming the firm strength for the saints.

Working Together with Others

Philemon is not only a beloved brother to Paul, but also his co-worker. It is no easy job to work with others. The one who serves the Lord always has a lot of plans and intentions of his own in his mind, and he is busy with affairs all day long. I have seldom found two brothers who really work with each other.

What does "co-worker" mean? Generally, we think it refers to a full-timer. But that's not correct, for Philemon is not a full-timer. Then what is a co-worker? Co-workers have the same commitment and visions in which they labor together.

Philemon is Paul's co-worker. He has the same vision, the same commitment, and the same laboring Paul has. Paul is the one who raised up the churches, including the church in Colossae. Philemon is also the one raising up the church in Colossae, and this church is for all the churches.

In the church, almost all the useful ones are young people. But when it comes to standing firm and building up, the church needs fathers. In the church in Colossae, Paul had this experienced brother Philemon, so he could testify of him as "my co-worker." Being Paul's co-worker was not a matter of how many messages one could give, how many things one could do, or how useful one could be. Being Paul's co-worker required a person to be experienced, firm and full of commitment.

The Serving Apphia

There is also a serving sister in this epistle, Apphia. A sister like her is serving, loving and caring. With such a sister, a church will be very rich.

Being Fruitful

The name “Apphia” means “being fruitful.” Possibly it’s easy for this sister to bear fruit. In a healthy church there must be very good serving sisters. The more burden and better coordination such sisters have, the more blessed and fruitful the church will be.

Serving in Coordination

In a church, as long as there is at least one family full of coordination, like Philemon and Apphia, the church will be blessed. One time in a locality, a sister complained to me about her husband going to meetings and serving too much. At that time I felt,” Oh, Lord, it’s a tough situation. They lack an Apphia.” In a home that ministers healthily in the church life, there must be both an experienced Philemon and an Apphia to help him. A brother Philemon has to know how to love Apphia and even produce the Apphia who will be a helper in service.

Here Paul doesn’t say “Apphia your wife,” but “Apphia the sister,” showing the intimacy between Paul and this family. To Paul, Apphia is not only the wife of Philemon but the beloved and useful sister for the Lord as well.

Every healthy church needs a Philemon who is the co-worker of the Lord’s servant, full of revelations and visions, laboring and firm. Whether the Lord grants blessings or not, he is rejoicing; however hard the outward circumstances are, he stands firm and keeps himself in the presence of the Lord. In addition, a healthy church also needs an Apphia who is more than a good wife. She serves well and knows how to coordinate with and help this Philemon.

The Fighting Archippus

The next person Paul mentions is Archippus, the fellow soldier. Such a brother is a soldier knowing how to charge, attack and supply. This brother is a real soldier who fulfills what Paul says in Ephesians, “For our wrestling is not against blood and flesh but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the world-rulers of this darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenlies”(Eph. 6: 12).

Ushering Man into the Presence of God

The name “Archippus” means the “master of the horse,” who is good at manipulating, controlling and leading the horse. In other words, Archippus knows man’s situation well, and knows how to bring a man into the presence of the Lord.

Everyone when entering the church is like a wild horse. The moment they enter the church life, some want to serve fervently but in a worldly way; others try to find possible ways to do business such as direct marketing and insurance selling. These people are wild horses and it takes Archippus to lead and guide them properly.

It is a spiritual fight to serve the church, and whether a church can fight or not depends completely on whether there is any Archippus or not. A fighting Archippus can bind the strong man (Satan) to plunder his goods (the Satan-controlled, Satan-occupied people). Furthermore, he labors and struggles according to the Lord’s operation operating in him in power to supply and perfect saints so that he can present every man full-grown in Christ.

Richly Supplying Others

A healthy church must have a rich brother like Archippus. In Col. 4: 17, Paul says, “And say to Archippus, Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you fulfill it.”

We usually think that only an uncommonly spiritual man has a ministry. But the fact is that a man few would know, Archippus, also has a ministry. However, Archippus' ministry is definitely not the ministry of Paul.

You yourself have a ministry, yet your ministry is not like the one of Brother Nee or Brother Lee. Your ministry is partial; theirs are inclusive. On the other hand, although you don't have a ministry so high as theirs, you have to take Paul's advice, "Take heed to the ministry which you have received in the Lord, that you fulfill it."

Archippus is Paul's co-worker and he fights together with Paul. With what does he fight? He fights with the divine riches. Paul here seems to tell him, "Archippus, you are rich spiritually. You need to manifest and testify your riches toward every saint in the church by fighting."

I hope the Lord may stir up and gain many young people in many localities to consecrate themselves absolutely in His presence, pursue the spiritual riches desperately, labor and strive for people, and minister Christ in church meetings. Such brothers in the New Testament ministry are like Archippus, who is bountifully supplying, leading and fighting.

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