

Performing the Letter to Philemon

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Before I address the subject matter of these presentations, I want to invite us to celebrate the work of Network of Biblical Storytellers in this anniversary year. Look at what has happened here in the last twenty years. We are sharing stories of peace and love and mercy and justice, of goodness and forgiveness and reconciliation. There are people here from thirty-seven different states, in addition to Canada and Australia. We have storytellers here from Gambia. NOBS is an amazing network that began with a small flame and has spread like wildfire. It was lit by Tom Boomershine and cofounder Adam Bartholomew. They had an idea, an idea big enough to spread across the world. And now there are twenty-four guilds in the country, four more outside the USA, and it is growing. It is out of your control, Tom! I would like to ask Tom and Adam to stand and allow us to express our appreciation. And in addition to applause, I would like us together to express our amazement with holy laughter. Thank you, Thank you!!

My purpose in these lectures is to introduce you to performing a *New Testament* letter. In so doing I want to share with you an approach to letters that enables you to interpret them as a stories. In this first lecture, I will use Paul's *Letter to Philemon* as the case study. In the second lecture, I will demonstrate the same process with Paul's *Letter to the Galatians*. In the third lecture, I will discuss and perform the *Letter of James*. But first I want to share generally about the performance of biblical materials in early Christianity in the first century when the *New Testament* writings were penned.

Recovering the Oral Traditions. Do you know what an astounding thing it is that we are collectively seeking to do in the Network of Biblical Storytellers? After about twenty centuries, we are seeking to recover something that has been lost, eclipsed, long gone from the experience of the church and from the experience of Christians—namely, the sacred art of telling biblical traditions. In the first and second centuries, the lively telling of stories took place as an ordinary part of life in the villages and communities and gatherings of early Christians. But since that time, the New Testament writings that bear the vestiges of these stories have been broken up into small lectionary segments to be read in worship or used as devotional material. Furthermore, these segments have been read rather than told from memory. For many centuries, they were even put into languages that did not correspond to the languages of the people. The writings have been kept in monasteries and limited to the priesthood. They have been studied by scholars as printed texts in classrooms and libraries. To keep the stories alive for folks who did not read or write, the stories were preserved primarily in art, in music, and by other means, but not in the telling. Even in the sixteenth century Reformation, when the *Bible* became more accessible to people, it was segmented into chapters and verses and short episodes to be read in worship

But here we are in the twenty-first century, seeking together to recover the ethos of storytelling in the first century—and not just individual stories but gospel narratives as a whole. In fact, we think that the gospels of *Matthew*, *Mark*, *Luke*, and *John*, along with the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Book of Revelation*, were each originally told in their entirety at one time. The same was true for the letters in the New Testament. The letters were dictated to be read as a whole before the churches to which they were addressed—because if you heard only part of any

one of these writings, you may misunderstand it. Remember, none of these writings were yet in a *New Testament* canon until a few centuries later. They were not written as scripture nor were they treated as scripture when they were first heard. The treatment of the *New Testament* writings as scripture came only a century or more later. Rather, at first, the writings were stories to be told by memory before firelight at night or in the market places or in public buildings or house churches. Primarily, the stories were recounted from memory before the gatherings of early Christians. Because they were not treated as scripture, they were not segmented into readings for synagogues or churches. Rather, they were either told and retold each time as a whole to the same audiences, or they were told as a whole to new audiences as the writings were circulated from one venue to another. So the storytelling was widespread, as informal gossip in the marketplaces or as teaching in the home or as storytelling in conversation when recalling these traditions. And there were also formal opportunities in the marketplaces and in open spaces between villages and in house churches and synagogues and other gathering places for people to recount these longer pieces.

The First Century as an Oral Culture. Remember, the societies of the ancient Mediterranean world were oral cultures. It is likely that only five percent of the people—the wealthy elites—were able to read or write. The overwhelming number of people experienced everything they learned aurally. Everything they learned and knew, they learned by word of mouth. In the oral cultures of the first century, there was very little opportunity for privacy. People lived together as extended families in homes; homes were open to the neighbors; and market places were centers of social interaction. All of life was communal life. The whole culture was personal and relational. There was no individualism as we know it today. The identity of individuals came as part of their collective identity. You were always with people, and what you knew everybody knew. Knowledge was social knowledge because everybody talked with everybody else and everybody told stories. Memory was social memory. Imagine never having a newspaper or book or anything else written. What you would know would be what you collectively knew as a family and a village. In an oral culture, all language—words and proverbs and stories and letters—were always embodied. That is, for almost everyone, there was no experience of impersonal print on a scroll unassociated with a person. In fact, people did not trust things that were written, because they did not know who wrote them. But if someone told you something orally and directly, you would know whether or not you could trust that person and what they were saying. In an oral culture, life was overwhelmingly relational and social.

In such a culture, people were able to remember what they heard in part because people were accustomed and trained to remember what they heard. Furthermore, in an oral culture, people remembered because there were sophisticated forms for memorable speech. People thought about how they talked, so that it could be easily remembered—with proverbs and parables, and words that had a ring to them that you would remember and stories and all kinds of teachings in which the words were made to sound right and good. Also, in an oral culture, words were understood to have power. When you think about the words in the early church, many of them are performative words. That is to say, they are words that change things. Consider what happens when a priest or pastor says, “I now pronounce you husband and wife.” Now *that* is a performative word that changes the situation in the very act of pronouncing of it. Consider the words of Jesus: “Be cleansed” (to a leper) or “Your sins are pardoned” (to a paralytic) or “Blessed are you poor.” These are performative words that are understood as actions. Words are actions that have an effect. And stories, particularly parables, also have impacts that are meant to

change people—change the way people think or relate or act or imagine the world. Such words are memorable words.

In the oral cultures of the first century, writing was present but limited, and reading was rare. Writing was done on scrolls made of papyrus reeds. The scrolls and the writing implements were expensive. The leisure time and the resources to learn how to make letters were only available to the five percent of wealthy elites and their retainers. The other ninety-five percent of the folks were peasants eking out an existence on the land or craftsmen living at subsistence level. Remember there was no middle class in these ancient pre-industrial agrarian societies. Even some who knew how to read may not have known how to write. Some scribes could copy letters without knowing what they meant. On the scrolls, the letters were placed one after another without punctuation and without spaces between words. With so few people writing, writing was not a past-time or activity for people to do for its own sake. The same is true for reading. In fact, we do not have a record of anyone reading silently until several centuries later. If a person was reading alone, they would have read the writing aloud. Or the person would have had the reading done aloud for them.

The Performance of the New Testament in an Oral Culture. Even when there was writing, that writing was not done for its own sake. Rather, orality remained primary, and writing was secondary and served the needs of orality. People wrote marks on the page to aid oral memory, to remind them of the sounds they needed to remember. People also wrote to enable oral stories and letters to be transferred from one city or region to another. So, the *Gospel of Mark* was probably composed orally and performed many times before it was written down at some point in its performance life. Other gospels may have developed the same way. Or a gospel may have been written before it was performed but certainly with the expectation and purpose that it would be performed—that was the whole point. Paul composed his letters in mind or in conversation and then dictated each letter orally so that it was written down by a scribe. Then Paul would send the letter with an emissary who would have heard Paul dictate it and who would have gotten instructions from Paul about how it should be performed. It is likely the emissary memorized the letter and performed it with little reference to the scroll itself. Because scrolls were cumbersome and words were compressed together, a so-called reader would have had to know the contents extremely well to “read” it. The scroll may have been kept nearby or held closed in one hand as a sign of authority. But it was most likely not consulted during a performance. The same would be true for all the other letters in the *New Testament*. Overwhelmingly, the early Christians would have experienced the traditions of Jesus and our present New Testament writings in a social context in which they would have heard them performed from memory by a presenter.

There is another way in which these writings served orality. The gospels and the letters served as scripts for oral performance. Dennis Dewey has likened the print in the *Bible* to a fossil. Just as a fossil is a trace record of what was once a living creature, so the *New Testament* writings are trace records of live performances in the first century. The writings contain the sounds that comprised a performance. They also contain all kinds of sayings and stories that reflect features of oral storytelling and memorable speech—such as alliteration, assonance, chiasm, parallelism, and various forms of repetition. Furthermore, they contain stage directions for performance when, for example, someone screamed or people praised God or someone wept. They contain stage directions for gestures when someone looks to heaven or lays hands on someone or beats their breast. They suggest facial expressions when there is irony or sarcasm or amazement or perplexity. They contain suggestions for movement when someone enters a house

or goes to the next town or turns around. To a limited extent, then, we can infer from the “fossil writings” what an original live performance may have been like. The point is that in the first century, whatever was written was written to reflect and foster performances. The performance was primary. And when people referred to the *Gospel of Mark* or a letter of Paul, they were not referring to a book or a scroll. Rather, they were referring to the performances they had experienced! In the first century, the contents of the *New Testament* writings were not encountered as print on a page, except to a few. Rather, they were embodied in a performer at a communal event.

Here is an interesting question: Is the *Bible* what we have in print? Or is it the stories that were performed of which the *Bible* is a script? I had a humorous experience that illuminated this for me. I was team-teaching a class with a preaching professor. The pastors taking the class had been doing some memorizing. They knew I did performing, and they knew that performance was an integral part of the class. One day, my colleague entered the room and began by saying, “I hope each of you brought your *Bible*.” They looked around at each other. Some had brought a *Bible*, some not. Then somebody noticed that I hadn’t brought my *Bible*, and here I was co-teaching the class. So one of the students piped up and said, Look, Rhoads didn’t bring a *Bible*.” At which point another student added, “What do you mean ‘bring a *Bible*’? He *is* a *Bible*!” That was a great line. It means that the *Bible* is embodied. The medium has changed. Now, *we* in NOBS are, in some sense, the *Bible*. Collectively, all the stories we know and perform are *Bible*. That’s what I mean when I talk about the orality of the ancient world. What we have in print is really simply a record of what was spoken and performed or it was a script written in order to be performed. Imagine you heard Dennis Dewey tell the story of the conversion of Paul. Now imagine it was your only experience of that story, and you had no way of accessing that story any other way. You would want to hear it again and again, wouldn’t you? Or you would want someone to make a transcript of what was said, so you could read the script. However, when you read the script, you might say, “That’s a nice script, but it is not the same as hearing the story.” The story is in the telling of it, and the community of performers and audience become the Bible.

Let me give you another analogy. Consider a stand-up comedian. I think that’s a good comparison to the way a lot of things were done in an oral culture. Stand-up comedians who prepare for lengthy presentations for Comedy Central certainly do not write down their material. They compose it in their heads and in their bodies, and they try it out in various nightclubs or other venues. And they think about how it sounds and what the timing will be and the precise choice of words, where to make pauses, how to emphasize things, where to modulate volume and pitch, what gestures to use, and what their facial expressions should be. And all of that then becomes something they prepare and then they perform it—live before an audience. But if you were to get a transcript from a performance at Comedy Central, you would be sadly disappointed. It would not be nearly as funny or as interesting as the performance itself, because you would not have the gestures and the facial expressions and the body posture and the timing and everything else that goes into a live performance.

Similarly, the writings we have in the *Bible* are scripts transcripts that we might refer to as “performance literature,” that is, literature that was meant for performance—no less than music, no less than theater, no less than oral interpretation of literature. Imagine what we scholars have done with these biblical texts all these years by studying them privately in print. Can you imagine a musicologist spending years sitting in libraries looking at scores but never hearing the music performed? Can you imagine theater critics studying scripts but never seeing the performance of a play? Can you imagine how we biblical scholars can study these texts

without hearing them performed as stories and speeches? Now, in NOBS, can we imagine biblical scholars studying these texts without performing them? The meaning of a text comes to bear at the point where it is performed. Performers are figuring out what these texts mean and seeking to embody them. That is what we scholars need to do. That is what we Christians need to do. The act of performance is the reason for scripts!

Performing Letters. Now I want to turn to the focus of these lectures. The challenge that I want to set before you in these three lectures is the following. All of us in NOBS are drawn to the narrative portions of the *Bible*. We are attracted to them because they are stories and they are interesting to tell and they are interesting for people to hear. But what have we as a NOBS community (Dennis Dewey excepted!) done with those parts of the *Bible* that are not stories or narratives of some kind? What about the *Psalms* or the wisdom literature, *Job* or *Proverbs*? What about the prescriptions of the Law? What about the letters in the *New Testament* or the *Book of Revelation*? After two thousand years, we are trying to recover the stories that we can tell each other; so why not also recover the experience of the *New Testament* letters. Recovering the orality of these letters is a rather astounding experience. I sometimes think to myself when I perform *Galatians* or *1 Peter* or *James*: How many centuries has it been since anyone heard these letters performed as a whole by memory? Oh, I have no illusions that we can recover how they were performed in the first century. But we know that they were done as a whole and that they were probably done by memory and that they were performed in lively and emotional ways. And we can do that! And so I want to invite you into the experience of hearing these letters, and I want to teach you a way to understand these letters as stories.

So a key point I want to make about letters is that they are part of a story. If we can recover the story from the letter, we can see the letter as a moment in a larger story. Krister Stendahl used to say that reading Paul's letters was like reading someone else's mail. And from each of Paul's letters, we can reconstruct the unique story around that particular letter. Let me give an analogy. A number of years ago in a hotel room where I was staying, I found a "Dear John" letter in the top drawer of the dresser. Actually it was a "Dear Jeff" letter. I believe it was from Karen, and she was making it very clear to Jeff that his behavior at a recent party was absolutely unacceptable. She did not know that he was having such a problem with drugs when they had first gone together. From what she wrote, he was very polite and listened, and they had a wonderful relationship and a lot of fun. But when she had gotten a promotion in her job, things had turned sour and he started to make barbed comments, and from there his behavior continued to get worse, and she could no longer continue to have a romantic relationship with him, although she was willing to continue to be his friend. Signed "Karen." Well it was really interesting, because I could virtually reconstruct the history of the relationship: how they got started, what they had been doing, how their relationship changed, then the point at which the letter had been written, and finally how Karen wanted things to turn out. From this letter, I could recover all the elements of a story—the settings, the plot, the characters, and the rhetoric of the letter designed to end their romantic relationship. I want to do the same kind of analysis with letters of Paul.

Performing Philemon. I want to begin by looking at the brief *Letter to Philemon*. It is brief enough, small enough, that you can get a real sense of it as a story and interpret the letter as a story embedded in this letter. And what an incredible story it is! I want first to give you some

background to this letter, then I am going to perform the letter for you, and then we will analyze it more closely as a story.

So, let me give you some context to the letter in preparation for its performance. I am going to assume that you know Paul was an apostle who went from place to place founding churches and that he had undoubtedly founded the church to which he was writing. In the letter, Paul addresses Philemon as the leader or the host of this church in his home. When, as an apostle, Paul founded the church, he converted people, including Philemon. We do not know quite where this church is located. It might be somewhere in northern Greece, in Macedonia somewhere, maybe in the city of Colossae or possibly Philippi. However, it is not necessary to know the precise location in order to understand the letter. What we do know is that Paul had left that church to travel to other places in order to found other churches. At the time he sent the letter, he was in prison. We are not sure where he was imprisoned. It was either in Ephesus, which was several hundred miles away, or perhaps further away in Rome.

In any case, while he was in prison, a slave of Philemon came to Paul in prison. He was probably seeking Paul out; it is unlikely that he would have accidentally found him in prison. The name of the slave was Onesimus. He was probably a runaway, or he came to Paul for help in settling a dispute with his master Philemon. When he came to know Paul, Paul converted him to become a follower of Jesus and a brother in the faith. Paul was concerned about Onesimus and what would happen to him. He had great respect for Philemon as a leader of this church; so he decided to send Onesimus back to Philemon—but with a letter asking him to receive Onesimus, free him from slavery, and welcome him as a brother in the faith. This was a very difficult thing to ask Philemon. The culture of the time would have expected Philemon to punish such a runaway slave. Even within the context of the Christian community, Paul was asking Philemon to do something quite magnanimous.

Please be aware that there was a lot at stake for Onesimus. Paul's decision to send him back was a risk to Onesimus. Paul must make sure that Philemon will do what he is asking of him. So Paul needs to make this request of Philemon in such a way that Philemon gains honor and does not lose face, and he must lead Philemon to do this willingly, graciously. You will see how much Paul builds up Philemon and how much he gives Philemon a cultural way to explain his action as part of a partnership—that he owed a debt to Paul (because Paul converted him to salvation!) and Paul was calling in that debt. And if Philemon does even more than Paul mentions, Philemon has a chance to be loved even more by his community.

So Paul dictated this letter (or wrote it himself) and then sent it with someone who would probably know it by memory and who would perform it as Paul wished—with Onesimus accompanying this person back to the church. Imagine the letter being performed aloud to the whole community with Philemon present and with Onesimus present before the gathered assembly. Most of the letter would be addressed to Philemon, but it would be framed in the awareness that the larger community would be responding to this letter also and perhaps putting pressure on Philemon to do what Paul was asking. Now the person who proclaims the letter is in some sense presenting himself as if he were Paul present there among them.

Now I will present the *Letter of Philemon*. I would now like to identify this person here in front of me as Philemon, to whom I will address most of the performance. Would you over there by Onesimus? And here are Apphia and Archipus. The rest of you can imagine you are the community that has gathered in Philemon's home to hear Paul's letter.

The Letter to Philemon

Paul a prisoner of Christ Jesus and Timothy our brother to Philemon our beloved one and co-worker and to Apphia our sister and to Archippus our co-soldier and to the church that meets in your house. Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I thank my God always making a remembrance of you in my prayers—hearing about your love and the faith that you have toward the Lord Jesus and for all the saints—that the partnership of your faith may be worked out in the knowledge of every good deed possible among us for Christ. For I have gotten much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have been refreshed through you, brother.

Wherefore, although I have much boldness in Christ to order you to do the appropriate thing, I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love, being such as I am, Paul an ambassador and now also a prisoner of Christ Jesus, I appeal to you on behalf of my child, whom I birthed in prison, Onesimus, who was formerly useless to you but who is now truly useful both to you and to me, whom I am sending back to you, him--he is my very heart—whom I would like to keep with me in order that in your place he might serve me in prison for the gospel, but I did not want to do anything without your consent, so that your good deed might not be under constraint but voluntary. Perhaps that is why he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back permanently, no longer as a slave but more than a slave, as a beloved brother, especially important to me but how much more so to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

So if you regard me as a partner, receive him as me. If he has wronged you in anything or owes you anything, charge this to me. I Paul am writing with my own hand, I will repay it—not to mention to you that you do owe me your life. Yes, brother, I ought to have some benefit from you in the Lord. Refresh my heart in Christ.

Confident of your obedience I have written to you, knowing that you will do even more than the things I have mentioned, and at the same time also prepare for me a guest room, for I hope that through your prayers I will be restored to you.

Epaphras my co-captive in Christ Jesus greets you, along with Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke—my co-workers. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon as a Story. Now I want to show how to read this letter as a story. When we analyze a story, we look at settings, plot, characters, and rhetoric. That is what we will do with the *Letter to Philemon*.

The Settings. First, I want to look at settings. Attention to settings helps us get oriented and gives us invaluable information to understand the dynamics of the letter. The setting of the sender is prison. When people were in prison in the first century, they were not isolated in the way prisoners are today. They were in chains, of course, so that they could not leave. Nevertheless, it was expected that the food and support of that person would be provided by their friends and family. So Paul depended on those with him to do this—Timothy along with Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke.

This setting explains several things in the letter. First, by mentioning all these people with him, Paul is putting further social pressure on Philemon from his end of the correspondence to do what he asks Philemon to do. Second, as a prisoner, Paul plays down his role as apostle in this particular letter. This position of weakness as prisoner serves his purpose well, because he wants to appeal to Philemon not on the basis of his powerful position as an apostle but “on the basis of

love,” from a position of weakness as “prisoner.” Finally, this setting helps us to see that a part of Paul’s request is for Philemon to send Onesimus (after he has freed him) back to Paul to serve Paul in prison on Philemon’s behalf. That would be one of the ways that Philemon could repay the debt that he owes to Paul for his “life” (his conversion for salvation).

What about the setting of the recipients? I mentioned that we are not sure of the identity of the city in which this Christian community exists. However, the important thing is that it is a church that gathers in Philemon’s house. This means that Philemon is a fairly wealthy person who owns at least one slave and who has a house large enough for people to gather and meet. And he has “refreshed the hearts of the saints,” which means that he has provided food and other support for this community—both as a host in the house but also in other generous ways that were needed by the community. Paul praises Philemon for the generosity he has already shown and appeals to him to do even more.

The Social setting. What is the social setting? What can we learn from that particular society that helps us understand the letter? It is important to know that one-third of all people in the ancient Roman Mediterranean world were slaves. And they were not distinguished by race as they were in the United States. So there was usually no way visually to distinguish a slave from anyone else in that culture. That is why Onesimus can go to Paul without being recognized by the authorities as a runaway. At the same time, slaves had no legal identity. The only identity they had was their master’s identity—so it is really interesting, because Paul refers twice to Jesus Christ as “Lord” or “Master”! Paul is saying that Christians should give up having slaves and all take their identity from their “master,” Jesus Christ, He is asking Philemon not to be a master to Philemon any longer.

Being a slave in the ancient world was harsh. Slaves came from Roman conquests over other lands or from slave trade where they were picked up from other countries and then sold, or they were born into slavery. It was possible for some urban slaves to have a great deal of very important responsibilities. In fact, most of the administrative duties of the empire were run by slaves. And slaves did have a capacity to make and save money, and they sometimes even got enough money to purchase their own freedom. And it was not uncommon for slaves to acquire freedom by the generosity of someone else. Often, after they gained freedom, the former slaves became hired workers of the slave owner to whom they had been enslaved. By calling in Philemon’s debt to Paul, Paul was paying for Onesimus’ freedom. Paul wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus no longer as a slave but as a brother in the faith. And he wants Philemon to employ him as a freed slave and send him back to serve Paul. That’s quite a shift in relationship!

The Plot. Now let’s look at the plot. When you are working with a letter, constructing the plot is a matter of taking all the references in the letter and putting them in chronological order. Read through the letter, find all references to any specific event or happening, then rearrange them in chronological order, including the moment at which the letter was written and what the writer hoped would happen after that—and you have your story. Seeing this plot sequence helps to clarify the letter. The writing of the letter is a high moment in the story, the moment when one of the characters wrote to other characters, seeking to impact them in significant ways. Here is my construction of the storyline of Philemon.

Paul finds a church where Philemon lives
Paul converts Philemon (saves his life)

Paul converts some of Philemon's household (Apphia his sister? Archippus?)
Philemon hosts (leads?) a church in his house
Onesimus, Philemon's slave, was not converted but may have met Paul

Paul leaves Philemon and the church there
Paul goes to prison because of his preaching of the gospel of Christ
Epaphras is with him in prison
Co-workers are with him: Timothy, Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, Luke

Onesimus runs away or leaves to find someone to help him in dispute with Philemon
He may have wronged Philemon in some way
He goes to find Paul in prison or somehow comes in contact with Paul
Paul converts Onesimus while Paul is in prison
Paul comes to love Onesimus as his heart
(maybe Onesimus serves Paul in prison)

Paul hears about the love that Philemon shows to the saints in generosity
Paul receives joy and encouragement from Philemon's love
Paul always remembers Philemon in his prayers with thanksgiving and prays that he will
do every good deed possible in Christ

Paul (and Timothy) writes a letter to Philemon
Paul's co-workers send their greetings
Paul sends Onesimus with the letter
Paul expects the letter addressed to Philemon will be public to the whole church

Paul hopes Philemon will accept Onesimus back in good graces as he would receive Paul
Paul hopes Philemon will receive Onesimus as a brother in Christ—as Paul
If Onesimus has wronged or owes Philemon, Paul will repay it.
Onesimus will be useful to Philemon now as slave and as brother.
Philemon will do more than the things Paul has requested
Perhaps Philemon will free Onesimus
Perhaps Philemon will send Onesimus back in Philemon's place to serve Paul while Paul
is in prison
All this will be done willingly/ in obedience to Paul and will be a benefit to Paul and will
refresh Paul's heart

Philemon will prepare a guest room for Paul/ the community will pray for Paul's return
Paul hopes to be restored to Philemon and to visit him

What a great plot! This is powerful storyline for a film! And what a great story it makes.
Notice the sequence of events, the point at which the letter is written, and what Paul hopes will
happen after the letter is received. I already profiled this story in a limited way above when I set
up the performance. You may review it.

The Characters. Now I want to talk about the characters. Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus are, of course, the main characters. Five others are mentioned with Paul. The community that meets in Philemon's house is also a character, including the two mentioned by name in the greeting. I will not develop the characters and their traits here, as I might otherwise do. Rather, I want to summarize the relationships between the characters and how the characters change in relation to each other.

The point I wish to make here is that Paul is seeking to shift all relationships from hierarchy to mutuality, beginning with himself. Paul is an apostle, and he could pull rank and order Philemon to do what he wants. But Paul prefers to appeal to Philemon on the basis of love as a brother in the faith. He calls Philemon a brother and a beloved one (a familial term of solidarity) and a *co*-worker. He also calls Philemon a partner and asks him to hold up his side of the partnership with Paul by freeing Onesimus as a fair response for Paul's conversion of Philemon. Paul has converted Onesimus, given birth to him as a mother to a son, but he also calls Onesimus a brother. Paul wants Philemon no longer to be a master to his slave but to welcome him as a beloved brother, to have the same relationship to Onesimus that he has with Paul. Indeed, Paul sees the whole Christian community as brothers and sisters and *co*-workers. He refers to Timothy as "our brother." He refers to Apphia as "our sister." He calls Archipus "our *co*-soldier." He calls Epaphras his "*co*-prisoner" and those four others with him as his "*co*-workers." All are to be in mutual relationship with each other under the Master Jesus. And all are to be brothers and sisters under the one Father God. Paul is using the crisis between Philemon and Onesimus as a teaching opportunity to change the dynamics of all relationships in the community. It is this movement in the letter from relationships of hierarchy to relationships of mutuality that is the most important way in which this letter relates to our time today.

The Rhetoric. Finally, let's look briefly at the rhetoric. The rhetoric refers to the way the letter is written/presented so as to have a certain impact upon the hearer(s). *Paul's purpose in Philemon is to lead Philemon to free Onesimus as his slave and to welcome him as his beloved brother.* How does Paul do that?

First, in the greeting, he begins with language of mutuality, as we have said, humbly identifying himself as a prisoner and others as "brother," "beloved," "*co*-worker," "sister," and "*co*-soldier." His greeting builds up Philemon, while honoring God alone as Father and Jesus as the Master. This greeting sets the tone for the rest of the letter.

The second part of the letter is a prayer of thanksgiving, in which Paul shows how much joy and encouragement he himself has gotten from Philemon's generosity in refreshing the hearts of the saints. In lifting Philemon up, Paul is leading him to do even more good deeds out of love for the community (which now will include Onesimus) and out of faithfulness to Christ. He appeals to Philemon's partnership with Paul. This thanksgiving helps to prepare Philemon for what Paul will ask of him in the body of the letter to follow.

In the body of the letter, Paul gets to the heart of the matter. As prisoner and old man, Paul appeals on the basis of love to Philemon on behalf of his "son to whom he gave birth in prison"—Onesimus. This is a lengthy sentence that makes many important points. He refers to Onesimus as "his very heart." He admits that Onesimus (which means "useful") has been useless (the word is *a-chrestos*, which sounds like being "without Christ") to Philemon since his absence, but that now Onesimus is really useful (the word is *eu-chrestos*, which sounds like being "well with Christ"). He suggests that Philemon could imagine that Onesimus has been serving Paul in prison in his place. He gives a rationale for the absence of Onesimus, that

perhaps Onesimus was absent from Philemon for a short while so that Philemon could have him back forever—no longer as a slave but as a beloved brother (the same words Paul has used of Philemon!). And he wants Philemon to do this act willingly, appealing to the fact that this decision will help Philemon: Philemon can send Onesimus back to serve Paul on his behalf and he will now have a new beloved brother in the faith.

Then Paul puts some pressure on Philemon. Paul wants Philemon to welcome Onesimus as he would welcome Paul, as a brother. Paul says he will pay for anything that Onesimus owes Philemon by wrong or injustice. He says he is confident in his “obedience,” such that Philemon will do even more than Paul has suggested. He reminds Philemon that he owes Paul his life (salvation). He asks Philemon to refresh his (Paul’s) “heart in Christ” (recall that Paul had referred to Onesimus as “my heart”!). Then he asks Philemon to prepare a guest room, because Paul expects to get out of prison and come to visit him. He requests the prayers of the whole community on his behalf in this regard. Why all this pressure? Remember that much is at stake for Onesimus. So, although Paul appeals to Philemon on the basis of love, Paul nevertheless pulls out all the stops in order to make sure that Onesimus is freed and welcomed as a brother.

In the closing, Paul reminds Philemon that there are also people with Paul who are waiting to see what Philemon will do. No doubt they all know Onesimus and are hoping Philemon will free Onesimus and send him back to Paul. In this closing, again Paul refers to others with the language of mutuality as co-workers. He closes with a prayer that the grace of the Master Jesus Christ may be with the whole community.

From this brief profile, you can see the rhetorical moves Paul makes to encourage Philemon to do what he is asking—in each part of the letter, with motifs and word plays, with compliments and appeals and requests, and with the support of others referred to in the letter. And you can see how Paul in his appeal to Philemon also was leading the whole community to move from hierarchies of power relationships to relationships of love and mutuality.

With all these observations about *Philemon* as a story in mind, I encourage you now to re-read or to re-hear *Philemon* in order to see if you can notice more things than you did the first time about the dynamics of the situation and its potential impact. And listen to it for your own transformation and the transformation of the Christian communities of which you are part.

Philemon as a Homecoming Story. *Philemon* is a wonderful homecoming story. I do not know why it does not rank with the parable of the Prodigal Son as one of our favorite biblical stories. I wish these characters could be as vivid to you as the characters in the Prodigal Son. And in this case, they are real people! The slave has gone off, and Paul acts on his behalf to allow him to come back. Paul uses what power he has to obtain freedom for Onesimus—not for his own benefit but for the freedom of Onesimus. And Paul takes a risk in asking a rich and powerful person to do it. Philemon had a legal right to have slaves, but that does not mean he had a moral or spiritual right. We sometimes assume that if we have the power to do something, then we have the right to do it. The letter suggests a different view, namely, the idea that Philemon would choose not to exercise his power over someone and in fact would relinquish that power in order to carry out mutual service to another rather than dominate and exploit. If Philemon did what Paul asked him to do, what an extravagant gesture! To free someone from subordination, to free someone of the burden of debt, to free someone from the burden of shame, to see him as a brother, to pardon his debts and wrongs, and welcome him with open arms as an equal—as a beloved brother. And here is Onesimus—freed (we presume, for the letter was preserved!) and

welcomed as though he were Paul! And the whole community celebrates renewed relationships of mutual love. What a homecoming!

Some exercises. At the end of this lecture, I want to suggest some exercises you might do in a prayer group or Bible study as means to make this story even more real.

- Divide up the group and assume the roles of various people in this story. Imagine Paul has gotten out of prison and has returned to visit the community and to be with Philemon and Onesimus and other co-workers. Now have an imaginary conversation with each other about what happened.
- Imagine re-telling this story a few years later from the viewpoint of each of the characters—Paul, Philemon, and Onesimus. Assign different members of your group to do this.
- Or imagine yourselves as different members of the house church and ask yourself: “How would I hear this, as a woman? As a slave in Philemon’s house? As a rich person who is a friend of Philemon?” And so on. Listen to the letter again from each social position, and ask yourself what your reactions might have been.
- Or take your own social positions in the twenty-first century, then listen to this letter again. How does it come to you? If you are a privileged person, with whom in the letter might you identify and how might this letter address you? If you are a vulnerable person in the society, with whom might you identify and how might this letter encourage you? •Or who are the people in the world that we, in the dominant culture of the first world, have kept enslaved in destitute circumstances—such as people in impoverished countries who provide the resources and cheap labor to sustain our lifestyle? How might we free them?
- Discuss the themes in this letter: the use of power, Paul’s choice and Philemon’s choice not to use power, and the shift from hierarchy to mutuality. What does this letter say about the nature of leadership? What are the implications for modern society in the shift from hierarchy to mutuality? Can you imagine some moment in your family life or church life or work life or life as a citizen as an opportunity—as a transformative moment—whereby those around you could learn what it means to make a transformation from hierarchy and power to mutuality and love?
- What kind of world does this letter dare us to imagine? How might we go about creating such a world today? What might a parish based on this letter look like? Can we reclaim a radical sense of being equal? How does this letter lead you to change your own life?

Further Reading on Philemon.

Norman Petersen, *Rediscovering Paul: Philemon and the Sociology of Paul’s Narrative World*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985.

Joseph Fitzmyer, *The Letter to Philemon*. New York: Doubleday (Anchor Bible Commentary) 2000

Carolyn Osiek, *Philippians and Philemon*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000 (Abingdon New Testament Commentaries).

Bonnie Thurston and Judith Ryan, *Philippians and Philemon*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press (Sacra Pagina Commentary) 2005