

PHILEMON

The Format of Paul's Letters

Paul expressed his theology in letterform. An understanding of the format and style of letter writing in the first century AD, therefore, should help the reader to interpret Paul's letters. Since the little letter to Philemon is typical of first-century letters in format and serves to focus attention upon much that is helpful for the understanding of Paul's letters in general, we shall quote it as a whole and then concentrate on the individual parts.

Paul's letters, as is now evident from comparisons with Greco-Roman and Jewish letters of the first century, followed the format in vogue at the time. The format consisted of four parts:

1. **The address and greeting** (vv 1-3), containing the name of the sender followed by the name of the addressee, whether an individual or group, followed by a greeting-wish, usually expressed by Paul in the words: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (v 3).
2. **The thanksgiving and prayer** (vv 4-7), containing an expression of gratitude and prayer to God, expressed in a long periodic sentence whose function is to focus the epistolary situation, i.e., to introduce the vital theme of the letter. In Philemon, the use of thanksgiving to focus the epistolary situation is found in v 6.

As an aid to interpretation, thanksgiving is valuable for the evidence it gives by anticipation of Paul's purpose in writing as well as for its function in setting the tone the letter will take. This is true of the thanksgiving in Philemon; it is generally true also of the longer letters as well, but it is not always so clear.

3. **The message or body of the letter** (vv 8-20), containing usually both doctrine and exhortation, i.e., both the theoretical and the practical. The doctrinal part is the heart of Paul's message. The exhortation or ethical part usually flows from the doctrinal part. In the earlier letters (1 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Philippians), the two are generally intermingled; in the later letters (Galatians and Romans), the doctrinal part occurs first (e.g., Gal. 1-4; Rom. 1-11) and is followed by a section dedicated to practical advice and exhortation (e.g., Gal. 5-6; Rom. 12-16). If one can speak of a doctrinal element in so short a letter as Philemon, it would be contained in v 16, where Paul refers to Onesimus as "a brother" in the Lord. Paul's exhortation to Philemon flows from the relationship of Christians as brothers in the Lord. It runs throughout the letter but is most evident in vv 8-9, 20-21.

4. **The conclusion and final greeting** (vv 21-25), containing personal news, requests, regards to friends, and a blessing. The blessing-wish is usually in the words: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit", or some such words (v 25 and 1 Thess. 5:28; Phil. 4:23).

The Nature of The Letters

Whether Paul's letters are truly letters in the usual sense of the term or literary pieces using the format of letters is of some significance because in both ancient and modern times a distinction has been made between the personal and the literary letter. The distinction is clear enough when it is a question of a purely private letter or a public, literary letter such as a papal encyclical. In other cases—and this is the situation of most of Paul's letters—it is the degree of privacy or personalness that determines whether the letter should be considered purely private, a letter to a single group, or a letter to many groups, which is for all practical purposes the same as an encyclical.

Philemon is the closest to a purely personal letter among Paul's letters, but even Philemon is addressed to more than one person (Paul mentions in his address, in addition to Philemon, two other persons, Apphia and Archippus, as well as the Christians who meet at Philemon's house). The other letters are relatively personal to particular groups and Paul's personal touch is evident in his references to common experiences and personal friends (see especially the concluding sections of the letters). Many consider Romans a literary rather than a personal letter, on the grounds that Paul wrote it to be read not only at Rome but in all the churches.