

Paul's Pastoral Tact as Illustrated in His Letter to Philemon

by Henry C. Nitz

[Read at the Pastoral Conference, Western Wisconsin District, Cambridge, Wis., Feb. 26, 1957]

A United Press report from Murfreesboro, Arkansas, says, "A forty-year-old Dallas housewife picked up what looked like a piece of glass near here Sunday—and it turned out to be a 15.31 carat diamond worth an estimated \$15,000.00. Mrs. Arthur Lee Parker had paid fifty cents to hunt for stones in a three-acre tract near here called the Crater of Diamonds. What she found is the largest gem ever discovered on the North American continent by an individual."

A much more thrilling experience is ours, and "for free," when we search the Scriptures, whether we go over familiar ground, or whether we study the almost forgotten "little books" of the Bible, as for instance Paul's letter to Philemon. It does not teach any particular doctrine; it has no "*sedes doctrinae*," no "proof texts," and, for most of us, no sermon texts.

But the letter, called "one of the most famous in literature," could well be called Exhibit A to show the Gospel of Christ in action. "It exhibits *a perfect model of Christian friendship* ... adorned by delicate and quick consideration, which divines with subtlest instinct what it will be sweetest to the friend to hear, while it never approaches by a hair-breadth to flattery, nor forgets to counsel high duties. But still more important is the light which the letter casts on the relation of Christianity to slavery, which may be taken as a specimen of its relation to social and political evils generally, and yields fruitful results for the guidance of all who would deal with such."

We take our cue for this paper from another remark of Maclaren's: "Nor is the light which the letter throws on *the character of the Apostle* to be regarded as unimportant. The warmth, the delicacy, and what, if it were not so spontaneous, we might call *tact*, the graceful ingenuity with which he pleads for the fugitive, the perfect courtesy of every word, the gleam of playfulness—all fused together and harmonized to one end, and that in so brief a compass and with such unstudied ease and complete self-oblivion make this Epistle a pure gem."

We need not share Maclaren's hesitation to call Paul's warm, delicate, graceful, ingenuous, and perfect courtesy by the comprehensive word *tact*. Let us see how Paul uses pastoral tact in this little personal epistle, the only one of his doubtless many strictly personal letters that has been preserved.

I.

In being all things to all men, Paul was most meticulous in *the way he introduces himself* to his readers. To Philemon he is in this instance "a prisoner of Jesus Christ." (2) On occasion he stresses his official title of apostle, but even then without a taint of clericalism. Paul would not have relished the address of "Reverend." And he certainly would not have condoned the legalistic way in which Heb. 13:7 is sometimes used to inculcate obedience to the clergy. He would likely have rejoiced that "them which have the rule over you" in the KJV has been changed into "remember your leaders" in the RSV, which is a much happier translation of *των ἔγουμενων*. Distinctive garb, such as the Roman collar and rabat, and the "lavender and old lace" of ministerial tailoring, may impress some people. But their use may inflate a parson's ego. The devil is ever trying to make the preacher talk and act so that people might realize: "*Ich bin der Herr Pastor!*" Kliefoth says somewhere in one of his liturgical studies that with Pietism the term "*Diener am Wort*" gave way to "*Herr Pastor*." A spirit of arrogance and pride may afflict a pastor in the most sacred act of announcing the absolution and prompt him to stress the words "office" and "called" and "ordained," instead of the unspeakably great and merciful phrase "*servant of the Word*." Let us ask for grace to practice the true humility of Paul "the prisoner of Jesus Christ." This endeavor may well occupy us daily well beyond the golden jubilee of our ordination.

Let us take to heart what Luther says about the term “a servant of Jesus Christ” in Rom. 1:1.

“Here in the beginning, the Apostle teaches by his own example how a minister should conduct himself over against his parishioners. It behooves a wise minister of God to hold his office in honor and to have his hearers show it proper respect. As a believing servant of God, he must not transgress the bounds of his ministry nor abuse it by pride, but he must administer it to the welfare and benefit of his parishioners.

“The servant of Christ, then, must be both wise and believing. If he fails in wisdom he will prove himself a sluggard, who is self-indulgent and so unworthy of his high office. Such a person will permit the divine office, entrusted to him by God, to be treated with contempt, though he should exalt it. If he fails in faith, he will prove himself a tyrant who terrifies the people by his authority and takes delight in being a bully. Calling these two vices by name we might describe them as frivolity and severity. Of the first Zechariah says (11:17): ‘Woe to the idle shepherd that leaveth the flock!’ Of the second, Ezekiel writes (34:4): ‘With force and with cruelty have ye ruled them.’ They are the two chief sins from which all other pastoral offenses flow. They are the roots of all evil. It is therefore very dangerous for anyone to receive the office, before these two monsters have been slain. The more power they exercise, the greater is the harm they do.

“Against these two monsters, the Apostle, in this entire prologue, or introductory part of his letter, pictures his ministry in a pleasing pattern. In order that he might not be despised by his hearers as faint-hearted or frivolous, he depicts his apostolic office in all its greatness and glory. Again, in order that he might not appear to them as a despot or tyrant, he wins their hearts by charming friendliness, and all this to make them amenable to the Gospel both by dignity and love. After the pattern of the Apostle every minister of the Church should clearly distinguish between his person and his office, between the ‘form of a servant’ and the ‘form of God’ and always regard himself as the least of all, in order that he with dignity and love might administer his office with the sole object in mind to promote the welfare and salvation of his parishioners. Indeed, knowing that this office has been entrusted to him solely for the benefit of his people, he should be willing to give up his ministry if it is no longer profitable, rather than become a hindrance to it. It certainly is a great offense on the part of the minister if by one of these vices, or also by both, he renders his office unfruitful. The final account that he must give of his stewardship shall in that case be very grievous.

“This phrase expresses both modesty and majesty. It expresses modesty (humility) because the Apostle does not regard himself as a lord or master as do the arrogant tyrants. It expresses majesty because he glories in his being a servant of the Lord. Now, if it is already disastrous to deny to the servants of an emperor honor and respect, what will happen to those who do not receive with due honor the servants of God! The expression ‘a servant of Jesus Christ’ is indeed overwhelmingly terrifying. Here it does not so much describe Paul’s personal reverent submission to God, as rather the exalted dignity of his office. Paul calls himself a ‘servant’ to confess that he has received the apostolic office from God above others. What he means to say is perhaps this: I preach the Gospel, teach the Church, baptize, and do other pastoral works, which truly are God’s. But I do them not as a Lord to rule over you, but as a servant to whom the ministry means nothing else than that which Christ declares me to do among you. This cannot be said of that other ministry with regard to which all believers are in equal measure called servants of God. The one is a special ministry of some; the other is a general ministry, which applies to all believers.”¹

The mania for titles and degrees is subject to the sobering lines of O. W. Holmes in *Contentment*:

“Honors are silly toys, I know,
And titles are but empty names.”

¹ *Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans by Martin Luther, A New Translation* by J. Theodore Mueller, Th.D., Ph.D., Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids 6, Mich., pp. 14–16.

II.

Paul *commends Philemon for his love and faith* toward Jesus Christ and all the saints. (5–7) He begins most of his letters with thankful commendations, all but Second Corinthians and Galatians, in both of which cases it would have been insincere to do so. But *Paul always gives due credit for Gospel fruit*.

Now there is a kind of flattering, sentimental praise that is appropriately called by inelegant terms. Of such verbal incense Solomon says, “A flattering mouth worketh ruin” (Prov. 26:28). Even the heathen scorned it. Aristotle, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, says, “A flatterer is a friend who is your inferior, or pretends to be.” And Tacitus calls flatterers “the worst kind of enemies.”

But an honest appraisal of the fruits of faith is ever in place in dealing with an individual or a congregation. It has its place in a funeral sermon or in an anniversary address, if it can be said, as Paul does here, that the “good thing” is “unto Christ.” But a congregation may well squirm when even a synodical official at the burial of a rather mediocre pastor, whose practice could not stand close scrutiny, compares the deceased with the Apostle Paul, and the apostle comes out second best.

But when there has been something like the giving of the widow’s mite or the sacrificial outpouring of precious ointment like that of Mary, one may safely follow the example of the Lord and voice public acknowledgment of the fruits of the Spirit.

Some pastors would find life more agreeable if they would practice the counting of their many blessings. And that includes grateful recognition of the fruits of the Gospel as preached and taught by them and their brethren, including their predecessors in office. Honest approval of the faithful work of teachers, elders, choirs, and other church workers—including synodical officials!—makes for more pleasant relationships. Are we not far too skimpy with our commendation, and too ready and liberal with our criticism? And when we must judge, then let us practice empathy, which has been defined as “the imaginative power to move over into another person’s feelings.” That is evangelical tact according to First Corinthians Thirteen. It is also the spirit in which Paul broaches his subject to Philemon.

III.

Paul does not command. He *beseeches*. (8–10) He had the right to enjoin, but for love’s sake he exhorts, beseeches. It has well been said that “men are not to be dragooned into goodness.” Paul “molded his conduct after Christ’s pattern,” who speaks to his disciples as friends. On this manner of approach Maclaren remarks: “There is a large lesson here for all human relationships. Fathers and mothers, husbands and wives, friends and companions, teachers and guides of all sorts, should set their conduct by this pattern, and let the law of love sit ever upon their lips. Authority is the weapon of a weak man, who is doubtful of his own power to get himself obeyed, or of a selfish man, who seeks for mechanical submission rather than for the fealty of willing hearts. Love is the weapon of a strong man who can cast aside the trappings of superiority, and is never loftier than when he descends, nor more absolute than when he abjures authority, and appeals with love to love... If mere outward acts are sought, it may be enough to impose another’s will in orders as curt as a soldier’s command; but if the joyful inclination of the heart to the good deed is to be secured, that can only be done when law melts into love, and is thereby transformed to a more imperative obligation, written not on tables of stone, but on fleshly tables of the heart.”²

“A monitor or instructor should be full of goodness and knowledge. The human heart resists censoriousness, pride, and ill feeling in an admonisher. And it is thrown into such a state, by the exhibition of these evil dispositions, that the truth is little likely to do it any good. As oil poured on water smoothes its surface, and renders it transparent, so does kindness calm the minds of men, and prepare them for the ready entrance of the truth. Besides these qualifications, he who admonishes others should be entitled thus to act. It is

² *Op. cit.*

not necessary that his being entitled thus to act should rest on his official station; but there should be superiority of some kind, of age, excellence, or knowledge, to give his admonitions due effect. Paul's peculiar modesty, humility, and mildness should serve as an example to us."³

At this point, by way of practical illustration, it would seem proper to insert a warning against the manner in which stewardship is sometimes handled as a motive for increased giving. Stewardship is basically a legal term. And legalistic application of the principle can make the Old Adam squirm and even shell out. But an evangelical, and more effective, approach is the reminder that Christ has redeemed us and made God our Father and us hell-bound sinners his children. The concept of Fatherhood and sonship must undergird the appeal for stewardship.

Or take the matter of racial integration. It may be decreed and enforced by the courts, but only a truly regenerate sinner will love his neighbor as himself.

In his plea Paul uses a subsidiary motive that could almost be called an *argumentum ad hominem*. He refers to himself as "Paul the aged." (9) But uttered by Paul, and by inspiration, it cannot be a piece of sentimentalism. Paul hints at his sanctified experience. We should not presume on our gray hair, but on the other hand, we do well to respect the judgment of our elders in pulpit and pew. Our aged church leaders should, *ceteris paribus*, be respected; for they know life, they know people, and they have experimental knowledge of the Gospel that merits our attention. The aged have climbed the seven-story mountain of experience and are above the timberline, where the horizon is wider and the outlook clearer. If they are sober-minded men otherwise, their age gives them a vantage point that the younger should appreciate and respect. There is no substitute for the maturity of experience. When a Franz Uplegger, a John Meyer, an Otto Hoenecke, a John Brenner speaks, let us listen with both ears. It ill becomes a newly hatched theologian, who still has the eggshells of the seminary clinging to him, to show disrespect for a hoary head.

IV.

Paul uses exquisite tact—or call it psychology—in pleading for Philemon's favorable reception of Onesimus (10–12). He finally calls the fugitive by name. He identifies himself with the slave in a father-son relationship. He makes a justifiable *appeal to Philemon's emotions*. It is plain that he intensely desired that Philemon might make Onesimus free. He all but says so, but stops short of the request. He hopes that Philemon may voluntarily come to that conclusion. But Paul desists from prescribing that reaction. That is consummate tact, to present the salient facts in such a way that the person being admonished will draw his own conclusions and the desired result come spontaneously.

The legalist in us is too ready to prescribe the time and manner in which our admonition is to bear fruit. We are too impatient to rest our case when we have brought an evangelical admonition. May not some of our agitation for regular church attendance and frequent communion come under that category? And when we attain our end so that it can be statistically certified we may feel smugly satisfied. *Ich hab' reich durchgesetzt!* Or we feel a glow of satisfaction when after much haranguing we barely make our synodical quota.

We do not know the result of Paul's procedure. Tradition makes of Onesimus subsequently a freedman and even a bishop. But it is fairly predictable that this technique of Paul's had a better chance of being fruitful than if he had made an explicit demand for the manumission of the slave. An oblique hint, if properly given, may have a more salutary effect than a direct order.

V.

³ *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans* by Charles Hodge, D.D. LL.D. New Edition, Revised, and in Great Measure Rewritten. Hodder & Stoughton, New York, George H. Doran Company, p. 702.

Paul was a *master comforter*. He knew that Philemon was distressed over the loss of the slave. Our translation is not quite accurate when in verse 15 it says that Onesimus departed. Literally it says that he was separated (ἐχωρισθη). The passive voice hints that some one else had his hand in the desertion.

There's a divinity that shapes our ends,
Rough-hew them how we will.

(Shakespeare, *Hamlet* V 2:10f)

The Lord rules and overrules in big and little things. The finger of God is at work in “bane and blessing, pain and pleasure.” The fact that Onesimus in the metropolis of Rome fell into the hands of the imprisoned Paul shows that “God works in a mysterious way His wonders to perform.” He makes all things to work together for good for his elect. The steps of a man, even of a runaway slave, are ordered of the Lord. It may not always be as apparent as in the case of Onesimus, but always

“Behind the dim unknown
Standeth God within the shadows,
Keeping watch above His own.”

(James Russell Lowell, *The Present Crisis*.)

The *Deus absconditus*, —a favorite theme of Luther—is the One of whom Isaiah says, “Thou art a God who hidest Thyself, the God of Israel, the Savior.”

How often we need that assurance when we must comfort some one who is in black despair and has forgotten that God “rules the world with truth and grace.” And He is always the God of love, even leading a good-for-nothing slave from distant Colossae into the arms of the warm-hearted missionary and making of him a true Onesimus.

VI.

We next note *how guardedly Paul speaks of the slave's wrong-doing*, how delicately he refers to his offense, how carefully he “puts the best construction on everything.” This is not the mock understatement that uses such weasel words as “cruel and inhuman treatment” in divorce action. Maclaren remarks: “With what charitable delicacy the Apostle uses a mild word to express the fugitive's flight. He will not employ the harsh naked words ‘ran away.’ It might irritate Philemon. Besides, Onesimus has repented of his faults, as is plain from the fact of his voluntary return, and therefore there is no need for dwelling on them. The harshest, sharpest words are best when callous consciences are to be made to wince; but words that are balm and healing are to be used when men are heartily ashamed of their sins. So the deed for which Philemon's forgiveness is asked is half veiled in the phrase ‘he was parted.’ ”

Here is the charity that covers a multitude of sins. Here is the love about which Paul sings in the thirteenth chapter of his First Epistle to the Corinthians. In the matter of admonition, it takes a lifetime of study to avoid using the wrong word for the right things.

“Apt words have power to swage
The tumors of a troubled mind.”

So says John Milton in *Samson Agonistes*. And Shakespeare says there are words that are “razors to my wounded heart.”

If Paul had used the ugly word “stolen,” that would have been a razor word. But he uses the gentler words “oweth” and “wronged.” “Mild language is mighty,” says Spurgeon.

VII.

In verses 20–21 Paul expresses *one of the greatest principles of Christian ethics*. The expressions “in the Lord” and “in Christ” describe the element or sphere in which both he and Philemon live. It is the majestic keynote we always strike when we address our people as “beloved in Christ.” May it never become a mechanical formula. The great frequency with which the phrase “in Christ” occurs in the writings of Paul has moved at least one biographer to maintain that this is the very heart of Paul’s gospel.

By reminding Philemon that he and Paul are “in Christ,” Paul says that they “have a living Person to gratify, not a mere law of duty to obey.”

Having thus put his reader *en rapport* with himself, Paul can continue: “Having *confidence* (πεποιθως) in thy obedience I wrote unto thee, *knowing* that thou wilt also do more than I say.” (21) Thus Paul here, as in other cases, takes it for *self-evident* that the desired response will come. He is not apologetic, timid. He knows that it can be done, it *must* be done, and it *will* be done.

That is the spirit in which a faithful pastor will present every reasonable request to his people. If every pastor in our Synod would thus present, for instance, the “Gift for Jesus” offering, or the budgetary needs of our Synod, our finances would likely be in a different condition. But a half-hearted appeal, or even the fear to present the matter at all, is not only a travesty of stewardship. It is a denial of the power of the Gospel. Let us trust our people that to the extent that they are aware of their being “in Christ” they will be given the grace to respond with holy living and sacrificial giving. But that means that we must make them aware of what it means to be “in Christ.” To that end we need to dig deep into such Scriptures as the first chapter of Ephesians, where Paul uses “in Christ” or “in Him” or “in the Beloved” again and again in this exalted exposition of the Gospel.

VIII.

Going back to verse 17, we note that Paul *identifies himself* with the runaway slave. Paul, a chosen vessel of the Lord, the greatest of the Apostles, the overseer of dozens of churches, stoops to conquer, becomes all things to all men. That is tender tact of a faith working by love. The modern word for it is *empathy*, the ability to enter into another’s thinking and feeling. Ezekiel had it. He writes: “Then I came to them of the captivity at Telabib, that dwelt by the river of Chebar, and *I sat where they sat*, and remained there astonished among them seven days.” (3:15) “Let me not judge my brother until I have walked two weeks in his moccasins,” says a Loucheaux Indian proverb. Such art is not easily acquired. Gustav Harders had it to a high degree in his dealings with Indians, Negroes, Mexicans, Chinamen, Japanese, and many others, including judges and criminals. Accumulated experience is a great help. That is why aged pastors have that “sure touch” in dealing with the tempted, the betrayed, the bereaved, the discouraged, the fallen. They have been through the mill. But it must be a sanctified experience, one that has been blessed with true humility. Richard Baxter expressed it when upon seeing a drunk lying in the gutter he said, “There but by the grace of God lies Richard Baxter.”

He who has true empathy can best comfort the disconsolate, console the mourners, encourage the erring, raise the fallen. This bearing one another’s burdens is fulfilling the law of Christ, as Paul writes to the Galatians. It means rejoicing with the joyful and weeping with the sad-hearted. “He understands,” is one of the highest compliments that can be paid to a pastor.

Paul’s true empathy with Onesimus (and also with Philemon) makes him willing to assume any debt the slave might owe to his master. He will be surety for him. He gives his personal I. O. U. when he writes, “I Paul have written it with mine own hand, I will repay it.” (19) This is not a mere friendly gesture, although it is difficult to see how Paul could have made good the promise. But he trusted that if he should have to pay the bill, the Lord would provide, the Lord who supplies all our needs by his riches in glory in Christ Jesus. (Phil. 4:19.)

We may feel like “suckers” when hungry tramps come to our back door. But better feed a hundred undeserving bums than turn away one of Christ’s little ones. It was shocking to hear a pastor’s daughter say, “Boy, when a tramp comes to our door, how we slam the door in his face!” Perhaps there was some connection between that pastor’s attitude and the cold-heartedness with which he was later treated by his congregation when he retired after many years of service in their midst.

IX.

A final remark on the contemporary importance of the whole letter to Philemon. Let us note how evangelically Paul deals with the social problem of *slavery*. At Paul’s time there were in the Roman Empire four to five times as many slaves as citizens. A certain Claudius Isidorus, at the time of Augustus, disposed in his will of 1416 slaves. If a slave murdered his master, all the slaves of the same household forfeited their lives. In one instance, four hundred slaves were thus executed. The slave population was a hotbed of vice. By some masters the slaves were regarded as real members of the family. And faithful service was often rewarded with emancipation of manumission. But on the whole, Matthew Arnold is right when he says:

“On that hard pagan world disgust
And secret loathing fell.
Deep weariness and sated lust
Made human life a hell.”

But *Christianity accepted the existing social order as a fact*. Although slaves are repeatedly mentioned in the Epistles—a connotation that escapes us when we read the modern meaning into the mistranslation of “servants”—we read not one word of protest against the institution of slavery. That does not mean that the New Testament endorsed slavery. The argument of silence would be a dangerous one. But the Apostles preached true brotherhood. “In Christ” the distinction between slaves and freemen was of no account. And the impact of that Gospel finally resulted in an almost universal abolition of slavery.

When we are prodded to work for social legislation, for integration, let us study Paul’s way of handling such matters. Not a militant crusader spirit, but the faithful preaching of the Gospel alone will heal the world’s ills. We are not called to reform the world. But we can appeal to our Philemons to accept even an Onesimus as a brother “in Christ.”