PARALLEL GUIDE 22
Paul's Theology, Part II
First Thessalonians and the Letter of Paul to Philemon

Summary

Being in Christ or "solidarity" is an important theme in Paul's theology as is the theme of "justification." This chapter explores these two themes and then provides a brief exposition of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians and his letter to Philemon.

Learning Objectives

• Read First Thessalonians and the letter to Philemon

• Explore the meaning of: "Being in Christ" or "solidarity," justification

• Learn the importance of the epistle to the Thessalonians

• Learn the importance of the epistle to Philemon

Assignment to Deepen Your Understanding

1. Take some time to think about the notion that we are all one in Adam and one in Christ. What does this mean to you? How is this reflected in your life?

2. "Justification" was a very important concept during the Reformation. Why is it important today? Take some time to write an essay on this for your personal notes.

Preparing for Your Seminar

"Being in Christ" or "solidarity" is important to Paul. Come to your seminar prepared to address how this theological understanding agrees or conflicts with social norms in western society. How does this inform us about other cultures around us? Examine your seminar group's life. In what ways does it or does it not reflect the notion of "solidarity" in its life?

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Chapter 22
PAUL'S THEOLOGY, PART II— FIRST THESSALONIANS AND THE LETTER OF PAUL TO PHILEMON

Explaining Paul's Call

An early reader complained that there are in Paul's letters "some things . . . hard to understand" (2 Pet. 3:16). More than one student of the Bible has since agreed with that opinion. In Paul's efforts to explain what had happened in his call to serve Christ and what he believed was the meaning of Christ's call for the world, Paul ransacked language. In this section we look at some of the ways he tried to talk about these things.

Being in Christ

Among Paul's most suggestive language to describe our new state is that involving the notion of "solidarity." The ancients had a natural sense of the solidarity of human society—a sense that the Hebrews fully shared. When King David sins, all Israel suffers (2 Sam. 24). When Achan, head of a household, sins, his whole family—even his cattle!—must be punished (Josh. 7). The force of the idea was not lost, even in later Judaism. The Mishnah explains the difference in seriousness, and hence in punishment, between false witness in a capital and a non-capital case by appeal to a theological principle:

In non-capital cases one may pay money and so make atonement, but in capital cases the witness is answerable for the blood of that person [who is wrongfully condemned], and for the blood of their posterity [that should have been born to them] to the end of the world. (m. Sanh. 4.5)

In the same context the rabbis ask, "Why was only one human being created in the beginning of the world?" They answer:

. . . to teach that if any has caused a single soul to perish, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had caused a whole world to perish, and if any saves alive a single soul, Scripture imputes it to him as though he had saved alive a whole world. (m. Sanh. 4.5)

In line with this kind of thinking, when Paul on various occasions discusses what is wrong with human beings, he refers to the Genesis story and applies it to the problems of his own age (e.g., Rom. 5:12-21). Whether Paul regarded the Adam and Eve story as literal history or as symbolic is difficult to say and need not concern us. The important point is that Paul is painfully aware of the difference between humankind as we all, at least in some moments, feel it should be, and humankind as it usually is. And Paul understands this as a solidarity of the human race in sin and death. That is the solidarity we have "in Adam." But now there is a new solidarity: solidarity with Christ, "for as all die in Adam, so all will be made alive in Christ" (1 Cor. 15:22).

For if the many died through the one man's trespass, much more surely have the grace of God and the free gift in the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, abounded for the many. (Rom. 5:15)

How can this be? The explanation is bound up with Paul's notion of solidarity. Just as the community of Achan is bound to Achan, so the community of the Messiah is bound to the Messiah. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" Paul was asked (Acts 9:4; cf. v. 5). According to modern Western individualism he was not persecuting Christ at all. He was persecuting Christians. But that is not the logic of solidarity. If one suffers, all suffer. If we persecute the Messiah's community, we persecute the Messiah. The good news is that if the Messiah dies and is raised, we as a community also die and are raised (Rom. 6:1-11).

It is extremely important that we do not regard this idea of communal solidarity as merely an old-fashioned notion that we have outgrown. Naturally, there is a place for individual responsibility, as the ancients themselves were perfectly well aware. So Ezekiel says: "The righteousness of the righteous shall be his own, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be his own" (Ezek. 18:20). But this does not affect the depth of our solidarity with each other in both the joys and the griefs of human life. Few ages have needed more desperately than ours to be conscious of the depth and significance of human solidarity. In Adam all die. The seventeenth-century poet and priest John Donne stated the matter perfectly:

And therefore never send to know for whom the bell tolls; It tolls for thee. (*Devotions upon Emergent Occasions*, Meditation XVII)

In Adam all die. What, then, does it mean for the individual to be "in Christ"? It is helpful to begin from Paul's background. What is the relationship of a Jew to Israel? Let us consider again the significance of Pesach (Passover). The Seder (that is, the liturgy for Pesach), like the Mishnah, is very clear:

We were once slaves of Pharaoh in Egypt, but the Lord our God brought us out from there with a strong hand and an outstretched arm. If the Holy One, blessed be He, had not brought our fathers out from Egypt then we, our children and our children's children would have remained enslaved to Pharaoh in Egypt. (Elias 1977, 73-75)

Again:

In every generation, one is obliged to regard himself as though He himself had actually gone out from Egypt. . . . Not only our fathers did the Holy One, blessed be He, redeem, but He also redeemed us with them, for so it says: "And he brought us out from there, so that he might bring us and give us the land which he had promised to our fathers." (147-149)

To be a Jew means, then, to find—and, of course, to accept for oneself—that one has been included in a people with a story, and that story is therefore one's own story.

What, then, does it mean to be "in Christ"? "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself." And Christ died and rose. What then? "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?" (Rom. 6:3) To be baptized (or, in the case of infant baptism, to affirm our baptism, perhaps at confirmation) is to accept what Christ did for us and to identify with that. It is therefore to accept Christ's story as a part of our story—indeed as the most important part:

Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. (Rom.6:4-5)

In the same way, by sharing in the Lord's Supper, Christians recall Jesus, who died, and rose, and lives, and is bound to them in the solidarity of his humanity and theirs:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread. (1 Cor. 10:16-17)

On the basis of such thinking Paul can adapt a metaphor that was something of a favorite in the Greco-Roman literary tradition and speak of Christians as a "body"—"the body of Christ":

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit. . . . Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.

(1 Cor. 12:12-13, 27; cf. Rom. 12:4-5; Col. 1:24; Eph. 4:4, 15-16)

We have come full circle. The community of the Messiah is bound to the Messiah. "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" If the Messiah dies and is raised, then each member of the Messiah's community dies and is also raised.

Christ's life is now our life. Does Paul then believe that there is nothing more to do? Is all now accomplished? Evidently not. Paul does not believe that, any more than he would have believed his incorporation into the Sinai covenant had meant there was nothing more for him to do as a Jew: "I am the Lord your God . . . . I have delivered you . . . . You shall . . . ."

The most important event in history has happened and we are involved in that event. But by that very fact a demand is placed upon us. Just as the kingdom of God is both present and future, so Paul, who has already died and risen with Christ, must yet die and rise with him. This paradox is well expressed in the letter to the Philippians:

. . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure. (Phil. 2:12-13)

How do we "work out" the salvation that God wishes to give us and that we have in some sense already received? Paul regarded Christ's cross as the ultimate and complete expression of obedience to God. Whereas Adam, created in the image of God, had wanted to be like God, Christ Jesus,

. . . though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited . . . . And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross. (Phil. 2:6, 8)

Jesus died because he obeyed God in a sinful world. To acknowledge oneself as being "in Christ," to accept that particular identity, is therefore to accept an identity involving a commitment to that kind of obedience and hence to the death that comes from it.

What does it mean to rise with Christ? Often Paul comments on the fact that Christ, the Risen One, should have appeared graciously to the one who had persecuted him. It was clear that to meet the Risen One was also to be forgiven. What then does it mean to be committed to that risen Christ? Inevitably it means committing oneself to forgiveness as a basis for living, and so to living, not only as forgiven, but also as forgiving (cf. Matt. 18:23-35). For those who identify with Christ, it is not enough to wrestle with the world's evil simply in obedience; they must also wrestle with it in forgiveness, since they know that they are forgiven. "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you" (Rom. 15:7).

Solidarity in Christ is not merely the basis of Christian hope. It is also the basis of Christian ethics. Paul exhorts his readers to moral behavior on the basis of that solidarity. For example, having described to the Romans the basis of Christian hope, he begins his exhortation to them:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. (Rom. 12:1-2)

Almost immediately he goes on to exhort them to that "sobriety" (or "moderation") that was the Hellenistic ideal. Again he exhorts them on the basis of what God has done for humankind. This time in more personal terms, he reminds them of his own story:

For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of yourself more highly than you ought to think, but to think with sober judgment. (Rom. 12:3a)

The whole of 1 Corinthians, which starts from our unity in Christ (e.g., 1 Cor. 1:10-13), follows this line of argument.

W. D. Davies, in *Invitation to the New Testament*, contrasts this with a different kind of attitude to ethical behavior, admirable in its own way:

I once heard the great mathematician and philosopher, Lord Russell, broadcast for the British Broadcasting Corporation. He described how lonely man is in this cosmos. As he once wrote (I quote freely), ultimately, when the universe runs down, "the whole temple of man's achievement must inevitably be buried in the debris of a universe in ruins." The cosmos is indifferent to man. But Lord Russell pleaded for two virtues even in such a cosmos—kindness and tolerance: these we must cling to in the cold world. But is not this a kind of whistling in the dark to keep up one's courage? Paul's call for obedience and forgiveness is different. He is not whistling in the dark, but appealing to a fact—the fact of Christ, in gratitude for whom the demand for obedience and forgiveness wells up in his breast. . . . The difference between Paul and Lord Russell is that the latter looks out on a bleak world, whereas Paul was assured that Jesus' death and resurrection had redirected the cosmos, created a new community which sustained him and poured forth a new spirit in the world, and that his moral endeavor took place, not against the background of an indifferent cosmos, but within the context of the new community and of a new spirit. (Davies 1966, 354-355)

As Paul himself put it:

Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will hardship, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all day long; we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered." No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. (Rom. 8:35-39)

Justification, Redemption, and Expiation

In our review so far we have often mentioned the letter to the Romans. which contains one of Paul's fullest and most powerful presentations of the gospel. It is a powerful proclamation of God's gift; it is also a powerful indictment of human arrogance. The first three chapters lead up to the assertion that "all" (Jew and Greek, liberal and conservative, believer and nonbeliever), "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (3:23). What then? There follows what Luther called "the very center and kernel of the epistle and of all scripture." Three metaphors whirl past us like images on a movie screen, as Paul struggles to describe his experience when he is encountered by the gospel:

Since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. (Rom. 3:23-25a)

Justification The first metaphor is of a law court. The prisoners at the bar are guilty. They know it; the judge knows it; the court knows it. Yet they are acquitted. They are given a new chance, as Paul was acquitted and given a new chance on the Damascus road. "All have sinned," but all are "justified by . . . grace as a gift" (Rom. 3:23-24). "Justify" (Greek: *dikaioō*) is an important word in the letter to the Romans (cf. Rom. 2:13; 3:4, 20, 24, 28, 30; 4:2, 5; 5:1, 9; 8:30, 33). "To be justified" means "to be treated as righteous" (that is, as loyal to the covenant), or more simply, "to be acquitted." "Justification" (Greek: *dikaiōsis*—e.g., Rom. 4:25; 5:18) is God the judge's declaration that we are not condemned (cf. John 8:11). It is, to put it another way, God's declaration that we are beloved, even though we are still sinners.

Dikaioō and *dikaiōsis* were probably used by Christians to describe God's grace to us even before Paul. In both Romans 4:25 and 1 Corinthians, for reasons quite unrelated to our present discussion, critics have seen reason to suggest that Paul may be quoting from Christian formulae known to his correspondents, rather than simply speaking in his own style.

The cognate noun *dikaiosunē* in the LXX usually translates Hebrew *tsedeqah* ("righteousness") and occasionally *mishpat* ("justice") (e.g., Isa. 61:8). Both the Hebrew and the Greek words are communal terms and have at their basis the notion of proper behavior with respect to a covenant. In some respects, we are back with "solidarity" again (see Note G, Chapter Twenty-one). Just as one cannot be human alone, so one cannot be "just" alone. In the Book of Judges even Israel's victories in battle can be described as "the righteousnesses" or "righteous acts" of the Lord (Judg. 5:11, KJV; NRSV "triumphs"), since it is a proper part of God's loyalty to the covenant to give victory to Israel. There is a "righteousness" (or, as we might almost translate, a "covenant loyalty") proper to everyone who is in a covenant—to parents and children, to brothers and sisters, to husbands and wives, to kings and people, and even to God. This is what the Bible means by "righteousness."

"Justification" is not a declaration that the sinners have ceased to be sinners, as if they had been infused with some kind of "instant" virtue and could now lead perfectly satisfactory lives. I may value my car even though

it is broken down: it still needs repair before it can be driven. The declaration that "we have been justified" says nothing whatever about our present ethical qualities. It speaks of the attitude that God chooses to take toward us. The awareness of God's love and forgiveness is the beginning of the struggle to be true to that love. In a human relationship my dawning awareness that I am accepted and loved, despite my various imperfections, may be the beginning of my efforts to make myself slightly more worthy of that love. Note finally that Paul is so anxious to emphasize the amazing and unmerited generosity of God's gift that he is guilty of a tautology. "They are justified by his grace" means of course that the acquittal is free. Yet Paul adds the word dōrean, "as a gift."

Redemption

Then the metaphor changes. The prisoners in court have now become captives held by an enemy or, perhaps, slaves in a slave market, hopeless and in bonds. How shall they be freed? A price must be paid, a ransom or "redemption" (Greek: apolytrōsis).

Apolytrōsis seems to have been a rare word, meaning originally the act of buying back slaves or prisoners: making them free by paying a ransom. The verbal form (*apolytroō*) is used in the LXX to translate Hebrew *padah*, meaning to "set free or redeem," with the underlying thought of payment (e.g., Exod. 21:8) or *ga'al*, "to set free or redeem," with the underlying thought of acting the part of kin (hence *go'el*, "redeemer").

Who will pay such a price? The captives certainly have no resources of their own. Then, unbelievably, the price is paid—"through the redemption (*apolytrōsis*) that is in Christ Jesus" (Rom. 3:24b).

It presses the metaphor too far to ask, as some theologians have, "to whom is the ransom paid?" That question is never raised in scripture. The essential point of the metaphor is perhaps that it speaks of cost. The word "redemption" reminds us that love is expensive. Jesus our brother acts the part of a kinsman and pays the price. A friend, moved by the kindness of a group with whom he was working, cried out, "Love is expensive, but you folk give it away!" That was the particular truth of his experience but it happens also to be a universal truth. Love can only be given away or it ceases to be love. It is always expensive, and the expense must be borne by the lover. You cannot love even a dog or a cat, truly, without pain; still less can you love a man or a woman. This is a human reality, but its basis is in God, who so loves the world as to be Immanuel—God with us—even though our response to that loving God is a cross.

There is a passage in the writings of C. S. Lewis that illustrates perfectly the principle behind "redemption":

To love at all is to be vulnerable. Love anything and your heart will certainly be wrung and possibly be broken. If you want to make sure of keeping it intact, you must give your heart to no one, not even to an animal. Wrap it carefully round with hobbies and little luxuries; avoid all entanglements; lock it up safe in the casket—safe, dark, motionless, airless—it will change. It will not be broken; it will become unbreakable, impenetrable, irredeemable. The alternative to tragedy, or at least to the risk of tragedy, is damnation. The only place outside Heaven where you can be perfectly safe from all the dangers and perturbations of love is Hell. (Lewis 1971, 111-112)

To look at the cross is to see God undergoing the dangers and perturbations of love for us.

Expiation

Again the picture in the letter to the Romans changes. Now we are worshipers in the Temple. We are sinners seeking atonement with a holy God. What rite can avail for us? For real sin, "sin with a high hand," the rituals of the Temple did not offer atonement, as the rabbis were well aware. They speculated extensively on

other means of atonement that might be available. For Paul the means of atonement has proved to be Christ. Christ, says Paul (Rom. 3:25), has been "put forward" by God "as a sacrifice of atonement" (NRSV translating Greek: *hilastērion*). *Hilastērion*

means basically "a way of dealing with sin." (In the LXX hilastērion refers to God's mercy and goodness in providing a means of forgiveness and to the act of forgiveness or atonement.)

Hilastērion was also used to refer to the mercy seat (Hebrew: kaporeth) in the Temple, and in the Greek OT (Paul's Bible) was virtually a technical term for this. It seems likely then that this is what Paul has in mind here. Sprinkled with the blood of sacrificed beasts, the mercy seat was a place of meeting between sinners and God. But that was for ritual sins. Now, Paul declares, God has provided a new mercy seat—Christ himself. This mercy seat avails for all sins and all sinners—even for those who like Paul have persecuted the church. Perhaps then we should translate verses 24c-25: "Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a mercy seat by his own blood" (Rom. 3:23-25a; cf. NRSV margin).

"By his own blood"—we note here that the new mercy seat, like the old, is sprinkled with blood, but the blood is Christ's. The phrase speaks of the cross of Christ. Paul had not seen that cross, as far as we know. The formative event of his life was the experience of the risen Christ. Yet he never seems to have been unaware that the cost of the love and forgiveness he experienced in the risen Christ was Calvary. As a distinguished scholar has expressed it, "the resurrection did not cancel the cross for Paul. It did not relegate it to the archives . . . rather, it makes present the cross as justifying event" (Fuller 1974,10).

The First Letter of Paul to the Thessalonians

It is time to look at some of Paul's letters. We begin with two of the shortest, First Thessalonians and the letter to Philemon.

Thessalonica was a flourishing seaport situated on the imperial highway, the Via Ignatia, which took traffic from Asia to the Adriatic. According to Acts 17:1-10, Paul came there from Philippi. He was able there, as at Philippi, to found a church. Reading between the lines of Acts and 1 Thessalonians, we can surmise that the church may have included some Jews among its founding members, but also a much larger number of converts from paganism.

Some time after the mission to Thessalonica, Paul sent Timothy from Athens to give further support to the church (1 Thess. 3:1-3). Timothy returned with news that was mostly good (1 Thess. 3:6-8), and so Paul wrote to the young church to commend it. He also gave advice about matters that required his attention. This may be Paul's earliest extant letter.

Greetings and Thanksgiving (1:1-10)

"We know that God has chosen you"—this is the basis of Paul's thanksgiving. The apostles had worked among the Thessalonians with a special sense of God's power and presence (1:5). The Thessalonians had received the gospel "in spite of persecution . . . with joy inspired by the Holy Spirit" (1:6), and now the fame of their conversion has spread abroad (1:9-10). The description of this as "turning from idols" (1:9) confirms our impression that the bulk of the Thessalonians were Gentiles. The good beginning the Thessalonians have made will form the starting point for Paul's exhortation to them now.

Recollection of the First Mission: The Meaning of Affliction (2:1-16)

Paul recalls the first mission in more detail, perhaps rebutting slanders (2:3, 5-6). The apostles had worked "like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children" (2:7). Indeed, they had worked night and day, so as not to be a financial burden to their converts (2:9).

Paul thanks God when he considers the faith of the young church (2:13). The Thessalonian Christians are not only imitating the faith of other believers. They are also taking their share of the afflictions of the church (2:14; cf. Rom. 5:3). The Gentile Christians at Thessalonica are suffering the same troubles from their "own compatriots" as churches in Judea are "from the Jews" (2:14). Those who persecute the church in Thessalonica are linked with those in Judea who have opposed God's word—an opposition that, in Paul's view, notably concludes with their "hindering us from speaking to the Gentiles" (2:16a); "but," he concludes, "God's wrath has overtaken them at last!" (2:16b) What does Paul mean? It is difficult to reconcile the way he seems here to speak of his former co-religionists with the way he will speak of them in the letter to the Romans (e.g., Rom. 11:11-36). One has sympathy with scholars such as Earl J. Richard, who simply regards the whole passage as a non-Pauline interpolation (Richard 1995, 123-127). However, there is no textual evidence for that, and when we lack such evidence but assume interpolation (virtually) on the grounds that Paul "cannot" have written something, we run the risk of arguing in a circle.

Timothy's Visit (2:17-3:13)

Is it possible that we are hearing Paul here, but that he is speaking, as J. Louis Martyn suggests, not of "Jews" in the normal sense, but rather of Jewish (and Judaizing) followers of Jesus (such as those with whom we see him in ferocious confrontation in the letter to the Galatians)? Certainly Paul might well have regarded them as "hindering" his preaching to the Gentiles (Martyn 1997, 63, 192). If so, what does he mean by the "wrath" that has overtaken them? Could it be the expulsion of the Jews from Rome by Claudius in 49 CE, which would certainly have included Judaizing followers of Jesus? Or is Paul referring to some other event simply unknown to us? It is impossible to say.

Matters of Conduct (4:1-12)

Unable to return to Thessalonica himself, Paul sent Timothy when he could bear the lack of contact no longer. And Timothy brought back good news, which has given Paul great comfort. "For we now live, if you continue to stand firm in the Lord" (3:8). So Paul prays for their continuing faithfulness until the end (3:11-13).

As always, the gospel challenges its hearers to respond. There is nothing very surprising in Paul's advice. Most of it is common in Hellenistic Judaism, and there were pagan moralists who would have said much the same. Paul probably felt the Thessalonians, as former pagans, needed most to be educated in new standards of sexual responsibility toward one another, sexual immorality being a feature of the common Jewish caricature of pagans at this period. As the Thessalonians had "turned from idols," Paul says, so they must now "abstain from fornication" (4:3), that "each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor" (4:4). Paul praises their strong love for each other (4:9). He gives advice that was given by other philosophers of the period such as the Epicureans: to live quietly and to mind their own affairs (4:10b-11). The church will "behave properly toward outsiders"

and "be dependent on no one" (4:12). This was a "patronage" society (see Note G, Chapter Twenty-one). Evidently Paul was not opposed to that social structure, and it is clear that he had patrons of his own for his work of ministry (see Rom. 16:1-2; cf. Acts 16:14-15). But it does seem likely that here he is encouraging the believers at Thessalonica not to become personally dependent upon the kind of patrons who would expect of

them the fawning dependency caricatured, for example, by the Roman poet Juvenal in his Satires (e.g., Satire 5).

Problems for Faith (4:13-5:11)

The Thessalonians know that Jesus has been raised from the dead and will deliver them from the coming wrath (1:10). But when will this happen? The problem in part may have sprung from Paul's own teaching. When the apostle told them to wait for God's Son "from heaven" (1:10), did some of them take this to mean an event that was very near? Then, when some members of the community died, it would be understandable that they would wonder if those members had lost their hope. In response to this possibility Paul first presents a picture of the last time, to show that those who have died will not be at any disadvantage when the Lord comes (4:13-18). He warns that the time of the coming is not a matter of timetables or calculation (5:1-3; cf. Acts 1:7). Finally, he reminds the Thessalonians that they are already children of light, "destined . . . for obtaining salvation" (5:9). Those who remember this have no need of other reassurance.

Closing Advice and Blessing (5:12-28)

Paul's closing advice (perhaps written in his own hand) contains nothing surprising. Perhaps "the idlers" are so overcome with adventist fervor that they see no point in working. Perhaps they are clients falling into the dependency trap. The instructions to "rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances" are, as one commentator calls them, "standing orders of the Christian church." They are also very Jewish. For Paul, as for the rabbis, joy is not a matter of emotion. It is a matter of will and action. (According to the sages, certain specific actions—for example, wearing festal clothes, drinking wine, and eating appropriate food—are the marks of joy. When joy is commanded, one is not normally permitted to refuse it.) When Paul says, "Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of the prophets, but test everything" (5:19-21), he seems to be referring to the two gifts of the Spirit that so impressed the Corinthians (1 Cor. 14). Apparently the Thessalonians were less impressed.

We probably should not attempt to construct any theories about Pauline anthropology on the basis of his reference to the tripartite "spirit and soul and body" (5:23). Paul may be quoting a liturgy, and the words may not be his at all. In any case it is likely that they are used quite loosely to mean "the whole person."

The Letter of Paul to Philemon

The Letter of Paul to Philemon is also addressed to Apphia "our sister" (presumably Philemon's wife), to "Aristarchus our fellow soldier," and to "the church in your house" (1-2). Although brief, it is priceless. It shows us a Christian community that is a network of coworkers and hospitality (2, 22-24). An emerging Christian ethos is already eroding social norms and altering symbol systems. Within the boundaries

of a classic epistolary form (greeting: 1-3; thanksgiving: 4-7; body of the letter: 8-20; final greeting: 21-24; farewell: 25), the letter shows us a Paul who is tactful, urbane, and witty.

Formally, Philemon is a "letter of commendation"—that is, the kind of letter that "we write on behalf of one person to another, mixing in praise, at the same time speaking of those who had previously been unacquainted as though they were now acquainted" (Pseudo-Demetrius, *Epistolary Types*). Certainly Philemon already did "know" his runaway slave Onesimus, and commendations did not always involve introductions. But notice how cleverly Paul weaves in the notion that now Philemon will "know" Onesimus as a *Christian*, and that will be a very different thing from the way in which he knew him before!

Paul is in a difficult position. He owes Philemon, the slaveowner, his legal rights. Yet he also believes that Onesimus, the runaway slave, is not merely property. He is Paul's "child" (10). He is now, to Paul and

therefore to Philemon, “a beloved brother” (16). Since some financial damage has been done to Philemon, Paul says, “charge that to my account” (18). At the same time, through Paul’s work, Philemon owes Paul even his very self (19).

Paul does not really want to send Onesimus back at all. He needs his help. He wants Philemon to allow Onesimus to return. Would Paul command this? He would be bold enough, he says, to do that (8), but for love’s sake he would rather appeal than command, “in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced” (14). So Paul mentions but does not actually commit his fragile and entirely unenforceable authority.

There are several elegant plays on words. Paul reminds Philemon (7) that “the hearts (ta splanchna) of the saints have been refreshed through you, my brother”—meaning, no doubt, the financial and other support that Philemon had given to Paul and his fellow workers. But now Paul says, “I am sending . . . my own heart (*ta ema splanchna*) back to you” (12).

The name Onesimus means “useful” in Greek. Paul observes that Onesimus had once been “useless” (*a-chrestos*) to him but has now become “useful” (*eu-chrestos*) to Philemon and to Paul (11). This is a twofold word play, because the Greek *chrestos* obviously suggests Christos (“Christ”). Before his conversion, Onesimus was *a-christos* (“without Christ”); now he is *eu-christos* (“well with Christ”). In short, as did Philemon, so Onesimus has found himself—in Christ.

The two word plays are linked in Paul’s final appeal: “Yes, brother, let me have this benefit (onaimen) from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart (*ta splanchna*) in Christ” (20).

Did Philemon agree to Paul’s request? Two facts suggest that he did. First, Ignatius refers to an Onesimus who was later bishop of Ephesus (Ignatius, To the Ephesians 1. 3). Identification is not certain, but it is possible, and the young man who so impressed Paul was presumably “bishop material.” Second, Philemon apparently kept the letter.

End of chapter

Solidarity back

But this isn't how we use the word in standard English. As frequently, the writers redefine a word in common use - this time because they can't quite think of the right word. Perhaps the right word doesn't exist, and a longer explanation is the best that can be done.

Cosmos-kindness back

This is pure Epicureanism. A pretty decent way to live one's life, actually.

It presses the metaphor to far back

No it doesn't. That question is perhaps the central mystery of the Christian faith, even if it's asked in terms of a metaphor that may or may not be accurate.

Our faith says that Jesus died as he did in order to do ***something*** for the human race. Exactly what he did (who was paid, if you like) we can't know. But the point is that he did something incomparably good for us all, and nothing is the same since.

Worked night and day back

Like many modern clergy

Hellenistic Judaism back

Actually the moral precepts of Hellenistic Judaism and of pagan moralists were pretty similar.

A "patronage" society back

As we've heard, the patron-client relaionship was fundamental to the Roman social order. But the relationship between Paul and his hosts was surely something different. If a more-powerful Roman did you, a less-powerful Roman, a favor, that established a relationship of *clientela* which was close to being legally enforceable. A different thing from the kind of charity that people showed to Paul and his co-workers.

Logic of solidarity. back

We really need a different word from "solidarity." Solidarity implies active participation, a decision to join or to stand with a person or an idea. Being baptised might indeed be a gesture of solidarity with Christ, but what binds us to him thereafter is, I submit, a mystery. Our relationship tothe divine has changed, and what flows from the change comes from God, not from us.

Communion? Membership? Any ideas>