

True Gospel Family: Social Divisions Transcended

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Date: 05 November 2006

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[0 : 00] up to Paul's letter to Philemon, page a thousand in the Visitor's Bibles. And having looked at this last week, we're looking at it again today with a slightly different focus and on the message that this little letter gives us about the social relationships that are transcended in Jesus Christ, in the true Gospel family. Our focus really then as we come back to this little letter is on the words in verse 15, rather verse 16. No longer as a slave, but more than a slave, as a beloved brother. As we began to see last week, this letter is all about transformed relationships brought about by the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And as always, when we begin to really take

Scripture seriously, we begin to see that there's much, much more than first meets the eye. This is not just a private letter. It's not just a personal letter from Paul to a friend. It's something much more than that. It's something that affects the whole church in Colossae and Philemon's house. Something that affects the church very deeply indeed. And more even than that, I think we have to say that there are things here that affect every Christian church in every age. There must be, because God has purposed that this letter should be preserved in the Scriptures for all time, that all the churches may learn from it. There's something here clearly then of vital importance for Christian churches. And that's because within the specifics of this particular situation in the first century, and in the way that Paul deals with it, there are principles that are true and that are directive for all the churches in every place, in every time.

But of course, as always, the Bible doesn't come to us in theological maxims or in syllogisms. We should be very thankful for that. These things are necessary. There's a place for theological maxims.

Of course there are. But it has to be said that most of the time these things can be exceptionally dull. And that's why the Bible comes to us in real life. It's a real life book. It's a down-to-earth book. [2 : 37] It's rooted in the real world. And that's the way God wants to teach us. It's the way we can best learn. He teaches us things about him and about us. As we read letters like Philemon.

That's just what theology is, by the way, knowing about God and about us, and about how those two things relate together. It's very simple. No magic about the word theology. But God does it through the colourful stories of the real life church.

And that's what he's doing here in Philemon, this book, about a wealthy Christian homeowner and the returning slave, Onesimus, who'd become a Christian. And about the apostle Paul, who, it turned out, was the one who converted both of them and became their father in the faith.

And the whole congregation that connects these three people. The church that met in Philemon's house. And last time we saw that the first focus in this letter is on Philemon himself and on his relationship with the restored Onesimus, the new Christian.

And Paul's challenge, remember, was that there must be tangible gospel fellowship as evidenced by the presence of truly transformed, truly restored relationships between these men with this new brother.

[3 : 54] And there must be because Paul is teaching us that in Christ there is found a miracle that transforms broken human relationships in this world and brings them into a true and a loving fellowship in Jesus Christ.

That's what the gospel does. And grasping that is vital not just for the health of the whole church but also, as we saw last time, for the health of every individual Christian believer.

Do you remember verse 6? It's this kind of fellowship, this kind of sharing of faith, this koinonia, this communion, that Paul says is effective in bringing us true knowledge of God, true experience of everything that is theirs in Jesus Christ.

And as we've seen, it's basic to the very gospel itself to respond that way. Just because the gospel makes us fellows, partners.

Verse 17, the same word as verse 6, sharing. We are sharers in Christ. Our relationship with God has been restored.

[5 : 02] It's been transformed in Jesus Christ. Therefore, we are, as the church, a company of people who are defined by relationship transformation with the living God.

We're all together in the same boat, the same way. And that brings us to the second focus, then, of transformation that I want to think about today. You see, this letter reminds us, not only that in the gospel is there a miracle that transforms the broken relationships of this world, in Christ there is also mercy that transcends the social divisions and the hierarchies of this world's society.

And therefore, the gospel must produce a fellowship where all our social models, our social relationships, rather, are remodeled, are changed, are transcended.

That's just another way of saying, simply, that the church must be a true gospel family. That's something that's taught so clearly all through the New Testament.

You know that. It comes from the teaching of Jesus himself. Remember, back in Matthew's gospel, we saw that Jesus was talking about gathering a new community around him, a family.

[6 : 19] These who gather around me and follow me in my teaching, these are my true mother and sister and brothers. Almost all the letters of the New Testament speak in these family terms.

But it's something that's especially evident here in Philemon, as Paul emphasizes it, because understanding that is going to be vital.

If this new believer, Onesimus, especially a new believer who otherwise might, well, might be looked down on by others in the church, if this new believer, Onesimus, is going to be received truly into the fellowship of this church.

And, more than that, if this new believer, Onesimus, a former slave, is going to be able to exercise the ministry in this church that Paul obviously plans for him to have.

I'm sure you noticed, just as we read earlier on in this letter, the family language that's there all through it. Just have a look. It's there in our text, isn't it? Verse 16. More than a slave, a beloved brother.

[7 : 28] Every word in the greeting in verses 1 and 2, if you look at them there, they're family words, aren't they? Timothy, our brother, fellow worker, sister, fellow soldier.

Because, verse 3 says, God is our Father. And, verse 10, Paul says, I've become like a father to Onesimus, just as I had done to Philemon.

In verse 7, he greets Philemon as a brother. I have joy and comfort from your love, my brother.

Verse 10, once again, my brother.

See, all the language, all the way through this letter, is so conspicuously family language. It exudes the bonds of family that are real, that are deep, that are rich, just like in any family.

But, in this family, Paul says, the great characteristic feature is love. That's one of the key words in the letter.

[8 : 28] It comes three times in critical places. Look at verse 7. This huge comfort in Philemon's evident love to the saints, to the church family.

In verse 9, Paul bases his appeal on love. For love's sake, I appeal. In verse 16, he speaks of Onesimus there as a beloved brother, literally, as a loved one.

See, the church family is marked out and defined by this love. Now, we have to be careful here. We have to remember that in the Bible, love is not the kind of wishy-washy, vague sort of thing that we tend to think of today.

It's not slush. It's not sentimentalism. That makes love almost meaningless. Now, in the Bible, love is real. It's tangible. You can see it. It wears clothes that can be seen.

And the clothes that the love of God in the fellowship of the saints wears is tangible fellowship. *koinonia*, sharing, partnership in the family of Jesus Christ.

[9 : 37] That's what he speaks about in verse 6 when he uses that word sharing in verse 17 when he uses the same word translated partner. And that's what Paul wants to see in Philemon's life and in this church as an evidence of the real presence of love that binds the family together.

That's what he's saying in verse 20. He's saying, show that to me. I want some benefit in the Lord. Refresh my heart by showing me that love is really real. By showing this tangible fellowship.

And that's why Paul's requests in this letter are definite even if in some regards they're not exactly directive for Philemon about every detail. He is saying to Philemon and to his church love must be real.

It must be tangible. It must be visible. I want to take you back to basics. That's what Paul's saying. I want to take you to the basics and for you to work out how the love of Christ in the gospel must manifest itself in your Christian family.

That's the way God teaches us, isn't it, in Scripture? He wants us to think. He wants us to grow up and to be mature to develop a Christian mind. He doesn't just give us lists and lists and lists and lists of rules and regulations.

[10:52] That's the bondage of many religions, isn't it? God's explicit commands are few and far between but he wants us to think through the demands and the commands of the gospel and to think of myriads of ways that we can apply them in our Christian lives.

But we do need to have those basics clear in our mind and in fact, in this letter, Paul gives us, if you like, the three R's of that kind of gospel love response. How is love to be real and tangible in our fellowships?

I wonder if you can see. Look at verse 7. Real love, he says, issues always in refreshing. That's the first R, refreshing the heart of the saints.

Look at verse 17. Real love will issue in receiving. Receiving the penitent sinner, the new believer, as a valued and equal partner in the church life.

And in verse 18, well this R isn't in the text but it's there all the same repaying. Repaying the debt. Bearing the cost ourselves of other people's sins against us.

[12:01] That's what real love does. It refreshes the heart of the saints. It receives and welcomes the sinner who's repented and come into fellowship with Jesus. It repays gladly the wrongs done to us by brothers and sisters that relationships may be restored.

That's love in action, says Paul. Quite comprehensive, isn't it? Just to think about that. Imagine what good it would do all of us if we just spent the rest of our lives doing nothing more but thinking about how to apply those three R's in our own Christian lives.

Inexhaustible, isn't it? But, what is it that motivates these tangible expressions of love? That's the fruit of love, if you like, but what's the root?

Well, that's here in another key word in Paul's letter to the Philemon. It's a word that's translated heart in our ESV. You see it there in verse 7, refreshing the heart.

You see it again in verse 12, I'm sending back to my very heart. And in verse 20, refresh my heart in Jesus Christ. Might be translated almost better, compassion.

[13:15] Here's the definition of that from one of the scholars. Compassion is not to pity someone, but to be drawn towards another in order to love and care for that person.

Now, there's nothing vague in that, is there? In fact, it's deeply physical. It's, even literally, it's a visceral word. Quite literally, the Greek word is the word for entrails, for guts, because in the Greek thinking, in their understanding, that was the place of our deepest feelings and emotions.

Some of that survives today. We say that sometimes. It's my gut feeling. It's deep. It's inner. In fact, if you've got an old authorized version, a King James version, you'll find that it translates that word, bowels.

That's all right, of course, if you're used to using the authorized version, but if you're not, although it could be a little bit unfortunate if you think that Paul, in verse 7, finds great joy in the fact that Philemon has refreshed the bowels of the saints.

That's how it translates it. Or if, in verse 20, he's asking for Philemon to refresh his bowels. Well, today, it's not really all that easy for us to understand what that means.

[14:28] There's suddenly no doubt that there are some rather spiritually constipated Christians and they need a bit of theological laxative from time to time, but that's not what Paul's speaking about here. I just point that out because actually sometimes new Christians or others pick up an old version of the Bible like that.

It might be the only version lying around in the house that's been gathering dust on the shelf for 30 years. And most people today find it really quite difficult. So I love the authorized version.

I was brought up with it. I still use it myself at home. But unless you really understand that or are au fait with it, I think it's probably best, if that's what you've got, perhaps to try and find a version that's a bit more modern that has the words as we would understand them.

So let's not misunderstand this word heart or compassion. Paul is talking about a deep, visceral, inner love.

The kind of love, the kind of bonds that bind together family members. The kind of bonds that are strong despite many difficulties, many irritations.

[15 : 36] The kind of things that make blood thicker than water when loyalty to a family is being threatened. Now, these kind of bonds of compassion, these bonds of the heart that are there in families carry deep emotions inevitably, don't they?

They can be the source of intense joy, but they can also be the source of great sorrow and hurt just because they matter so much. We all know that.

And ruptured relationships within our families can be terribly painful just as joyful relationships can be full of inexpressible happiness. And every family has its foibles, every family has its oddities. We can drive each other mad with exasperation in our families, can't we? We know that. But we are family. And that makes a difference. It makes all the difference, doesn't it?

Because our very hearts, our very beings are in the bonds that unite us together. And therefore, that fact transforms our thinking about one another.

[16 : 52] And that fact transcends the divisions that there could otherwise be by nature in any diverse group such as a congregation like Philemon's or a congregation like ours or, to that matter, any Christian congregation.

It's very likely, isn't it, that within any diverse congregation of people like a Christian church there will be the ability for people to drive one another mad lots of the times with exasperation.

There will be opportunity for people to find one another difficult. There will be all kinds of things which sometimes just seem to make things impossible. But, we are true family.

And families are like that. But families transcend these things just because they are family, because they're bound together by the heart, by the guts, if you like. Because there is compassion.

Because we're drawn towards one another, in order to care for one another, whatever the stresses, whatever the vexations of family life. That may be that within our own church family here, you find that there are all sorts of things that leave a lot to be desired.

[18 : 12] And I might even think that too. And no doubt, the fact is that there are always going to be things like that just because, well, we're saints who still sin, aren't we?

And that's likely always to be the case, right up until the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. But I want you to listen to something from a letter that I received this week from somebody in the fellowship here.

And he was commenting on the fact that sometimes people can be very difficult. But, he says, I'll never forget how A and B and C got alongside me when I first parachuted into the Tron.

Nor will I forget how D immediately reached over and shared his Bible with me the first time I snuck into the back of the church. Or how E immediately invited me for lunch the first time he met me at a prayer meeting knowing nothing about me.

There's a time when the Spirit provoked F to leave his lunch and come and sit with me for an hour and share something of his life before conversion with me at a time when I was starting to feel that I was too wretched even to sit in the congregation.

[19 : 25] I could go on further about the time when another dear sister agreed with me that so often you go through a period of feeling so joyful and so close to our Father and then out of nowhere like a curve ball that you don't even see coming you're caught up in sin and left feeling so absolutely bereft.

And there's the stories I could tell about X and Y and Z and on and on and on. That's our family.

Of course it's dysfunctional. Every family is. But isn't it wonderful? Isn't it wonderful that that Onesimus can be received and ministered to and helped so wonderfully like that by so many different people each playing a part?

Refreshed my heart greatly to read that I can tell you this week. That's a mark of family love. It reaches in and it reaches out in order to draw in.

And Paul's reminding the church in Colossae, he's reminding the church in Philemon's house that they are family. With all their individual faults, with all their individual backgrounds, they are united in Christ and by Christ.

[20 : 39] And therefore they're all of equal value in this gospel family, no matter what their idiosyncrasies, no matter what their oddities. It's often been said that the church is God's peculiar

people in more than one sense.

We know that. All the relationships within the Christian family, the household of God, have been remodeled. They've been transformed by the mercy of Christ which humbles all of us and which lifts up all of us on the same basis by his grace alone.

And the church is true family, unlike the world, which is not, which has all kinds of wrong valuations, social divisions, hierarchies.

All of these are transcended totally by the bonds of the heart, of the guts that unite believers in Jesus Christ, brothers and sisters.

brothers. So as far as the church of God is concerned, there will always be and must always be a mentality that says, no longer a slave, but a beloved brother.

[21 : 47] There must always be a realization, a recognition at the very heart of our thinking that that is the truth about one another. But most especially about new additions to the family of the Lord Jesus Christ, new believers.

believers. Our valuations in the Christian family always must turn the world's valuations upside down. True gospel family always transcends in every way the world's divisions, the world's hierarchies, the world's social culture.

And it must always do so. That's one reason, I think, why in this letter Paul keeps referring to himself as a prisoner, not as an apostle. You see, in the world's eyes, he's the lowest of the low. He's scum. He's nothing. He has no authority. But in the church, well, it's quite a different story. He's not a prisoner of Rome. He's a prisoner of the Lord Jesus Christ.

He's a brother. He's a father. And therefore he can speak. The church is a true family. It's the true family of the redeemed.

[22 : 54] the place where the deepest family bonds of the hearts transcend all the valuations, all the pecking orders of this world. And so any new convert, whatever they once were, is no longer that.

And they must be received by all of us as no longer that. They must be received as a beloved brother, as a sister, as a partner, as a true sharer in all the family inheritance with everybody else. And that's what Paul's message is to Philemon, to his church, and to every church, to us too. The church is true family. Now that simple fact has vast implications for all our thinking about the church. Just like the three R's, there are endless applications. But I want this morning just to bring out two particular things that come out very clearly out of that teaching in this letter.

first, the implications it has for our thinking about how we ourselves consider status within the church, that is, how our family thinks.

[24 : 03] And secondly, the implications for how we ourselves order the structures in our church, if you like, how our family lives. Next week we're going to go on and think about the wider question of what statement that makes to the world, but that's for next time.

first of all then, how we consider status of people within the fellowship of the church. And Paul's point is pretty clear, isn't it?

It's crystal clear. What he's saying to us is that there must be no snobbery at all in the Christian church, in the family of the Lord Jesus Christ. The family of the Lord Jesus just cannot think in that kind of way.

That might sound a very obvious thing, but in the circumstances, Paul knew it was necessary to emphasize it because, well, here was a man from the lower classes, and on top of that, a man with a reputation, with a certain amount of scandal attaching to his life.

And Paul is sending him to this church not only to be welcomed by the church and received into the church, but to be Paul's own ambassador, to have a ministry among that church. And Paul says, receive him as you would receive me.

[25 : 21] That's what he's been to me, he says. In verse 13, he's served me, he's ministered to me. He's so useful to me. In verse 11, he says, he can be so useful to you, I'm sending him to minister to you also in your church.

He's a willing and able servant, he's saying, so make sure that you value him as a person and that you value his ministry among you. Now, whether Paul ultimately wanted him back in Rome to help him there, or whether he envisaged Onesimus coming with him later on another mission that may be suggested in verse 22, whatever that case, he certainly envisaged a full and a valuable ministry for Onesimus within the church in Philemon's house, the church at Colossae.

And at least as far as the church was concerned, whatever the specifics of the legal status Onesimus might have in the eyes of the law in terms of being a slave or whatever, as far as the church is concerned, at the very least, there was to be absolutely no question of snobbery, no looking down on Onesimus by Philemon or anyone else.

He's no longer a slave, he's a beloved brother, he's one of you. You can imagine how difficult that might have been for some of them, not least Philemon.

Onesimus? That useless slave? One of us? Just like us? And what's that? He's going to what? He's going to teach us from one of Paul's letters?

[26 : 52] Are you kidding? I mean, that's a natural reaction, isn't it? And we know it is because often it's very easy for that to be the natural reaction today, isn't it?

It often happens in churches that there can be resentments about newcomers in a fellowship, especially if they're people who are not quite like us. One pastor told me not long ago that he was getting complaints of people in his church saying, there's so much focus on these new people. What about me? What about us? We've been here for ages. Don't we count? Well, that's EBFC syndrome, isn't it? Elder brother, fatted calf.

But it's easy to be like that, isn't it? It's easy to be snobbery and just to be selfish. Or you get this, well, why should I listen to that Johnny-come-lately?

He's only been here five minutes. Look at him, he's leading a house group, or he's doing this, or he's doing that. I've been here for ages. I've been overlooked for ages. Well, that's probably because other people can sense your attitude, just as they can sense Johnny-come-lately's attitude and his willing servant heart and his desire to serve and to help others.

[28 : 18] See, snobbery can be a real problem in the Christian church. We maybe don't think so, but it can be. It's natural to our natural hearts. And it always will be, really, because most of us think that we ourselves are the real benchmark, don't we?

Others who don't share our credentials ought to be lower down in the pecking order. That's the natural way that human beings think. And it's a real challenge to those of us who've been Christians, especially those of us Christians for a long time.

I've been a Christian a long time. This challenges me. Can the anesimuses of this world really minister to me? Can they really offer me something? Well, you know, the fact is, it's very often the new Christians, even the newest Christians, who have the most vibrant witness, who have the most enthusiastic and the most effective ministries of all.

Often they're the ones who give more than anything else in the church, in terms of encouragement, in terms of fellowship, in terms of evangelism, and so on. It's interesting, just during this week I was thinking of this, and in the course of the week I was in contact with a number of different ministers, just on the phone, and so on.

So I just asked them all this question. And you know, they all said exactly the same thing. They said, new believers, often those from a very humble background, often those who are ignorant of all sorts of things, not yet up to speed with all the kind of evangelical shibboleths they've still got to learn.

[29 : 52] These are the people who offer the most encouragement, the most joy, the most gratitude, and are the most willing to serve others. They all said that, the same thing.

And, they also said, it's often in stark contrast to those who are supposedly the mature Christians. Those who have been Christians longer, much longer maybe, but by the Bible's criteria, if they're like that, not mature Christians at all.

Infants in the faith. Isn't that striking? That was a real challenge to me. It is a real challenge to me. More than that, one of them said, I've never had strife or grief or tantrums from a new Christian. I've never been wounded by a new Christian, an anesimus. It's the Philemons. It's the longest-standing Christians who always do that. Why is that?

Why is it that the passage of time seems to be able to change us into Christian snobs? Maybe it's just that we forget the wonder of the transformation that's been worked in us by Jesus Christ to restore us to him.

[31 : 11] Maybe we've forgotten the joy of forgiveness, of renewal. Forgotten the things that are so uppermost and full in the heart of an anesimus.

But it makes us think, doesn't it, it's so easy, according to the Bible, it's so easy to lose our first love. And we do need to be careful how we think about status in the church.

We're a family that can't be snobbish, especially towards the anesimuses of this world. We need the anesimuses of this world and in the church.

We need them to encourage us, to minister to us. And friends, I can tell you, I do give thanks constantly for the anesimuses in this fellowship, who are a constant source of joy and encouragement to so many people.

And we almost do that, mustn't we? I know many of you do. You just have to listen to that email that I read. But let's not grow out of that, never, ever, ever, into the kind of snobbishness that can develop.

[32 : 19] There's much more I could say about that, but I want to move on to the second thing. But I do ask you to challenge your own heart as I've challenged mine about that attitude. Secondly, there's an implication of all of this for how we are to order the structures in the life of the church.

Now, this is an important issue. I can only touch on it briefly this morning. But what it means is that the practical way that we seek to live together as a fellowship, as a family, needs to be led by the gospel that transcends the artificial divisions of the world.

There's not to be, in other words, a kind of spiritual apartheid in the church of Jesus Christ and in the way that we seek to live church life. What do I mean by that?

Well, for some time, the so-called church growth movement, as it's sometimes called, has to a greater or lesser degree pushed the line of what's called the homogeneous church growth principle. Well, to put it simply, what that means is just this. If you want your church to grow, the best way to do it is to target a particular age range or social class or educational group or whatever it might be and focus everything on that particular group and almost certainly that's the easiest and the fastest way to grow a larger church of that kind of people.

[33 : 44] And generally speaking, I suppose, not surprisingly, the focus tends to be on educated, affluent, middle class people. And it does seem to work. Now, you get a greater or lesser degree of this in different circles and certainly there are many nuances and as with all such movements, there are good things and bad things.

I don't really like the term church growth movement. It rather implies that if you have reservations that you're in the church decline movement. You know, it's like political slogans. We are for the NHS and the health of this nation as everybody else was for disease and death.

And there are many evangelicals who, while they would eschew and avoid much of the paraphernalia of this kind of thing, yet either consciously or unconsciously, nevertheless, they do pursue something like that model of church life.

For some, it's openly pragmatism that dictates it. They would say, if you want to reach a certain group, then this may be the only way and we need to start a specific church for that group.

Now, in many situations, that might be the right thing to do, particularly, for example, if there's a language issue and you're trying to reach a particular language and culture, it might be. For others, it would be seen as a stage on the way to being a fully integrated church.

[35 : 14] So, for example, in evangelism, you would target homogeneous groups, people who are all the same, and later on, somewhere down the process, you would begin to teach people that we need to integrate as a church. I've heard it put like this.

Part of sanctification, of growing in maturity, is learning about real family and fellowship. But, we have to get people justified first. And that's an argument for justifying this homogeneous approach to evangelism.

Well, that may be, but, I had a very interesting conversation a few years ago with my friend, Rico Tice. Some of you know him. He works at All Souls in London and developed the Christianity Explored course.

We were talking about this. And he said, well, interestingly, in our evangelism, in our doing of Christianity Explored, we used to put people on the tables according to like with like.

We would try and divide the group up and put all the people who seemed to be the same with the same sort of interests and so on at the same table. But I don't do that anymore. And I asked him why and he said, well, one time it happened that we just didn't get a chance to do that.

[36 : 18] We mixed everybody up. And I just saw that not only was it better in terms of a mix of people, it actually worked too.

He told me a story about two people who sat together. An elderly lady from the east end of London whose speech probably most of us here in this congregation couldn't understand.

And sitting beside her, a high-flying guy working in the city of London. Both of these people came to Christ and were converted. And both of them said to him, one of the things that struck us the most was that here was the two of us, totally different people from totally different backgrounds.

In no other place on earth would we rub shoulders together sitting here and we've been changed by the same message about the same saviour. But it was amusing. He told us that this woman had no idea that the young man she was beside was a multi-millionaire until the day of the Christianity Explored Away Day when he said, well, I live quite near you.

I'll come past and pick you up. And he rolled up in some great Bentley or something like that. And she said, oh, you're posh, aren't you? But isn't that wonderful?

[37 : 27] I think that's dead right, you see. It's the unique, uniting power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. And that's why it's such a joy to me to see when I turn up from time to time on a Thursday night and to see all these people sitting, eating together, Christianity Explored, new Christians going to discipleship Explored, others doing Release the Word and so on, all just mixed in together.

Just as on a Sunday night here after the service down at the front there's a great throng of people of all ages and all kinds and all types mixing in together, speaking to one another, encouraging one another.

Now, that's a mix that you don't find anywhere else in the world. But it's a mix, I think, that you do find and you must find within the genuine Christian church.

It seems that in many churches today, especially in living churches and growing churches, especially in larger churches, the natural tendency is towards separation so that you have a very early morning service for the oldies and a mid-morning service for the young families and evening service for the students and the singles or whatever it might be.

But actually, what you're getting there is not separate parts of one congregation, you're getting separate congregations, separate churches. I don't want to dismiss that, I don't want to condemn that.

[38 : 55] Sometimes, I think perhaps in larger cities, particularly where people travel more or whatever, it seems inevitable. But it just seems to me that it's somewhat lacking in breathing the air of the New Testament conception of a true church family.

That's why I believe that it's important for us that we do seek to preserve, to foster the congregation, the whole family as the focus.

And especially on the times when we're gathered together as the whole family on Sundays and on Wednesdays, every fortnight for our congregation, our family prayers. That we should not drift into becoming two different or three different congregations, morning and evening or whatever, that just happen to be connected loosely by sharing a building, essentially.

But that we should be one. Our Wednesday lunchtime service is a little different. It is, if you like, a separate church. There's just a few of our Sunday people who are there, largely to help to make the thing happen, but it's almost exclusively a different congregation.

And that's self-evidently so. But the rest of our lives together isn't that. Now that is to swim against the tide in society and it seems against the tide in the church today, but it seems to me that the gospel demands that.

[40 : 19] Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that there's no place for other fellowships and groups and so on within the life of the church. I think that's essential.

Just as in any family there's going to be a need for the provision of structures that can help particular needs of particular people. So we do have dedicated groups for children and teenagers. We have a group for senior ladies who meet on a Monday afternoon. We have some morning groups that young mothers and people with children can come to. We especially employ a pastor, Robin Brough, who focuses on the older members and their needs.

We have Agnes who has a specific responsibility for our young people and so on. We need our Discipleship Explore groups, our Enquirers groups, our Christianity Explored, Release the Word, all these sorts of things.

These things are necessary, they're just applications of Paul's teaching in the pastoral epistles to Timothy and to Titus that there's needs for older women, for younger women, for older men, younger men, so on.

[41 : 21] It's essential in a congregation like ours, especially when we're scattered all over the city, when we're very diverse in nature. But these are the things that we have through the week and so on, so that, especially on Sunday, we may gather as a whole family, as one family, and not as many

families, not as fractured groups.

These structures are there to serve and to strengthen the cohesion of one whole family. They're the glue, if you like, that hold us together. And it's right that we ensure these things happen and have people responsible for them.

But I see my place as the pastor of the whole congregation not to be giving my time to all of these things. That's why we have different people involved in them. That's why I personally spend 99% of my time focusing on things that pertain to the whole family.

Because we are. And it's always going to be hard if we're going to be a church like that. It's always going to mean sacrifice and forbearance. It's especially going to mean, isn't it, that those of us who are old-timers in the fellowship, the Philemons, the Aphias of our church, we're going to have to be going out of our way to welcome the Onesimuses.

And that email testified, doesn't it, that many of us do exactly that. But ours is a large family. We are plagued, aren't we, with an upstairs-downstairs situation, just from geography, from architecture.

[42 : 51] It's hard for newcomers to work in, to get to know people in the church. And so we've got to be especially careful, haven't we, not to have upstairs-downstairs structures of a different character in any evidence in the church.

Rather, we must be willing to have structures that will be aimed to help others, especially those like Onesimus, who have so much to give, if only we'll realise it, so that we can help such people to find their way into our fellowship, to be part of the family and to have a role and a serving place with us. Some of us are well-in in the church family here, have been for years. It may be hard for some of us to see the need for some of these things. We might even resent sometimes the effort, the time that's put into them, and that's very easy, it's natural for us to think like that.

But that's why this letter of Paul is so helpful for us. It's a gentle reminder, isn't it? It is gentle. But it reminds us that in this Christian family, we never get to the point where we say, well, we're past that stage now.

Our family is complete now, our household is big enough, we're moving on. This is the gospel family. And the love of the true gospel family never diminishes like that.

[44 : 15] There's no quote on it, there's no cap on it. This family grows all the time by immigration, by adoption. That's the kind of family we are. So let me finish with a word for Anesimus and a word for Philemon.

Maybe you are something of an Anesimus. Maybe you've crept in recently here to the periphery of this family. Maybe you're quite unsure of yourself and wondering whether in this family there really is a place for you or your kind of person.

Maybe you do have a past and a history. Maybe you have a past history that's passed through this family. You've had to run away for some reason, but you've crept back.

Maybe like Anesimus, the shadow of that word useless is ringing over you. But look at verse 11.

Because Paul makes a wonderful point there about what it means to find the Lord Jesus Christ.

It turns what was once useless into something that's useful, not just to the church, not just to the gospel, but to the Lord Jesus himself. And that's true of you, my friend, however awful your past, if you've found the Lord Jesus Christ.

[45 : 32] You've gone from useless to useful. The Greek word is ekrestos to euchrestos. Because, it's a pun, once you were ekrestos, without Christ, but now you're euchrestos.

you're complete in Christ. And if that's you, then verse 16 is for you. Whatever you once were, you are no longer that.

You are a beloved brother. You're a beloved sister. Every single person in this gospel family. And we welcome you in the Lord Jesus, and we welcome you in the flesh.

We want you to be practically welcome and cherished to become one of the family. family. We want you to be a first-class citizen among us, as good as anybody else in this place.

I have to tell you that we are an odd family. We have moments of stress, we have moments of occasional madness. But we are family, and we welcome you into our family, an isomus.

[46 : 40] And lastly, to Philemon and Aphia. And there are many Philemons and Aphias here, many others, who have refreshed the hearts of the saints again and again.

And again, I read them in that email. For love's sake, I appeal to you as I appeal to myself. Keep it up. Welcome, Enesimus and the people like him.

Let our goodness not be by compulsion, but let it be with joy. Let's refresh one another's hearts and go on doing it, even as we respond together as true gospel family, to grow this family together, warts and all.

That's what it's all about, isn't it? As Paul says in verse 21, confident of your obedience, I write to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

Well, let's pray, shall we? Gracious God, our Father, we thank you. Thank you.