

Persuasion All the Way

Philemon 1:1-21

Rev. Henry Pascual

Prayer: Stillspeaking God, you are always speaking. Help us listen for your Word—in our doubts, in our struggles, and in our daily lives. Amen.

In an interview with *Faith & Leadership*, a magazine for Christian leaders, the ethicist and theologian Stanley Hauerwas was asked about leadership, especially leadership in the church. He simply said, “It’s always persuasion. It’s persuasion all the way down,”¹

I sometimes wonder if churches have lost this art of persuasion. Instead of patient conversation and taking time to understand those with opposing views, many rush to votes, play “winner-takes-all,” or avoid conflict altogether. This practice often leads to fractured relationships, as parliamentary procedures and simple majority votes create winners and losers. And when people feel unheard, resentment grows, and the mission of the church suffers.

Politics is even worse. There, the art of persuasion seems to have vanished altogether. Dialogue has been replaced by domination. Laws are pushed through quickly and unfairly, with little room for honest debate or proper information.

But the church is called to be different. For us, it’s about persuasion and appeal.

So how do we do it? How do we persuade? Let’s look at Paul’s letter to Philemon.

Paul writes to Philemon, a slave owner, whom Paul himself had led to faith in Christ. The church in Colossae even met in Philemon’s home, and Paul was the one who founded that church.

Paul writes with a personal appeal on behalf of Onesimus, one of Philemon’s slaves. At some point, Onesimus was separated from

¹Stanley Hauerwas, “What Only the Church Can Do,” *Faith & Leadership: A Learning Resource for Christian Leaders and Their Institution*, December 21, 2009, <https://faithandleadership.com/stanley-hauerwas-what-only-the-whole-church-can-do>.

Philemon. We don't know exactly how it happened. The most common view is that he ran away after stealing from Philemon, as verse 18 seems to suggest.

But others think Philemon may have actually sent Onesimus to help Paul in prison—just as the Philippians sent Epaphroditus to care for Paul (Phil. 2:25-30).² If that's true, then Onesimus wasn't a runaway slave at all.

But we don't know for sure. What we do know is that, while with Paul, Onesimus became a believer. He became a friend and partner in ministry. Now Paul writes to Philemon, asking him to receive Onesimus back—not as property, but as a *beloved brother in Christ*.

Notice Paul's approach. He doesn't order Philemon. He appeals. He persuades.

From Philemon's perspective, Onesimus was useless (v. 11). Roman law gave Philemon the right to punish him severely. But Paul reframes the story. He tells Philemon that this "useless" slave has become, during his imprisonment, like a son to him—a spiritual child, a brother in Christ. Paul even calls Onesimus "my own heart" and offers to repay any debt Onesimus might owe. *"If he has done you any wrong or owes you anything," Paul writes, "charge it to me"* (vv. 18–19). Finally, Paul makes the boldest move of all. He tells Philemon, *"If you consider me your partner in Christ, then welcome Onesimus as you would welcome me"* (v. 17).

Paul's strategy is subtle but powerful. He could have commanded Philemon to do the right thing. Instead, he gives him freedom to choose. He tells Philemon, *"I do not want to force you to help me; I want you to do it of your own free will. So I will not do anything unless you agree"* (v. 14 GNB).

We can see that Paul clearly persuades, but he persuades in love. He tells Philemon, "I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love" (v. 9).

And how does love work? Love never coerces. It doesn't manipulate. It's not confrontational. Instead, it persuades. It appeals. It invites.

Notice also how Paul begins his letter. He starts with a spirit of gratitude. *"I thank my God every time I mention you in my prayers. I've heard of your*

² Eric Barreto, "Commentary on Philemon 1:1-21," *Working Preacher*, September 4, 2016.

love and faithfulness... I have great joy and encouragement because of your love, since the hearts of God's people are refreshed by your actions" (vv. 4-7, CEB).

Gratitude opens hearts. When we feel seen and appreciated, we are more willing to listen and respond with love. The tone of Paul's letter to Philemon is one of respect, love, and admiration for Philemon. And he builds on that. This is leadership by persuasion. Leadership rooted in love.

This letter is truly beautiful. Here we see Paul at his most pastoral—graceful, thankful, and appreciative.

Have you ever felt misunderstood? Or maybe unappreciated? We all have. And then—how different it feels when someone notices your effort. Or simply says, *thank you*. It lifts your spirit, doesn't it? And here's the beauty—gratitude doesn't just bless the one who receives it. It blesses the one who gives it too.

Now, seeking recognition can sound selfish. But it's not. It's part of being human. God made us that way. To need encouragement. To thrive when we know we matter. This is what persuasion looks like in leadership.

That's what Paul is showing us in Philemon. He calls us to approach one another with love—even when we disagree. The goal isn't to win an argument. Not to prove, *I'm right, you're wrong*. The goal is to live by our shared calling as servants of Christ.

And when love leads the way—things change. Relationships heal. People are reconciled to each other. Communities grow stronger. Even systems and cultures around us begin to look more like God's kingdom. That's the power Paul is pointing to. **The gospel has the power to change hearts. To change lives. To change us—in Christ.**³

Friends, the world is watching the church. They're watching how we treat one another. They're watching how we make decisions. People are sick and tired of competition, manipulation, and backroom deals. They see it in politics. They see it at work. They see it everywhere.

³Cain Hope Felder, "The Letter to Philemon, in *The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary* Vol. X (Nashville: Abingdon, 2015), 464.

And many wonder—could the church be different? Could the church be a place where love still matters? Where respect and harmony are real? Where relationships are built on trust and shaped by mutual accountability?

The world longs for that. They're hungry for a community where people are influenced not by power but by service. Not by intimidation, but by empathy. Not by secrecy, but by transparency.

Oftentimes, constitutions and bylaws are used to solve problems in the church. Constitutions and Bylaws have their place. Don't get me wrong. But Christ calls us to a better way—the way of persuasion, grounded in love. That way leads to peace. That way brings lasting harmony.

So, again to quote Stanley Hauerwas: *"It's always persuasion. It's persuasion all the way down."*

May this always be our way. And I have every confidence it will. Thanks be to God. Amen.