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Week 4: Reflection 4: Philemon 1

Amazing GRACE: **G**rowing **R**ace **A**wareness **C**hampions for **E**quality/**E**quity.

Cham•pi•on – (n.) A supporter who enthusiastically defends or fights on behalf of another's beliefs or rights; (archaic.) one that advocates for another's rights and honour.

The Black mother's face revealed her frustration as she approached the doors of the Sixth Form College. She dreaded, yet another conference with education professionals eager to point out the failings of her teenage son, and the resulting pain that followed. Over the years, she had listened to the various descriptions of his learning disabilities – auditory sensory processing disorder, attention deficit disorder, hyperactivity – each disability being examined only to be replaced by another.

With each new diagnosis, the stigma of him as a problem child increased. As a mother, she feared teachers were beginning to perceive him as having special needs that were too great, absorbing precious time that could be better spent on other learners. So, she prepared herself for yet another conference, holding little hope for her son's future. Over the past year, she had seen his energetic, friendly, and outgoing personality disintegrate; his self-confidence dwindling with his interest in school. He was hinting at 'dropping out', leaving college and getting a job – at age 14.

So, it was a pleasant surprise when she entered the meeting room and saw her son's Maths and Science teachers present, with the Learning Development specialist. Perhaps, there was hope. For some reason, her son had always managed stellar grades in Maths and Science, whilst course work in other subjects was problematic with grades just above passing.

Somehow this meeting felt different. The atmosphere in the room was less tense, voices were more conciliatory, even optimistic. It began with the learning specialist admitting that both teachers had approached 'her' to discuss the teen's performance. The teachers were recommending the teen be tested for 'cross lateral dyslexia', explaining that 'lateral dominance' was essential for reading and writing, but students with 'mixed dexterity' often revealed heightened skills in maths and scientific analysis.

Both teachers offered to support her son and work collaboratively with the specialist. The mother was moved to tears as the teachers offered to encourage her son throughout tests for the disability, put any needed support mechanisms in place to enhance his progress in other subjects, and nurture her son's interests in maths and science.

They would become his advocates – educational champions – willingly placing their integrity as educators on the line. They could have easily walked away or chosen not to involve themselves in a developmental learning case outside their purview. They could have simply left it up to the professionals.

Today, they might be interested to know the young student they supported went on to achieve a STEM degree, with diplomas in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics. Without their intervention, critical support, and advocacy as 'champions' – the student's future might not have been as bright.

Likewise, Apostle Paul's letter to Philemon offers a theological context to our understanding of champions. In the 1st century, Greco-Roman dominance in governance, culture, and civil law established a widespread precedence that yet influences contemporary society. While slavery is no longer a legally, acceptable practice, there is little doubt that Paul's letter to Philemon played an essential role in propagating, with religious justification – the lengthy duration of the Transatlantic African Slave Trade. Perhaps, deeper reflection will give us a different perspective.

Between 1600 and 1801, the legal trade of human beings (based on the colour of their skin), facilitated and sustained the prosperity of Western civilisation through the continued use of free, life-long labour. The teachings of the Church and its financial investments, benefitted this practice which flourished for over 200 years, without impunity.

Unfortunately, many of the teachings were based on inaccurate or misleading interpretations of Scripture, taken outside their social construct. Perhaps, one of the most unknown facts is that, throughout the history of slavery and human trafficking, it was not based on skin colour, but rather, war, financial indebtedness, and criminal behaviour. Roman conquest proliferated and embedded the practice into its legal and cultural system, whereby 'run-away' slaves were considered criminals, and professional 'slave-catchers' were employed to capture and return them to their owners. Likewise, sheltering, concealing, or advocating on behalf of a slave was also considered criminal behaviour.

It was a culture, where even those harbouring or protecting run-away slaves were prosecuted alongside the slave, upon return. Protectors of slaves endured similar punishment, which included – severe beatings, burning, branding with hot irons, and death. Paul places himself in this dangerous position when petitioning Philemon to accept the return of Onesimus, for the purpose of setting him free. Paul models Christ – offering himself, sacrificially on behalf of Onesimus.

Without explicitly condemning the practice of slavery, Paul champions inequality, unafraid to record his advocacy of Onesimus in writing. He acknowledges the slave has been with him, and he expresses his desire to keep him as part of his household. Even while incarcerated under house arrest, Paul unashamedly confesses his role in harbouring a run-away slave, receiving him as a son, and accepting him as a brother in Christ.

More importantly, he acknowledges that Roman law requires Philemon's consent to liberate Onesimus – something only a slaveowner can grant. I believe, this reminder would have crushed Philemon's heart with the realisation that in order to lawfully punish Onesimus, he must also punish Paul for sheltering him.

As the person who has led Philemon to Christ, Paul appeals to the owner's sense of Christian charity. He humbly pleads for him to consider the possibility of divine intervention at work in Onesimus 'running away'. While the slave's actions could end his life, they have also been used for good – bringing him to salvation and spiritual freedom through Paul's instruction, and then by allowing his return as Paul writes, "no longer a slave, but... as a beloved Christian brother."

Is this apostolic teaching in support of slavery? Or, theological instruction that emphasises the 'highest' level of Christian charity – the ability to love another as oneself. This love comes at great personal and financial loss, as well as the expense of social standing. Paul leaves the decision to Philemon but bears the cost of full responsibility. If there is a financial loss, Paul will cover it. If there is a wrong that brings loss in

social standing, Paul will assume it. In other words, if Philemon decides to punish Onesimus as a run-away slave, Paul is volunteering to be punished as well – to be reported and prosecuted for sheltering, protecting, and advocating on behalf of a slave.

In championing Onesimus, Paul discerns God's will. He sees what Philemon does not – that God has endowed Onesimus with gifts needed to grow the church and build the kingdom of God.

These gifts flourish, not by the sword or whip, but through the love and liberating power of Christian salvation. Paul's letter to the Church in Colossae reveals the fruit of this discernment. Colossians 4.7-9 says this:

Our dear brother Tychicus, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord (is coming to you).⁸ I have sent him for this very purpose, so that you may know how we are and that he may encourage your hearts;⁹ he is coming with Onesimus, the faithful and beloved brother, who is one of you. (Together) they will tell you about everything here.

According to writings of the Early Church Fathers, Onesimus serves as Paul's disciple until the Apostle's death. Christian tradition identifies him as a notable apostle, with Onesimus preaching in Spain, Carpentaria, Colossae, and Patras. While imprisoned, the theologian Ignatius records a visit from Onesimus (then Bishop of Ephesus). Finally, Onesimus serves as the Bishop of Byzantium until martyred in 95 A.D.

When we serve as champions, like Paul we discern the work needed to grow God's Church. Like prophets of old, we search inward, not the outward appearance – spiritually visualizing the gifts and divine potential that will faithfully do God's will (and, not necessarily our own).

One of Paul's many gifts to the church is divine revelation – a 'spiritual awareness' that equality dismantles the sin of partiality and preference. Through the churches he formed, Paul's actions display, that while diversity can be 'messy', it builds incredible spiritual strength. Only God's divine vision would join Jews with Gentiles, males and females, enslaved and free in 'home churches' that welcomed all peoples from diverse cultures, nationalities, languages and social status. This is God's church!

As race awareness champions will we also carry this prophetic vision? Will we faithfully mentor and nurture others? In prayer and humility, as champions, we must be prepared to advocate equality, to break the Church's enduring cycle of complicity in the oppression of others. Like all prophets, as champions we are being called to challenge the structures and institutions that give us voice, in love and truth, we warn against the sinful influences that choose wealth at the expense of the human life, privilege at the cost of indignity, and social limitations that impede others from truly becoming our brothers and sisters in Christ – a shared humanity created that is created in the image of God.

So if you consider me your partner, welcome him as you would welcome me.¹⁸ If he has wronged you in any way, or owes you anything, charge that to my account.

