

12. PAUL'S WRITINGS AND CO-WORKERS ON HIS THIRD MISSIONARY TRIP



Ephesus

Apollos, a Jewish Christian with a firm grasp of the Hebrew Scriptures, carried out his evangelizing activities in Ephesus. An eloquent and convincing speaker, he attracted many followers. After Aquila and Priscilla completed his Christian formation, he left Ephesus and went to Corinth, where once again he explained the Scriptures to the Jews, demonstrating that Jesus was truly their long-awaited Messiah. Luke says that Apollos “greatly helped those who through grace had become believers” (Acts 18:27b). However, some of the Christians of Corinth were not spiritually mature and were drawn to Apollos because

of his polished speech. They were full of enthusiasm for him as a person, considering him to be a leader of the Christian community, rivaling Paul, Peter and even Jesus for this position. In his first Letter to the Corinthians, Paul emphatically states that the Christians have only one leader: Jesus Christ. Everyone else is simply his minister and a servant of the community (cf. 1 Co. 1:12; 3:4-5; 3:22). In clarifying this, the Apostle defines Apollos as “the one who watered” what Paul had planted. In short, each of them needed the other.

Tyrannus, an Ephesian Christian, allowed Paul to hold meetings in his lecture room for two years after the Apostle was banned from the local synagogue. Paul sent Timothy and Erastus ahead of him to Macedonia, while other unnamed co-workers remained with him in Ephesus. Luke writes: “He sent two of his helpers, Timothy and Erastus, to Macedonia, while he himself stayed for some time longer in Asia (Acts 19:22). It is very probable that Titus was one of these co-workers. The fact that Paul left Ephesus accompanied by Sopater, Aristarchus, Secundus, Gaius, Timothy, Tychicus and Trophimus makes it quite clear that the Apostle did not live and work alone!

Paul stayed in Ephesus for about three years. While he was there he wrote a letter to the Galatians and several letters to the Corinthians, although only two of the latter have come down to us. He also wrote to the Philippians and to Philemon.

While in Corinth, he wrote to the Romans (Acts 20:3), stating his intention to visit Rome, which was considered the center of the world, and from there to go on to Spain, the edge of the then-known world. He said, however, that there were serious obstacles to fulfilling this goal:

“When I have completed this [visit to Jerusalem] and have delivered to them [the alms] that were collected, I will set out by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you, I will come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by our Lord Jesus Christ and by the love of the Spirit, to join me in earnest prayer to God on my behalf, that I may be rescued from the unbelievers in Judea, and that my ministry to Jerusalem may be acceptable to the saints, so that by God’s will I may come to you with joy and be refreshed in your company” (Rm. 15.28-32).

Paul’s letter to the Philippians, probably written while he was in prison in Ephesus, reveals his profound bond with the Christians of Philippi. With these friends, he candidly shares his exhilarating experience of Christ whom, in this letter alone, he ardently refers to as “my Lord” (cf. Phil. 3:7). The letter mentions Epaphroditus, whom the Christians of Philippi sent to help Paul during his imprisonment. Paul calls him a brother, co-worker, fellow soldier and minister of the Gospel. He also mentions Euodia and Syntyche who, along with Clement, were in charge of the Christian community of Philippi.

Paul names both men and women as his co-workers in the difficult Corinthian community. He speaks about the families of Chloe and Stephanus, calling them “the first fruits of Achaia,” which most likely means they were among the first families to embrace the Christian faith and that their homes served as “domestic churches.” Paul urges the Corinthians to esteem

and collaborate with these ministers of the Lord because they “have devoted themselves to the service of God’s holy people” (1 Co. 16.15). He also mentions Fortunatus and Achaicus. Other homes in Corinth that served as domestic churches for the Christians were that of Aquila and Priscilla and of Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cenchreae (Rm. 16:1), a district of Corinth. Paul says that it is Phoebe who will take his letter to Rome and he asks the Christians there to give her a warm welcome, just as she herself wholeheartedly welcomed Paul and the believers of Corinth.

Paul’s short message to Philemon is precious because it reveals the Apostle’s ability to speak to the hearts of Gentile Christians. Philemon was a wealthy friend of Paul and Onesimus was his runaway slave. Paul met Onesimus while in prison and converted him. The slave then became his highly-esteemed co-worker (cf. Col. 4:9).



Philemon

Paul sent Onesimus back to Philemon, telling the latter that he himself was ready to pay for the wrong the slave did to his master by running away. In his note, the Apostle begs his friend to welcome the fugitive back as a brother, as he would welcome Paul himself. He does not speak about freedom as a civil right to be defended with the sword or the force of authority, but reminds Philemon that Christians are all brothers and sisters in Christ and therefore no one is slave to another.

In his message, Paul also mentions Apphia, who is probably Philemon’s wife, and Archippus, another co-worker. It is likely that Philemon’s home also served as a domestic church.

FOR DEEPER REFLECTION

Read 1 Co. 1:11-16. Note the different people Paul refers to in these 5 verses and why he mentions them.

Read the Letter to Philemon, which can be found right before the Letter to the Hebrews. Note the individuals mentioned in it: who they are, what they do, and how Paul describes them. The Apostle calls the wealthy Philemon his friend (v. 17) and on the basis of this friendship he urges him to live the Christian faith radically because only in this way can social structures be changed so as to give rise to fraternity.