

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

My 2-year Philemon problem

2020: When I got to this session I was confused. Philemon is so small, what else could I say at this level. Was I going to say the same thing here as I did in session 4 of book 1 of the Introduction to Paul's Middle Letters? I tried to write a different session, but I couldn't. It was just a repeat. So I paused for a couple of weeks and tried to restructure the entire middle section, but could not. As I look back now, this is one of the reasons the whole series paused.

2021/2022: As I picked up this middle section of Paul's letters, I was still confused about what to do with this session. Should I, switch it to session 5? I was still a bit confused thinking it would be a repeat and a bit boring, until yesterday!

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

In this session we return to the little letter Philemon, which is practically attached to the letter to the Colossians. You could almost continue his network section at the end of Colossians right on into this letter.

In the next session, session 5, we will focus on doing theology in culture as Paul was doing in Philemon. But we will do that theology from the added dimension and implications of a network context as well as insights on building an apostolic network in the context of progressing the gospel through establishing churches that lead to spontaneous expansion, gaining a growing understanding from Paul's letters of how he did it.

In this session, we will reflect on our recent work a few sessions ago in book 1, session four, the introduction to *Paul's Middle Letters*, to discover any additional insights that allows us to see more clearly.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

This illustrates two things:

1. The importance of integrated thinking, illustrating what we mean when we say Paul was a coherent thinker.
2. How our thinking grows as we reflect again and again on Paul's letters: going back and forth between them, back and forth in a canonical subsection (Paul's Middle Letters), and back and forth in the whole canonical section (the Pauline corpus).

This is very exciting, because we are actually learning to do theology in culture based of Christ's grand strategy, philosophy, and first principles. I am actually teaching you through experiencing Paul's experience. And with the booklets, all of our partner networks globally can learn the same thing!

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Challenge to you in this session:

The session is almost the same as session 4, book one of Paul's Middle Letters, "Philemon."

The introduction is different; a couple of questions are adjusted; the challenge in the "Study the Scriptures" section is expanded a bit; a few comments are added; and "Thinking Through the Issues" has the added focus of new insights you gained from your work in book 1, session 4.

Theology in culture experiment: What did you see more clearly this time around?

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Philemon—a small little letter sent along with the letter to the Colossians

Why was it included in the NT?

What value does it have for us today?

In this little letter, Paul is “doing theology in culture.”

He is taking the “household texts” and practicing the “first principles” in his cultural context around the issues of slavery.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Think about some of our key issues globally today.

Inner cities in North America—the New Jim Crow, intergenerational poverty, Black Lives Matter

Global cities—shadow cities, India caste system, ethnicity

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Think about Paul's "household texts"

Husbands, wives

Parents, children

Masters, slaves

Why does he include masters, slaves?

Does he accept slavery as okay?

Why does he not condemn slavery?

Why does he not challenge it politically?

What about the "New Jim Crow" in the USA? Black Lives Matter? Black reparations today?

What about the caste system in India? the Dalits? the Illiterates?

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Issue: Significance of Philemon

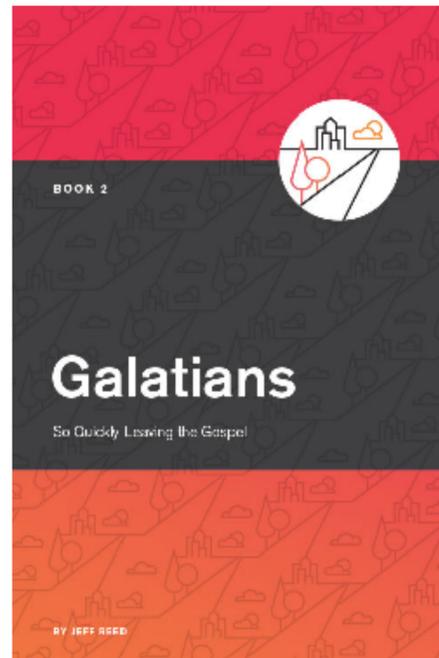
Questions:

1. This letter was sent along with the major letter to the Colossians. Why was it included in the New Testament?
2. How is Philemon integrated with Colossians? How does it help us understand the significance of the Colossians letter?
3. In what sense is this letter an illustration of doing theology in culture? How is it an illustration of applying the “first principles” — specifically the household texts of Ephesians and Colossians — to a specific cultural situation?
4. After reflecting on your work a few sessions ago on Philemon, what do you see this time around that allows you to understand more clearly than before?

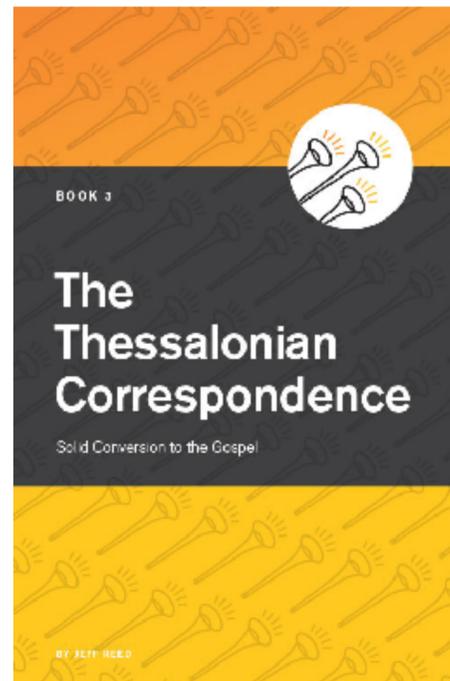
Paul's Early Letters



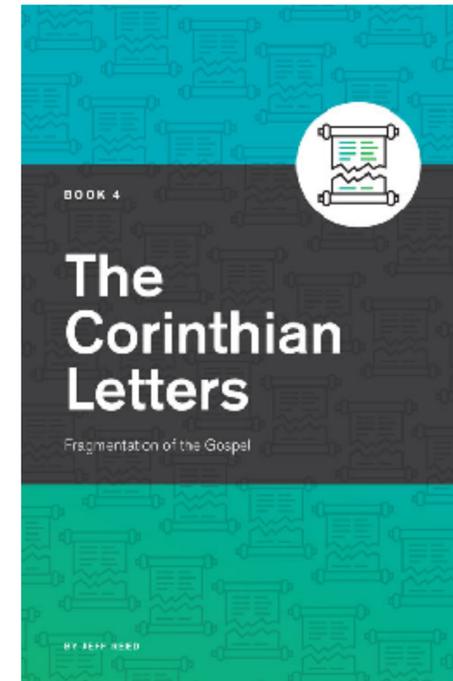
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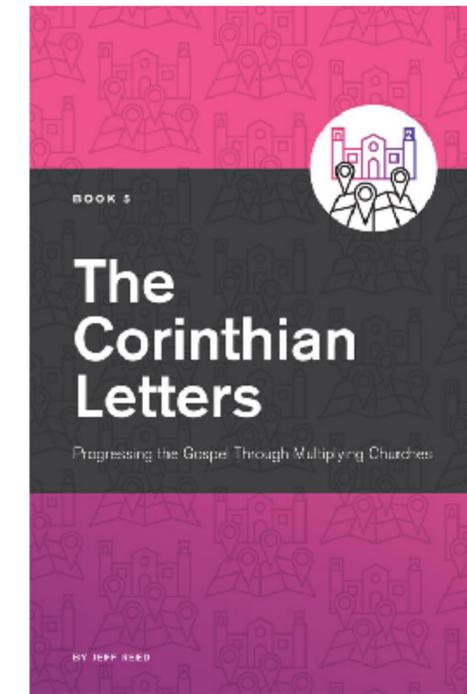
Autumn 49



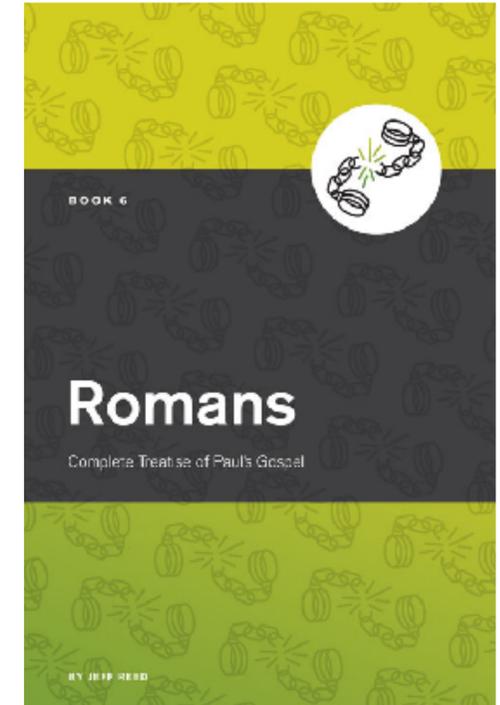
Winter/Sum. 51



Sept. 53



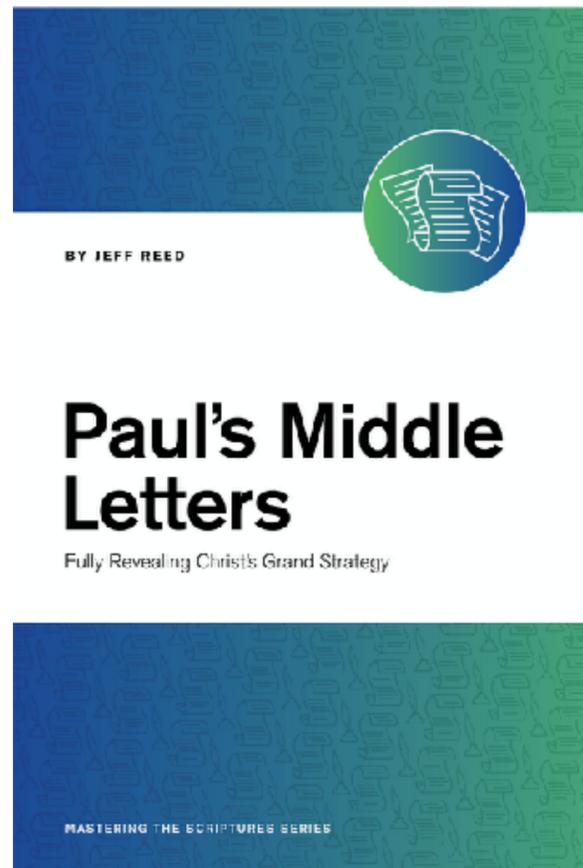
June 56



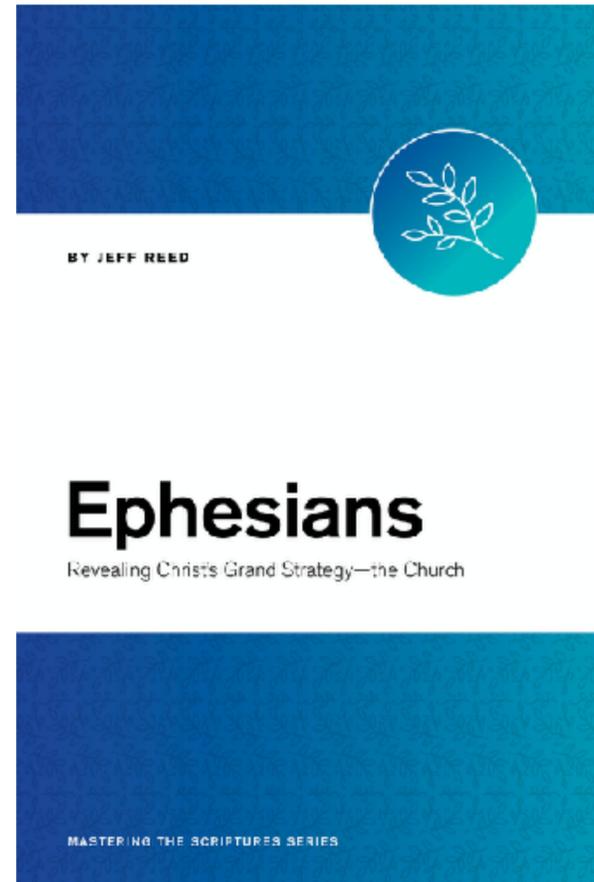
Nov. 56



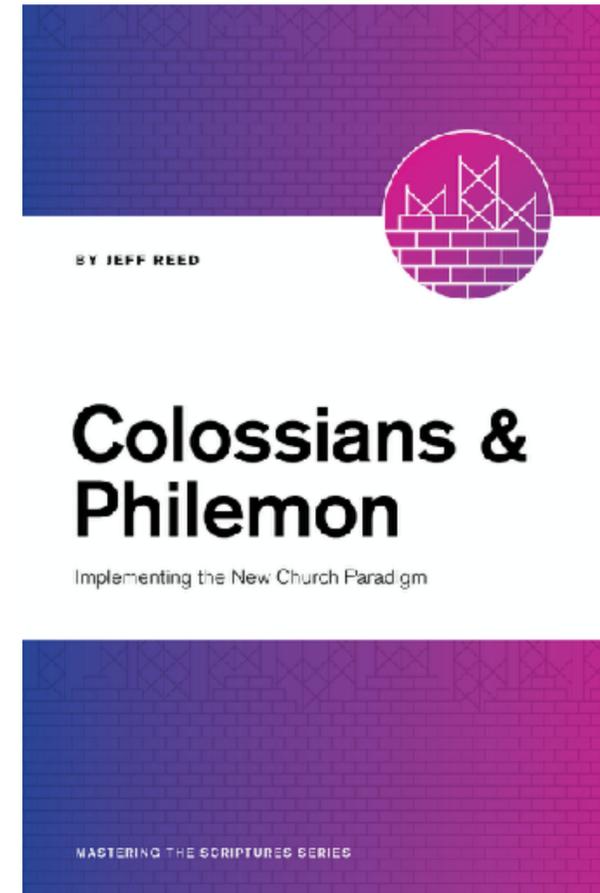
Paul's Middle Letters



Feb. 60 to March 62



Autumn 60



Autumn 61



Spring 62



Paul's Middle Letters

New Testament Theology

It is critical that we treat these letters as a collection within Paul's larger collection.

These letters build on each other as they unfold. And while they each stand alone as a letter to a particular set of churches, they all deal with similar issues that together present a very clear picture of establishing churches in Christ's grand strategy, including a full picture of the centrality of church networks in that strategy.

New Perspective on Paul

Old Perspective on Paul

Paul's letters contain miscellaneous, often unrelated topics, that would be useful for future believers, especially in dealing with sin, salvation, and living the Christian life. These topics are a significant part of today's ever growing systematic theologies.

New Perspective on Paul

Paul's letters form a coherent, interlocking shape, foundational for churches in any generation to fully understand Christ's grand strategy of the Church being central to His unfolding kingdom and to living in full alignment of that grand strategy.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

As you will see

Ephesians—is mostly Christ's grand strategy and has a little on Paul's network.

Colossians–Philemon—is similar on Christ's grand strategy and has a lot on Paul's network.

Philippians—is mostly on participating in Christ's grand strategy through Paul's network.

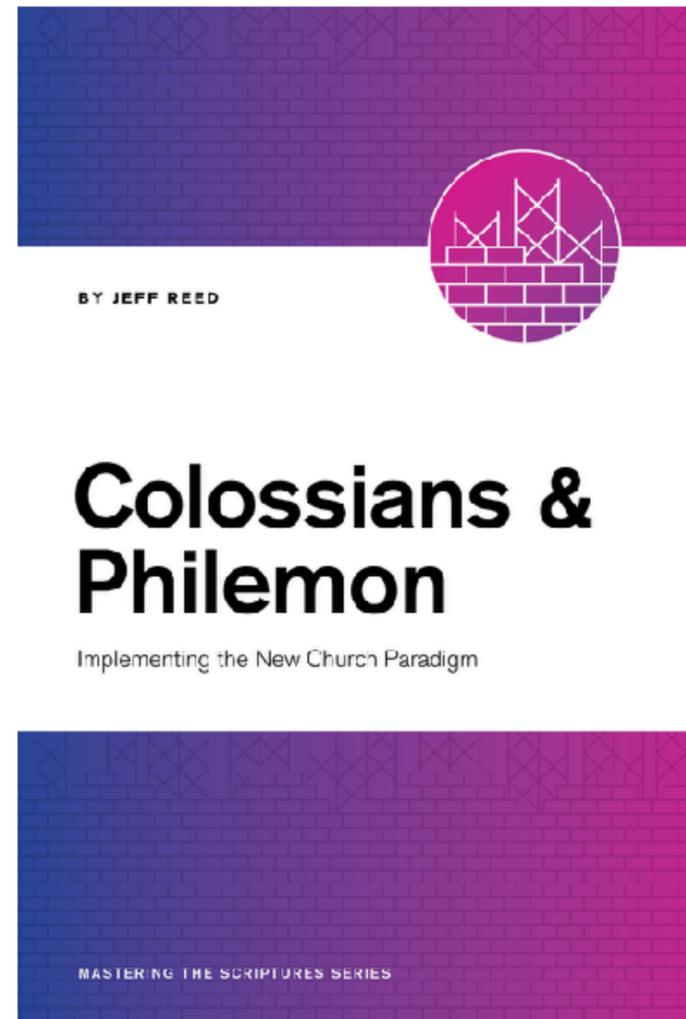
All 4 letters use similar terminology and sort of work as one growing theology of Christ's vision and mission for His churches.



Paul's Middle Letters

Fully Revealing Christ's Grand Strategy

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians



Session 1: Situating the Lycus Valley Church in Christ's Grand Strategy

Session 2: First Principles of the World

Session 3: First Principles of Christ

Session 4: Philemon—Doing Theology in the Network

Session 5: The Importance of Network—the Lycus Valley Network

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

What is Paul worried about with the Lycus Valley churches?

⁴ I am saying this so that no one may deceive you with plausible arguments.

Plausible arguments — persuasive speech

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Remember what Paul is doing and not doing. Remember how Paul is doing theology.

Paul is a coherent thinker (New Perspective of Paul).

1. He is not trying to say what is true and not true in philosophies of the world and human traditions passed on down.
2. He is generalizing at a principle level that complete philosophies and human traditions, including religious systems (including Jewish and Christian traditions), are ultimately built on a set of first principles.
3. By using the phrase “plausible arguments,” he is assuming there is truth in all of these systems, but when the world and man build them, ultimately they wind up opposing Christ's first principles.
4. Paul was reasoning from the philosophy, first principles, and grand strategy Christ had revealed to him. It allowed him to assess every other cultural, philosophical, and political philosophy with a simple process of pushing them up to their first principles.

Paul's Middle Letters—Colossians

Paul wants to see them established in the faith—rooted and built up in the faith. He is concerned about the “firmness of their faith,” 2:5, and them being “established in the faith, just as you were taught,” 2:7.

There are two philosophies, two traditions, two sets of “first principles” in view here: those of the world and those of Christ. The body of the letter lays out these two sets:

“the first principles” (core tradition, philosophy, teaching) of the world 2:16–23

There were two general philosophies of the world these churches were facing—Judaism and Greek philosophy and religions. Paul reviews their general principles.

“the first principles of Christ” (authoritative tradition, philosophy, teaching) 3:1–4:6

Here Paul lays out the core first principles (authoritative tradition, philosophy, and teaching) of Christ

Paul's Middle Letters — Colossians

Paul lists several philosophies of the world based on the first principles of the world

- Greek—Did the Greeks have a philosophy? First Principles? Plato—the Republic; Aristotle—First Principles
- Jewish—Did the Jewish people of Paul's day have a philosophy? Human traditions and sects based on the principles of the world?
- Barbarian—uncivilized, non-Greek, speaking another language (closest to ethnic tribes today)
- Scythian—Iranian nomads with no kingdom (that would change)
- Slavery—both a political and cultural philosophy

Philosophies of the world—based on a core set of first principles can be

- cultural
- political
- religious

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Now we are going to look at Paul actually taking one of the first principles of Christ, embedded in the household text (Colossians 3:18-4:1), and using it in addressing a very important issue in the Lycus Valley churches.

This is critical for 2 reasons

1. To model for us how to use these principles, thinking through a potentially volatile situation, just using one principle out of the household texts.
2. To actually deal with a specific situation but expanding the implications of the principle in a way that will lay a firmer foundation across the 3 Lycus Valley churches, producing a precedent for correcting cultural stratification (class) brought in from their old lives before Christ, which is key to the churches functioning as one family in a broken, stratified, cast system-oriented culture.

Is this likely to exist globally, in different forms, all over the globe today?

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

¹ Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus, and Timothy our brother,
To Philemon our dear friend and co-worker, ² to Apphia our sister, to Archippus our fellow
soldier, and to the church in your house:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ When I remember you in my prayers, I always thank my God ⁵ because I hear of your love for
all the saints and your faith toward the Lord Jesus. ⁶ I pray that the sharing of your faith may
become effective when you perceive all the good that we may do for Christ. ⁷ I have indeed
received much joy and encouragement from your love, because the hearts of the saints have
been refreshed through you, my brother.

Philemon 1–7 NRSV

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Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

⁸ For this reason, though I am bold enough in Christ to command you to do your duty, ⁹ yet I would rather appeal to you on the basis of love—and I, Paul, do this as an old man, and now also as a prisoner of Christ Jesus. ¹⁰ I am appealing to you for my child, Onesimus, whose father I have become during my imprisonment. ¹¹ Formerly he was useless to you, but now he is indeed useful both to you and to me. ¹² I am sending him, that is, my own heart, back to you. ¹³ I wanted to keep him with me, so that he might be of service to me in your place during my imprisonment for the gospel; ¹⁴ but I preferred to do nothing without your consent, in order that your good deed might be voluntary and not something forced. ¹⁵ Perhaps this is the reason he was separated from you for a while, so that you might have him back forever, ¹⁶ no longer as a slave but more than a slave, a beloved brother—especially to me but how much more to you, both in the flesh and in the Lord.

Philemon 8–16 NRSV

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Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

¹⁷ 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. ¹⁹ I, Paul, am writing this with my own hand: I will repay it. I say nothing about your owing me even your own self.

²⁰ Yes, brother, let me have this benefit from you in the Lord! Refresh my heart in Christ.

²¹ Confident of your obedience, I am writing to you, knowing that you will do even more than I say.

²² One thing more—prepare a guest room for me, for I am hoping through your prayers to be restored to you.

²³ Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, ²⁴ and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers.

²⁵ The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.

Philemon 17–25 NRSV

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's revisit the core set of principles of Christ we saw in the household texts of Colossians last session:

Principles of the New Community—the church is a family of families

- In these household texts, we are given principles in how families are to be ordered in Christ's new communities—the churches.
- Husbands are to lead, but they must clearly love their wives and children in a way that creates a loving, caring family within Christ's new community.
- Children are to obey both parents.
- In households and in a society in which slavery exists, slaves are to serve as if they are serving the Lord. And masters (again, in the context referring to men leading their households) are to be fair and just so, again, they don't embitter anyone in their household—again, against the backdrop of Christ's new community.

Now we will address the problem of slavery in cultures where it exists—which has been the case all through history.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

What was the situation of Paul sending this letter to Philemon?

We got a clue from the Colossians letter

⁷ Tychicus will tell you all the news about me; he is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. ⁸ I have sent him to you 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. They will tell you about everything here.

Colossians 4:7–9

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

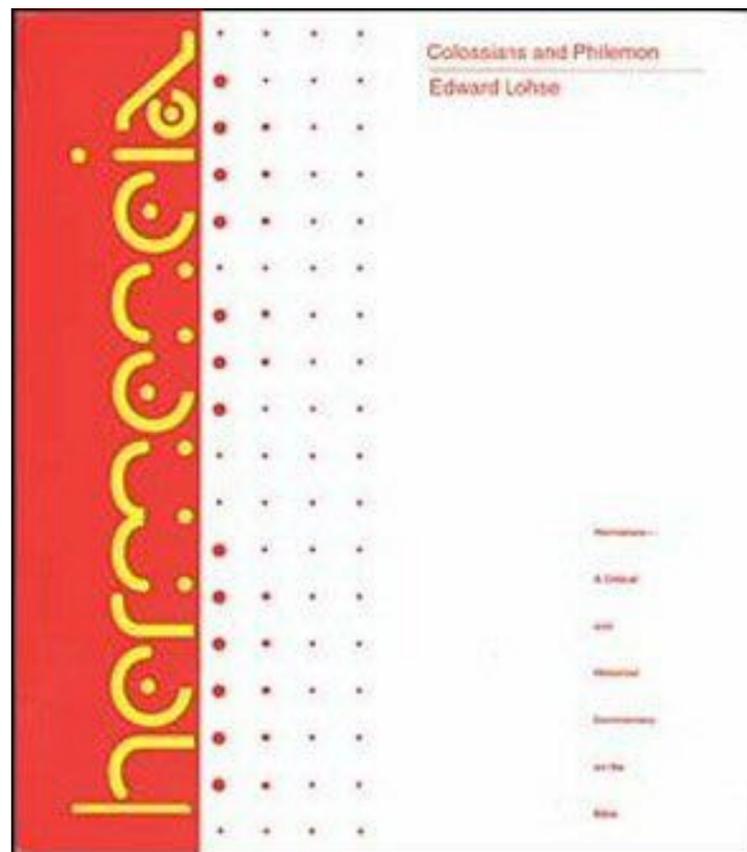
What was the context of Paul sending this letter to Philemon?

Evidently Onesimus, who was Philemon's slave, fled from Philemon and ended up with Paul. Paul invested in him, and he became very dear to Paul. Paul now refers to him as useful to Philemon and asks him to take him back—not only as a slave, but also as a brother.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's look carefully at Paul's little letter.

Hermeneia quotes

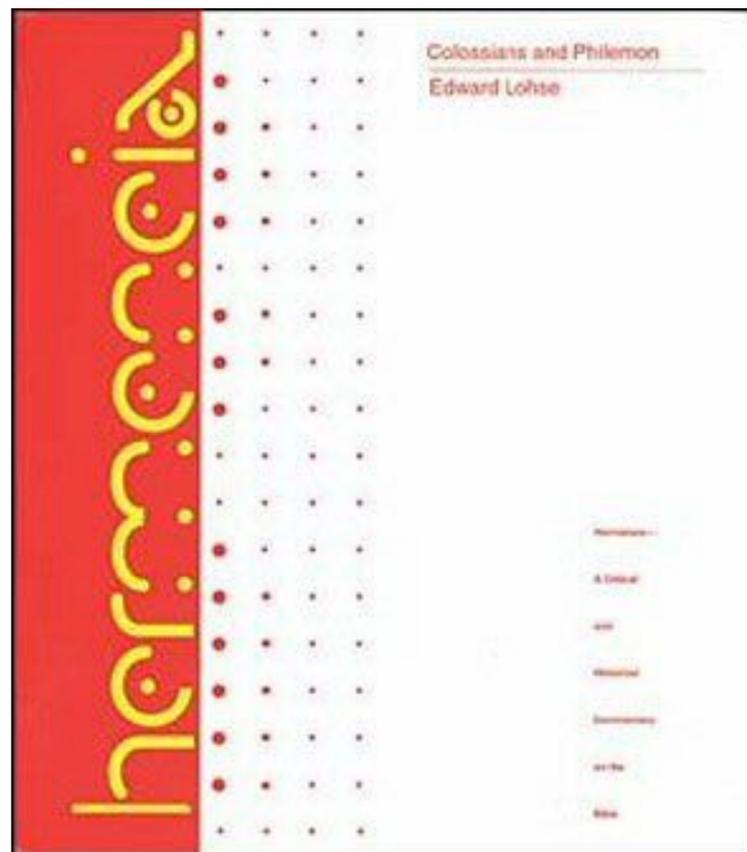


Paul addressed this letter to Philemon, whom he calls his beloved fellow worker. Additional addressees are the sister Apphia, the fellow soldier Archippus, and the community assembled in Philemon's house. Since Col. expressly mentions that Onesimus (Col 4:9*) and Archippus (Col 4:17*) belong to the community at Colossae, it can also be assumed that Philemon, from whose house the slave Onesimus fled, lived in Colossae. Philemon was obviously well-to-do and had become a Christian through encountering Paul (v 19*) —possibly in Ephesus. He had placed his house at the disposal of the community for its meetings (v 2*) and had given concrete expression to his love for the saints (vv. 5*, 7*). Perhaps Apphia, whose name is mentioned alongside his, was his wife. It is unclear how Archippus was related to him.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's look carefully at Paul's little letter.

Hermeneia quotes

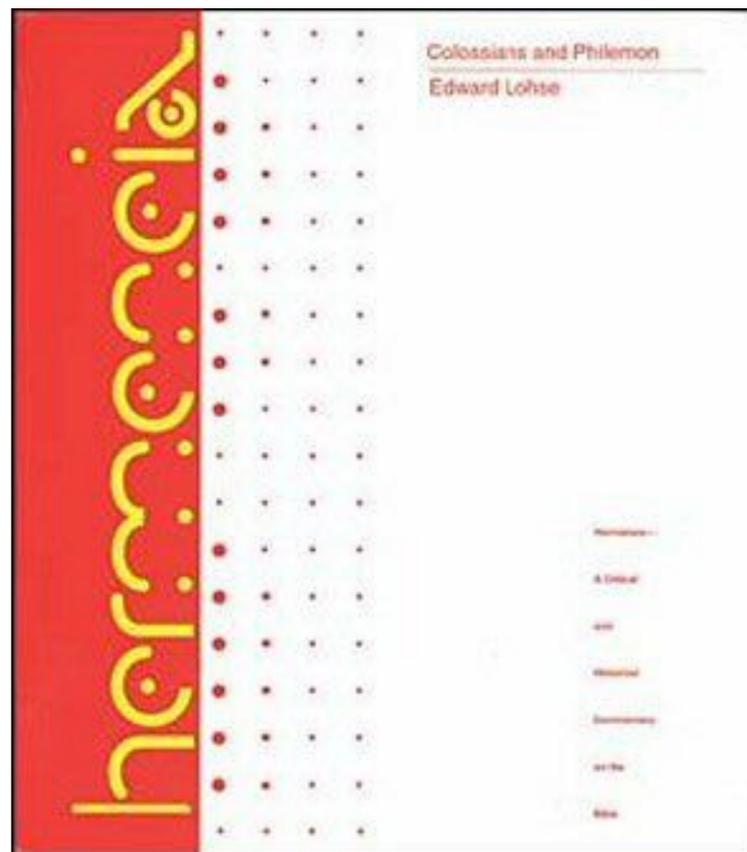


Paul writes to Philemon to intercede for his slave Onesimus. It is not said what caused Onesimus to flee. A slave who emancipated himself could take asylum in a sanctuary. He could also disappear in a large city and there eke out an existence by begging and thievery. If he were captured, he had to be taken back to his master. Then the least he could expect was to be enslaved again. A far worse fate, however, might be in store for him. The master could punish him at his discretion. He could put him up for sale. If he wanted to, he could even kill him. Onesimus had taken refuge with the imprisoned Apostle. He had certainly not been apprehended by the police and been thrown into prison. If that were the case, it would have been the duty of the authorities to take him back to his master.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's look carefully at Paul's little letter.

Hermeneia quotes



Perhaps he had heard the Apostle's name mentioned in the house of his Christian master and had now hastened to him for help in his perplexity. Paul took an interest in him, converted him to the Christian faith (v 10*), developed great affection for him, and benefited from his dedicated service (v 13*). Nevertheless, he could not retain him and had no authority to do so. Therefore, he sent him back to Philemon with an accompanying letter. Through this letter Paul used his influence on Philemon so that he would receive Onesimus as a beloved brother (v 16*), indeed that he welcome him as he would the Apostle himself (v 17*). Paul refrained from giving Philemon any command and from urging a distinct demand such as: give Onesimus his freedom. Rather he puts the matter in Philemon's hands. The decision is his. Paul's sole injunction to him is the commandment of love as the norm for his conduct.

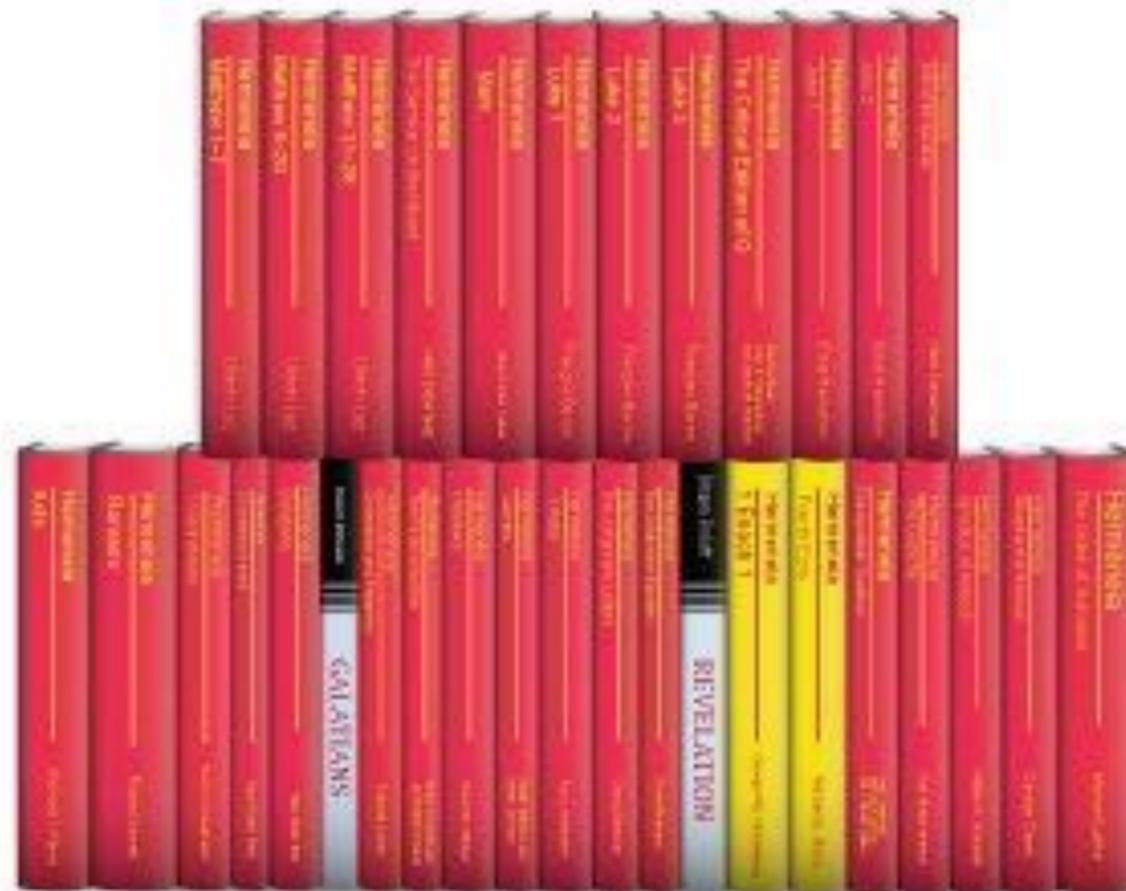
Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Hermeneia series—top shelf excursus

Definitive Early Church research

38 volumes

Beginning point of almost all the contemporary scholars in search of the Early Church in the Greco-Roman context—the body of work which sits at the base of most of my writings on the early churches.



Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's put Paul's little letter in its context of Ephesians and Colossians.

Paul is putting into practice the "first principles" he taught in the household texts in both Ephesians and Colossians:

Ephesians 5:22–6:9

Colossians 3:18–4:1

Husbands

Wives

Parents

Children

Masters

Slaves (Paul focuses on one principle) Aaron and Kathy

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's look carefully at both of them?

⁵ Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ; ⁶ not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart. ⁷ Render service with enthusiasm, as to the Lord and not to men and women, ⁸ knowing that whatever good we do, we will receive the same again from the Lord, whether we are slaves or free.

⁹ And, masters, do the same to them. Stop threatening them, for you know that both of you have the same Master in heaven, and with him there is no partiality

Ephesians 6:5–9 NRSV

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's look carefully at both of them?

²² Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. ²³ Whatever your task, put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for your masters, ²⁴ since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ. ²⁵ For the wrongdoer will be paid back for whatever wrong has been done, and there is no partiality. 4:1 Masters, treat your slaves justly and fairly, for you know that you also have a Master in heaven.

Colossians 3:22–4:1 NRSV

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

What does this show us about “doing theology in culture” based on “the first principles”?

We can see several things here.

1. Paul’s household texts on masters and slaves is similar but not the same, showing he is truly working with principles.
2. His focus is on the slaves, not the masters, because evidently he is working with a principle of authority from many angles—cultural reality, attitude toward authority, perspective on unjust treatment by authority, and God’s perspective in light of eternity.
3. His extensive focus on slaves again in this letter sets the stage for the other letter he is sending with this one—Colossians.
4. He just gives a one line review of husbands and wives and parents and children, which shows he is focused on the Philemon situation.
5. In his letter to Philemon, he is giving us a clear illustration of “doing theology in culture” by using the principles to address the real live situation between Onesimus and Philemon.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

What does this show us about Paul's view of authority? about his view of authority and government? about his view of culture?

1. Paul begins with slaves first (also wives first and children first), which means the principle of authority is in his mind throughout the household texts.
2. The principles of the two household texts shape his whole letter to Philemon.
3. He follows the principles himself, sending back Onesimus and instructing Philemon on the principles, not exercising authority over him. The letter is an appeal not an order.
4. Philemon was evidently a benefactor, both owning slaves and "refreshing the saints," with a greater capacity to do good. So Paul is asking him to use his authority the right way.
5. Specifically, Paul appeals to Philemon about Onesimus' development while with Paul, his new usefulness to Philemon, and challenges him to use his authority with love as he would toward a brother.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

What does this show us about Paul's heart, even though he is very tough with his churches?

1. Even though Paul can be tough on the churches, at times full of frank speech, here we see Paul's heart in becoming a father to Onesimus.
2. He was clearly committed to Onesimus' development since he states he is now useful to Philemon.
3. You can see Paul's love for Onesimus in the midst of the need to follow the principles and send him back.
4. Paul calls him his child; he refers to sending him as sending his heart to Philemon and as a beloved brother to him.
5. Paul was willing to use his own resources to position Onesimus correctly with Philemon.
6. Again, Philemon was clearly a benefactor to Paul, with a church in his house and able to provide a guest room for Paul, and Paul refers to him as a partner. So Paul must have had some prior interaction with Philemon.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Why did Paul decide to handle the situation this way?

Why did Paul not condemn slavery?

Why did he not deal with the issue of injustice?

Why did he not try to right this wrong “politically” by calling on the churches to fight this in culture? to fight this in the Roman Empire?

Why did he not take his cause to Rome?

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Paul's whole worldview was shaped by Christ's teaching—in this case, by the household texts he laid out in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1.

Paul's purpose was to take the gospel to the Gentiles and then to reveal Christ's grand strategy of the Church as His strategy for unfolding the kingdom, which He inaugurated.

The church, when properly established, was to engage in good occupations and meet pressing needs, not to challenge the authorities of Rome and reform it.

The church is to model how to live and mature regardless of the cultural situation. The fundamental principle (already taught in Romans) is that as far as possible, obey your government.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

What does this show us about how Paul is building his "complex apostolic network?"

It is very interesting how Paul positions his apostolic team in the Colossians letter and now in Philemon.

He sent greetings from them—a way of him commending them to the churches, thus strengthening his team in the Lycus Valley churches.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Issue: Significance of Philemon

Questions:

1. This letter was sent along with the major letter to the Colossians. Why was it included in the New Testament?
2. How is Philemon integrated with Colossians? How does it help us understand the significance of the Colossians letter?
3. In what sense is this letter an illustration of doing theology in culture? How is it an illustration of applying the “first principles” — specifically the household texts of Ephesians and Colossians — to a specific cultural situation?
4. Even though Paul is strong and authoritative to the churches in his letters, what does this teach us about Paul’s heart and his care for his churches and individuals in the churches?

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Why did Paul decide to handle the situation this way?

Why did Paul not condemn slavery?

Why did he not deal with the issue of injustice?

Why did he not try to right this wrong “politically” by calling on the churches to fight this in culture? to fight this in the Roman Empire?

Why did he not take his cause to Rome?

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Our whole worldview is to be shaped by Christ's teaching—in this case by the household texts he laid out in Ephesians 5:22–6:9 and Colossians 3:18–4:1.

Our purpose is to progress the gospel and to fully participate in Christ's grand strategy of the Church as His strategy for unfolding the kingdom, which He inaugurated.

Our churches, when properly established, are to engage in good occupations and meet pressing needs, not to challenge everything wrong in our culture and government and to bring reform through political means.

Our churches are to model how to live and mature regardless of the cultural situation. The fundamental principle, already taught in Romans, is that as far as possible, obey your government.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Let's go back to where we started in thinking about some of our key issues globally today.

Inner cities in North America—the New Jim Crow, intergenerational poverty, Black Lives Matter

Global cities—shadow cities, India caste system, ethnicity

Our churches cannot transform culture through political means, but we are to transform ourselves into true communities that live as one in Christ, as brothers and sisters in one big family of families.

Then, as we mature ourselves, we are to engage in good occupations and meet pressing needs.

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

This is what we are doing with our two initiatives:

North American Antioch Initiatives

Michael and I had 2-hour “scaling discussions” recently on Little Rock and Atlanta. Why?

Global City/Shadow City Initiatives

I am anxious to rekindle our Mumbai initiative this year. Why?

Our local strategy will be part of our focus this year.

Re:BUILD and our Central Iowa Antioch Initiative

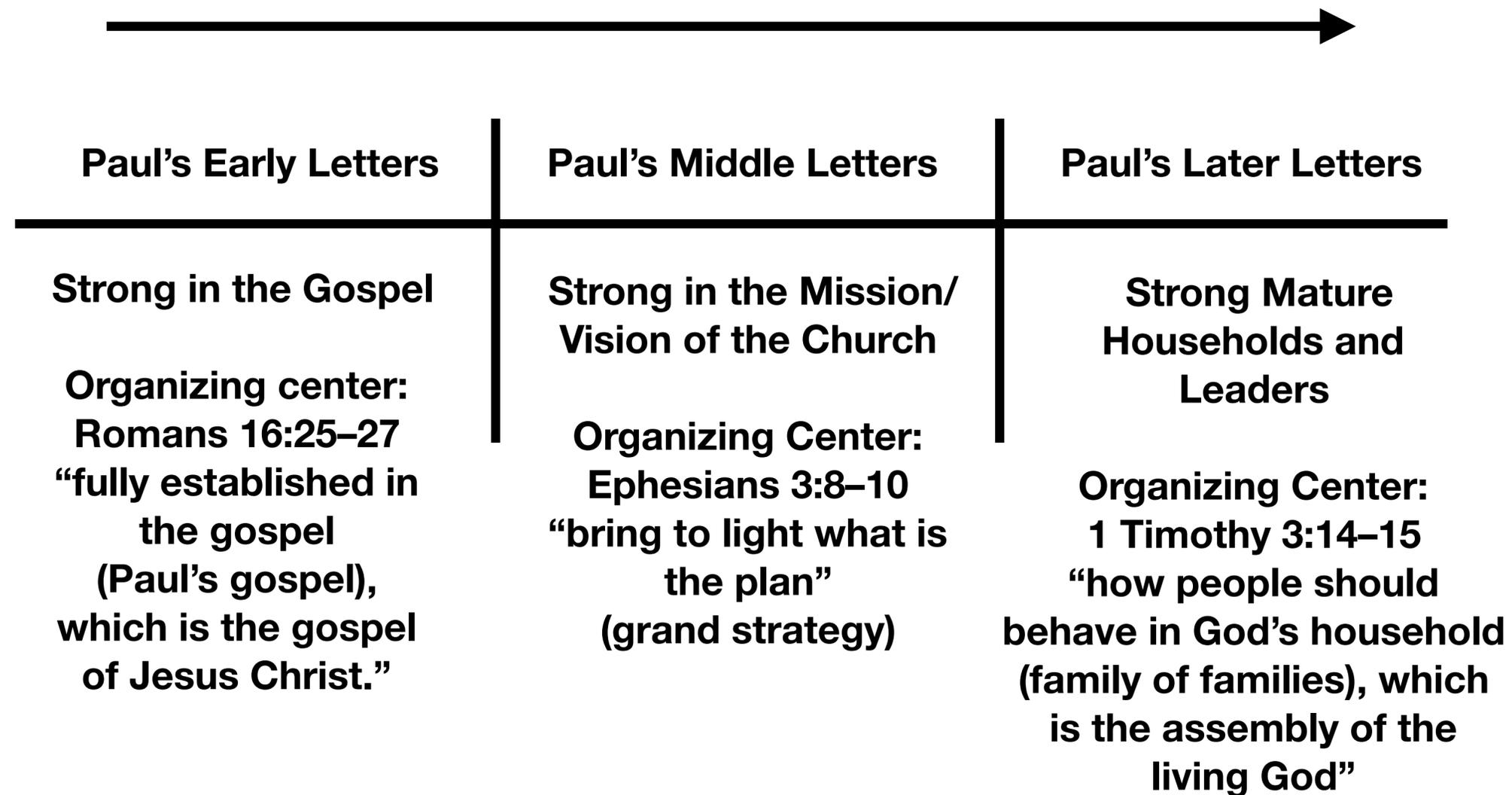
Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

If you understand the basic philosophy of Christ (his grand strategy and core principles) and the basic philosophy of the world (its grand strategies and core principles),

- then you can think theologically in culture, on your feet, and give a reasonable answer for your faith when the conversation presents itself.
- you will not be led astray by plausible arguments by those presenting a cultural narrative (cultural, political, or religious), but be able to think things through with the mind of Christ.
- you will have a full and growing understanding of the philosophy of Christ (grand strategy and core principles) as it unfolds across all of his letters, and it will grow even more when they are situated fully as the foundation of the New Testament.
- as you think across Paul's early, middle and later letters, you will develop the mind of Christ and be able to think biblically, critically, avoid plausible arguments of the world, and do theology in culture everyday on your feet.

Paul's Early, Middle, and Later Letters

The Process of Building Strong Churches



Paul's Early Letters	Paul's Middle Letters	Paul's Later Letters
Strong in the Gospel Organizing center: Romans 16:25–27 “fully established in the gospel (Paul's gospel), which is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”	Strong in the Mission/ Vision of the Church Organizing Center: Ephesians 3:8–10 “bring to light what is the plan” (grand strategy)	Strong Mature Households and Leaders Organizing Center: 1 Timothy 3:14–15 “how people should behave in God's household (family of families), which is the assembly of the living God”

Philemon: Doing Theology in the Network

Issue: Significance of Philemon for us today

Questions:

1. How is Philemon integrated with Colossians? How does it help us understand the significance of the Colossians letter?
2. In what sense is this letter an illustration of doing theology in culture? How is it an illustration of applying the “first principles” — specifically the household texts of Ephesians and Colossians — to a specific cultural situation?
3. Even though Paul is strong and authoritative to the churches in his letters, what does this teach us about our care and love for our churches and individuals in the churches?
4. What further implications came to light for you as you revised your past work, and what is the significance of these new insights to your life and ministry?