

ST. PAUL NOT AFRAID TO LOSE FACE

Nobody likes to lose face. So when you see a VIP risking his reputation that way, you can't help but ask what's up. The apostle Paul was such a set-'em-up and knock-'em-down type of guy that you'd never suspect him of admitting to losing face.

But on at least one occasion he risked such an embarrassment.

It was obviously an exception to the rule. More characteristic was the way he handled the churches in Galatia. When they started to warp his teaching, he wrote a no-nonsense letter. He chewed them up one side and down the other. No punches were pulled, and no face was lost.

Again, when his congregations at Corinth fell on troubled times, Paul straightened them out in no uncertain terms.

His correspondence to the Corinthians reveals that they were a quarrel-some bunch of folks, that they were tolerating some sexual hanky-panky in the parish, that some members were bending their elbows too much at the church suppers, and that basic Christian teachings were being twisted beyond recognition.

In that instance he laid on every ounce of apostolic authority he could muster. He jumped down their throats for letting things get out of hand, and he saved face with a brilliant defense of his own credentials. As a rule, Paul was not about to back down.

The exception to the rule was the way he went to bat for a slave. You can read the evidence for yourself in less than five minutes. It's the letter to Philemon, tacked on at the end of the collection of Pauline writings in the Christian scriptures.

Regrettably, the details are not entirely clear.

According to one scenario, a disgruntled household slave named Onesimus had escaped. To make matters worse, he had absconded with the silverware. Somehow or other he had managed to find his way to Paul.

The upshot of it all was that Onesimus had a change of heart and was willing to return to his owner. So Paul sent him back to his owner with a letter of recommendation suggesting that Philemon (who had been one of Paul's earlier converts) should treat the slave kindly.

Another reconstruction of the events suggests that Onesimus was not actually a runaway, but that his owner had loaned him to Paul, to assist the apostle while he was in prison.

In which case his goal was to hint that Philemon should free his slave in order that he could return to assist the apostle in his work as soon as he could get out of jail.

In either case, the apostle admitted that he could order Philemon to do what he wanted, but under the circumstances he preferred another approach. Instead he bent over backwards to ingratiate himself with Philemon.

He laid in on thick, praising the owner for his past cooperation and good work. He appealed to his sense of kindness and fair play. He promised to reimburse him for any monetary loss. He made plans to visit him in the near future and stay as his houseguest.

In sum, Paul did everything but stand on his head and spit nickels in order to get Philemon to welcome Onesimus back as a brother.

Why was the apostle willing to risk his self-respect like that? Perhaps because he was at the time stuck in some imperial prison, jailed as a result of his outspoken preaching.

Perhaps because he truly hoped Philemon would return Onesimus to him to help carry on this work. Perhaps because it was otherwise unheard of to insist on the civil rights of slaves.

In any event, the one-page letter to Philemon is something of a surprise in the Christian scriptures. It's one of the few places where a full-fledged apostle pulled his punches.

In this case, St. Paul risked his self-respect. And that's noteworthy simply because nobody likes to lose face.