

The Good Church At Philippi

Paul begins his letter to the church at Philippi with these words: "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you, Always in every prayer of mine for you all making request with joy" (Phil. 1:3-4). He proceeds to fill the letter with praises to the church at Philippi, commending their faithfulness to the gospel of Christ. As many will find out while studying this letter, the only negative thing in the letter was a mild rebuke to two women who were involved in some contention (Phil. 4:2-3). One of the very impressive statements Paul sends their way is found in Philippians 1:27: "Only let your conversation be as it becometh the gospel of Christ: that whether I come and see you, or else be absent, I may hear of your affairs, that ye stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27). The words surrounding this wonderful verse are filled with Paul's confidence that the church at Philippi would be found doing exactly as he had said. There can be no doubt that Paul's words of praise to the church at Philippi would have a profound effect. They would serve to build them up even more. This is something important

that we need to consider—churches need to be built up, not torn down.

(I found the following paragraph in a series of article by Frank Jamerson in GOT, 1982) “Several years ago, I was very discouraged with the unfaithfulness and apparent indifference of so many brethren. Brother James Cope was in town and made basically this observation to me: ‘Frank, we do not build churches, homes, businesses or anything else by majoring on the weak points.’ How true it is! If a husband begins emphasizing the weaknesses of his wife or the wife majors on the shortcomings of her husband, the marriage is in trouble. We need to learn this lesson in the church. Some preachers can only see the unfaithful members and the problems in people’s lives. They completely overlook all the good, God-fearing people who are striving to be what God would have them to be. We are not to overlook the shortcomings in ourselves, or others, but we can ignore the good characteristics and discourage rather than encourage efforts to improve. Even a child who is constantly criticized will finally quit trying to do right! We need to ‘major’ on the strong points and try to strengthen the weak areas.” (Amen and amen, tfs).

To hear some preachers, and even some members, the church where they are is filled with the most unrighteous people who ever drew a breath. Some are treated with constant suspicion and criticism. While brethren are the target of such scrutiny, the same ones would not dream of doing so to those in the world! I

don't understand it! In this they err and bring about much heartache and discouragement. Why not give someone a little praise once in a while. It just might build someone up.

The Philippian “Mind”

The word “mind” is found seven times in the Philippian letter (1:27; 2:2, 3, 5; 3:16, 19; 4:2, 7). All are connected with Paul's theme of praise for the good church at Philippi.

Some of these passages are concerned with the unity of the church at Philippi in the faith. Unity was something which Jesus prayed for (Jn. 17:20-21) and which Paul encouraged other churches to have (1 Cor. 1:10; Eph. 4:1-6). Those at Philippi were “...stand [ing]fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel” (Phil. 1:27). Paul had hope that this would continue (Phil. 2:2). He encourages them to “...walk by the same rule, let us mind the same thing” (Phil. 3:16). Whatever difference existed between Euodias and Syntyche could be cured by being of “...the same mind in the Lord” (Phil. 4:2).

A few years ago I listened in a Bible class as a brother stated that unity among brethren was impossible. I tried to persuade him otherwise by pointing out that Jesus thought it possible and that Paul said it existed at Philippi. He would not accept my explanation. It finally became evident that he erroneously thought that the unity described in 1 Corinthians 1:10 was robotic. He believed this meant that everyone said the SAME WORDS! That was not the meaning of the verse. For example, one might say, "baptism for the remission of sin" while another says, "immersion for the forgiveness of sins." Though different words have been used, THERE WAS NO CHANGE IN SUBSTANCE! Both would be, as Paul wrote to Philippi, of one mind.

Another interesting occasion of the word "mind" is found in Philippians 2:5: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus." Was Paul asking the Philippians to do something impossible? There are those among brethren who would think so for they would affirm, "no one can be like Jesus." Of course, not one of us will be divine like Jesus. However, Philippians 2:5 is not considering that. The passages that follow (vv. 6-8) show that what is under consideration is the humility of Christ as a servant. "Just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matt. 20:28, NKJV). The mind that Jesus had in being such a servant is the mind that is to be in the Christian. When Jesus washed the disciples feet, He was using the act as a lesson on servitude (Jn. 13:12-16). He encouraged them with these words:

“If ye know these things, happy are ye if ye do them” (Jn. 13:17).

Paul’s words to the Christians at Philippi were words of praise for their unity in the faith and for their diligence in service. Such is still possible for Christians today.

The Organization Of The Church At Philippi

In the very beginning of the Philippian letter we read of the church consisting of “...the saints...with the bishops and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). As many say, this good church was scripturally organized. It had “the things that are wanting...” (Titus 1:6).

It is sad that there are few churches today that have “...the things that are wanting...” Some, for one reason or another, simply do not want bishops and deacons. Others may desire them, but have no one qualified to appoint. Certainly the latter case, though far from ideal, is better than the former.

“Bishop” is a word that has been greatly abused and today denotes an ecclesiastical position in a hierarchy. The word comes from a Greek word (episkopos) that actually means “overseer.” This is defined by Thayer as, “a man charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly.” In our day a bishop is more commonly referred to as an elder (Acts 20:17, 28). Much discussion swirls around the work of bishops (elders). Some will say that they have the oversight of the work of the church. While that is true, it is unfortunately too limited of a view. 1 Peter 5:2 tells us that elders have the oversight of “...the flock of God that is among you...” Elders have the oversight of the church, not just its work. Thus they have the duty to feed, protect, guide and shepherd the church. It is an important work. It is not that men should be appointed because they are successful in the world; it is that men should be proven to be leadership material according to the qualifications found in the New Testament (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:1-3).

Deacons, like elders, have qualifications (1 Tim. 3:8-13). The work of deacons has long been a matter of some discussion. We do not have it spelled out for us like the work of elders. “Deacon” comes from diakonos and means simply “servant.” It is understood that all Christians should be servants (1 Cor. 7:22). However, due to the fact that there are certain qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:8-13, there are those who are special servants known as “deacons.” Goodspeed translates Philippians 1:1 as “superintendents and assistants.”

Perhaps that is the idea; deacons assist the elders in ministrations for the flock. This would include material AND spiritual needs of a church.

We have earlier in this series noted Paul's praise for the church at Philippi. Especially is this brought forth when we consider that it was a full functioning church of Christ.

Good Memories Are The Best Memories

I have good memories of the churches I have preached for in the past. We still hear from people in those places. I have been fortunate enough to have been invited back to preach by all of them except one. On such visits I find that in each case a feeling of nostalgia always comes over me the minute I step inside the building. It increases as the brethren begin to filter in. Pleasantries and warm greetings are exchanged and some good-natured teasing always takes place. Finally, I find myself standing before them all and I always feel overwhelmed and choked up. My memories are good

ones because of the love between my brethren and me. Those memories are enriched because we all love God and seek to do His will. I am thankful to God for the good brethren in my good memories.

Perhaps this is similar to Paul's sentiments as he wrote to the good church at Philippi, "I thank my God upon every remembrance of you" (Phil. 1:3). One commentator says that Paul is saying that "...my remembrance of you in its entire tenor and compass is mingled with thankfulness toward God" (Meyer). The point is that Paul's entire memory of the Philippian saints caused him to thank God.

I am sure that we all understand that a measure of thankfulness is directed toward the brethren at Philippi, but the thanks here is toward God. Now, why is that the case? It is so because it was God in them (and in Paul) that made even the smallest amount of association possible. Consider that the first convert at Philippi, Lydia, was one "whose heart the Lord opened, that she attended unto the things which were spoken of Paul" (Phil. 16:14). Add to this the statement about the Philippians' "fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil 1:5) and "that in the beginning of the gospel, when I departed from Macedonia, no church communicated with me as concerning giving and receiving, but ye only. For even in Thessalonica ye sent once and again unto my necessity" (Phil. 4:15-16). Hence, the Lord was working in the church at Philippi from the beginning (which would be true of any church) and is the real recipient of any thanksgiving.

Having such good memories allows one to be very optimistic and encouraged to persevere in the good work of preaching the gospel. It also does those who are the recipients of such words to feel the same way. These few words and the feelings they convey go a long way toward building up a preacher and a church.

Joy

One thing that fairly leaps out from the pages of the Philippian letter is the subject of joy. Paul has it for the saints at Philippi and he exhorts them to cultivate it as well. The words “joy” and “rejoice” are found a total of 19 times in this letter. Hence, it is much in Paul’s mind and heart and in his expectations for the good church at Philippi.

Joy is in his prayer for them (Phil. 1:4). He describes them as being “my joy” (Phil. 4:1). Paul sincerely hopes that they can be full of joy as he is full of joy (Phil. 4:4).

I wonder if the idea of joy is not overlooked among brethren today. Yes, there are those who may entertain joy while thinking of their salvation. Yet, is there truly

joy over having fellowship with the saints? In churches where sharp disagreements and contentions abound, joy is far away. Yet, Philippi was a good church that exhibited no evidence of the discord as is found in other churches of the New Testament. Thus, news of or thoughts of the Philippian church were occasions of rejoicing for Paul. It seems that if we were to focus some attention on good things about brethren then we would have some occasion to rejoice like Paul. I am unconvinced that things are ALL bad in any church. Surely there is something that will bring joy unless the heart is so jaded that it cannot rejoice over anything. I find myself concerned when brethren seemingly have no joy in their lives. Joy is a fruit of the spirit (Gal. 5:22). As such it should be found in a Christian. There is much occasion for joy over salvation, for good brethren, for successes in the opportunities that come every day. There is much to rejoice about “in the Lord” and Christians ought to do so.

I close with these words from brother L. A. Mott: “Paul was not a Pollyanna who never saw the evil in the world. Nor was he an unrealistic and foolish optimistic who saw everything through rose colored glasses. He saw the evil. He felt the pain. He shed tears. But he also knew what he had in Christ Jesus. And even as he walked ‘the way of the cross’ he never forgot the rich treasure he had in Christ; and this great wealth could not be touched, affected or disturbed by any of the changing and often adverse circumstances of life.

‘Rejoice in the Lord’”

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by Terry Sanders
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