

Build Well through Fellowship

Philippians 1:1-11

Today is Pentecost Sunday! We celebrate the coming of the Holy Spirit. We celebrate the birth of the church. This morning we're continuing our Sunday worship series *Build Well*, but we are shifting our focus from Nehemiah to the Apostle Paul. We fulfill God's purposes for the church as we grow in fellowship, to care and share Christ and his love. We do so, in part, through our One Great Hour of Sharing mission gifts.

We also express our love and fellowship in Christ as we seek, reach, invite and welcome persons each Sunday. It's all about making disciples and building new relationships in Christ.

When Jesus gave his Great Commission he told his closest followers, and perhaps several hundred others who gathered on that mountainside in Galilee, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the son and of the Holy Spirit..." (Matt. 28:19; see 1 Cor. 15:6). The call to make Christ-like disciples and to build Christ-centered relationships remains our privilege.

It was this same privilege that expressed the heartbeat of Paul's message to the Philippians. What do we know about the believers in Philippi? For one thing, Paul helped to plant this Gentile church in Macedonia—modern day Greece—on his second missionary journey in the mid-first century. For another, when you read Paul's brief letter, you find that he speaks of *joy* and *rejoicing* some 16 times.

It seems that Paul is encouraged by their congregational life. He senses their excitement and enthusiasm. He affirms their growing ministry and mission. He commends their Christ-centered faith and vibrant work. They obeyed Jesus' Great Commission. They followed their Master in baptism and became part of his body of believers. They entered into the life and fellowship of the church.

Here was a church that shared more than a periodic covered-dish dinner or picnic potluck. They went well beyond the occasional invite-a-friend-to-church emphasis. They were actively building a growing a faith community. It wasn't a sharing *of* something. It was a sharing *in* something and *in* Someone. It could accurately be said that this church was becoming the fellowship of the King.

In the language of Paul's day in Philippi, this church enjoyed real *koinonia*. That is, they enjoyed purposeful fellowship and partnership. The root of the word *koinonia* is the word *koine* which simply means "common." If a group of Christians are to enjoy real *koinonia*, they must share a common faith in Christ and a common commitment to serve him. Based on what Paul writes, the Philippians did. "I thank my God every time I remember you...because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:3,5). It seems that the Church at Philippi was an exciting, spiritually-alive fellowship. People gathered as partners in a great and important endeavor to serve and to share the Good News.

Fast forward 2000 years. Partnership in serving and sharing the Good News is at the heart of dynamic church fellowship today. Our *koinonia* in Christ will draw us together for worship and then send us forth to witness.

We enjoy a deepening commitment to one another and to the Lord. As believers and *belongers*, as maturing members of Christ's church, we have the opportunity to build bridges and breakdown walls.

How did Paul help to foster Christian fellowship in Philippi? How can we take comparable steps, led by the Holy Spirit, to strengthen our church's *koinonia* in Christ?

Follow along on your back-page bulletin outline, if you wish. The first step that you and I need to take is to boost prayer for one another.

1. Boost prayer

From the outset of his letter's greeting, Paul conveys how he prays for the believers in Philippi: "In all my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Philippians 1:4-5). Tell me, do your prayers follow this pattern? Do you pray daily for your brothers and sisters in Christ?

We laugh at the prayer that goes, "God bless me and my wife, my son John and his wife, us four and no more." But unless we regularly uphold those on our weekly prayer lists, unless we gather for prayer each week in a small group at church or in someone's home, we will tend to pray with just our closest concerns and loved ones in mind.

Perhaps we need to more fully follow Paul's practice of "always praying with joy." Perhaps we need to boost our personal prayer ministries to more broadly and boldly encompass the praise and prayer concerns of those with whom we share partnership in Christ. One matter is certain: If we expand our prayer ministry and regularly pray for others, we will discover a far deeper sense of fellowship.

Now you may wonder, "How am I supposed to pray for persons I don't really know, or don't really care to know?" Genuine prayer brings about change. When you pray and seek God's plan and purpose, often the first change you'll notice is within yourself and your outlook. So be honest with the Lord. You might begin by praying, "You know, Lord, I'm having a hard time with so-and-so, who (*fill in the blank*: seems difficult to be around, seems difficult to talk with, seems so different). Lord, help me to love and work with so-and-so."

When you honestly pray in this way, God listens. But He also begins to work in your heart and mind, in so-and-so's heart and mind, as well as in the circumstances at hand. You may begin to discover that you are growing closer, even becoming friends with so-and-so. You may find that any perceived differences are really inconsequential. You may find that you share a strong, common bond in Christ. When you regularly praise Jesus, pray for your church family, then pray for yourself, you may be surprised by the outcome.

2. Unleash confidence

Beyond boosting prayer Paul points out a second important step in build fellowship. We need to unleash our confidence. Paul writes that he not only prays for each of the believers in Philippi, but he is also confident of them. Paul knew that Christ was at work in their midst, and that God would establish His purposes in their lives. He writes of his joyful prayers and grateful partnership with these believers, then says, "being confident of this that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Philippians 1:6).

In the original text the word which is translated *being confident* also implies such things as certainty, trust and reliance. Even though Paul was most likely writing from Rome during his detention in 61 A.D., he expresses his certainty that the Philippians will stand strong in the face of persecution, while unmasking the hypocrisy of legalists and libertines.

Paul shares his heartfelt gratitude for their financial support, and he commends both Timothy and Epaphroditus to them. Throughout this letter, Paul affirms his confident trust that God's Spirit is at work in their lives and within their fellowship.

Do you have this same kind of confidence and expectation? Are you confident that God is truly at work in our church, in the lives of the sisters and brothers within our fellowship? Do you go to church with expectation and anticipation that God's Spirit moves within you and among you? Are you confident, as Paul was, that the God who saves us, keeps us and calls us to

do the works of ministry which he has planned long ago, has great things for you to do today?

Paul would have us grow in our confidence. He would point us to Christ in whom we may be confident. Paul would have us remember that we can do all things through Christ which strengthens us.

The fellowship of the church is the one place where, in the words of William Carey, we may confidently “attempt great things for God and expect great things from God.” To build-up our church’s fellowship: First, let us boost our prayer. Second, let us unleash our confidence. And, third, let us ignite our love.

3. Ignite love

Paul nurtured real *koinonia* among the Philippians by expressing his love and longing for them. “It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart; for whether I am in chains or defending and confirming the gospel, all of you share in God’s grace with me. God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Jesus Christ” (Phil. 1:7-8). Without question, the greatest evidence of Christ-centered fellowship is love among believers, and a longing for one another’s company.

Paul loved the Philippian Christians. He prayed for them. He was confident of them. He longed for them and longed that a Spirit-led, Christ-centered love be ignited among them.

This leads us to a fourth step which Paul called for, one which we need to take to build-up our fellowship: We must launch agreement. We find this truth at the end of Paul’s letter to Philippi where the apostle focuses on a brewing problem in that church.

4. Launch agreement

Paul writes, “I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord” (Philippians 4:2). The word *agree* in the original text refers to thinking in a way that expresses concern and support. It’s affirming basic shared commitments. It’s realizing there is far more that unites believers than should ever divide believers. When we “agree in the Lord” we protect the unity of the church. What’s at the heart of this protection plan? Practically speaking, when we agree in the Lord: First, we promise to act in love toward the other members. Second, we refuse to gossip. Third, we promise to follow our church leaders. Agreeing to these principles enables us to seek a Christ-centered common ground, which is what Paul calls Euodia and Syntyche to seek when he writes, “I urge Euodia and Syntyche to iron out their differences... God doesn’t want his children holding grudges” (Philippians 4:2, *Msg*).

Grudges, of course, are a mark of spiritual immaturity. By contrast, when we are growing in Christ, our walk matches our talk. Our lives will match our language. Paul takes this directive of launching agreements in the Lord to a deeper level. In effect, he calls us to dump our old attitudes for a new attitude. Not the old pout, spout and shout. Not the old me, myself and I. Not the old “it’s my way or I’ll take the highway.” No, it’s not the old attitude. Paul calls us to a radically new attitude: “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:5). What was Jesus’ attitude in relation to others? The attitude of Christ is one of humility and service. It is the attitude of one who did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but who willingly emptied himself to die on Calvary’s cross for our sin,

Tell me, how is it with you today? Does that attitude from your old way of life, when you were living apart from the Lord, still seem to control you from time to time? How does that old attitude express itself? It may be in pride and perfectionism. It may be in a critical and complaining attitude. It may be in stirring dissension and division. It very often comes when we engage that sharp double-edged cutting instrument called the tongue.

Any of us, at any time, can feed those old attitudes. On the other hand, we can follow

Paul's advice. By God's grace, with God's help, we can agree with each other in the Lord. We can seek the servant-hearted attitude of Christ. But we'll never achieve this on our own. Agreement in the Lord will not occur unless you and I are growing in our daily walk with Jesus. We must seek agreement in the Lord.

At the end of the day, each of us will either help or hinder harmony. We will either be driven by our pride or drawn to prayer. To enjoy the uncommon fellowship Paul called his beloved Philippians to enjoy, we must boost prayer, unleash confidence, ignite love, and launch agreement. Then, fifth, we need to discover joy.

5. Discover joy

As we agree together in the Lord, you and I will also grow in our Christ-centered commitment to serve others. Not surprisingly, as we worship and work together in the Lord, we will discover new joy and build *koinonia*. Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Philippians 4:4). Why does Paul counsel the Philippians—and each of us—to rejoice? For one thing, Paul knows that if a Christian is rejoicing in God's blessings, they aren't likely to be nitpicking with their fellow believers.

To rejoice is related to the word *joy*, which is one of the fruits of God's Spirit. Have you been rejoicing in the Lord lately? Unlike happiness which is dependent on external happenings, joy is more internal and eternal. Joy comes from the heart and mind and spirit. It is a gift from the Giver of every good and perfect gift, welling-up within those in whom God's Spirit dwells. Christians who are filled with joy won't be in disharmony or disunity with other Christians.

Paul also counsels the Philippians and each of us, "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near" (Philippians 4:5). The word *gentleness* also can mean "moderation" or "being reasonable." It seems that Paul is saying: Friends, lighten-up. Be kind. Go easy. Catch your breath. Don't be petty and pinched. Don't be driven by pride or by perfectionism. Instead, be gracious, gentle, moderate and reasonable.

Of course, this is a demanding directive. But Paul gives us the key to real *koinonia*. Three times in the first five verses of chapter 4, Paul talks about being "in the Lord," then he reminds us that "the Lord is near." The key to *koinonia* is being in the Lord Jesus Christ, yielded first and fully unto him. When we boost our prayer, unleash our confidence, ignite our love and longing, launch agreement in the Lord and rejoice in the Lord, we grow united in Christ. It's then that we build well through fellowship!

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1. Boost prayer.

"In all my prayers for all of you I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now" (Phil. 1:4-5).

2. Unleash confidence.

"...being confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

3. Ignite love.

"It is right for me to feel this way about all of you, since I have you in my heart ... God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:7-8)

4. Launch agreement.

"I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord" (Phil. 4:2 NIV). "Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2:5).

5. Discover joy.

"Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!" (Phil. 4:4 NIV). "Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near" (Phil. 4:5 NIV).