

Medicine of the Person
Drübeck, 11 – 14 August 2004

Bible Study
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Our identity in Christ

Our reading of the Scriptures: Philippians 2:1-11

1. If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,
2. then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.
3. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.
4. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.
5. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:
 6. Who, being in very nature God,
did not consider equality with God
something to be grasped,
 7. but made himself nothing,
taking the very nature of a servant,
being made in human likeness.
 8. And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself
and became obedient to death
- even death on a cross!
 9. Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
 10. that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
 11. and every tongue confess that
Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.

Introduction

When you are at a party, or a meeting, and you are asked to introduce yourself, what do you say? Perhaps you tell your name, your profession, that you are married, and how many children you have. In Africa people say 'tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are'. However, when I visit someone's home for the first time, I

tend to look at their bookcase. I assume I can identify a person when I know what kind of books they read.

Is that what you are? Is your identity determined by your social life, your possessions or your worldly status? And what if you lose your job, if you get divorced, if your children emigrate to Africa? Who are we essentially?

My personal view

When I think of who I really am, and of what the foundation of my existence is, I think of my roots in Jesus Christ. My relationship to him was established not because of something I did, but because of the sacrifice Jesus Christ made for me on the cross. This relationship began independently of me, I made no contribution to it initially. This foundation was laid once and will be there forever. My life is rooted in my Lord. God created me, he bought me with his blood, and he has recreated me after I received him into my life. I am his child.

For myself, I love the description of a Christian found in the first question of the Heidelberg Catechism written in 1563. It is one of the creeds we have in our Dutch Protestant Church:

What is your only comfort, in life and in death?

That I belong – body and soul, in life and in death – not to myself but to my faithful Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Our identity in Christ according to Paul

Paul states that we as Christians are united with Christ, and so he makes an appeal to us to imitate Christ's attitude. He links our being children of God with the practice of daily life. If we are united with Jesus Christ, what are the consequences? Paul is quite clear about this. He refers to Jesus Christ and his sacrifice, when he instructs the Philippians, and us, concerning the attitude we should have.

Why should we imitate Christ's attitude? The motivation to imitate Christ's attitude springs from the fact that we belong to Christ and so should share what we ourselves have received. We need to act out of responsibility and love.

The first four verses of Philippians chapter 2 bring us the strongest possible appeal for Christian unity, the kind of appeal that many Christians seem prone not to take very seriously today. In verse 1 Paul gives four reasons for such unity; in verse 2 four ways of describing it; in verse 3 two negative attitudes to avoid and two positive ones to follow; and in verse 4 a 'not only' linked to a 'but also'.

Paul appeals to the Philippians for unity as the fruit of personal humility. He gives four reasons for this unity (verse 1).

The first reason for unity is the encouragement that results from knowing Christ. The second reason is the comfort found in Christ. If we know of the blessing of His love, we should show that to others without reserve or discrimination (1 John 4:7-12). The next phrase ('if any fellowship with the Spirit') can mean our fellowship with the Spirit, or, the fellowship that the Spirit gives us with each other. Both meanings provide a strong ground for living in unity. Then if in Christ we find tenderness and compassion, all our relationships with others should share the same characteristics.

In verse 2 Paul gives four ways to describe unity. There are no great differences between the four phrases here: being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit, and being one in purpose.

Twice there is reference to the mind or to thinking, and this is an emphasis found elsewhere in the letter. The apostle knew well that thought and attitudes are the bases of speech and action and so direct the whole course of a person's life. In another passage Paul advises to the Philippians 'whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, - if anything is excellent or praiseworthy - think about such things' (Phil 4:8). This perhaps needs underlining in an age when there is great emphasis on feelings and experience. In Rom 12:2 Paul speaks of transformation of life taking place 'by the renewing of your mind'.

In the verses 3 and 4 Paul gives three ways we should avoid and two we should follow. Selfish ambition, vain conceit and self-centredness are inevitably enemies of fellowship and hindrances to unity. There are realistic ways of overcoming them. One way is by the practice of humility, considering others better than ourselves, which means seeing the strengths and gifts of others and our own weaknesses, failures and limitations. It is also very practical to make a habit of thinking and speaking of the interests of others rather than boring people by constantly dwelling on our own interests. In the letter to the Romans, Paul describes it like this: 'Each of us should please our neighbour for his good, to build him up' (Rom 15:2).

As Christians we often justify or rationalise our divisions. The kind of unity for which Paul was concerned - and the way to pursue it - will only come when Christians are humble and bold enough to lay hold on the unity already given in Christ and to take it more seriously than their own self-importance.

We have a great example in Christ

Christ's attitude is described in a Christian hymn about the true humanity and deity of Christ (verses 6-11). The version of the English Bible I have emphasizes this by using another typesetting. It is an old Christian hymn, used by Paul to encourage his readers to live in humility, and so to have true fellowship and unity, by reminding them of the example of Christ.

One definition of attitude is the manner of expressing your beliefs in relationships. As doctors we are in an outstanding position to build relationships. What do we show in our relationships? Is it the attitude of Christ? One English translation of verse 5 describes it like this: 'let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus.'

How was Christ's attitude? From verses 6 to 8, we learn that Jesus gave up his divine nature (vs 6), his social status (vs 7), and his legal status (vs 8).

Jesus gave up his divine nature, although His natural status was being equal with God. However, he did not hang on to this status as something valuable to be grasped. Instead, He made himself nothing, he downgraded himself, because grasping - or clutching - , is the complete opposite of Jesus' attitude to life. He came down from heaven and became human.

Powerful words are used here. The participle 'being' in 'being in very nature God' comes from a stronger verb in the Greek than the normal verb 'to be'. This participle is followed by a noun that is well translated as 'in very nature'. Jesus was truly God before he became a human person. Then, without ceasing to be God, he was willing to lay aside the glory of being equal with God. This 'being in very nature God' was not something to be grasped. There is perhaps an intended contrast with Adam in Genesis 3 as the temptation to which he fell was wrongly to seize what he thought would make him 'like God'.

Jesus gave up his social status. He was King of kings and Lord of lords. And yet, he took the very nature of a servant, or, literally, a slave. This is the opposite of climbing the social ladder. 'For even the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve' Mark tells us (10:45).

Jesus made himself nothing. Literally it says 'he emptied himself'. Not of his deity, but of his glory. It also can be translated 'he made himself of no reputation'.

Then, when it says that he was made in human likeness and found in appearance as a man, that does not merely mean similarity without the reality of our human nature. He was indeed truly human, as Paul says in Rom 8:3 and Gal 4:4, but the expression leaves room for the thought that the human likeness is not the whole story.

Jesus gave up his legal status. Jesus stooped lower still; not only was He made in human likeness, but He became obedient to death. He lived a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying. He gave up his right to live and 'became obedient to death, yes, even to death on a cross'. That death, moreover, was death on a cross, a death of unimaginable pain and utter shame, a curse in the eyes of the Jews, because of what the law said in Deuteronomy 21:23 ('Someone who hangs on a cross is a

cursed one'). Death on a cross was a death meant for the very lowest social class: the class of slaves.

What crucifixion meant to Romans is expressed in Cicero's words. Cicero was a famous Roman orator and philosopher who lived in the 1st century before Christ. He expressed the Roman disgust for crucifixion as follows: 'Far be the very name of the cross, not only from the body, but even from the thought, the eyes, the ears of Roman citizens'.

The consequence of humiliation

As a consequence of his humiliation and self-sacrifice, Jesus was given by the Father the name that is above every name. That does not mean a specific name or title as such, though 'Jesus is Lord' is the right and proper Christian profession. It means that God exalted him to the highest place of honour. It is most significant – especially when people affirm that the Christ of the New Testament is less than God – to realise that in vs 10-11 the words that are used in Isaiah 45:23 of God, here are used of Jesus, to express his honour and rule of authority over all creation. (Isaiah 45:23 says: 'Before me every knee will bow; by me every tongue will swear').

Finally, however, we need to notice that this is to the glory of God the Father, that is the glory to which Christ has been raised is in no way independent of the Father (1 Cor 15:58).

All these tremendous statements, we should remind ourselves, have in their context the most practical purpose of persuading the Philippians – and us – to put aside disunity, discord and personal ambition.

Jesus himself taught us that real nobility and greatness have their foundation in acts of service. Mark 10:43-44 mentions this: 'Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all'. Jesus showed us that humility leads to exaltation. In Luke 14:11 Jesus said: 'For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted'.

Jesus himself showed us that this principle works: He lowered himself into the lowest place and God gave him the highest place. From this place, he exercises authority over the whole church and even over the whole universe (vs 10).

We have been called to make this attitude our own and to follow the example of Jesus Christ. This means to lower our selves in rank, to humble ourselves under the mighty hand of God, to serve others and to look to the interests of others.

When we do this as children of God, He promises to exalt us.

As sources for this Bible study mainly two books were used:

- New Bible Commentary; 21st Century Edition. Carson DA, France RT, Motyer JA, Wenham GJ (eds). Leicester: Intervarsity Press, 1994.
- The Dutch translation of: Gumbel N. A life worth living. Eastbourne: Kingsway Publications, 1994.