

Philippians - The key to a unified church ::

Luke Tattersall shows how he approached Paul's letter to the Philippians.

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BACK IN THE DAYS when I was a school teacher I learned there were a number of ways to influence a classes behaviour.

There was the *big stick* approach. This is where you're tough with the class. You tell them what you expect and point out those who are misbehaving.

But often the best approach was the example method. Rather than telling them what they were doing wrong you praise those who are showing the right behaviour. When you show them the behaviour you want they will normally begin to exhibit that behaviour.

Reading through Paul's letters in the New Testament you can see that he uses both these techniques. There are times he uses the big stick method – Galatians and 1 'Corinthians are good examples of this approach.

When Paul wrote to the Philippians, though, he opted for the example approach. He gives them four examples to follow. Paul knows there's a problem in the church in Philippi. And the way Paul sets about fixing the problem is to set before them models of the kind of behaviour they should be showing.

The Main Theme

If you read Philippians and try and figure out why Paul wrote the letter its probably not too obvious at first.

Many scholars speculate that Paul was writing to encourage the Philippians in the face of persecution. There's obviously some support for this idea. The reference to "*those who oppose you*" (1:27) could well be a reference to persecution. Paul also talks about "*suffering*" (v.29) and their "*struggle*" (v.30).

While Paul may make a few references to persecution he certainly doesn't dwell on the idea and I doubt you could say that it was a dominant idea in the letter.

Others have suggested that the main theme of Philippians is joy. If you have a Bible Program on your computer you would know that the words *joy* and *rejoice* come up over 15 times in this short letter.

But again I don't think that the idea of joy could be seen as the unifying theme of this letter. The idea that does come through strongly is the idea of unity in the Gospel and unity for the sake of the Gospel.

The verse that sums up what Paul is on about in this letter is 1:27:

"Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel ..."

If *unity in the gospel* is the theme Paul wants to stress then it's safe to speculate that the problem in the church is disunity. Something was dividing the church and it was effecting their commitment to the Gospel.

In a great article entitled "*The Composition and Unity of Philippians*" [Novum Testamentum

XXVII, 2, 1985] David Garland suggests that Paul's purpose in writing was to deal with a division that had arisen between Euodia and Syntyche (4:1).

At first this idea may seem a little far fetched. But as you look through the letter you can see that it does show a unity and purpose to the letter.

Sermon Outlines, Illustrations & Notes

1. Paul and the Philippians (Philippians 1)

The Setting (Acts 16:11-40/Philippians 1:1-2)

When we get a postcard from a friend there are three things that we automatically do when we start reading.

We register who it is from, where they are and what their situation is.

When we open up a letter in the New Testament we need to try and do those same things for the writer and the original readers. Paul was writing from prison (probably Rome) to a relatively new church in Philippi – (Acts 16 gives us some background).

Partners with Paul (1:1-11)

From Acts 16 you could easily assume that Paul had some bad memories of Philippi – being beaten, thrown in gaol. But Paul says he remembers them with joy. Why? For one simple reason – their partnership with him in the Gospel.

Talk about a one-tracked mind! (1:12-26)

Paul's life was an example of what it meant to be committed to the Gospel. Even though he was thrown in prison – what might be considered a hindrance to preaching the Gospel – Paul sees it as a great opportunity. He now gets to speak to people he would have never even met before. The other great thing is that people have seen Paul's boldness and they, too, "have been encouraged to speak the word of God more courageously and fearlessly." (v.14)

Lives Worthy of the Gospel (1:27-30)

As a result of all that Paul has said in this chapter he calls on them to live lives worthy of the Gospel. They are to be united and stand firm as they contend for the sake of the Gospel. He tells them it will be hard – they may even suffer.

He has given them his example. He is in prison for the sake of the Gospel.

Conclusion

How committed is our church to the Gospel?

Are we standing firm as one man for the sake of the Gospel. 'What is it that unites and binds our church together?

The Gospel or something else.?

2. Paul – The Good Coach (Philippians 2)

A Plea for Unity (2:1-4)

In churches around Australia today there is a plea for unity. There is no end to the number of Ecumenical activities that you can be involved in.

Paul begins chapter 2 hot on the heels of where he ended chapter 1 – encouraging the Philippians to stand firm, and be unified for the sake of the Gospel.

He wants them to be unified – but Paul doesn't want unity just for the sake of unity. He wants unity for the sake of Christ.

The Example of Christ (2:5-11)

Paul sets before them the example of Jesus – an example of humility, considering the interests of others, endurance of suffering and singleness of purpose. They are all the things he has asked from them in verses 1-4.

Therefore... (2:12-18)

There shouldn't be any complaining or arguing among the Philippic Christians. As disciples of Jesus they are supposed to "shine like stars in the universe". And they have a job to do. They are supposed to "hold out the word of life" – the message about Jesus.

Timothy & Epaphroditus (2:19-30)

I had a Rugby coach at school who wouldn't just tell us what he wanted you to do. He would also point out those players who were doing it – he would give us a model to copy or follow. Paul does much the same thing in the close of this chapter. He gives the examples of Timothy and Epaphroditus – men both known to the Philippians.

Timothy is a man who puts the interests of Christ and others ahead of his own (v.20-21). A man devoted to the Gospel (v.22) Epaphroditus is described by Paul as a "fellow soldier and fellow worker" (v.25). – a man willing to die for the sake of Christ (v.30).

Conclusion

How serious are we about the preaching of the Gospel? How do we respond when Paul shows us the example of Timothy or Epaphroditus? Are we like them? Are we committed to preaching the Gospel or do other things stand in our way?

3. A Funny Thing Happened On The Way To Damascus (Philippians 3:1-4:1)

Paul's Testimony (3:1-11)

If you've been a Christian for any length of time you would have heard one of those testimonies where the speaker wants to tell you how BAD they were. You know the story. When they were seven they were involved in drug running in Kings Cross. By the age of nine they were into illegal arms deals. By twelve they were the head of a major crime syndicate. They were BAD but by becoming Christians they have now become GOOD.

Paul gives his testimony – but his is a little different. He wants to tell you how GOOD he was. He had it all going for him – he was about as Jewish as you could possibly get.

What a Load of Garbage (3:7-11)

Paul says that all the things he once counted as important he now considers garbage compared to knowing Jesus as Lord & Saviour. (Brings to mind Jesus' parables in Matthew 13:44-46)

Berger Paints & Christians (3:12-4:1)

Paul is quick to remind his readers that we have not reached the end yet. He says that, we all need to keep on keeping on.

Conclusion

We are citizens of heaven. We need to be sure that our lives reflect that citizenship. We look forward to a great hope – the return of Jesus. That should also shape our lives and encourage us to stand firm.

4. Putting Things Right In Philippi (Philippians 4:2-23)

Right Relationships (4:2-3)

In the last chapter Paul starts to name names – Euodia & Syntyche. This seems to be the heart of the problem in Philippi. There is a division between these two women – a division that is having an impact on the life of the church.

Once they had worked together and contended at Paul's side for the sake of the Gospel (v.3). Now something has divided them. What division could possibly be bigger than the Gospel that unites them?

It's interesting to note that Paul doesn't take sides – for him it wasn't a matter of right and wrong.

Paul's concern is the Gospel. They needed to settle this dispute for the sake of the Gospel

It is here that we find the words for the popular chorus "Rejoice in the Lord always." But this is not some Pauline thought for the day like "Smile and the world smiles with you". Paul wants to focus Euodia and Syntyche on what they have in Jesus – he wants them to rejoice in that rather than being divided.

Right Focus (4:4-7)

Paul tells them that they are not to be anxious about anything. That would be hard advice to accept if you know that persecution is on the door step.

But this advice comes from a man who is sitting in prison – probably about to die. If anyone has the right to be anxious it is Paul. But Paul knows that God has got it under control – no need to be anxious.

Right Thinking (4:8-9)

As well as a right focus Paul says we ought to fill our minds with the right things (v.8-9). Paul knows that the things that fill your mind shape your lives.

Right Finances (4:10-23)

Paul finishes the letter on the touchy subject of money. He thanks the Philippians for their gift .

He also tells them that he has learned the secret of being content no matter what the situation. This is not some false peace or the power of positive thinking. Paul says this "I can do everything through him who gives me strength" (v.13). The Philippians were not only co-workers with Paul in the preaching of the Gospel. They were also financial supporters of Paul.

Conclusion

The church in Philippi is a church that Paul has strong feelings for – not just because it was a church he started. Paul's love for this church is because they share with him a commitment to the gospel.

Conclusion

Philippians is a wonderful book to preach through.

Paul (a man totally committed to the preaching of the Gospel) calls on the Philippians to remain

committed to the preaching of the Gospel too.

Like us, they were his partners and co-workers, united in the task of taking the message of salvation to the world.