

Christ Exalted

Probably written close to the end of Paul's life in the late 50s A.D., we are reading a letter of encouragement to the first church Paul established in



Michael K. Olmsted

Europe. Paul, a prisoner in Rome, understood that the greatest threat to Christians was not a pagan government but internal factions resulting from personality conflicts, false theological teachings, and the daily pressures of a corrupt society.

Characteristic of Paul, he puts his own perilous situation aside and encourages his fellow believers: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, any consolation from (his) love, any sharing in the Spirit, any compassion and sympathy ... make my joy complete" (vv. 1-2). Like anyone facing suffering, those embattled Christians needed a reminder of their hope, written by their beloved teacher who was facing death every day.

We all can imagine what it is like for a doctor to say, "It's cancer, and sadly we cannot cure it." We know how deeply it hurts when someone trashes our reputation with a lie. We know what it is like to feel alone or betrayed. Paul loved these people and they loved him, so he steps outside his own dark circumstance to encourage them. Additional evidence of the close bond between Paul and this church is his gratitude for a financial gift they had sent to him in prison (Philippians 4:18-19).

The affection Paul expresses in this letter is much more than sentimentality. He needs their love and prayers, but he tells them what will "make my joy complete": "Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind" (v. 2). Notice Paul did not begin by addressing any divisive false doctrine or personality clash, but by calling them to a oneness in Christ, a common

bond that will hold the church together. Doctrinal tests and signed creeds can never substitute for personal faith in the Savior.

Paul takes the next critical step which follows faith in Christ: "Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others" (v. 4). This unselfishness is defined by our loving Savior: "The same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness ... he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death ... even on a cross" (vv. 6-8).

Years ago a member of a big church in my community came to me confidentially to unburden himself. He had observed how his pastor took advantage of people, expected to be treated in a special way, and made it clear he should be compensated handsomely because he was "God's anointed." I listened, we talked, and he struggled with what to do, because leaving that church would be hard on his children. We talked about Jesus' example of leadership and what it means to be a disciple.

Paul is helping us see what it means to be a faithful witness, and to face the ideas and influences of the world – inside and outside the church. It means to "empty self ... take the form of a slave ... to be humble" (vv. 7-8).

There are challenging markers for the Christian life, a stark contrast to the values and actions of our society. Watch television, read the news reports, listen to modern political rhetoric and you see the world has not changed in 2000 years.

Consider your values, actions, and words. Can the world see in you the compassion, generosity, and actions that Jesus modeled among the people of the first century? Too often the

institutional church presents a witness that does not match the teachings and example of Jesus. Dare we face ourselves and change?

Behavior can be changed, but that requires an internal spiritual reorientation. Again, Paul points to the example of Christ who "emptied himself, taking the form of a slave ... born in human form ... humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death ... therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him a name that is above every name" (vv. 7-9). This means we can become like Christ in our thinking and actions, but we will never be Christ.

Paul clearly defines what it means to be a child of God: it is to kneel before Christ as does all of heaven, to confess with our words that Jesus Christ is Lord as we begin to understand that our hope is only found in God the Father who sent his Son to us (vv. 10-11). Paul is most likely paraphrasing a hymn of the early church.

We know we are not perfect and we cannot fully grasp the wonder of God's grace in his Son. But we can put aside the world's adoration of success and power, as we care about others and share God's love instead of building our own kingdom. We can remember that beyond the cross there is resurrection. As you live today, what will you say and do that could help someone else begin to understand God loves them, and that there is so much more than the empty trophies of this world?

The Apostle Paul was very likely coming to the end of life when he wrote this letter, but his hope was undimmed as he encouraged a people he loved as though they were his children. So he wrote about "encouragement in Christ" (v. 1). The image of Christ exalted in heaven is dramatic, but the witness of God's church in this world requires that believers exalt Christ in their heart and in their living.