



The Resolved Church

A Theology of Gospel Community

by Pastor Duane Smets

Philippians 1:27 "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

Introduction - An Exegetical Treatment of Philippians 1:27

Philippians is letter the Apostle Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, which he founded about 10 years earlier. Philippi is in Greece in Southern Europe and is the place where Lydia, the first European convert became a Christian. The church in Philippi had been doing well for the last ten years and the letter to the Philippians is extremely happy and encouraging.

In Philippians 1:27 Paul writes in response to some challenges the church was facing. There were challenges from the outside and from the inside. From the outside there were apparently physical threats of violence from opposing foes (Phil 1:28-29). Christianity was not too popular in that time and many Christians were put to death for becoming Christians.

There were also challenges from the inside, internal friction and conflict among some of the people in the church. He addresses two ladies by name later in the book saying, I urge you, Euodia and Syntyche, to get along in the Lord (Phil 4:2).

So in response to those outside and inside pressures he writes this phrase, " Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

There are three steps here in this verse. First, the phrase, "manner of life." Do you see that? What does that mean? What is one's "manner of life"? Does that just mean going to a church service on Sundays? Does it just mean following a list of do's and don'ts? Does it mean just how you individually behave when your by yourself or at work? What is one's manner of life? Or what does life consist of?

Well, life is everything right? Life is eating, drinking, talking, working, playing, and even sleeping. Manner of life is the way in which you live your life and a regular, daily basis. Now look what he does next, look at the next phrase..."Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ." Manner of life ↔ Worthy of the gospel.

This is the next step, here manner of life gets connected to the gospel of Christ. The gospel is to determine how we live our lives. This is huge. Out of the 137 references to the word "gospel" in the New Testament, 90% of the uses of the word "gospel" only refer to the content of the message that is shared.

The content is the factual truths of the gospel, who Jesus and what he has done for us. The gospel is news and it is good news because there is bad news first, namely that we have failed at life and rebelled against God. The good news is God has had mercy by sending Jesus into our world to live the life we were supposed to for us and

also died a death for us, a death which satisfies the eternal death and wrath we deserve for being such crooks. All Jesus' goodness becomes ours simply through faith or belief in him and his work. That's the message of the gospel in short. But here, in Philippians 1:27, the word "gospel" extends to something more than just the message or the proposition of the gospel itself.

Look at the way it's worded. Here "gospel" is something which effects our manner of life! The word of the gospel does a work in our life. Let me say it another way...the gospel, primarily, is the doctrine of justification by faith alone. But the gospel here also includes the doctrine of sanctification. Wayne Grudem defines sanctification this way, "Sanctification is a progressive work of God and man that makes us more free from sin and like Christ in our actual lives (Systematic Theology)." For those who get confused by big words, that simply means, if you're a Christian and you love Jesus then that is going to have an effect on the way you live your life.

But there is yet another step here in Philippians 1:27 and that is the qualification Paul provides. What I skip in my quote with the ellipse is a brief digression where Paul talks about making a trip to go see the people of the Philippian church, but he picks it back up at the word standing, so that the verse really does read "Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ so that standing firm in the one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel."

Do you see the third step? First step is recognizing we have a manner of life, the second step is that our manner of life is to be directed by the gospel, and the third step is that such a thing only happens through "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel." That is community. I don't now how Paul could have said it clearer? Several spirits coming together as "one spirit." Several minds coming together as "one mind." Several people striving "side by side" together. THIS IS COMMUNITY!!!

Have you ever watched the Olympics? It is fascinating to me. Some of my favorite events to watch are the volleyball matches, the team swims, and the men's basketball game for the gold. It is interesting...with many of the sports the gold must be won together as a team as ONE, otherwise they fail. They have to train together, talk together, and practice together and if they don't they will fail. Christianity is the same thing. It is meant to be lived out together as ONE in community.

Community - An Etymological Treatment of Koinonia

Now let me ask you a very important question. Think of this "one mind" "one spirit" "side by side" community...can that happen through us just seeing each other on Sunday morning? Well maybe you could make an argument about being in one spirit and one mind in the experience of this day...but not striving side by side. That is something different and on top of it all, this verse is talking about our manner of life. This verse says our manner of life is to include regular intimate community.

The word "community" comes from the Greek word that usually gets translated as "fellowship." The word is *koinonia*. Here is a good definition of *koinonia* from J.I. Packer, "[It is] a sharing with our fellow-believers the things that God has made known to us about himself, in hope that we may thus help them know him better and so enrich their fellowship with him. Second, [it is] seeking to share what God has

made known of himself to others, as a means to finding strength, refreshment, and instruction for one's own soul."

Community is a uniquely Christian and relational thing. It begins first with a relationship with God and then true relationships with others. The book of 1 John in the Bible says we have fellowship with God and that enables us to have true fellowship with one another. Fellowship is sharing and participating in the life of God with others...it is "how we wrestle with understanding truth and struggling to apply it to our lives (John Loftness)" even with all the problems, hurt, misunderstandings, and inconveniences it brings. That's real life in a world with sin and brokenness both around us and in us.

Many think relationship with Jesus is all they need, you can pray and read your Bible on your own. But this way of thinking limits God's sovereign choice to by his Spirit frequently use people as the means of communicating and applying his truth to us.

For the more theologically minded, listen to C.J. Mahaney on this...He puts this together and says a theology of community groups flows out of this understanding. He writes, "If one has truly been justified, that will be evident by a progressive work of sanctification in his life. Small groups contribute to this magnificent and gradual work of grace in our lives." For the rest of us, that means if you love Jesus and you love his church then you will get involved in small community groups that are really focused on the gospel.

Christian community is about life together. This is how the gospel spread so much within the first 30 years so much so that people were saying that the world was being turned upside-down (Acts 17:6). Acts 2:42 says the early church "devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and to community and to the breaking of bread and prayers."

Michael Green, a prominent scholar of the historical and cultural background of the 1st century writes this, "The house [was] the fundamental unit of society...both in Israelite and Roman Culture...[and was] One of the most important methods of spreading the gospel in antiquity. It had positive advantages: the comparatively small numbers involved made real interchange of views and informed discussion among the participants possible...The sheer informality and relaxed atmosphere of the home, not to mention the hospitality which must often have gone with it, all helped to make this form of evangelism particularly successful (Evangelism in the Early Church)."

One-Anothering is Christian Community

Homes, small groups, was how they were striving side by side...this is a main work of the gospel. This is how true Christian community happens. An interesting study is looking at all the passages in the Bible which call for us to "one another" each other. They are all commands.

1. Be at peace with one another (Mk 9:50)
2. Love one another (Jn 13:34)
3. Be joined to one another (Rom 12:5)
4. Be devoted to one another (Rom 12:10)
5. Honor one another (Rom 12:10)

6. Rejoice with one another (Rom 12:15)
7. Weep with one another (Rom 12:15)
8. Live in harmony with one another (Rom 12:16)
9. Accept one another (Rom 15:7)
10. Counsel one another (Rom 15:14)
11. Greet one another (Rom 16:16)
12. Agree with one another (1 Cor 1:10)
13. Wait for one another (1 Cor 11:33)
14. Care for one another (1 Cor 12:25)
15. Serve one another (Gal 5:13)
16. Carry one another's burdens (Gal 6:2)
17. Be kind to one another (Eph 4:32)
18. Forgive one another (Eph 4:32)
19. Submit to one another (Eph 5:21)
20. Bear with one another (Col 3:13)
21. Teach and admonish one another (Col 3:16)
22. Encourage one another (1 Thess 5:11)
23. Build up one another (1 Thess 5:11)
24. Spur one another on (Heb 10:24)
25. Offer hospitality to one another (1 Pet 4:9)
26. Minister gifts to one another (1 Pet 4:10)
27. Be humble toward one another (1 Pet 5:5)
28. Confess your sins to one another (Jas 5:16)
29. Pray for one another (Jas 5:16)
30. Community with one another (1 Jn 1:7)

Now, are these things possible if the church only commits to seeing each other on Sunday morning? I think those commands envision and call for something far different.

The Word "Church" and the Nature of a Family

The word "church" itself is *ekklesia* which means "called out ones" and is described in the Bible as "the body or group of believers in Jesus." But how do we most often use the word? We say, we "going to church?" We don't go to church. Church is not a movie or a football game. CHURCH IS NOT AN EVENT, IT IS A COMMUNITY OF PEOPLE. If we allow ourselves to only be part of a local church by being connected on Sunday we are not being a church...we are being attendees to an event.

By what we've seen in the Bible so far, if we want to "bring people to church" really what we should mean is we want to have someone come to our group and see how we live and love one another. We ought to never to refer to our Sunday morning church service as "church" ever again. Church is you and me, and us, together.

Perhaps the best definition church to get to an understanding of church in the Bible is family. Pastors are supposed to be good at the little church, their family, first because that is most what the church is like (1 Tim 3:5). The Bible teaches that a good solid, loving, caring family...is most like what being a church is (see "The Jesus Family Series" on Romans 8:12-17 [<http://www.theresolved.com/?p=269>]). We, as the church are a family and we love getting together and eating together and talking with one another and working through things together AS A FAMILY. This has got to

happen and it will not happen without everyone who considers themselves a part of the church commits to regularly being part of a community group.

God is a Community

Let's step back for a minute and ask the question, "If community is so important and so central to God and his gospel, then wouldn't we expect to see that throughout the whole Bible?" Is this just something another pastor has drummed up as his get big fast church planting or pastoring strategy? Or is this really something that God wants and expects? If so we would expect to find evidence of this throughout the Bible (systematic theology).

First, God. As Christians, we believe that God is a Trinity. The Father is God. The Son Jesus is God. The Holy Spirit is God. And the three are one. It is a mystery that presses the bounds of our finite minds but the Bible as a whole communicates that God himself is a community.

The People of the Old Testament were in Community

What does God do first in the Bible? He creates. He creates all the stuff of the earth, the sky and the water and the trees and the animals and then he creates a man. But after that he says, it is not good that the man is alone, so what's he do, he makes a woman. And then tells them to have lots of sex and have a lot of kids. Why? Community. God likes it.

Then what is the story of the rest of Genesis and the whole Old Testament for that matter? It is the story of God creating and calling a community of people. First through Noah and his family. Then through Abraham and his family. Then through Moses and all the people he delivers out of Egypt. In fact, in many ways when you look at the Ten Commandments themselves, they are formed in a unique way so that the people can live together in community. Think about it:

1. The community has one God
...no other gods before me (Ex. 20:3)
2. The community centers in God's presence among it
...no graven images (Ex. 20:4)
3. The community talks rightly about God
...don't take God's name in vain (Ex. 20:7)
4. The community commits to each other
...remember the Sabbath and keep it holy (Ex. 20:8)
5. The community is a family
...honor your father and mother (Ex. 20:12)
6. The community deals with hostility
...do not murder (Ex. 20:13)
7. The community deals with sexuality
...do not commit adultery (Ex. 20:14)
8. The community respects one another
...do not steal (Ex. 20:15)
9. The community serves one another
...do not covet (Ex. 20:17)

There was way too many people for that to happen just in one day of getting together, so Jethro, Moses father-in-law gave Moses good advice and told him to break up the group into a bunch of small group communities (Ex. 18:22-23). Then in the next chapter (Ex. 19) God uses an analogy and says that the whole community is to be like priests for all the other peoples of the world. The idea is that others, outside the community, would be attracted to Israel because of how unique their and awesome their community was and then when they came the community would say it was because of God and his work among them. But even with such clear instructions the community failed.

So the story of the Bible says that then God basically kicked them out and sent them to Babylon. Babylon was the bad city, a place you don't want to go. Getting kicked out isn't good and you don't want to go to Babylon. Jesus calls it spitting a church out of his mouth (Rev 3:16) and is what he does to a church which neglects his clear instructions.

Once God's people are in exile in Babylon he calls them to community again. Jeremiah 29:4-7 "...To all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare."

The Old Testament is the story of God calling his people into a community with him and each other.

Jesus' was in Community

Jesus comes on the scene a number of years later and what's the first thing he does? He calls out twelve dudes to come live in community with him. And what's he do with them for three years? He has community with them. Sometimes there is a big celebration meeting and there are thousands present...but most of the time, it's just Jesus and the disciples hanging out together, eating, talking and discussion and listening to Jesus. Community groups.

The Early Church was in Community

So what do Jesus' disciples do in the New Testament? Jesus dies on the cross, rises, and then ascends to his throne in heaven. After that the disciples then get together in a house, community, and start the church that way and then devote themselves to meeting together, both for big meetings and small community meetings. You get a good picture of the small community group meetings and what was going on in 1 Thessalonians 2:8 "Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own lives."

A New Definition of "Church"

Okay, a word of clarification. I love Jesus' church and this is not attempt to simply deconstruct and tear apart and only say negative things about Jesus' church and the

state it is in. Jesus is doing great things in his church despite us and many of our faults and failures and it is truly marvelous. I feel so honored and privileged to be serving as a pastor in this day and age.

What I have been attempting to do is see how the Bible overwhelmingly conceives of a church means being a community and not putting on a service. We need to totally re-orient our thinking around our love, commitment, and regular interaction together. Jesus said people would know us by our love for one another (Jn 13:35) and we must create places and space where that can be seen and experienced!

Okay, so Snoop Dogg. Snoop had a reality show one year called "Snoop Dogg's Fatherhood." It was the biggest joke I've ever seen. He has his own "Dogg" house out in his backyard where he goes to get away from his family and smoke weed and play video games. In every episode he had a word of the day he would teach on a chalkboard like we were all in school. In one episode was the phrase, ""Chuuch on the move." Which Snoop defines as "the cue for a group of people at a club to move on to the next location."

So what I am after is changing what we think of when we hear the word "church" too...like Snoop. I'm overwhelmed with the Bible's picture of community, so much so that I believe we can no longer think of Sunday service when we hear the word, "church." We must think community. We must think relationships. We must think of the web of workings of God's gospel among his people. We must think of the Christian community group we are involved in.

Here is an example. The way most people view life is one where each of us as individuals is basically juggling all this stuff...family, friends, our jobs, our chores, our fun activities, our money, church responsibility, you name it, we try to juggle it. Ever so often, the pressure overwhelms us and we drop one or more of the balls we're juggling and usually church involvement is the first one to go. Gospel community calls for us instead to view all our activities and responsibilities as centering not around each of us as individuals but around us as the Christian community.

So for example, Steve Timmis tells the story of Bob and Mary. "[They] are involved in a local congregation. Mary gives birth to twins. Bob and Mary are now facing the prospect of trying to cope with babies who constantly need feeding and changing. In the first model, juggling the church ball alongside the new family responsibilities becomes impossible. Bob and Mary decide they will have to forget being involved in church activities on anything more than a minimal level for quite some time. So they take a unilateral decision to absent themselves from much of church life. In the alternative [community] model, it not only Bob and Mary's issue when the babies are born. It is an issue for the whole church. The congregation takes on some of the responsibility because their identity and life is that of persons-in-community. So perhaps a couple of people go round early each morning to bath the babies so Bob and Mary can have time together over breakfast. Or someone offers to take Bob to work for a few months [so that he saves gas and money and can take Mary out on a date one night. In this way, the couple becomes intimately wrapped up and enabled to be a part of the Christian community.]

The story of the church I pastor, The Resolved Church, is that we began as a community in our home. But after three years we primarily became a Sunday service with little glimpses of true community here and there, some good some bad.

From what I can tell community groups have also been seen as something you elect to "go to" if you feel like it, or if like what the group is talking about, or if it is convenient with your schedule...rather than community groups being something expected for us if we are Christians and love Jesus and his church.

Conclusion: A Gospel Community

I'm pleading with us to make a shift in our understanding. Community is what happens when each of our individual stories get connected to each other's stories and all together it is the story of God working in an intricate tapestry of lives and events. That is the overall story and it is always because of Jesus.

The overall story is always Jesus. Each of us as Christians has been especially reached out to and welcomed unto him, to be close with him and to have his life and death and resurrection change all that we are. All of our needs are met in Jesus and are cared for through the hands of his family, the Church.

If you're not a Christian, or you're new to all this, then let me tell you today first, that the ultimate community you are longing for is first with God through his son Jesus. All of our stories are the similar in that we've all been rebels against God and rejected him and yet he has lovingly sought us out and died for us and all our sin so that we might not be cast away from him forever. Embracing that truth has radically changed us and is changing us.

What you've read is a wrestling with the Bible about who we are as the church and what we need. I am saying we need true gospel community. I invite you to be a part of that, we would love to have you be part of Jesus' family. So if you sense that longing and sense the sufficiency of Jesus to meet your need today then become a Christian, it is what you are destined to be.

For all of us who are Christians, let us community with Jesus, our Lord and savior, taking taking to him all our questions, worries, cares, and joys and worshipping him for he is the worthy Lord of the Gospel. Then let us adore him together as we community with one another in all these things.

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