

NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 25 SEPTEMBER 2011

Tony Lai, Candidate for Ministry

Philippians 1:27 - 2:12

“The Foundation of Unity”

Some theologians would like to classify Philippians as a second group of Paul's epistles. It is because Paul wrote this letter when he was imprisoned and not only in prison but was also facing the danger of death (1:13,17,20-26). Even though Paul was imprisoned, he still cared about the unity of the church of Philippi. Even under persecution Paul has reminded the congregation of the importance of 'being worthy of the gospel'.

What does it mean by 'being worthy of the gospel'?

In modern day terms, it means 'you deserve to be who you are'. Just like, if you call yourself a chef, you should be skillful in making food. If you call yourself a teacher, you should be well knowledgeable in certain areas of teaching.

By being worthy of the gospel, Paul has a few expectations. One of the most important requests by Paul was on unity, and it is the key focus of today's scripture. For Christians to be 'worthy of the gospel of Christ' (1:27), they must live in unity with one another. Paul sees unity as very important especially in difficult times of the church.

In today's sermon, I want to bring your attention to Paul's perspective of unity. How Paul sees unity among people and how to achieve it as the follower of Christ.

Last month, we have talked about the beauty of unity in Psalm 133:1 which says, *'How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity'*. Every one of us would like to live in unity, but where is the starting point? Paul has given the church of Philippi two very practical ways, the first was: *'Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves.'* As said by Paul. It is not hard to see the good in other people, but it is very hard to see others being better than ourselves.

I am pretty sure that most of us would have seen or heard of people being torn apart in their relations due to serious arguments.

Self-righteousness is one of the main causes of human conflict. Some people would like to think that they are more valuable than the others; or they may think that they are wiser than the others because of their background. Leaders may think that they are wise enough to lead the whole group, but followers may think that they are there to police the leaders. Inside the human mind, there is always an ambition to win over the others. Just as we always want our children to be better than those of our friends. Or, some of us may think that our experience and knowledge is more advance than the older generation, and more reliable than the younger ones. This may be one of the reasons that every generation would like to complain about the next generation and rejects the older generation.

Paul did not say that others are better than us, he said, 'regard others as to be better than ourselves'. This works like the brake of a car. When we have different opinions, the first thing we need to be

aware of is to pause and say to ourselves, 'hang on, they may have a better point here...'. Paul asked us to consider the possibility that 'other people's choice is better than my choice'. This is humility, as Paul said.

Not only that, Paul has pointed out another practical way to unity, which is, '*Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others*'. What does it mean by looking to the interests of others? It means, when we have different opinions, we have to ask questions like this: How can other people benefit from these different opinions? What is their interest? What is their need? Can we make it come true for these people?

By looking not to our own interests but to the interests of others, we learn to love and care.

We have just mentioned two practical ways of unity, that is to regard others being better than ourselves, and to look to the interests of others first. They are useful to bring in peace and harmony among people.

But these are just the horizontal dimensions of unity only. There is a vertical dimension that Paul tried to tell us.

The horizontal dimension gives us practical ways of unity, but the vertical dimension tells us that we have to achieve unity in a Godly way.

I may say our experience has told many of us that sometimes even when we tried to maintain unity or to act humbly, it just didn't work. We still fell into the trouble of hurting each other or have the feeling of not being good enough.

It is because unity may not be achieved if we give way to others all the time. And it can also be a problem if we only value other people's interest and give up our own interest. There must be an anchor point for unity to take place.

Paul said: '*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*'. Paul's anchor point for unity is Jesus Christ.

What does it mean by same mind as Jesus? Let me quote an example.

Since the 1990s, there was a new product released in the Christian market. It is a bracelet imprinted with the letters WWJO. This is an abbreviation of the phrase 'what would Jesus do?' To many people, especially those young ones, they use it as a reminder of their personal motto. This is a modern version of the verse, '*Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus*.'

In the beginning of the reading, Paul told the readers: '*make my joy complete: be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*.' Having the same mind and same love is always a sign of unity. But Paul wanted to draw our attention to a second level, which is when we have the same mind as Christ Jesus, we will have the same mind to each other automatically.

We have to ask ourselves: What would Jesus do in our situations? How would Jesus see and act out humility? We can become closer to Jesus' mind through prayer, scriptures and contemplation. We don't know what's meant by humility until we see it in Christ. But Jesus has shown us clearly what it is. Jesus Christ has humbled himself, born in the form of a human likeness and in the form of a slave. Not only that, he humbled himself and was 'obedient to God even to the point of death'.

Slaves are workers according to their masters' will, they work without complaining, and even unnoticed. They are not necessarily thanked by their masters. We may easily get offended by working like a slave, but Jesus gave up his right to be a master in order for humankind to reunite with God and one another. This is the kind of humility that touches the human heart.

When we look up to Jesus for answer, this becomes an encouragement to us all especially when we are feeling exhausted in serving people and loving our enemies.

We are followers of Jesus, if he can be humble even to the point of death, we should be humble to our fellow brothers and sisters, leaders and servants as well. We cannot achieve this by just wanting. Paul said, *'work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.'* By working out our own salvation, Paul means we have to express our new life seriously. Both in the horizontal dimension and the vertical dimension. We can make it, because God works in us. God gives us the power and joy in serving one another, and to live in unity.

In conclusion, what is the foundation of building a united congregation? Paul showed us that genuine unity can only be possible where there is true humility. Jesus Christ is our example of such true humility. It is such humility that pleases God who then rewards us with his glory. In other words, what we have done for our brothers and sisters will be noticed by our heavenly Father.

Do you wish to try or have you been doing it?

Hope that we all have the same mind as Christ Jesus. Amen.