

"Christian Life". Philippians 2: 12-18

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1. Foundation

1.1 Commentaries on the letter to the Philippians suggest that Paul wrote this particular letter to a beloved congregation.

One can hardly escape the question: Would Paul have considered anyone of our congregations as a beloved one? And for that matter this Synod as an international congregation equally as beloved? Supposing that the answer would be yes, another question crops up: Would he have written a similar letter if he would have been alive today? Although we may be inclined to say no, a conclusive answer to these questions cannot be given.

1.2 On the other hand the questions are relevant in that they may lead us to a more interesting analysis. I think that we express our faith in a different manner owing to cultural differences historically grown and geographically spread. I also think that cultural differences are governed to a lesser or greater extent by our relationships to God and the subsequent relationships to one another, to the environment in its broadest sense, as well as by the interrelation of these relationships.

1.3 The first thing we might say about these relationships is that they are unavoidable and essential. Unavoidable, because no relationship with our Lord leads to spiritual death; no relationship between one another leads to mental death and no relationship with the environment leads to self-destruction. Essential because the presence of these relationships is a prerequisite for development and change. Now my distinction between development and change is that by development is meant building on meaningful traditions, while change stands for a more radical course, for instance dropping of traditions.

1.4 The second thing we might say about these relationships is that they ought to be understandable and recognizable in forms adequate to the problems of daily life, to exert influence thereon.

1.5 Concluding this part we may say that Christians then seek continuously a new balance between the necessity to maintain and to be moved by unavoidable and essential relationships and by their expression in daily life in adequate forms to influence a variety of cultures.

2. Interpretation

2.1 I would like to come back now to the contents of Paul's letter to the Philippians in particular Chapter II, the verses 12-18. In this part Paul stresses obedience without murmuring and disputings. He urges

them to go on and be even better in his absence than in his presence. He stresses to remain blameless and harmless and the Sons of God without rebuke. He describes the nations as crooked and perverse. He asks them to consider his own position in saying: "that I have run in vain, neither laboured in vain".

2.2 On reflection the quoted parts of the letter show sometimes skepticism towards his followers, the world at large and himself. It seems as if his image of man is pessimistic. An old-fashioned relationship between teacher and pupils is also shown. Contrary to Paul's opinion I would venture that a sound congregation full of life will murmur and will dispute.

2.3 Can his notions and way of communicating as reflected in this part of the letter make it possible for us, here and now and in the future, to understand and react adequately to verse 13 which says: "For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure"? I think that other conditions have to be fulfilled such as: To free ourselves from manmade ideologies (conservatism, liberalism, socialism and in fact any other isms), to face them not prejudiced but with an open mind so as to be able to hear God. Not to preach as an old-fashioned teacher but to establish a learner oriented relationship which meets with the real needs of people to enable them to live the Gospel. To accept that love should not reject law but that law is unavoidable as well as that love is indispensable as an expression of the unity of Old and New Testament. To constantly review present structures and attitudes within the organisation of our church to see to it that conditions prevail to meet the foregoing.

2.4 Concluding we may say that the times of the obedient Christian slave who accepted what was thought out for him and who did what he was told to do by his leaders are over. The new Christian wants to be accompanied and wants also everyone to understand his position as a free agent on a new level of relationship with God, with one another, and with the environment.

3. Principles

3.1 Fundamental is the notion in Genesis Chapter 3, verse 22: "And the Lord God said, Behold, the man is become as one of us, to know good and evil". God indicated then and there that man has the faculty of distinguishing between good and evil and hence to choose between them and to make decisions.

Forsaking this faculty i.e. not choosing and not taking decisions is denying the new post-paradise relationship between God and man. It is, however, the law that decisions have to be taken and that is irrevocable.

3.2 With what attitude and what behaviour do we meet this law? May I refer to John 15, verse 15: "Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends". Christians call this love, we call it brotherly love and the secular world calls it true friendship. The first conclusion is that true friendship presupposes the willingness of all concerned to be and feel responsible for one another. The second conclusion is that in this new relationship with the disciples Jesus, to put it in modern terms, dis-

carded autocratic leadership. He became the "primus inter pares" because of the quality of his acts, not because of his rank.

3.3 When a while ago I said that Christians then seek continuously a new balance, I did not exactly specify to which purpose cultures are and should be influenced. I think that basically the aim is emancipation of man, i.e. the willingness to take responsibility and to function in that responsibility. Such responsibility does not only cover the relationship between men and women, but foremost the relationship between one another irrespective of sex and the relationship to the environment in the broadest sense.

3.4 Concluding we may say that Christians ought to be subject to a lifelong process of learning how to balance law and love in order to constantly improve their effectiveness in their relationships.

4. Christian life

4.1 Throughout what I have been saying I have implicitly supposed that Christians want to be on the move and that the earth, with all that is in it, on it and around it, is the area for which responsibility is to be shared among them and others. I have also supposed that Christians are forward looking people, who are not scared of the next minutes in their lives, but to the contrary want to use these in facing and coping with whatever is going on at these very moments. If that means politics, then politics, if economics then economics, if ecology then ecology, if questioning then formulates probing questions. It is then necessary to review at least present conditions and, if necessary, to create conditions where that attitude can be honoured. I suggest that in this connection we have a look at our congregations, our church and the environment.

4.2 Congregations. If we are to accept the principles set out before, we have to ask ourselves whether the roles and relationships in our congregations are conducive to a learning situation and to development and change. How would it be if the pastor would not act most of his time as a semi-professional psychiatrist or as an organizer? How would it be if he were to direct his energies in helping others to be responsible and to take decisions? How would it be if he were a facilitator by creating situations where people want to learn and develop themselves? How would it be if by creating independent and capable laymen he would make himself, figuratively speaking, superfluous? How would it be if the council of elders and their committees would base their decisions on consensus instead of their own wisdom? How would it be if they could help the congregation to be without a pastor? How would it be if we were capable of releasing and mobilizing all members, possibilities?

It is my firm belief that Paul's word in verse 15, "among whom ye shine as lights in the world," will come true only if the whole congregation learns to live in uncertainty, yet without fear of making decisions for which it feels responsible and accountable.

4.3 The Church. For various reasons this is a far more complex subject, but indispensable for Christian life.

Members form and are the church as an expression of their faith and unity. Consequently they are supposed to be responsible and

accountable for its actions and representation. They are also supposed to create, maintain and renew the church, thereby qualifying its continuity, but by elections they delegate this task.

They delegate this task to other members who in their dual position then are expected to carry a joint responsibility by representing the church also as an institution. Through the congregations represented in provincial management and its synods, through the unity board and the unity's synod--regulated by the roles, relationships and prerogatives spelled out in the church order-- it leads a fairly independent life. When I say "a fairly independent life," I mean to stress the interdependence of "the church of faith and unity" and "the church as an institution".

Three dangers threaten the church as an institution: Firstly, the inclination to settle for tradition without change. Secondly, that the unqualified continuity of the church becomes the hidden objective of all concerned; and thirdly, that a paternalistic bureaucracy evolves. The church of the relatively quiet life, with refinements in the church order only, comes into being.

To put it more concretely: Is it not true that such areas as mission, education or oecumene, at least to my knowledge and experience, are much less lively discussed and supported by the congregations than in Zinzendorf's days? Is it not true that financial sacrifices are made to a lesser extent and that personal commitments, though present, are increasingly difficult to find?

Whether these dangers materialize will, perhaps, depend on how the broad fundamental objectives of the church are made clear and concrete for the present, the future, and in relation to the total environment in which the church operates.

The continuity of the church must not be taken for granted. It must be regularly discussed, the need for it restated and its acceptance and understanding sought by the membership.

Continuity, approached in this manner, can become a motivating force through a motivating process. It is perhaps the only course, not only to avoid disparity between the church of faith and unity and the church as an institution, but to achieve a new awakening, however not without murmurings and disputings.

May I conclude this part by simply referring to Luke 12, verse 48: "For unto whomsoever much is given, of him shall be much required; and to whom men have committed much, of him they will ask the more".

4.4 The Environment. Nobody can deny that the secular development of this world surpasses Christian influence in our various cultures. Many Christians not only view this with apprehension but suffer bodily and mentally because of it. Fortunately, a growing number have begun to ask themselves what in their own actions and behavior has caused and continues to cause this phenomenon.

I think that an inward looking church, principally directing its own and foreign resources toward the achievement of diaconal objectives in a limited sense, is fulfilling only part of the role it must play in its interactions with its surroundings.

The church can never be satisfied if it only helped (and continues to help) free people from traditional slavery so that they may become victims of a modern form of slavery: Slavery by systems and patterns of thought which are man-centered and seek material well being only.

There must be a continuous reaffirmation and reappraisal of the church's role in society. It must have the courage to discuss and tackle the big contemporary problems as well as those affecting its future, such as peace, the distribution of wealth and the proper allocation of energy resources. For this, supreme guidance is offered in the passages of Luke and Matthew, in ideas crystallized in the Sermon of the Mount.

The search for a new balance between law and love on a new Christian level must be undertaken individually as well as collectively in partnership with God. Only in this way, I think, can we make known that our relationship with God is the prime motivating force in our lives. Christians must not only be present in this world but influence it. This is no easy task; but, fallible as we are, as long as we acknowledge that all of us are laymen, when it comes to living as a Christian, such efforts may bear fruit. Deo volente!

P.S.

I have been asked to amplify on my understanding of environment or, as I put it sub 1.2 and 3.3, "the environment in its broadest sense". Under 4.1 the environment is described as "the earth with all that is in it, on it and around it". Sub 4.3 "the total environment in which the church functions" is in fact the equivalent of what is said in sub 4.1.

These references do not quite explain my intentions. To my mind, the Christian church, hence the Christian, has onesidedly concentrated on the man to man relationship and underplayed the important man-environment relationship. It has tended to neglect the interrelationship between man and environment. For too long nature, in its totality and particularly in its ecology has been understood as a passive datum. More or less, the picture of man in the center of the stage with nature as his decor, has been predominant. Less attention has been paid to man's ability to manipulate nature. Nature's balances are manipulated by man's growth in numbers and by his way of life. Whatever man's societal structure, there always is a dependence upon nature.

Concentration therefore on man to man relationships and neglect of the man-nature relationship denies too much of his interdependence and certainly of the interrelationship between the two. In this way man in effect is showing disrespect for God as Creator, hence my plea for the acknowledgement of these relationships as part and parcel of Christian life.

For other comments dealing with this issue, see the exchange of letters between Br. Koots and Br. Theile published in preceding issues of Unitas Fratrum.