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Paul and the Philippians: A Model for Leading an Anxious Church

CARLUS GUPTON

An elder called not long ago to voice concern about the flock under his care. He is the kind of man whose presence makes others want to live more nobly, with an unusual blend of sensitivity and boldness, vision, and tradition that provides a secure present and a promising future. In an attempt to encourage him, I reminded him of some of these characteristics. But I was struck with phrases of desperation, “If I’m a rock, then I’ve been reduced to the size of a pebble. I haven’t had a good night’s sleep in three months. I snap at my wife. I’ve lost all joy in worship.” In fact, he said he dreaded attending the worship assemblies of his congregation for fear that he would be cornered by indignant members venting their frustration.

I feel caught in the middle of not just two, but four or five factions in my church. It’s not just worship, leadership, relevance, role of women—but all of these, intensely, at the same time. I don’t know how it got this way: Six months ago we were doing better than we ever had, but recently, the place has started unraveling. I don’t know what to do, and I’m not sure I can take it any more.

My friend is not alone. Three years before, it had been me on the other end of line crying out to him. Today there are few leaders who have not felt these moments of exasperation, even depression, over their churches.

Church conflicts are on the rise. This is acknowledged by virtually everyone who works with the church at large. The proliferation of Christian materials on this subject and the popularity of workshops on congregational conflict seem to support this statement. The scope covers all major Christian fellowships.

There are many explanations for this increase, most of them relating to the dramatic cultural shifts that show no signs of letting up. One theory suggests that in periods of widespread cultural uncertainty, society becomes increasingly anxious, evidenced by increases in divorce, litigation, racial tension, drug abuse, bankruptcy, moral license, crime, violence, and terrorism.¹ In general, the emotional processes of all individuals, families, and institutions are impaired. Even the more mature members of society are less intentional in their actions, creating a state of recurring incivility and stressful conditions for leaders.²

Churches may be more vulnerable than most institutions. Nonreligious bodies, such as businesses, are places of low tolerance, with controls that make it more difficult to act out. Churches are high-tolerance settings where leaders often neglect discipline, avoid conflict, and abide almost anything to keep people happy.³ In addition, “religion is an emotionally charged subject, and people typically surround the most meaningful and worthwhile areas of their lives with tripwires and alarms.”⁴ These and other factors make churches ripe environments for highly anxious individuals, partially explaining the rise in church conflicts.

What should leaders do? We are helped in this if we avoid two extremes. At one end of the continuum are quick-fix programs, events, and interventions. A plethora of resources suggests mechanisms for congre-

gational transformation, guaranteeing success if we simply try harder and follow the program. Certainly, God blesses churches with gifted practitioners who are skilled to design paths of revitalization. But if one trusts too deeply in such processes to revive Christ's body, the results may be short-lived and disappointing. Even worse, they may give the illusion of progress while depriving persons of the deeper transformation that should occur. We become full of anxious activity (doing) and empty of spiritual insight (being), we read more strategy and less scripture, we meet more than we pray. This is soul neglect, where "we obsess about the externals and starve our souls."⁵

The opposite extreme on the continuum is using prayer as a shield from needful action. A spiritualistic paradigm that elevates prayer above thoughtful intervention may quench the Spirit as much as a technocratic paradigm that overemphasizes strategy. One may rightly argue that seeking God in repentance, confession, and dependence should precede and permeate the execution of reconstructive efforts. This approach becomes irresponsible, however, when it is used to shelter one from the hard tasks of leadership.

Between these two extremes is a kind a soulful engagement, a spirituality of being and doing, a rhythm of nourishing separation and courageous obedience, a cycle of divinely given clarity and spiritually focused achievement. The Philippian correspondence reveals Paul in this way. He called a conflicted church away from its anxiety and into a way of peace, purpose, and progress. More importantly, he presented his own character and way of life as a path toward finding that peace (4:9). His soulful engagement of life became the spiritual compass to guide his readers into a more confident expression of their faith.

THE PHILIPPIANS – PAUL'S SPECIAL JOY

The Philippians had been one of Paul's favorite churches. Acts reveals a series of events that threaded these two into a special bond, and the Philippian letter exudes Paul's affection for those whom he "loved and longed for, his joy and crown" (4:1). They were Paul's first converts in Europe, and they helped him establish a beach head for Christianity in that area (Acts 16). He left soon after the first conversions and then reconnected with them upon returning to Philippi on his third missionary journey (20:5-8). This may explain why the Philippians became so loyal to the apostle through the years.

Paul wrote his letter from his Roman imprisonment, facing the possibility of martyrdom (Phil 1:12-24, 30; 2:17; cf. Acts 28). While Paul was there, the Philippians sent Epaphroditus with a special gift (2:25-30; 4:14-18). Paul thanked them for the gift (4:10, 14-18), but it is unlikely that this thanks forms the primary occasion for the letter, as Philippians reads more like a multi-purpose personal letter between the apostle and the church he dearly loved and missed (1:8; 4:1). He updated them on what was happening in his life (1:12-26; 2:17, 24). He also dealt with their concerns about Epaphroditus who had become ill while with Paul (2:25-30). He exposed the error of false teachers at Philippi (3:1-21) and sought to minimize the effect of another group of preachers who were stirring up trouble (1:17). Another circumstance Paul mentions is the disagreement between two prominent women, Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3). Very little is said of their dispute, but it is obviously affecting the whole church—else Paul would not have mentioned it.

THE PHILIPPIANS – ANXIOUS AND IN NEED OF REASSURANCE

It seems that these two women were not the only ones at odds, as the call to unity is a frequent refrain (1:27-2:4; 2:12, 14). This is an anxious church that is internally divided with notable dispute and feels intimidated by a crippling form of opposition. Their downheartedness is also evident from Paul's use of words such as "joy" and "rejoice." In the opening chapter, Paul "prays *with* joy because of your partnership in the gospel" (1:4). Yet this joy is set against the Philippians' insecurity over how Paul feels toward them.

He makes it a point in 1:4 to mention that he is praying for "all" of them, using the word *all* in some form quite noticeably (1:4, 7, 7b, 8). Are there some in Philippi who would suspect that he is praying for others but not for them? It also seems that Paul is convincing these people that he still has a special place

for them in his heart. “It is *right* for me to feel” so good about you (1:7). “*God is my witness ...*” (1:8). Why does he have to use an oath? The intensity of his language shows that he wants to leave no doubt. He says “*always* and in *every* prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy” (1:4). “I *yearn* for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus” (1:8).

What had happened to the Philippians to make this emphasis necessary? Had the opposition they were facing from the outside sapped their joy? Perhaps Paul felt that if they could see that *he* was joyful amid circumstances of imprisonment that would normally breed doubt, despair, and bitterness, *they* might be able to recover their joy. You also wonder if the strife among them and the disagreements between prominent members like Euodia and Syntyche had tainted their image. Perhaps it is this image that Paul asks them to rebuild as they did “all things without grumbling or complaining, that they may be blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you shine as lights in the world” (2:14). Had infighting blemished their appearance and stolen their luster?

All of this may be why Paul wrote to assure them they were still special to him and to God. The one who started the work of grace at Philippi was not going to abandon it in a state of incompleteness (1:6). The Philippians relationships were soured, their image was tarnished, and their joy was depleted, but they need not give up on themselves because God had not given up on them.

This forms an important backdrop for 4:2-9, where Paul presents his own character and presence as a source of strength. In the throes of seemingly dreadful personal circumstances, he exhibits a God-inspired confidence that, if emulated by his recipients, will provide them with a way toward peace. He says, “whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice, and the God of peace will be with you” (4:9). The topic at hand is the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3). There is no noticeable shift between verses 3 and 4, which makes a credible case for seeing 4:2-9 as a unit, with 4:4-9 instructing these women and the whole church with a way of finding “peace” (4:7, 9). This peace is placed over being “anxious” (4:6) and is woven throughout as a promise, first as the “peace of God,” (4:7) and then as the “God of peace” (4:9).

The text, therefore, presents how to rejoice in the Lord’s nearness (4:4-5), request his intervention (4:6-7), reflect hopefully on others (4:8), and in so doing, be equipped to “agree in the Lord” and to help others to do so (4:2-3). The exemplar of this way of the heart is Paul himself, the one whose lifestyle, if emulated by the Philippians, will bring them closer to the “God of peace” (4:9).

PAUL’S SPIRITUALITY OF LESS ANXIOUS LEADERSHIP

Paul’s spirituality of being and doing before an anxious, conflicted church presents a model for congregational leadership in today’s anxious times. A series of disciplines marks the pathway toward this impacting spirituality.

First, in 4:2-3 there is the discipline of **obedience**. Paul’s language is strong, urgent, and is repeated for emphasis, “I *plead* with Euodia and I *plead* with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord.” The word *phronein* requires the disputants not only see eye-to-eye but also to have positive feelings toward each other, restoring a “total harmony of life.”⁶ Nothing short of complete reconciliation will do. No distancing into a superficial harmony. No triangling of others to do the hard work of peacemaking that the conflicted themselves must do. The parties must convene and resolve their differences. Paul’s joy would not be complete until they were completely “like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and in purpose” (2:2). The contributions of these two who had “contended side by side” with Paul were far too valuable for the disagreement to weaken their testimony. The assistance of the faithful community, the “loyal yokefellow,” (4:3) should be brought in to support this obedience.

Leaders in anxious churches are called upon for bold leadership and to remind persons of their duty before God. Lowering the bar by allowing others to harbor or express various shades of hatred, resist peace-

ful overtures, stonewall efforts at conversation, or become willful not only destroys the prospects of peace but also constitutes an abdication of shepherdly oversight. Coddling disobedience compromises the church's immune system and allows the leaven of discord to spread like a virus. To arrest this sickness, leaders must refuse to become host cells to the viral strains, always pushing persons back to the lofty biblical standard of relational integrity, doing this as gently as possible but no less urgently than is necessary. The "holy manners" that should distinguish the faith community from the world are usually in short supply when churches become conflicted, but leaders should never allow anything less to be characteristic of their flocks. They should pose the questions such as "what does the Lord require of us here?" and be ready with humble instruction toward biblical peacemaking, using convening strategies to bring disputants to peace. The empowerment to lead others into this obedience is provided by the disciplines that follow.

Leaders must have a vision for what the church, in union with God, is destined to be and do.

The second discipline in 4:4-5 is that of **celebration**, which may be defined as "focusing on the joy of our salvation and on our gratitude for God's good gifts. We replace anxiety and fear with 'holy delight and joy' in our response to God's work in our lives."⁷ Paul had this in mind when he redirected the focus of the church away from their disagreements and toward a joyful assessment of God's activity that transcended their current distress. He reminds them, "Rejoice ... Rejoice ... the Lord is at hand."

Anxiety often constricts our vision and restricts our ability to see solutions to our difficulties and the progress God is making toward his will for mankind. A popular curriculum rightly emphasizes the fact that God is always at work in the world around us and that wherever we see God at work, we should rejoice in that. This attentiveness to God arrests our anxious preoccupation with self-interest by reminding us that our conflicts may be mere sand-lot scrimmages with low stakes as opposed to the high-stake struggles in which heaven wants us to engage. It forces us to ask, "Who are we to persist in this trifle when God has more important things for us to do?" Whether this rejoicing is done in silence, solitude, or corporate worship, there should be an intentional effort to saturate ourselves with the ever-present reality of a powerful God.

Leaders must have a vision for what the church, in union with God, is destined to be and do. Out of their own quiet reflection and Spirit-led insight into the kingdom possibilities that surround them, they draw public attention to the amazing work of God, and call others, especially conflicted parties, to lay aside the lesser and reach toward the greater (3:13-4:1). This is not the excessive "happy talk" of conflict-avoidant, risk-averse leaders who want to merely cover up serious issues that lie in the subterrain of their congregations.⁸ In contrast, this practice of celebration is concurrent with the tough obedience that faces issues head-on, in keeping with the first discipline. It is a responsible joy that, while engaging the "messiness of ministry," refuses to be limited by the finite and maintains a faithful gaze toward God, sustaining the irrational confidence that despite every disappointing feature of the church, God still empowers them for ministry that is beyond imagination.

Such visioning is done, however, in the midst of flawed assemblies and the discouraging effects of our fallen behavior. In anxious times, leaders are prone to worry, to lose sleep, to become irritable. They are not at their best. The third discipline of **prayer** becomes the fundamental way of reestablishing peace in such environments (4:6-7). Paul describes it as the first line of defense against anxiety, that we "in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present our requests to God." The promise follows, that "the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." The phrase, "the peace of God," is found nowhere else in the New Testament. It describes the peace which God himself has. This is most likely a reflection of the Hebrew *shalom*, which conveys the image of completeness, soundness, unity and harmony. *Shalom* was the foundation for the belief that the world is not chaotic

but purposeful. It expresses the fulfillment that comes to human beings when they experience God's presence (cf. 4:5, "the Lord is near").

We may broaden this discipline to encompass many of the more reflective disciplines such as confession, fasting, journaling, meditation, silence, and solitude. It points to regular communication with God, talking and listening to him in both protracted periods of quiet concentration and constant missives during normal life. The outcome is a less-anxious, focused life that helps one to live above the circumstances, recapturing the joy that is discussed in the verses above.

Recent literature attests to the fact that less-anxious leadership is required of those who minister to troubled churches.⁹ Leaders must learn the skill of differentiating oneself from external circumstances and reflecting objectively on events in order to conceive and follow the best courses of action. The literature rightly discusses how this may involve overcoming a reactive emotional constitution that comes from one's family system, perhaps even with deliberate efforts at rewiring the dysfunctional parts of our circuitry. Much of the literature, however, is noticeably quiet about the divine power that transcends human effort and equips one with a supra-rational gift of peace, a personal harmony with God "which transcends all understanding" (4:7).

Putting aside debates as to whether one's tendencies toward anxious leadership are from nature or nurture, there is bedrock assurance that prayer provides a supernatural endowment of peace necessary for leading anxious churches. Some may need more disciplined effort than others, but the only assurance that God, not merely man, is at work, is for ministry to be saturated with prayer. The clarity of spiritual discernment may take time, but the divine peace is more often immediate.

Apart from this discipline, a leader is limited to self-reliance. Even with thorough knowledge of the principles and skills of leading anxious emotional systems, one may fail. The power for doing less-anxious leadership is found in being in intimate communion with the peace-giving God. His sovereign rule over creation provides the only true immunity to chaos, and the *shalom* he offers to those who depend upon him is the only true antidote to anxiety.

Practicing this discipline of prayer "develops the reflexes of our souls."¹⁰ Anxious, conflicted churches tend to politicize leaders, treating them as elected representatives and pressuring them to cave in to dissent

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or to act rashly to champion the agenda of this or that faction. They demand quick solutions without allowing the time for adequate deliberation. In these and many other ways, such churches push leaders to be reactive and rash. If a leader's soul is ordered by God's peace and is free of its own internal chaos, not shamed by its own inadequacies but made confident by God's sustaining grace and power, one is free to

lead from a peaceful spiritual center. Such a leader is not easily politicized, polarized, or threatened.

The fourth discipline builds upon obedience, celebration, and prayer, translating into *a way of viewing and treating others*. A healthy leader begins to view people, especially people who are conflicted, in a different light. Anxious reactivity leads us to think of all conflicts in terms of for-or-against, as contests to be won. Often the conflict is personalized resulting in blaming, faultfinding, and accusations. Less-anxious leadership sees people more hopefully. Also, during conflict, one may ruminate about such things as getting even or spreading falsehood. Less-anxious leadership practices a more constructive mental discipline that devises favorable scenarios. This is the fourth discipline of principled relationships (4:8).

The passage in 4:8 is popularly set forth as Paul's prescription for a positive mental attitude. Certainly the verse is positive and it does convey a mental discipline ("*think* on these things"), but the purpose is more specific. This verse presents the relational outcome of a heart that is at peace with God. Not only does one

emerge with a more joyful assessment of life (4:4-5) and a deeper spiritual dependence and empowerment (4:6-7) but also with an improvement in relationships (4:8). We begin to interact with people from a posture of grace rather than self-righteous judgment.

Note carefully how the terms describe what we see in others or what we contemplate in our relationships with them—noble, lovely, admirable, excellent, praiseworthy. In terms of how we view others, we follow that which is *true*, rather than piecing together selective data that perpetuates a false or inadequate impression. We emphasize how others are *admirable, excellent, and praiseworthy* rather than giving disproportionate or exaggerated attention to their faults. These words also apply to how we contemplate our own actions toward others. For example, we reflect on how to act *nobly* and with *pure* motives. This obviously leads to more principled behavior.

PAUL'S PRACTICE OF LESS ANXIOUS LEADERSHIP

A survey of Philippians gives evidence of Paul's own practice of the spirituality he described in 4:4-8. He encouraged the Philippians: "Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." The Philippians were to draw upon a long history of association with Paul, gaining insight from his behavioral pattern and following his example in the path toward peace. The letter itself shows this behavioral pattern, showing how Paul's own obedience (4:2-3), celebration (4:4-5), prayer (4:6-7), and principled relationships (4:8) shaped his leadership.

A person with a spirituality of leadership as described in these verses is likely to become more like Paul and be able to respond in the following ways:

- Reassure followers of one's belief in them and of unconditional love and affection (1:3-5, 7-8)
- Reframe difficult experiences as an opportunity for spiritual formation (1:6; 9-11)
- Remind others of how God uses adversity to advance the gospel (1:12-14)
- Rejoice in the productive ministry of healthy persons (1:15-18)
- Refuse to become hooked into the dysfunction of others by anxious reactivity (1:15-18)
- Restore confidence that prayer and divine intervention will equip the faithful to prevail over circumstances and ensure the sustained progress and joy in the faith (1:19-26)
- Repeatedly emphasize the call of corporate unity (1:27-30)
- Redirect preoccupation with self-interest and frustration over unrealized personal goals toward an intentional concentration on others' welfare and the mutual benefit of the body (2:1-18)
- Redeem opportunities to highlight the servant spirit of exemplary believers and describe it in terms of the healthy behaviors that should be imitated (2:19-30)
- Rebuke legalistic spirituality and refocus the congregation on healthy spiritual disciplines (3:1-4:1)
- Reconcile conflicted parties and encourage the congregation to hold these persons accountable (4:2-3)
- Repeat the certain truth of God's sovereign presence and redemptive work among them (4:4-5)
- Redirect anxieties into prayer and thanksgiving, helping them to rejoice and be at peace in God's control and the constant evidence of his care (4:4-7)
- Refocus attention on the hopeful attributes of others, especially in the lives of those with whom they differ (4:8)
- Reveal a less anxious presence that is not controlled by the surrounding anxieties (4:9-13)
- Receive and praise every act of kindness shown, even when the kindness was not required (4:14-19).

THE ANXIOUS CHURCH NOW AND THE PAULINE SPIRITUALITY OF LEADERSHIP

Church conflicts are on the rise. This is not likely to change in the foreseeable future. The temptation is for leaders to look for quick solutions without addressing the transformation that needs to occur in them and their followers. Certainly the quest for solutions is important and necessary. Paul's relationship with

the Philippians reminds us, however, that a more fundamental need is for our leadership to emerge from a spiritual center rooted in God's presence and power. This will cause us to aim ourselves and others toward whatever obedience is called for, all the while celebrating God's redemptive presence, requesting his powerful intervention, and hopefully pursuing constructive relational outcomes. This was Paul's way of being and doing, a spirituality of leadership that allowed him to minister effectively to an anxious church. No less is necessary for our own effectiveness.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 See Bowen Center for the Study of the Family at www.georgetownfamilycenter.org/.
- 2 The effect of uncivil behavior on congregations is discussed in an excellent volume by Gil Rendle, *Behavioral Covenants in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001).
- 3 See the excellent discussion by Gil Rendle, "The Illusion of Congregational 'Happiness,'" in *Conflict Management in Congregations* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 2001), pp. 83-94.
- 4 Kenneth Haugk, *Antagonists in the Church* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg, 1988), 39-40.
- 5 Jim Herrington, R. Robert Creech, Trisha Taylor, *The Leader's Journey: Accepting the Call to Personal and Congregational Transformation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 132.
- 6 Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43. (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 178.
- 7 Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, 163.
- 8 See John P. Kotter's description of the over-managed and under-led corporate culture in *Leading Change* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business School Press, 1996), 28.
- 9 In addition to Herrington, Creech, and Taylor referenced above, see Peter L. Steinke, *How Your Church Family Works: Understanding Congregations as Emotional Systems* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1993), and *Healthy Congregations: A Systems Approach* (Herndon, VA: Alban Institute, 1996); Ronald W. Richardson, *Creating a Healthier Church: Family Systems Theory, Leadership, and Congregational Life* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1996).
- 10 Herrington, Creech, and Taylor, 133.

