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... With the Affection of Christ. . . Paul and the Philippians A MODEL FOR RELATIONSHIP IN MINISTRY

By Shelley G. Neilson

How close is too close? In the complex process of becoming a family, is it possible for members to be too connected? Intimacy and interdependence can be positive within a family system (a system being an organism or organization having a number of parts that work together), if they are balanced with healthy levels of differentiation. Healthy families allow individuals to form separate identities; less functional families hinder the development of self-reliance. When boundaries between persons are blurred, the family is said to be enmeshed. This means that, in the process of becoming a cohesive system, individual identities have become "so tightly wound up with their family that there is no healthy separateness."¹ While enmeshed families "offer a heightened sense of support, [it is] at the expense of independence and autonomy."² Members of such a family find themselves unable to relate to those outside the family, to make decisions, or to achieve any sense of personal identity without reference to other family members. An enmeshed family is unhealthy. Human beings were created to be autonomous individuals who by early adulthood have formed a sense of who they are independent of their families of origin. A loss of personal identity compromises an individual's capacity to be fully functional. Even in the most intimate of relationships, a degree of separateness is essential in order for each individual to continue to grow and achieve his personal potential and in order for the shared relationship to deepen in meaningful ways.

A number of years ago, when human individuality was being celebrated to excess, wedding ceremonies often included the words of Kahlil Gibran on marriage:

You shall be together even in the silent memory of God.

But let there be spaces in your togetherness,

And let the winds of the heavens dance between you.

Love one another but make not a bond of love:

Fill each other's cup but drink not from one cup.

Give one another of your bread,

but eat not from the same loaf.

Sing and dance together and be joyous,

but let each one of you be alone.

Even as the strings of a lute are alone though they
quiver

with the same music.

Give your hearts, but not into each other's keeping.

For only the hand of Life can contain your hearts.

And stand together, yet not too near together:

For the pillars of the temple stand apart,

And the oak tree and the cypress grow not
in each other's shadow.³ (emphasis added)

This passage poetically glorifies an image of individuality that is not altogether unhealthy. While some would argue that marriage is intended to unite two individuals into one, others would contend that a healthy distinction between partners should be maintained. In intimate relationships where joys and sorrows are shared, inner thoughts

are expressed, and hearts are laid bare, there is the risk of unguarded intimacy. This intimacy can be damaging, due in part to the human tendency of the strong to push for advantage over the weak.

The risk of unguarded intimacy is also great within the church. Theories of family psychology need not be stretched much at all to view the church as a family system, though of course on a much larger scale. Like an immediate family, a congregation of believers is a "collection of individuals in a living and developing system whose members are essentially connected."⁴ But just like a family, church members can become too cohesive, resulting in a lack of separate identities. When members become enmeshed and lose their capacity to develop as individuals, they tend to "hang onto others rather than to let them go, to focus on others rather than on themselves, to be obsessed with the salvation of others rather than their own."⁵ Christians are called to personal relationships with Christ, and thus need a sense of their own spiritual identities. At the same time, Christians form the body of Christ and thus seek corporately to glorify and serve him, who is the head. Herein lies the challenge.

It is the dichotomy of this existence that causes confusion in the church concerning how fellow believers should relate to one another. Members who come together sharing a common love for God and a common sorrow for sin quickly develop intimacy. Together they celebrate the joy of redemption and they praise the God of creation who has called them into his presence. Fears are exposed, sins are confessed, and hearts are laid bare—not only before the Lord, but before one another. Those called out to minister are summoned to encourage and to offer words of healing on behalf of the Lord. They become the presence of God in the lives of vulnerable people. Ministers have at their disposal the power to dominate, the authority to control, and the opportunity to tie the affections of others to themselves.

Without some understanding of the intended nature of relationships within the Christian community, ministers (I use this term for all Christians who offer service in the name of the Lord, whether it be as a caring friend; loving prayer partner; mentor to a new convert; deacon; elder; counselor; or associate, youth, or pulpit minister) may unwittingly initiate the development of unhealthy relationships.

The implications are many. A pulpit minister may use his personal magnetism and skill to attract attention to

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and dependence on himself instead of the Lord. A charismatic leader can have a seemingly positive effect on a congregation. He can "galvanize a family into quick action, take an emotional system that has been down in the doldrums and lift it rapidly to great heights, and in a short period of time produce an efficient organization that moves as one toward a clearly articulated goal."⁶ However, charismatic leaders tend to cause a "high degree of emotional interdependency . . . and to create clones among their followers rather than individuals."⁷

The responsibility of avoiding enmeshment does not lie solely with preachers. All members (though especially those in leadership roles) may find themselves in positions of power over a brother or sister that must be handled prayerfully to avoid enmeshment. Elders who insist on dictating personal matters in the lives of a congregation may foster improper dependency. Counselors who listen to intimate details of a person's life may forge inappropriate bonds if they engage themselves personally in a client's pain and make themselves available to meet his or her emotional needs. Mentors "who abuse the principles of discipleship by trying to run others' lives, [requiring disciples] to get permission to miss church, make major household purchases, date, marry, leave town for vacation and so on, have completely misapplied the model of relating which exists within the pages of scripture."⁸

Those are examples of what Dietrich Bonhoeffer calls "human absorption. It appears in all the forms of conversion wherever the superior power of one person is consciously or unconsciously misused to influence profoundly and draw into his spell another individual or a whole community. Here one soul operates directly upon another soul. The weak have been overcome by the strong."⁹

The apostle Paul seems to have grasped the interpersonal risks involved in being a minister of the gospel. When he set out to spread the good news, he shared his story, he proclaimed the truth, and he nurtured relationships. But he did the latter very carefully. His association with those he nurtured in the Lord seems to have been guided by this adaptation of Gibran's words: "Let there be *Jesus* in our togetherness." That is not to say that he used Jesus as a

The independence evident in this letter indicates that Paul was able to win the Philippians to Christ without the complications of enmeshment

shield to fend off interpersonal involvement with those to whom he brought the gospel. Reading his letters provides ample evidence that Paul indeed engaged deeply in the lives of those he converted. When he settled in a particular place to share the gospel, he did not "simply organize a church, Paul founded, shaped and nurtured a community."¹⁰ This process of founding and shaping carried with it the same potential for enmeshment that exists in churches today. Paul had authority, he had influence, and he developed personal relationships with the people he led to Christ. He loved them deeply, he saw them at their most vulnerable, and yet instead of capitalizing on their vulnerabilities, Paul launched the churches he planted on their own journeys of faith apart from himself. How was he able to do that? How was he able to prevent a church like the one in Philippi from placing its allegiance in him, from becoming so entwined with him that it floundered without him?

Paul was able to accomplish those things because he understood the spiritual nature of relationships within the community of faith. He understood that spiritual love is not expressed in respect for human authority or in dependence on clever speakers or compassionate counselors; it is not even expressed in the love a minister shares for a soul he is nurturing. "Spiritual love proves itself in that everything it says and does commends Christ. . . . It will

respect the line that has been drawn between him and us by Christ, and it will find full fellowship with him in the Christ who alone binds us together."¹¹

While we have often looked to Paul as a model for evangelism, he demonstrates in his letters that he is also an appropriate model for relationships in personal ministry. In his letter to the Philippians, Paul reveals that he was "determined to be the way, not in the way; to speak and act in Christ's name not his own, to point to the Lord who sustains and not to his own personality."¹² That determination enabled Paul to be effective not only as an itinerant evangelist, but also as a personal minister.

Philippians is a beautiful example of Paul's personal ministry. It has been called "the antithesis of Romans," being "like a chat, the subject matter changing without notice as in an informal conversation between friends."¹³ However, Philippians is not a simple letter between casual friends. Indeed, clearly evident is the deep affection between the author and the audience to whom he refers, not only as fellow saints (1:1), but as "brothers" (1:12) and "dear friends" (2:12; 4:1). Paul celebrated the partnership they shared (1:5); he yearned to be with them (1:8); he drew from them a will to live (1:24-25); he loved and longed for them, referring to them as his joy and crown (4:1). Paul's letter is filled with the compassionate advice, loving reminders, wise admonitions, and tender blessings of not just a teacher, but a friend. And like a successful parent, Paul had the wisdom to recognize that one of the best things he could do as a friend and teacher was to give the Philippians their independence in the Lord.

The independence evident in this letter indicates that Paul was able to win the Philippians to Christ without the complications of enmeshment. This seems not to have been the case with the Corinthians, for Paul chides them (1 Cor 1:11-15) for quarreling about belonging to Apollos and Cephas. (They later seemed to correct their misaligned allegiance, for Paul commends the Corinthians in his second letter for standing firm in their faith [2 Cor 1:24].) In Philippians, Paul praises the Christians for shining "like stars in the universe as [they] hold out the word of life" (2:15). Without him they had achieved spiritual independence, an independence made possible in part by the fact that they were without him. He brought the gospel, helped them establish a faith community, and then took his leave. Henri Nouwen explains the effectiveness of this approach:

"There is a ministry in which our leaving creates space for God's spirit and in which, by our absence, God can become present in a new way."¹⁴ Paul reveals in his letter the effectiveness of his ministry among the Philippians and the value of his departure. Note verse 2:12: "Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed—not only in my presence, but now *much more in my absence* . . ." Their obedience increased when he was gone; they did not fall away. Paul trusted them to the care of the Holy Spirit, and his trust was validated.

Many in ministry today do see themselves as indispensable in the lives of those they serve. There is the tendency (and very often the expectation) for one who is ministering to be always available. "We live in a culture which places a great and positive emphasis on presence. We feel that being present is a value as such, . . . present to patients, and students, at services, Bible groups, etc."¹⁵ But present, as Paul shows, is not always better. Too often, the most well meaning Christian, ministering in the name of the Lord, *does* get in the way, when the best thing would be to simply step back and let the Holy Spirit work.

That is not to say that Paul taught on the run (though he may have been run out of town). An essential part of his nurturing was the model he provided. A call to imitation is common in his letters (1 Cor 4:16; Phil 3:17; 2 Thess 3:7, 9); "Paul's method of shaping a community was to gather its members around himself and by his own behavior to demonstrate what he taught."¹⁶ A situation like this could be dangerously prone to enmeshment. The Philippians trusted Paul, and "to trust is to commit oneself. To trust a person is to rely on that person and to allow oneself to be shaped by that person on a deep level, for the object of the trust shapes the truster. To trust a message is to rely on it, to act on it, to be shaped by it."¹⁷ For Paul, there was no separation between his identity and gospel message he preached. Every word, every choice, every action—his whole being—was a walking testimony. But it was a testimony made in the name of Jesus and not his own. Indeed, the Philippians *were* committed to Paul; yes, they *were* shaped by him. But when he called the Philippians to imitate him, it was only as he imitated Christ. They were to become "imitators of him as divine power, manifested in the gospel, was reflected in his life."¹⁸ The Philippians were not intended to be servants of Paul or

clones of Paul, but individuals transformed by the love of Christ, called to service in the name of Christ.

It would seem that the Philippians had developed a strong enough sense of their spiritual independence to answer that call. They knew where to direct their service, if indeed they are the Macedonians to whom Paul refers in 2 Corinthians 8:1–5: "They voluntarily gave according to their means, and even beyond their means, begging us

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earnestly for the privilege of sharing in this ministry to the saints—and this, not merely as we expected; they gave themselves *first to the Lord* and, by the will of God, to us." These people had their allegiance firmly planted not in Paul, but in the Savior who united them.

This observation demonstrates the primary reason why Paul was able to successfully establish a stable spiritual community. Paul made it very clear that their common bond lay in their citizenship in the kingdom of heaven, that it did not rest on their love for him as a brother or their respect for him as an authority figure. In 1:6 he stresses that it was the Holy Spirit at work in them that called them to the gospel; he does not take credit for their conversion. He held these people "in his heart," but his yearning was "with the affection of Christ" (1:8). It was clear for Paul that "Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ."¹⁹

Then in 4:14–19, a passage often overlooked though rich with important precedent, Paul demonstrates what community *in Christ* means by *carefully* acknowledging the generous gift that had been sent. Paul does not accept the gift as a personal favor; rather, "the giving and receiving from Philippi prompts Paul to move the whole transaction to the altar."²⁰ The gifts were a "fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God" (4:18). This passage, with all its seemingly impersonal accounting terms,

has been called "a thankless thanks,"²¹ when in fact it is a thanks replete with spiritual significance.

This was not the first time Paul had received gifts from Philippi (4:16). It would have been easy (in human terms) for him to feel indebted to the Philippians, or for them to feel that they had a vested interest in his life and ministry (how often do major contributors in churches today expect their own agendas to be heeded over the voices of those who do not fund their opinions?). But Paul in his wisdom was able to "relate the gift to ministry . . . and to God and not to himself personally. In other words, the intimacy of giving and receiving must be balanced with distance, discourteous as it may sound."²² It was to God's account that their gift would be credited, and appropriately so, for it was God and not Paul who would meet all their needs. In distancing himself by accepting their gift as an act of worship, Paul was not being ungrateful but was focusing the devotion of the Philippians on the Lord, who was the mediator of their relationship.

By establishing an intimacy with boundaries, Paul was able to avoid the problem of enmeshment with the Philippians. When he left the church in Philippi it was a "strong church which continued to show its fidelity to God and its love and concern for the apostle."²³ Paul accomplished a healthy intimacy with the Philippian church by fostering their dependence on not himself, but Christ; by presenting himself as a model for Christian living, yet calling the Philippians to follow not him, but Christ; and by understanding and ministering on the basis of the truth that Jesus Christ is the tie that binds members of the Christian family together. The life he lived was a testimony to the belief that "through him (Christ) alone do we have access to one another, joy in one another, and fellowship with one another."²⁴

When that essential truth is ignored, forgotten, or simply overlooked, enmeshment can become a problem in churches today. It is critical to the health of our churches for Christians to talk about what relationships mediated by Christ look like,²⁵ to be intentional about the decisions made and the actions taken, and to not allow feelings to dictate the process of ministering.

When ministry to others is rendered on human terms instead of spiritual, the bonds that are forged often lead to dependence, misunderstanding, and conflict. A congregation enmeshed with a charismatic preacher may flounder when he leaves, uncertain of how to proceed on its

faith journey. Disciples enmeshed with spiritual mentors may remain dependent on them and fail to connect with the congregation as a whole. Those in crisis, enmeshed with well-meaning counselors, may be unable to cope without continual contact with their advisors. However, in all of these relationships as well as others, if ministers are careful to place Christ as the mediator between themselves and those to whom they minister, they will serve, as did Paul, as sign posts directing others to the source of all knowledge, strength, maturity, and healing—God the Father and his Son the Savior, Jesus Christ.

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Notes

¹Jack O. Balswick and Judith K. Balswick, *The Family: A Christian Perspective on the Contemporary Home* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 69.

²Michael P. Nichols and Richard C. Schwartz, *Family Therapy, Concepts and Methods*, 3rd ed. (Needham Heights: Simon and Schuster, 1984), 214.

³Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 16–17.

⁴Charles Siburt, *Managing Conflict in Churches*, Session 4 (Seminar, Abilene Christian University, Spring 1994), 1.

⁵Edwin H. Friedman, *Generation to Generation: Family Process in Church and Synagogue* (New York: Guilford Press, 1985), 212.

⁶*Ibid.*, 226.

⁷*Ibid.*

⁸Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 39.

⁹Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1954), 32–33.

¹⁰Abraham J. Malherbe, *Paul and the Thessalonians: The Philosophic Tradition of Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 1.

¹¹Bonhoeffer, 36.

¹²Henri J. M. Nouwen, *The Living Reminder: Service and Prayer in Memory of Jesus Christ* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, nd), 47.

¹³Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 43 (Waco: Word Books, 1983), xlviii.

¹⁴Nouwen, 44.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁶Malherbe, 52.

¹⁷Leander E. Keck, *Paul and His Letters* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1988), 53.

¹⁸Malherbe, 58.

¹⁹Bonhoeffer, 21.

²⁰Fred B. Craddock, *Philippians*, Interpretation (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1985), 79.

²¹Hawthorne, 195.

²²Craddock, 78.

Notes continued on pg. 37