

1-1-1997

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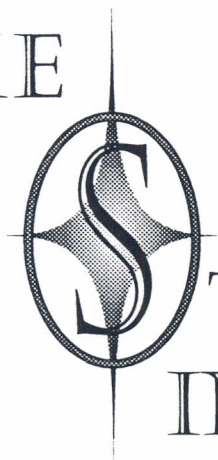
Recommended Citation

Smith, Dean (1997) "Like Stars in the Universe," *Leaven*: Vol. 5: Iss. 3, Article 6.

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LIKE



STARS

IN THE UNIVERSE

By Dean Smith

Exhausted, he hangs up the telephone after an extended conversation. It wasn't so much the length of the call that wore him out, as its content. He had been calling as an elder of the church just to check up on one of the members—one of the members who has seemed to lose interest lately, even for attending church. So he had called to ask how she was doing. She gave him an earful. The worship service is getting too long due to all of this "extra" singing every week. The temperature in the auditorium is never on a comfortable setting. The youth minister isn't doing enough to ensure that the teens are dressing appropriately for church on Sundays. The bulletin frequently has misspellings, and three months ago her daughter's wedding shower was completely overlooked. The litany of complaints went on and on until the conversation mercifully ended an hour later. He wonders if their conversation accomplished anything except to spoil a pleasant evening at home and interrupt her favorite TV show. After all, they never discussed any solutions—only problems. He reminds himself that this is just part of the job that elders do, but lately he's been wondering if it's a job *he* still wants to do.

She emerges from the bedroom after her telephone call to find her husband asleep as usual in front of the television. She doesn't know what came over her to keep talking so long. Her telephone conversations are never that long, but she just couldn't seem to stop once she got started.

Looking back, it surprises her to have spoken to an elder that way. She's known him since she and her family became members of that church twenty years ago. But a lot has changed since then. Back then she taught Sunday school. Now she doesn't even attend. Back then she volunteered in the church office and often typed the weekly bulletin. That's why she finds the mistakes so irritating. Back then her children were still at home and she was always hosting the teens for one kind of activity or another. Somehow the teens seemed more serious back then. She thinks of the people she has brought to that church over the past twenty years. Now she and her husband are so busy most weekends, they hardly make it themselves. As she looks at her sleeping husband, she wonders why they even go at all.

"Do all things without complaining or arguing . . ." (Phil 2:14). That seems like such a mundane request to follow one of the most memorable passages in all of the Bible (the "Christ hymn" of 2:6–11). After all, complaining and arguing are two of the most fundamental human activities. They come as naturally to us as speaking. So how can the apostle Paul seriously make such a request? Well actually, it's not a request. It's what is known in Greek as an *imperative*, one of four that occur in this brief section of Philippians (2:12–18). Another one is found two verses earlier, in verse 12: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. . . ." That would seem to suggest

that eliminating complaints and arguments from our everyday conversation is an important part of how we “work out” our salvation as God’s people. At least it’s a theory worth considering.

This passage (2:12–18)—the conclusion of a section that begins in 1:27—constitutes the second part of the body of the letter (1:12–4:20). In the first part (1:12–26), Paul informs the church that his recent imprisonment has actually served to “advance the gospel” (1:12) rather than impede its progress, as one might expect. For Paul, the “advance” of the gospel is a constant concern, as evidenced by his willingness to tolerate those who preach the gospel with false motives, and to suffer—even die—if that will exalt Christ (1:20) and encourage others to proclaim the gospel more boldly (1:14). In fact, one can safely say that Paul’s principal goal in life is to proclaim and exalt Christ throughout the world. No other desire even comes close.

That explains why Paul’s chief concern for the church is that they conduct themselves “in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ” (1:27). To be “worthy” here means “to be consistent with” the gospel of Christ. In other words, their conduct is to reflect the attitude and behavior of Christ, which Paul portrays in what many scholars believe is an early Christian hymn (2:6–11). In it, he describes how Jesus “emptied himself” of all divine privileges and prerogatives and took on the nature of a servant; how he was obedient to God’s purpose, even to the point of suffering a humiliating death as a criminal. It’s that example of humility and service Paul calls the church to emulate—the same example that will bring about their salvation.

And Paul is very concerned about their salvation. Not that somehow God’s grace is up for renegotiation, but that it’s always in danger of being squandered away, like Esau’s selling his birthright for a bowl of lentil soup. There are a host of enemies that are aligned against our salvation. Some, like the “circumcision party,” are always trying to convince us that the grace of God is simply too good to be true and, thus, to be trusted; that what we need to assure our salvation, especially when our emotions betray us, is a system—a series of steps, or habits, or truisms—to which we can devote ourselves until we attain perfection. Even in our enlightened, post-Reformation age, this danger is always with us. But perhaps Paul’s greatest fear for the church in Philippi is something far more subtle and in-

sidious—subtle because it arises from within their relationships with each other; insidious because its erosive effect on their faith and fellowship, although almost imperceptible at first, is no less lethal in the end. For in the end, it will spawn division and will eventually undermine and destroy their unity. Indeed, perhaps Paul’s greatest fear for the Philippian church is their complaining and arguing.

Now that should come as some surprise to most of us who have been led to believe that this letter is the only one in which Paul doesn’t address some problem in the church. In fact, I’ve even heard some preachers eagerly exclaim that the church in Philippi was probably the closest to spiritual perfection of any church in the history of Christianity. However, a closer examination, perhaps prompted by our own experience in church, yields a more realistic assessment. You can see it in the appeal Paul makes to the church to help Euodia and Syntyche work out their differences and “agree with each other in the Lord” (4:2). Or in the cautious, some would even say stoic, way that Paul addresses the subject of his need and their monetary gift. Or in Paul’s repeated concern for unity in the church—that they “stand firm in *one* spirit, striving with *one* mind for the faith of the gospel” (1:27). But it’s most obvious in his appeal for them to “do all things without complaining or arguing” (2:14).

Making it even more clear is Paul’s fear for how this church will behave in his absence. Not that he’s unduly anxious, but he does express a concern that’s understandable given the obvious intimacy of their fellowship with one another. As Richard John Neuhaus once noted, “The clearer the intention and the greater the intensity, the harder one must work at sustaining community.”¹ Paul has experienced a remarkable “partnership” with them. But now he faces the real possibility that his temporary absence from them might become permanent in his death. Perhaps that’s why his thoughts turn to Moses’ “farewell” speech in Deuteronomy 32. From it he draws the image of the Philippian church as “blameless and innocent, children of God without blemish”—an inverse image. You see, in Deuteronomy 32, Moses describes Israel as a “corrupt” and “shameful” people who, because of their unfaithfulness to God, became a “crooked and perverse generation.” Perhaps it is that image of Israel’s unfaithfulness that provokes Paul’s concern as well as his recognition of one of the underlying causes—murmuring, or complaining.

Whining, or complaining, is a sickness that affects every church, and in too many churches it's become an epidemic.

In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul warns the Corinthian church of that same story of Israel in the wilderness. He reminds them that Israel, like them, had also been baptized in the sea and had all shared the same spiritual food and drink, yet most of them displeased God and never reached the promised land. And one of the reasons they displeased God was that they “murmured,” or complained, in the wilderness. These things were recorded as warnings for us, Paul writes. “So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!” (1 Cor 10:12). Well, “standing firm” is precisely what Paul wants the Philippian church to do, so his warning to avoid “complaining and arguing” seems entirely appropriate.

Complaining, like arguing, is an activity that serves no fruitful purpose. Instead, it's debilitating, serving only to weaken both the giver and the receiver. Murmuring is a lot like what we call “whining.” You know, that irritating and irresponsible habit of pointing out all the problems in life without feeling any obligation to provide, or even seek, any solutions. Indeed, the search for solutions quickly undermines the whole enterprise of murmuring and reduces it to constructive criticism, something whiners steadfastly avoid. No, whiners aren't seeking the kind of spiritual health and wholeness that exemplifies salvation. Whiners are enjoying ill health.

Whining, or complaining, is a sickness that affects every church, and in too many churches it's become an epidemic. Like a cancerous cell, it exists for no other purpose than to perpetuate itself. It does so by shifting the focus in our lives—from self-examination to condemning others, from solutions to problems, from maturity to immaturity, from trusting in God to work out our differences (Phil 3:15) to trusting in the superiority of our knowledge and analytical skills. And, most importantly, it shifts our focus from the transcendent, all-encompassing goal of

exalting Christ and proclaiming his gospel to the mundane concerns of our own comforts and desires—concerns which, when they become our primary focus, feed on themselves and trap us in the egocentric cycle of selfishness from which Jesus came to save us in the first place.

Arguing has that same effect. The particular word that Paul uses here (*dialogismos*) has a wide range of meanings, from anxiety and doubt to dispute and argument. The latter meaning probably best fits this context, for it carries with it the connotation of futile or speculative arguments—the kind of arguments that, like complaining, have no particular goal but to perpetuate the process. And when we engage in this activity, it, like complaining, traps us in an egocentric cycle from which we may eventually feel powerless to extricate ourselves—like a sweatshirt I once saw that read: “Help me, I'm talking and I can't shut up!”

An endless cycle of complaining and arguing will eventually drain us of all spiritual strength. It will slowly cloud our thinking and corrupt our hearts until we begin to accept our own jaundiced perspective. Soon, anger and fear will edge out faith and hope so that love can no longer grow. And then the sacrifices and disciplines of a new life in Christ will begin to look like problems and burdens in our lives instead of our salvation. Is it any wonder that those who are locked in this futile cycle invariably lose both the desire to be “living sacrifices” (Rom 12:1) for God and the joy that characterizes such a commitment? As Paul approaches the end of his life and ministry, he faces the prospect of his life being “poured out” like a drink offering upon the “sacrificial offering” of their faith. The thought that their sacrifice, their “offering,” might be blemished by complaining and arguing and thus rendered unacceptable is more than he can bear.

But all of this pales in comparison to Paul's greatest concern, which is also his greatest desire—that the gospel of Christ be proclaimed. You see, because complaining and arguing is a self-perpetuating, futile, and, eventually, all-consuming activity, it leaves no room for the purpose and will of God. It reminds me of one of Aesop's ancient fables, the story of a man who rents a donkey to cross the desert. Sitting astride the donkey as the owner leads it along, he thinks of the measure of relief he will enjoy when they eventually stop and he can sit in the shadow of the donkey. Soon they stop, and he dismounts to discover the owner of the donkey already sitting in the donkey's “shadow for one.” This leads to an argument about which

one of them is entitled to sit in the donkey's shadow. Is it the one who rented the donkey or the one who owns it? The argument is futile, since neither is willing to submit and share. It ends in violence, the two men rolling around in the sand fighting for their rights. Meanwhile, the donkey runs away. Aesop's simple moral is this: Sometimes, while arguing about the shadow, we lose the substance.

Let me be very plain. All across America churches are experiencing decline, which has opened up a lively debate over causes and possible solutions. Everywhere you look these days, Christians are discussing every facet of the church's mission and work. Unfortunately, this discussion has often degenerated into the kind of complaining and arguing that Paul addresses in Philippians. Such complaining and arguing is futile because it is not focused on resolution or submission, but on the simple assertion of our rights and privileges—the shadows of our identity and mission, if you will. And we are at risk of losing the substance of both.

Now, lest I become a “whining example” of this very phenomenon, let me suggest that there is hope—real hope. Most churches, like the one Paul addresses in Philippi, are not on the verge of division and dissolution, but the fault lines are beginning to show. That is precisely why Paul addresses himself to this issue, before the “sickness leads to death.” In many ways, our situation reminds me of the isolated outbreaks of polio that have occurred in recent years because people who are not old enough to remember the devastating effects of polio have neglected to inoculate their children. Make no mistake about it—when complaining and arguing go unchecked in our churches or in our lives, the final result is spiritual death. So the first step is to recognize the danger of this phenomenon and to offer it no encouragement nor even tolerance.

But the next step is found in Paul's admonition to “work out your own salvation with fear and trembling”—not simply their individual salvation, but the salvation of the entire church. Paul's use of the plural pronoun is a reminder that they are inextricably bound to one another in Christ. So, he writes, live out the example and attitude of Christ who kept himself focused on the goal—the salvation of the world—and make that your goal as well. The seemingly personal, private, and innocuous habit of complaining is in reality a public menace, because it does not lead to the resolution of problems nor to the reconciliation of relationships. Complaining is thus incompatible with the life of faith in God. It is a “work of the flesh,” which, as Paul reminds the church in Rome, not only will not submit to God's rule, it *cannot* submit to God's rule. So get serious about this seemingly innocuous habit, Paul writes, before, like termites in the foundation, it destroys the substance of your fellowship and your glorious mission.

And if we do, then in the midst of a “perverse and crooked generation” where complaining and arguing and its deadly fruits are so evident, we will “shine like stars in the universe, holding fast the word of life.” We will once again be “the light” to a world that is stuck in this futile cycle, rather than simply a reflection of its destructive values.

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Notes

¹Richard John Neuhaus, *Freedom for Ministry: A Guide for the Perplexed Who Are Called to Serve*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992), 124.