

## **The Secret of Christian Community**

### **Phil 1:1-11**

English is a great language

because there are always new words being added to our dictionaries.

A couple of years ago the word 'selfie' was given the official nod:

a picture you take with your camera of yourself.

There's another newish phrase that particular to our church culture,

and that's the idea of 'church-shopping'

as in "I've moved to a new area, and so now I'm church-shopping."

It's all about having a look around at what's on offer at the various churches,

doing your homework before you take the plunge,

just like you might do your homework before buying a new car.

It can be easy to be cynical about it,

but it does reflect something quite positive about our local context,

in that, church-shopping requires lots of churches,

and if there are lots of good churches then that is surely a good thing.

Unless this is the church you have grown up in,

then presumably all of us went through some kind of process

before we made our final decision to come *here*.

It may have been a long time ago,

but can you remember what it was that you were looking for?

My observation is that there are a number of classic criteria

that the modern church-shopper will be looking for.

The quality of Biblical teaching is one of them

[The quality of the music is another]

If it's a family that's looking, then the children's ministry is important

But perhaps one of the biggest is the potential for friendship.

"Will I be able to form friendships here"

That's the questions many church-shoppers are asking.

Not all of them, it must be added.

Some people love a good sermon but they're incredibly shy

and so community might not be as high on their list.

But it is true that for many the potential for Christian community is vital.

It also follows that these are the areas that people have the most grievances over.

They'll notice when these areas are not done well:

"I don't like the teaching, I don't like the music",

and yes, "I don't like the quality of fellowship".

"We have terrible community!"

That was the lament I remember hearing from one friends a few years back.

What quality of fellowship did the Apostle Paul enjoy?

Was his experience of the early church  
one that forced him to throw his hands up in frustration—  
“We have terrible community!”

Well, let me read again a couple of verses from our opening passage in Philippians

Ch 1 vs3-4 I thank my God every time I remember you.  
In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy

And a bit further on in v 7 It is right for me to feel this way about all of you,  
since I have you in my heart ...

And then in verse 8 God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus.

When was the last time someone at church ever said to you “I have you in my heart!”

So, I ask again, what was Paul’s experience of community like?

Well, it was joy-filled, it was affectionate, it was expressive,  
it was the kind of community that some people are longing for,  
and perhaps the kind of community that others are a bit wary of.

Today I’d like to explore the dynamics

of the relationship Paul enjoyed with the Philippian church.

How did they engineer this incredible warmth?

Today’s passage, the first in our Philippians series, will give us some ideas.

Have a look again at verses 3-4,

I thank my God every time I remember you.  
In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy  
because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.

The joy and thankfulness that overwhelmed Paul when thinking of these guys

was not something that just happened,  
it wasn’t just because they managed to start off on the right foot  
or because they grew up together  
or because their kids played in the same football team,  
Paul is really clear about how this bond was created:  
It came about because they were working together to promote the gospel.  
The key to Christian community is *gospel partnership*:  
It’s making the decision that you are going team up with others  
to promote the message about Jesus.  
Fellowship happens when you unite together in a common mission.

How did the Philippians do this? Well, Paul is writing this letter from prison in Rome.

In the final chapter of his letter he thanks the Philippians for a financial gift that they sent, and for the person that they sent with the gift, Epaphroditus, someone the Philippians had sent to take care of Paul’s needs. Paul was the great gospel preacher, and the Philippians were a group of believers whose

aim was to support and care for Paul as he conducted his ministry. It was a partnership where each side was working to promote the gospel. What was the result? Well, the gospel of Jesus was announced—that was one result—but also a deep bond was forged between the two parties.

When you walk into a church and you are thinking about the potential for fellowship, perhaps the first question shouldn't be "do these people look like friends" but rather "is there opportunity to get involved in ministry".

That way you get two for one:

you're promoting Jesus *and* creating community at the same time.

I think this is particularly important for Christian men to realize.

For many men—not all, but for many—

the relational nature of church can be a bit of an obstacle.

If you want men to enjoy church and relate to one another

then it helps if they have a task or an activity,

it helps if there's a goal to pursue.

And the goal, according to Paul,

a goal that takes lots of different players to achieve,

is the announcement of the gospel,

the announcement about who Jesus is

and what he has done for us.

Now, if you imagine that Christian community is loaf of bread,

the oven in which it is baked is the task of gospel partnership;

working together will help you bake the loaf of friendship.

But, you can't bake a loaf unless you have the right ingredients to begin with.

Even before we allow the task of Christian ministry to foster friendship

there's something else that needs to be in place to begin with.

Verse 6: being confident of this,

that he who began a good work in you

will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.

It doesn't have to be a Christian mission that enables you to have friends;

you can form friendships over all sorts of shared goals: bushwalking, politics.

wherever there is a common objective there is the potential for fellowship.

But Christian community goes deeper than that.

What ultimately binds us together is that God is at work within each of us.

In v6 Paul casts his mind back to when God first moved among his friends.

We read about this in Acts 16, where we are told that the Lord

opened the heart of a woman named Lydia to receive Paul's message.

We read how the superintendent of the gaol in Philippi

was baptized after listening to Paul

and after witnessing Paul's miraculous release from his prison cell.

This was the beginning of God's good work in the Philippians,  
 a work which Paul himself had experienced  
 when he came to believe in Jesus on the Damascus road.  
 Even though they came from different parts of the world,  
 even though they would have come from different social backgrounds,  
 what united them ultimately was a the common work of God in each of them,  
 a work leading all of them to see and accept Jesus as Lord and Saviour.  
 As Paul puts it at the end of verse 7: all of you share in God's grace with me

I remember hearing a story of an Australian prisoner of war during WWII.  
 His name is Keith Marr and he was captured by the Japanese  
 and held in the infamous Changi prisoner of war camp.  
 The prisoners were allowed the use of a chapel during the day,  
 but Keith would sneak into the chapel at night and pray in the cool darkness.  
 One time he had snuck into the chapel and was bringing his requests to god  
 When he heard the bamboo door swing open  
 and his eye caught the outline of a Japanese guard entering the building.  
 Keith held his breath thinking, "This is it. Caught in a restricted area ..."  
 The guard made his way to where Keith was sitting  
 and in very broken English asked "Are you Christian?". "Yes" said Keith,  
 "Me too" said the Japanese guard. And the two men sat together for a bit,  
 before the guard told Keith that better not be caught doing that again.

But isn't that a great illustration of the reality of Christian fellowship?  
 Different cultures and different tasks—  
 their task as soldiers was to destroy one another—  
 but trumping all that was the work of God that was underway in each man.

How does this basis of God's work in us affect our fellowship here at church?  
 Well, one application is that Christian community isn't based on performance.  
 In other communities you might form friendships based on a common task  
 but that may not be enough to maintain the friendship;  
 if you're not contributing well enough you might find yourself on the outer.  
 Or, if your friendship is based on mutual benefit,  
 then when that benefit is no longer available  
     maintaining that relationship might no longer be a priority.  
 But when your friendship is based on what God is doing, and when,  
 as Paul says in verse 6, when this is a continuing work of God,  
 then the relationship remains and continues no matter how badly we do.  
 Christian community is not a product of fair-weather friendship (familiar?)

What this means is that we don't give up on each other.  
 Christian communities are never going to be perfect,  
 they are never going to be exactly what we might hope for  
 but despite our imperfections we work hard on forbearance and forgiveness,  
 Why? Because we recognize we have a bond that deeper than the quality of

our friendship; we all share in the same grace that God has shown us in the Lord Jesus.

Another practice that will be evident within our community  
will be the prayers that we offer on behalf of one another.

Have a look at Paul's prayer for his Philippian friends, from verse 9 And this is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight,<sup>10</sup> so that you may be able to discern what is best and may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ,<sup>11</sup> filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ—to the glory and praise of God.

Paul doesn't wait for the Philippians to pass on their own prayer requests, He already knows some good things to pray for and so he gets straight to it.

He asks that the Philippians might continue with the path their already on,  
They've shown great care and love for Paul and so he asks God that their love may abound more and more  
But to this Paul adds a request concerning his friend's minds,  
that their love might grow alongside their knowledge,  
that they might be blessed with a depth of insight so they can discern what is best.  
Paul wants his friends to be *wise*:  
to be able to discern those things that are pleasing to God  
and to be able to recognize those things that are displeasing;  
to choose a path which leads to a life of righteousness;  
to choose a life that will shine brightly on the day Christ comes to judge us;  
a life that will bring glory to God and not one that will bring him dishonor.

I wonder whether your own prayers are concerned with these kinds of requests.  
Every night either Jas or myself will pray with and for Theo.  
Most often we both do.  
Already I've noticed in myself a tendency to pray for things in the sort term:  
"Help him sleep all the way through Lord!"  
Often I pray for things that are important, but not specifically about his faith:  
"Father, I ask that he might be kept healthy"  
And since we've known about Theo, as soon as we found out Jas was pregnant, we've been praying that he would know Jesus as his Lord and Saviour.

But this prayer from Paul goes even deeper, doesn't it?  
"I pray that my friends might really know what's best in your eyes Lord,  
I pray they will make really goodly decisions, godly decisions,  
may their lives be filled with righteousness!"  
Is this how we are praying? Is this what we pray for ourselves?  
Is this what we actually want for our friends and family?  
We all want to be happy, we all want our loved ones to be happy,  
But do we want holiness as well? It's what Paul wanted for his friends,  
and so it's a good prayer for our own community as well.

Let me close by drawing your attention once more to the red booklets you received.  
*Opportunities to Serve*

Given what we've seen in our passage from Philippians today  
I think this booklet could have also been given the title  
*Opportunities for community.*

Because of God's work in us we are already connected to one another.  
That connection might not be well exercised, but it is there.  
It's a bit like trying a new exercise for the first time,  
as your body moves in different ways  
you discover muscles you never knew you had!  
Well, as you try new ministries within the church  
you discover new relationships that you didn't know you had!  
The exercise is partnership in gospel ministry.  
We have \_\_\_ different opportunities laid out in this book,  
\_\_\_ opportunities to connect with others who are in Christ,  
\_\_\_ opportunities to meet others whom you can pray for  
in the way Paul prayed for his partners.  
So please take a look.  
Let's pray.