

The church from the very beginning has struggled with the ethics of relating to civil culture.

Can we be in the culture, yet not of the culture?

The apostle Paul, that veteran church-builder, favors engaging the culture head-on, at least in the letter to the Philippians.

**Just keep living your lives in a manner worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that you stand firmly committed – one spirit, struggling in one earthly life of faith in the gospel.**

Similar advice is given to churches today.

In an article titled "Where you're going is more important than where you've been," church advisor Tom Bandy compares the church to a rocket launched into the heavens. No matter how high it soars above popular culture, it eventually yields to the pull of gravity. But grounded though it may be in popular culture, the church must still lift off and rise above.

Bandy implores church leaders, "Find a mission. First and always, find a mission. And your church will grow."

Paul had a mission when he started the church to which he is writing in today's lesson.

Philippi was a great location to start a church.

On the north coast of the Aegean Sea, Philippi was a strategic outpost between Asia and Europe, a bustling commercial center and loading point for traders from all over Asia to buy from and sell to the great economic powers of the day.

Home to 10,000 people, Philippi was a jewel of the Roman Empire,

open to people and customs from all over the Mediterranean world –

Greece, Italy, Egypt, and the Phoenician coast.

Philippians were cosmopolitan, diverse, ambitious, and hungry for spiritual meaning in their lives.

They enjoyed upward mobility in a booming economy.

Prior to founding the church at Philippi, Paul toured their temples to Roman gods, Greek and Egyptian gods, as well as to local deities. He suspected that Philippi might be open to Christianity.

On his third missionary journey across the northern Mediterranean, sometime after the year 48, Paul started the church at Philippi, his first on the European continent.

The Philippian church grew and prospered, eventually hitting the problems most growing, prosperous churches face – loss of a sense of servanthood in the world. Its focus tended to be on itself, rather than serving its surrounding environment.

The letter from Paul that survives in the N.T. suggests that the Philippian church was more consumed with internal matters than missional concerns.

Paul writes to a sophisticated congregation.

He states his concerns tactfully, even poetically, as in verses 5 through 11 today.

**"Christ emptied himself, taking the form of a servant."**

Perhaps these verses are an early Christian hymn; if not, they are the most poetic among Paul's letters.

I would like to focus on the verses before and after the poem.

In these, Paul enunciates the blessings of the gospel.

Here is my own paraphrase of verse 1:

**Since a certain boldness comes from Christ, a certain consolation comes from mutual love, a certain fellowship from life itself, a certain guts and compassion, get it together: make my day!**

We can only guess what there is about Philippi that causes Paul to write about boldness, love, and guts.

Does he sense a plateau in their growth?

Does he detect envy within the ranks?

Does he notice a breakdown in friendliness?

Such are problems of churches, even today, though not, God-be-praised, in our church here.

The next verse is an unmistakable appeal to unity in the church:

**May you discern one-and-the-same mind,  
share one-and-the-same love,  
in unity, seeking one-ness.**

Piecing together the church's situation, then, we speculate that the church probably was running out of steam, split apart by petty rivalries, and driven by competing personalities and priorities.

They had lost the unity of a common mission.

Here's what verse 3 says in my paraphrase:

**... with no axes to grind,  
with no empty boasting:  
Rather, in humility, regard one another  
as superior to yourselves.**

Paul then introduces the need for humility in achieving a unity of purpose.

Pastor Rick Warren,  
author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*,  
whom I seldom quote in a sermon,  
defines humility in a chapter on  
*Cultivating Community*.

"Humility is not thinking less of yourself;  
it is thinking of yourself less."

Warren is taking his cue from Paul at verse 4:

**I don't want to hear about every one of you  
watching out for himself or herself.  
Instead, I want you to watch out for  
every one of your neighbors.**

In summary, the first 4 verses urge the Philippians to stop being individual soldiers and start being comrades.

"Be of the same mind, having the same love."

Paul is prescribing boot-camp for churches.

As a nation, we would benefit from boot-camp.

Our nation seems unable to sustain unity for long.

On a Sunday morning in December, 1941, a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, sank or damaged eight U.S. Navy battleships. The Japanese also sank or damaged three cruisers, three destroyers, one minelayer, and 188 aircraft.

2,402 troops were killed and 1,282 wounded.

The spirit of unity brought about by this attack sustained our nation through a long world war and molded the values of a generation.

Where do we see such unity now?

A quick review of this week's news headlines:

Nashville minister recounts chaos in church shooting.

Russia used Facebook to widen social divisions in U.S.

Blue states served unequally in administration proposals

Sports-loving public divided over national anthem

The one-ness that once described America has been sucked up into the goopy nostalgia of "remember the times when."

Our children are no longer assured of living better than their parents.

Comparing Domestic Product of world countries on a Purchasing Power basis at the end of 2016,

the U.S. ranked well behind front-runner China.

The Quality of Life Index, much broader than GDP, compares countries on affordability,

job markets, economic and political stability,

family friendliness, income equality, and

public safety, public education, and public health.

On that Quality of Life Index, the U.S. ranks 18th, after front-runner Canada, all the Scandinavian countries, Australia, New Zealand, Switzerland,

the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, the U.K., Luxembourg, Ireland, France, and Singapore. As for public health, we count our blessings that we are a country with well-trained doctors who have access to the latest medical technology. Indeed, U.S. health spending per person — \$9,000 annually — is more than that of any other country. And the United States does measure up well for diseases preventable by vaccines. Yet U.S. outcomes for other preventable diseases rank in the 80th place worldwide. On income equality among working classes, so much a part of the tax overhaul being debated, the U.S. is among the 5 most *unequal* nations, behind Latin America, even after social welfare. The data show that U.S. tax and spending policy does relatively little to reduce income inequality. At the individual level, too, community-building loses out to individualism. Example: our obsession with personal technology like I-Pads, laptops, and cell phones. We will never have the mind of Christ this way. Like the Philippians, we're dispirited. Like the Philippians, we are empty-boasters. In its present state, our nation could benefit from the straight-talk Paul gives the Philippians.

**Be in full accord and of one mind.**

It is here that Paul introduces the Christ-hymn, a tribute to the self-emptying, self-abasing servanthood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus was born into human poverty and lived an itinerant life. Yet he demonstrated obedience, humility, and courage. He showed love and compassion for the lowliest and the neediest, selflessly.

Jesus Christ of the NT reverses ancient expectations of a Messiah. Though powerless, he is hated by the powerful, who execute him as a common criminal for his uncommon decency. Nevertheless, Jesus Christ, the Exalted One, represents The Servant's Triumph. Try to discover this Christ in yourselves, Paul urges. Identify with Christ's guts and compassion. Seek unity in common purpose for the world. Continue on the path to salvation Christ teaches, by serving the world, self-lessly and humbly. The Philippian church is urged to struggle to tune diverse personal agendas to a common pitch. Just so we must tune to one another, using the Gospel as our common tuning pitch.

**Work out your own salvation  
with fear and trembling,  
for it is God working in you,  
enabling you to will  
and to act according to God's purpose.**

Again, Rick Warren:

"Working out is our responsibility, working-in is God's.  
"This is not about how to be saved,  
but how to grow.  
Jesus already has done all that is necessary.  
We can't add anything.  
In God, we are given a new life.  
Now we are responsible to develop it —  
accompanied with fear and trembling."

Or in my words: Despite our fear and trembling, though our energy be in short supply, we are to work out our own salvation. The church participates in **The Servant's Triumph**.

This story comes from the early days in the Pacific theater, February 20, 1942.

Lt. Commander Butch O'Hare was a fighter pilot assigned to the aircraft carrier Lexington. One day, airborne with his squadron, Butch noticed that his fuel was too low to complete the mission. He was ordered to break formation and head back. On the way, he spotted a squadron of Japanese aircraft apparently headed to the same place he was. With the carrier's fighter squadron away, the fleet was without air cover. Except for Butch. He gave himself a solo mission to divert the Japanese. Film in the gun-camera recorded his heroics. Full-throttle, he flew head-on into their formation. He looped and fired his wing-mounted guns from behind. One Japanese fell from the sky. He continued buzzing and diving like a crazy-man until the ammunition ran out. After that, he rammed tail sections and clipped wings, literally knocking planes from the sky, five in all. The Japanese commander called off the raid. Butch and his tattered plane sputtered back to the carrier. For his self-appointed mission which spared an entire fleet, Butch became the Navy's first Ace Pilot of World War II. Later he received the Congressional Medal of Honor. He was killed in combat a year later, age 29. This son of Chicago mobster, Easy Eddie, was a hero to his hometown and still is remembered.

There's a memorial between Terminals 1 and 2 at the airport that bears Butch's family name, O'Hare International.

The church is like that lone fighter pilot. The rest of the squadron – the politicians and lawyers and captains of industry are away on sorties. The world lies in disunity, in fear and trembling. We have to stay focused on mission, in the world, but not of the world. to divert the enemies of the Gospel. Like that lone pilot, we need to do the unexpected if we hope to be effective defenders of the Gospel. We won't be effective by living in the past. We won't be effective if we're out for our own glory. With fear and trembling, yet confident that God is at work, not just in the church, but with the church, let us join in **The Servant's Triumph**. Amen.