



Church Past, Church Present, Church Future

Acts 16:6-15; Philippians 1:1-11

If you've ever found yourself listening in on an end of a telephone conversation, you'll know how hard it is to understand what's happening when you can only hear one person speaking. It's often been said that this is one of the challenges we face when we read the letters of Paul in the New Testament. We hear the messages which he wants to convey to the various churches he writes to, without knowing the exact circumstances of these early Christian communities.

But it is possible to 'read between the lines' of these letters and build a picture of who Paul was writing to, and the relationship he had with them. Contained within the opening verses of Philippians 1, we find a couple of clues about how Paul felt about 'all God's holy people in Christ Jesus' at Philippi and the messages he wanted to convey to them.

In other letters written by Paul, there are difficult issues to address. Tension comes through, for example, in 1 Corinthians and Galatians, letters which begin with Paul insisting on his authority as an apostle of Christ. Regarding the Philippians, however, it's as if Paul doesn't need to assert himself or justify his credentials. Instead, he introduces himself as a servant of Christ Jesus. The Greek word used in 1:1 actually means 'slave,' an incredibly humble way for Paul to describe himself in a world so obsessed with status but also a hint about his understanding of how Jesus relates to us and how we should relate to each other, a theme which will be explored more in chapter 2.

Philippians 1:1-11 also conveys the obvious love and affection which Paul feels for this church. Later in the letter (4:10-20) he will thank the church for gifts they have given to him. It could well be that Paul is remembering how supportive the Philippians have been when his opening words refer to their 'partnership in the gospel' (1:5) and the way 'all of your share in God's grace with me' (1:7).

Another theme of these opening verses is Paul's confidence in the purposes of God. Tom Wright notes that, 'The confidence Paul has throughout this letter is that God himself is a 'finisher' as well as a 'beginner'. The particular work which he has begun, and will finish, is the work of grace, through the gospel, in the hearts and lives of the Philippian Christians. Verse 6 sums it up, as a kind of motto or theme for the letter: the God who began a good work in you will complete it by the day of King Jesus.'¹ As we reflected on Sunday, it may well be that in this case Paul's confidence is heightened by his memory of the remarkable way in which the church in Philippi began, God directing him to Macedonia by way of a vision of a man asking for help.

¹ Tom Wright, *Paul for Everyone: The Prison Letters*, 2002, 83-84

These opening verses conclude with a beautiful and powerful prayer which Paul offers for the Philippians. The language he uses is lavish and generous. Just as he prayed that the Ephesians would be able to 'grasp how wide and how long and high and deep is the love of Christ and to know this love that surpasses knowledge' (Eph 3:18,19), Paul prays that the Philippians' love would 'abound.' But his prayer is not just one for increased affection. He anticipates that more love will bring with it a greater degree of knowledge and insight which it turn will lead to changed behavior, a church 'pure and blameless for the day of Christ, filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ – to the glory and praise of God' (1:10-11).

For discussion

1. In 1:1 Paul introduces himself (and Timothy) as 'servants of Christ Jesus.' It's a sign of humility but also trust. There are other situations where Paul needs to be more assertive and insist on his authority as an apostle. What lessons do these greetings offer us about how leaders relate to churches?
2. Another theme of the book emerging early on is joy. Do you find it as easy to be thankful for SBC as Paul seems to in Philippians 1:3,4? Can you take time now to list the things you see happening in SBC for which you feel thankful? How does it change your feelings about the church to make that list?
3. How does Acts 16:6-15, and the story of how the church in Philippi began, change the way you read Philippians 1:6? Do you agree with the suggestion in Sunday's sermon that we sometimes attach too much significance to the things we can see and do, and fail to pay attention to how God is already at work in a situation?
4. Can you think of a recent occasion when you have sensed God leading you to speak to someone or help them in some other way? What did you learn from this experience?
5. Commenting on Philippians 1:9-11, Daniel Migliore writes: 'The importance of Paul's linking of love, knowledge, and discernment in this prayer cannot be overstated. He does not pray for an unknowing love or a loveless knowledge. What good would be a love that lacks wisdom and sound judgment, and what good would be a merely cerebral knowledge that is separated from love? Over the centuries, Christian theologies and movements within the church have often impoverished their witness or have even fallen into serious errors because they have severed love and practical wisdom.'² Do you think we are getting the right balance in SBC between love and sound judgement? Are there any steps you could take, as individuals or as a group, to help us move in the right direction?

² Daniel Migliore, *Belief: Philippians and Philemon*, 2014, 38