

SAME MIND, SAME LOVE, FULL OF CHORDS

Sermon by William W. Williamson, Jr.

First Presbyterian Church
Columbia, Tennessee
September 30, 2007

Philippians 2:1-11

Paul is writing to the Christians in the town of Philippi. He says that if they really want to increase his joy, if they have Christ in them, if they have compassion for one another, then here is what they are to do: They are to have love for one another. They are not to have selfish ambition or vanity, but instead humbly think of others as better than themselves. If they want to show their faith, they are to pay attention, not to their own wants and wishes, but to what others want.

Paul had said something similar in the famous chapter on love in I Corinthians 13: “Love doesn’t insist on its own way; it is not ‘me first.’” To be a follower of Christ, says Paul, means to put myself aside—my ideas, my opinions, what I want—and instead be alert to the wishes of others.

That is a pretty tall order. We live in a world where everyone seems to be clamoring for what they want: My way or the highway. This is the era of single-issue politics, where noisy groups focus on just one issue to the exclusion of all else—no compromise! I know what I want, and I want it now! Cooperation gives way to conflict. We’re so busy yelling about what we want that we can scarcely hear what others are saying.

Paul says it shall not be so among you. In the church we are aware of others, we give in to others, we humble ourselves and our desires and wants and wishes, and pay attention to what others want.

Do we see any group in the church that actually lives by that high standard? I want to propose that we do see a group that does it all the time, and they are right here in front of us. It’s the choir, and every week it tries to practice what Paul is saying here.

All of this probably comes as a surprise to the choir, since they were not aware that they were doing this. But for those of you who have never sung in a choir, let me tell you how choir practice works on Wednesday night. The members of the choir ascend the steps at 7:30 for rehearsal, and they know as they do so that they will not be in charge. Someone else, the choir director, will decide what the group will sing. The choir director decides how choir practice will go. The choir director decides which anthems we will sing on which Sundays.

The choir is not a democracy. We don't vote on what we sing. We give our authority over to someone else. We humble ourselves, as Paul says, and allow the wishes of another to take charge.

Suppose we didn't do it that way. Suppose each person in the choir came determined to sing just what he or she wanted. I've tried a little experiment with the choir. I've asked each one of them to select and sing a favorite hymn from the Presbyterian Hymnal. You can imagine what it sounds like when they sing all these hymns at the same time—it sounds awful! Then one person picks a hymn, and all sing it together. What an improvement! If we all do our own thing, the result is chaos. If we submit ourselves to one another, we stand together, we point in the same direction together, we catch the same vision together, and the results are glorious. We are of the same mind, having the same love, and Paul says full accord, but we could also say of the choir that they are full of chords!

We already know this is true. It is not just true in the choir, not just true in the church, but in all the projects of life, it works better when we work together. If everybody does his or her own thing, nothing gets accomplished. It is when we gather together, when we put our own demands on hold, that great things can be done.

A couple of years ago I was able to travel on a mission trip to Egypt. (There's no point in making a trip like that unless you can come home and casually drop it into conversation.) One of the sights we saw, of course, were the Pyramids. They were majestic beyond anything I was prepared for. I was impressed not just with how they got those huge stones way up there, but the engineering—the measurements down to the finest point. But the question I found myself asking was: How did they get a whole society to decide to do this? How did they get from the idea to this stupendous reality? The Pyramids couldn't happen unless everyone the whole society worked together.

Now, of course, in ancient Egypt, the fact that the Pharaoh had the power to chop people's heads off was a pretty strong motivator for everyone to work together. But you can't chop off everybody's head. You've got to use persuasion; you've got to set out the vision; you've got to get everyone to see and agree that working together is a good thing. The ancient Egyptians would not have known Paul's words, but I bet from time to time the project of the Pyramids called for people humbly to put their own opinions aside, to follow the instruction of another, to submit to someone else's direction. And look at the result.

A couple of years ago they had a special on TV about the development of a new airliner, the Boeing 777, intended to be the new aircraft to fly passengers around the world. The TV cameras were allowed into the Boeing facilities not just to watch the new plane being built, but even before that, as engineers began talking about the design of this plane. Here is one of the most complicated machines ever built, and it took the cooperation and intelligence of all who were involved.

At one point the cameras followed a group of engineers into a meeting during the design phase of the plane. There must have been about 15 people in the room. The final design was still undecided (we might say still up in the air). There was still a lot of give and take. From time to time voices were raised as one person or another got pretty passionate about a particular point of view. People didn't want to give up their cherished ideas; they didn't want to compromise with someone else. It got pretty heated.

It reminded me for all the world of a Session meeting. There are those times when we discuss together some important project or idea. We have to be aware of the feelings and ideas of others. One person may have to be willing to let go of their way of doing things; another may have to compromise, so that two ideas can be brought together. The goal is to be of the same mind, the same love, and full accord.

I don't want to fly on an airplane where the engineers never resolved their differences. Neither do I want to be a part of a church where people are thinking only of their own way. A church like that is divided, going in a hundred different directions. In fact, I'm thankful for the maturity I see in this congregation of God's people, where most of the time we are more interested in working together and staying together than in having one idea and one way prevail. We're in this together. "My way or the highway" is not in the Bible.

None of this means that we're all going in lockstep like a bunch of robots, everyone thinking exactly the same thing. We're all different. We have different thoughts and abilities. Some sing high; others sing low. Some are good at speaking; others at teaching. Some can do one thing, and some another. We bring what we have.

But then we work with each other. And we work together. We do nothing from selfish ambition, but in humility we regard others as better than ourselves. We look, not to our own interests, but to the interests of others. Everything works better when we do it together. Together we can make beautiful music.

If you forget how it's done, just look at the choir. †