

Worthy Christian Citizens

²⁷ Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel, ²⁸ and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. ²⁹ For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear *is* in me. (Phil. 1:27-30)

When I worked in radio, I once had a fellow call me and claim to be a wealthy man interested in developing a property. His idea was that I would put my name on this development and it would be called “Christian City”. Supposedly we would attract hundreds of people, Christian who would want to live in a Christians-only development. I turned him down, first because I don't want the gospel exploited for commercial gains. Second, I knew it was doomed from the start. The idea that you could gather a bunch of people who claim to be Christians into one property development and end up with a little Utopia misunderstands the nature of human beings, and even the nature of the gospel. By gathering professing Christians into one complex, you won't get Heaven on Earth, you're very likely to get almost the opposite, as people with very little shared beliefs come with high expectations and low commitment.

But even though his idea was wonky, it is true that Christians are citizens of a city. Christians do belong to God's country, God's kingdom, and the city of the New Jerusalem. And as citizens of countries have certain duties and responsibilities, so Christians do have citizenship duties.

Christian Citizenship is a major idea in Philippians. The heart of the letter is that Christians are citizens of heaven first, not Rome. Paul explains that the further advance of the gospel depends upon its ambassadors getting their act together internally.

That idea comes out in another impossibly long Pauline sentence from verse 27 to 30. But there is one action, one verb that carries the whole section, all of it fitting under the one idea. It is the words *conduct yourselves worthy*. This is a rather weak English translation of the one Greek word. That word is a form of the verb **πολιτεύομαι**. That word comes from the other Greek word *politeis*, and *polis*, which meant the city-state. The word literally means, live as a citizen. Perform your civic duties. Be a dutiful citizen.

Now why is this such an important word? Remember how Roman citizenship was such a big deal to the Philippians. We've already mentioned how Philippi was a Roman colony, which meant it was exempt from tax, and it meant the citizens had the rights of full Roman citizens. It wasn't like all the cities around it, which had been conquered by Rome, but were not colonies. They were cities paying tribute to Rome. A colony was a carved out slice of Roman territory. So the Philippians took particular pride in the honour of being Roman citizens.

Paul undermines and undercuts this honour culture by not only showing them that the gospel is death to self and magnifying Christ, but also by showing them that they are really citizens of heaven.

²⁰ For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, ²¹ who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself. (Phil. 3:20-21)

Paul is saying, “Philippians, you are ultimately the citizens of Heaven, not Rome. And the church is actually a colony of Heaven on Earth.”

With that in mind, Paul says, “Live as citizens worthy of the gospel”. That message you proclaim:

you should wear it! If you are citizens of God's country, then you are ambassadors, and ambassadors must act in a way that is worthy. The word "only" means that Paul wants this to be their focus, whether he comes to them after being released, or whether Timothy spends time with them and reports back to Paul. Either way, when Paul hears of their affairs he wants to hear that they are living as worthy citizens of the gospel itself. The rest of the paragraph is Paul's description of worthy Christian citizenship, along with some explanations of why this is happening to them.

We can pick out three actions of worthy Christian citizens.

I. Worthy Christian Citizens Stand Firm in the Gospel

"that you stand fast in one spirit"

The first mark of the worthy Christian citizen is that he or she stands fast in one spirit. This phrase is a favourite of Paul's. He repeats it in 4:1.

Philippians 4:1 Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved. (Phil. 4:1)

He gives the same command to at least three other churches, altering the wording of what you stand fast in.

Galatians 5:1 Stand fast therefore in the liberty by which Christ has made us free, and do not be entangled again with a yoke of bondage. (Gal. 5:1)

1 Corinthians 16:13 Watch, stand fast in the faith, be brave, be strong (1 Cor. 16:13)

2 Thessalonians 2:15 Therefore, brethren, stand fast and hold the traditions which you were taught, whether by word or our epistle. (2 Thess. 2:15)

What does Paul mean? When we combine the faith, the traditions, the liberty, and one Spirit, we get something like: stand rooted and committed to Christian faith and practice. The truth and the life demanded by that truth. What must you do with that? You must remain firmly committed to it, unwavering in your belief and commitment.

Paul says, a real ambassador of the gospel does not vacillate on the gospel. He doesn't get blown over by the latest ideas coming out of the academy, the latest cultural trends, the latest false teaching. He knows the essentials of his faith, he knows sound doctrine, he knows the kind of life that comes from it, and he is not blowing in the wind when it comes to his beliefs.

This is a militaristic term because it carries ideas of standing guard. The true faith is always and ever will be under assault.

How could Christian citizens be blown over? Opposition, deception, and distraction.

Opposition. Sometimes the Christian faith comes under direct attack for its doctrines and practices. It is opposed as false or obstructive or intolerant or hateful. Christianity is shouted down, threatened, accused, intimidated. Right now, Christianity is being opposed as intolerant. Christians who oppose some agendas today are called hate-filled, the opposite of open and inclusive. Christians who insist that Jesus is the Messiah and that no one can come to the Father except through Him are called intolerant, spreaders of divisive, exclusivist hate.

Deception. Sometimes the faith is threatened through those who seek to pervert it, re-invent it, distort it. The worthy citizen knows what is true and what is false. That's why every believer must

be deeply familiar with the fundamentals of the faith. You do not need to be familiar with every perversion of the faith, and every false doctrine. Some Christians seem to enjoy collecting lists of false doctrines, so as to create a chamber of horrors of error. But that is a rat treadmill that Satan will keep you on your whole life, and you will never get to the positives of the Christian life. There are infinite ways that the gospel can be perverted and distorted, but there is only one way that it fits together: those fundamentals of the faith, those essentials that we're considering. Know those, know those in ever deepening doctrinal detail, and you will stand fast.

A pastor-friend of mine said that when it comes to the playground called Christianity, some children like to play as close to the chain-linked fence as possible, always peering out and over. They like to toy with these new ideas, and consider if this new movement might not be the shot in the arm that every church needs or every Christian needs. These are the guys who come out in support of some weird heresy and shocks everyone, but in truth, they were playing at the edge of the fence all along. So, too, with those who run to fads and fashions, looking for the next hot book to take them to the next level.

Distraction. Sometimes holding fast is just steadily weakened by distractions, entertainments, amusements, conspiracy theories, sports, hobbies, recreations. There are endless ways to distract pilgrims from staying on the road to the Celestial City. Some Christians no longer hold fast not because they were bowled over by opposition or won over by deception. Some are just lulled into a weak and flabby posture, and Satan barely has to push them to move them out the way.

This is one of the reasons Christians need to regularly affirm their commitment to the gospel. That's not done privately in the abstract. It's done corporately at the Lord's Supper. We renew our belief and partaking of Christ in the new covenant.

Worthy Christian citizens are unwavering in their commitment to truth.

But this standing fast must be done in a particular way.

II. Worthy Christian Citizens Stand In Formation for the Gospel

with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel,

We are worthy citizens when we stand fast for the gospel, but we are worthy citizens when we do it together, in unity. We do it with one mind (literally one soul), a parallel to what he just said to stand fast in one spirit. The word *striving* comes from a word for athletic contests. The idea is energetically struggle together. We struggle together to defend and to spread the faith of the gospel.

Roman soldiers were known for their military formations: the tortoise, where they would march in tight formation, linking their shields, some covering the sides, some the back, some the front, and the others placed them on their heads, forming a complete shell of shields that enemy arrows and stones couldn't penetrate. Working together, the Roman army was much stronger than if they just ran at the enemy as individual soldiers.

The church at Philippi was beginning to have problems with unity. We find out in chapter 4 that two prominent women, Eodia and Syntche were having some kind of personal conflict. And from what Paul is going to instruct in chapter 2, there was all round selfishness, petty resentments, jealousies, competitions.

Now this is what Paul is talking about when he calls for unity. People read Paul on unity and immediately apply it to broad, ecumenical unity between all churches. But Paul's concern is not

unity in the global church. Paul's concern is always unity in local churches. It is the local church that is the most effective tool of spreading the gospel and evangelising the lost. And it is the local church in which the fleshliness of humans bump up against each other. So in almost every letter of Paul, you have him exhorting the local churches he is writing to to work hard at internal unity.

How do we do this? How do we stand together?

Now one of the first ways you do this is by standing firm on the gospel. If the church is pure in doctrine, it will find unity around that purity. If the church is not pure, it will only find a surface or superficial unity. Unite on the deepest held truths, and you are uniting on your deepest loves. Unite on your deepest loves, and you have a very thorough unity.

That's also why the church unifies around the pulpit, not the discussion group. The pulpit is a moment of one voice expounding the Word, to which all the believers tune their hearts and minds. It is one voice, exhorting all to love and believe the Word. Churches with a strong pulpit, and with strong faithfulness to hear that pulpit, will be well on their way to a lot of unity.

Now, it is not infallible, agreed. And yes, we should all be like Bereans who went and searched the Scriptures for themselves to see whether the things Paul taught were so. But broadly, you're supposed to be able to trust those who occupy the pulpit. Once you've done your checking and join the church, you should be able to relax, and be taught. It's not supposed to be an Easter-egg hunt for error every time you listen. If you can't expect faithful preaching, you're in the wrong church.

The churches that make the discussion group the mainstay of fellowship will find their unity continually eroding, assaulted by immature opinions that all want to be heard. I'm all for small group studies, their value in applying the Word, of giving mutual testimony, or asking and answering questions. But when they are just opinion ping-pong, or high-school debate club with the Bible, they don't create unity, they pick it apart. They give platforms to people who are just thinking out loud, or to immature people whose doctrine is still in formation.

Once you are uniting around truth, the second thing you do is you put to death your selfishness with Christlike humility. That's what we'll see in 2:1-4, and if you scan your eyes down, he bases that selfless service on the gospel itself. Let this attitude be in you, Philippians, which was also in Christ Jesus, who though He was God, did not cling to His privileges, but emptied Himself, became like a slave, became obedient to death.

What happens when the members of a church begin imitating the mind of Christ? No insisting I get my way, that my decisions or wishes are implemented, and sulking if they aren't. No jealousy and backbiting when someone else receives recognition. No trying to insinuate yourself into the inner circle of a church, or trying to climb the corporate ladder of church leadership. No resenting those who are more involved, or who insist upon following the church's order or discipline. No quiet undermining of others, or sneakily placed gossip or innuendo.

All of that belongs to the flesh: it's the world, the old man, the Adamic nature, still controlled by the idols of ambition, self-seeking.

It's the opposite of the gospel, so we must shun it if we are to be worthy citizens of heaven. Unify around the gospel, practice the unity of the gospel: Christlike selflessness.

Once citizens of Heaven stand fast and stand together, it leads to a third response.

III. Worthy Citizens Stand Fearlessly for the Gospel

and not in any way terrified by your adversaries, which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God. ²⁹ For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake, ³⁰ having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear *is* in me.

The third thing which Paul tells his hearers is that worthy Christian citizens are not intimidated by their enemies. They are not terrified by their adversaries. Of course, they are human, so some kind of temptation to fear and cowardice is natural, but Paul is exhorting the Philippians, don't be intimidated. This is a word that was sometimes used when horses were spooked. Don't let your adversaries scare you and get you all into a panic.

We don't know exactly who the adversaries were. There are hints in Philippians: perhaps those Judaisers that Paul calls dogs, who were calling for a return to the Law to be saved. Perhaps it was those pagans, whose god was their belly, those enemies of the cross. Paul experienced firsthand what happens when you upset pagans by casting out a demon, and they lose some of their income: he was cast into prison and put in stocks.

And one of the things which began happening in the first century was that Roman citizens had to go to the public square, burn a pinch of incense, and then say the words, "Caesar Kurios" – Caesar is Lord. Fundamental to the Christian Gospel is that Jesus is Lord. No Christian could speak those words without denying the faith. As Roman persecutions increased, refusing to do so could mean beheading.

Paul says, don't be intimidated. Well, that seems easier to say than to do. Paul gives reasons why Christians need not be intimidated by their adversaries.

which is to them a proof of perdition, but to you of salvation, and that from God.

First, he says, when you stand amidst persecution, and stand in unity, without fear, it becomes a **sign** to your adversaries that they are on the wrong side of this affair. The steadfastness of Christians, their internal unity, and their inner calm witnesses to those persecuting them. It becomes a dual sign, that on the one hand, those persecuting are in the wrong, and those enduring are in the right.

so that we ourselves boast of you among the churches of God for your patience and faith in all your persecutions and tribulations that you endure, ⁵ *which is* manifest evidence of the righteous judgment of God, that you may be counted worthy of the kingdom of God, for which you also suffer; ⁶ since *it is* a righteous thing with God to repay with tribulation those who trouble you, ⁷ and to *give* you who are troubled rest with us when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with His mighty angels, (2 Thess. 1:4-7)

Because lying at the heart of Christian confidence is what we saw earlier in the chapter: in Christ, living is more of Him, and dying is even more of Him. **Mat 10:28** "And do not fear those who kill the body but cannot kill the soul. But rather fear Him who is able to destroy both soul and body in hell.

This has happened many times in Christian history. The martyrdom of Polycarp, who at the age of eight-five defied the Roman governor in the arena. Or Perpetua, who refused to do the sacrifice in the arena before a crowd, and wild animals were set upon her. And who knows what modern stories are being written in North Korea by believers unwilling to worship Kim Jong Un? Or believers in the 10/40 window, unwilling to confess. Even now as secular governments shut churches down supposedly for health reasons, it is fearlessness that is needed.

Second, he says, suffering for the gospel is a **stewardship**. That's why you don't need to be terrified. Suffering has been graciously granted to you.

²⁹ For to you it has been granted on behalf of Christ, not only to believe in Him, but also to suffer for His sake,

The word *granted* means to be graciously given. This is a grace gift for the sake, or for the glory of Christ. What is the first grace gift which Paul mentions in that verse? To believe in Him. Your believing in Jesus is a gracious gift. Yes, it was a gift you had to receive, but it was a gift given. Salvation was not just sitting around on the shelves of God's store, and you happened to walk in, and decided to pick one up. No, God came to you, and gave you belief.

And part of that package gift was to suffer for Him. To believe on Christ is to walk where He walked, to sacrifice as He sacrificed, and if necessary, to face persecution as He faced it. Not every Christian will face the same amount and the same degree, but Paul does say in 2 Timothy 3:12: ¹² Yes, and all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution.

How does this help our boldness? It helps us to know that God is as sovereign over our suffering as He was over our salvation. We haven't taken a massively wrong turn. Nothing has gone tragically wrong. We're suffering, because that is the package deal of salvation.

¹⁷ and if children, then heirs-- heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with *Him*, that we may also be glorified together. (Rom. 8:17)

Suffering is not enjoyable in itself, but to suffer for Christ is considered a privilege. **Act 5:41** So they departed from the presence of the council, rejoicing that they were counted worthy to suffer shame for His name.

Suffering is a **stewardship**. God gives it to His children for many reasons. It makes us like Christ. It delivers us from being shallow and petty. It tends to expose our idols. It makes us long for Heaven. It teaches us spiritual toughness and endurance. It humbles us and makes us worthy to rule and reign with Christ one day.

So when we suffer, we say, "This, too has been given by God." I don't need to be terrified by these people. They are just instruments in a much bigger picture.

Third reason to not be intimidated: Because you're **sharing** in what I went through and am going through. ³⁰ having the same conflict which you saw in me and now hear *is* in me.

Paul says, you remember what I went through in Phillipi: my arrest, the beating, the stocks. You know what I'm going through now: prison, trial, possible execution. In other words, we're together in this. You're in decent company.

Worthy Christian citizenship is not tossed to and from by every wind of doctrine. It stands fast on the truth. And within the local church, it stands together, in formation in unity, allowing the gospel to strip us of our selfishness and pettiness. And then, remembering that suffering is a stewardship from God and a sign to unbelievers, and a shared experience, we stand fearlessly.

Standing for the Gospel is not some far away ideal. It begins right now. It begins with Christian discipline. Coming to hear preaching. Being at the Lord's Supper. Joining the church. Upholding its unity. Being bold in evangelism.