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Moving Forward Together: The Future of Science and Faith

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Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers and sisters, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ.
Philippians 3:12–14

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Moving Forward ...

Our conference theme this year is “Moving Forward Together: The Future of Science and Faith.”* I think it’s good for us to stop and ponder this theme this morning. We could ask a number of questions about it. For example, moving forward—to *where, exactly?* What’s our destination or goal?

In terms of science, this question must remain somewhat open and conjectural: we can’t fully predict all the ways that science will develop, what discoveries will be made, and which applications will be pursued. As Alister McGrath has said,

Science is on a journey, it’s traveling. It hasn’t yet arrived at definitive answers, it hasn’t yet reached its goal, and every now and then it may even take wrong turnings.¹

But today’s passage contributes something important about the *faith* aspect of moving forward together: our singular goal—which supersedes, ranks, and aligns all other goals—is Christ! More

specifically, our singular goal is to know, love, and participate in Christ together.

We at the ASA and CSCA agree on this central goal, and we affirm it in our belief statements about scripture and the ancient Nicene and Apostles’ Creeds, both of which point to Christ as the center of our faith, and to the triune God whom Christ reveals in his earthly life, his resurrection appearances, and his sending forth of the Holy Spirit to create and fill the church.

In our passage today, Paul reminds us of the crucial importance of focusing on our very highest goal, Christ and his calling upon us. He uses powerful athletic imagery and emphatic rhetoric to make his point: “I don’t look behind me ... I strain toward what is ahead ... I press on toward the goal to win the prize” (Phil. 3:13–14).

This is not like little league soccer. I remember coaching my son’s soccer team, years ago, when he was very young.

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Communication

Moving Forward Together: The Future of Science and Faith

Coaching little league soccer is hilarious! There's "the hive," the big ball of kids that collectively follows the ball wherever it goes on the field. There's the child who's looking up to the sky, fascinated by the birds soaring overhead. And my personal favorite, there's my goalie, hanging from the goalposts—*facing the wrong direction*—as the opposing team's players speed down the field, closing in with the nearly empty goal in their sights.

Instead, Paul's image is more like an athlete devoting her life to training to win Olympic Gold—strenuously, intentionally, and with keen focus and determination. All of this serves to emphasize the inestimable value of this very unique and specific prize Paul has in mind. It reminds me of Jesus's parable of the man who sold everything he had in order to purchase a field in which he had buried a precious treasure. The parable illustrates the central priority and value that Jesus and his kingdom should have for believers.

... Together!

So, our goal is Christ and his call. But why does Paul stress the importance of such single-minded, all-encompassing devotion, contemplation, and mental and physical focus and training?

Because there are many distractions that threaten to impede or even distort and redefine the goal. This deviation from goal leads to division, as each person begins to pursue their own conception of the goal. In the midst of this, we are reminded that Christian unity is found only in our joint togetherness in Christ in the Spirit.

At the ASA and the CSCA, we recognize that some agendas, goals, and disputes are a distraction to our mission and potentially harmful to our fellowship in Christ.

The ASA is not an advocacy organization. Where there is honest disagreement on an aspect of science, Christian faith, or the relationship between the two, the ASA strives to create a safe environment in which dialogue can flourish and diverse, even contrasting, ideas can be discussed with courtesy and respect.²

Over the years, when cultural controversies and infighting within the church have arisen over matters of science and faith (for example, young earth creationism vs. evolution), it has been important for

us to remember and preserve our commitment to this statement.

Our Context

I'd like to suggest this morning, however, that these kinds of issues and debates will not be the ones that threaten our oneness in Christ and our singular pursuit of "the goal" or "the prize" he calls us toward as we move forward together in the coming years (of course, healthy debate on scientific matters will certainly continue). I think that a much greater threat in our social and cultural context is the threat of *ideology*. I refer here to social, cultural, and political forces, which are pseudo-religious in nature (though not consciously acknowledged as such) and are disguised as all-important, supremely central moral causes calling for absolute allegiance. These ideological forces might be conservative, or they might be liberal, or progressive. What's key is that they come to displace Christ himself (the Living and Present LORD) as THE goal, THE prize, THE focus of Christians and the church. The temptation toward ideology is subtle, because some of its ideas and goals, taken on their own at face value, might be important and morally righteous. The problem is the idolatrous and divisive ways in which ideology works, and its tendency to foster further polarization and attitudes of self-righteousness and judgment of others (constant "othering").

We live in a deeply divided time, in a deeply polarized and polarizing society. A massive study recently conducted by the Edelman Trust Institute (composed of 30-minute interviews that included 32,000 respondents in 28 countries) analyzed public trust in various institutions, organizations, media, government, and other people; it found high degrees of division and polarization. (Incidentally, the US was found to be one of the top six most severely polarized countries of the 28 measured). In one stunning measure of the polarizing effects of ideology, the study found the following concerning American respondents: In answer to the statement: "If a person strongly disagreed with me or my point of view," I would help them if they were in need (only 30% responded positively); be willing to live in the same neighborhood with the person (only 20%); be willing to have them as a coworker (only 20%). For Canada, the numbers were quite similar at 26%, 24%, and 19%, respectively.³

This deep polarization might well be the greatest missional challenge the church faces today.

We Are Like the Philippian Church

Ideological threats of this kind are not new; actually, the Philippian church in Paul's day was facing similar problems. A Jewish faction (please note: not "Judaism" *per se*), zealously devoted to maintaining ethnic and cultic boundary markers as a condition of inclusion for Gentile Christians (e.g., circumcision), was infiltrating the church, proselytizing their agenda, and causing division and polarization (the work of ideology). This not only distracted the believers from their precious goal and prize, but more fundamentally, it also threatened to redefine the goal itself, and thus lead the church away from Christ as its one and only LORD.

Paul describes this group as being *characterized by self-righteousness and self-justification* (Phil. 3:13-14). And he worried that some within the Philippian church were vulnerable because they had become *focused on earthly rather than heavenly things* (vv. 18-21) and were *focusing on themselves and their desires* (selfishness, hedonism) rather than Christ and his sacrificial, missional call ("everyone looks to their own interests," Phil. 2:21). This lack of focus and dependence on Christ was producing *anxiety*, which threatened to deprive believers of the joy, gratitude, and peace which should have been theirs in Christ by the Spirit (Phil. 4:4-9). Does this sound like our culture today? Does it sound like the church?

The problem with ideology is that it makes promises it can't possibly fulfill. And when those promises are not fulfilled, it produces distrust, cynicism, division, and further polarization. And it deprives people of true joy, gratitude, and peace.

Moving Forward Together *in Christ!*

What does it mean to move forward *together in Christ* in the midst of such a polarized culture? Paul gives us helpful direction.

First, we are called to repent of our allegiances to other masters, leaders, systems, philosophies, and ideologies, and to realign ourselves to Christ's sole Lordship. Considering his own life and former zealous devotion to religious and political causes, Paul confesses, "whatever were gains for me I now

consider loss for the sake of Christ" (Phil. 3:7). And Paul intentionally moves forward, "forgetting what is behind" (vv. 13-14), refusing allegiance to anything that displaces Christ himself as personal and living LORD.

Second, we are called to seek to know and to participate in Christ. Paul expresses this desire poignantly: "that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own" (Phil. 3:9). It is helpful to observe that the theme of participation in Christ is pervasive in the book of Philippians. (The italicized text *reflects our active participation* while the underlined text stresses God's prior and ongoing work.)

- In chapter one, Paul refers to his readers as *partners* in the gospel (v.5) and reminds them that God, who began a good work in them, will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus (v.6).
- In chapter two, Paul exhorts the believers to *work out their salvation* with fear and trembling, for God himself is at work within them both to will and to act in accordance with God's purposes (vv. 12-13).
- In chapter three, Paul admits, "not that I have already obtained all this or have arrived at my goal," but "I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of me" (v.12).
- And then, finally, in chapter four, Paul instructs the believers to *rejoice, pray, be thankful, and intentionally think about* the goodness of God and his gifts to us in creation (whatever is true, noble, right, pure, lovely, etc.); and Paul reminds his readers that the God of peace will be with them and will guard their hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (vv. 4-8).

How might we participate in Christ in response to Paul's exhortations? One important way is by participating in Christ's sufferings (Phil. 3:10) and thus following his cruciform example (Phil. 2:5-11). Think of what Paul says in chapter two, where Christ the LORD of glory is our example in humility, obedience, and selfless service to others (even others who mock, insult, disrespect, and debase us). Recall too Paul's words in Philippians 1:29: "for it has been granted to you on behalf of Christ not only to believe in him, but also to suffer for him." Part of our suffering, in the context of a divisive and polarized culture and church is to resist the temptation to elevate our own

Communication

Moving Forward Together: The Future of Science and Faith

sense of righteousness (or “being right”) by pointing out or cynically celebrating the ignorance, faults, and blind spots of others. This can be so difficult. Especially when others ARE CLEARLY WRONG (at least in our view!). In our time, we desperately need to hear and heed the cruciform witness of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., who said:

Another thing we had to get over was the fact that the nonviolent resister does not seek to humiliate or defeat the opponent but to win his friendship and understanding. This was always a cry that we had to set before people that our aim is not to defeat the white community, not to humiliate the white community, but to win the friendship of all the persons who had perpetrated this system in the past. The end of violence or the aftermath of violence is bitterness. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of a beloved community. A boycott is never an end in itself. It is merely a means to awaken a sense of shame within the oppressor but the end is reconciliation, the end is redemption.⁴

At the same time, God also wants to draw us to participate in Christ’s resurrection power (Phil. 3:10). New Testament scholars Michael Bird and Nijay Gupta describe this as “the life-giving, death-crushing, and new world-creating power of God.”⁵ We are meant to move out in this power in order to do what we could not possibly do in our own strength and by our own desires. The church is meant to be a sign, foretaste, and instrument of the Kingdom of God (as Newbigin said).⁶ We are called to be agents and ambassadors of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5:19–20), and therefore—“*somehow*” (Phil. 3:11)—to build and foster trust and to care more about others than we care about our own reputation (not being afraid to be associated with “the wrong people”) or need for being right.

The good news is that you, as scientists, still enjoy a high degree of trust in our society. I know it may not feel that way (and, at the same time, people struggle to trust authorities outside of themselves in general), but people tend to trust scientists (76% trust them) more than they trust coworkers (73%), their CEO (64%), their neighbors (63%), people in their local community (61%), citizens of their country (59%), journalists (47%), and government leaders (41%).⁷ This trust is a gift and you have the opportunity to lean on it in a Christlike way and move forward into

new relational and influential possibilities by Christ’s resurrection power.

Conclusion

In his classic work on Christian community, *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer argues that true and genuine Christian community is not an ideal that we achieve, but a divine reality established in Christ by the Spirit.⁸ We seek oneness in the Holy Spirit, which is not simply “getting along” in a sentimental way, but a deep spiritual union and joint participation in Christ together. This is something God has achieved and now invites us to pursue actively, including and perhaps especially when we face conflict and division in our midst. We are to press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus has taken hold of us.

In connection to what I’ve been saying today about the threat of ideology to Christian community, both for the Philippians in the past and for us in the present, Bonhoeffer cautions those who try to force their idealistic vision of Christian community on others, writing:

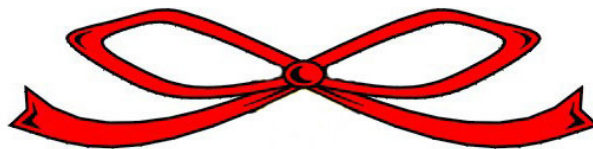
They act as if they have to create the Christian community, as if their visionary ideal binds the people together. Whatever does not go their way, they call a failure. When their idealized image is shattered, they see the community breaking to pieces. So they first become accusers of other Christians in the community, then accusers of God, and finally the desperate accusers of themselves.⁹

Bonhoeffer’s caution resonates with Paul’s wise counsel to the Philippians: “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others. In your relationships with one another, have the same mindset as Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:3–5).

And so, may “the God of peace” (Phil. 4:7, 9), by the presence and power of his indwelling Holy Spirit, continually remind us of our unity in Christ as we pursue the future of science and Christian faith together. And may our unity in Christ extend outward in our missional presence in the world, as we seek to be peacemakers and ambassadors of reconciliation in our families, friendships, neighborhoods, and vocations. Amen.

Notes

- ¹Alister McGrath, "Science Is on a Journey," BioLogos Podcast Animated Quotes (2020), 1 min., <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TcQXHUI4Di8>.
- ²American Scientific Affiliation, About the ASA, "Our Approach," <https://network.asa3.org/page/ASAAbout>.
- ³Edelman, 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, "Ideology Becomes Identity: Few Would Help, Live, or Work with the Other Side," https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2023-03/2023_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FINAL.pdf, 23. (The Canadian figures were shared with me directly via personal email.)
- ⁴Martin Luther King, Jr., "The Power of Nonviolence," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James Washington (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 12.
- ⁵Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *Philippians*, New Cambridge Bible Commentary (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 148.
- ⁶Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995).
- ⁷Edelman, 2023 Edelman Trust Barometer, "Institutional Leaders Distrusted," https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2023-03/2023_Edelman_Trust_Barometer_Global_Report_FINAL.pdf, 11.
- ⁸Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together*, vol. 5 *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, trans. Daniel W. Bloesch and James H. Burtness, ed. Geoffrey B. Kelly (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1996), 35.
- ⁹*Ibid.*, 36.



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