

Pressing Ahead

Philippians 3:12-16

As a new year and a new decade approach in anno Domini 2020, it's good to consider where we have been and where we are going. The task of every church and disciple of Jesus is to walk in the grace God has already given, and long for more.

Summary of the Text

Paul writes this letter from prison, probably in Rome around AD 62, thankful for the gift that arrived from the church through Epaphroditus (1:7; 2:25). He plans to send Timothy to visit the Philippians but is also hopeful for his own release (2:23-24). Among all of Paul's endeavors, his focus is pressing forward to the resurrection of the dead, "to grasp that purpose for which Christ Jesus grasped me", as J.B. Phillips renders it (3:11-12). This is not a reward for law-keeping righteousness, but the goal of the righteousness that is given by God to the man in Christ (v9). He hasn't attained this goal yet, but forgetting the past, he presses ahead for the prize of the upward call of Christ (vv13-14). Paul knows that at his death the resurrection will likely not have taken place yet, but the resurrection is still his target destination. And his approach is anything but passive. All who are mature will be likeminded in this, and those yet to see it the Lord will bring along soon enough (v15). Regardless, he says, they will keep what have already attained, according to same rule or canon, and be of the same mind (v16). Although they won't dwell on the past ("forgetting those things which are behind"), they will conserve what God has given and build on it. Christians are not doomed to repeat their sins or live in the "glory days". Some people are always learning, but never arriving at the truth, and others have found the truth, which they don't build on. We want to steward what we have been given and lean into what the Lord has for us. So what do we have?

Reformed

We belong to the Communion of Reformed Evangelical Churches, a denomination founded in 1998 to increase unity among individual churches and welcome a wide stream of classical Protestants. "Reformed" means we identify with the doctrines recovered at the Reformation, summarized in the five solas: sola scriptura, sola fide, sola gratia, solus Christus, and soli Deo Gloria. Scripture is our highest and only infallible authority. Salvation is by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. And all of this gives the glory to God alone. In late Middle Ages the Roman Catholic Church taught that grace could be obtained through the purchase of indulgences and automatically channeled through sacraments. The Reformation was a work of the Holy Spirit to purify the church. We recovered the gospel of free grace, "that one is justified by faith apart from works of the law" (Rom. 3:28), whether those works be of the law of Moses or of a pope with a huge hat. The Pauline gospel rules out all striving and climbing in order to be saved. We work out of our salvation, but not into it. As orthodox Christians we affirm the ecumenical creeds: Apostles' Creed, Nicene Creed 325, and Definition of Chalcedon 451. Out of the Reformation came many Reformed confessions: Westminster Confession of Faith 1647, Belgic Confession 1561, Canons of Dort 1619, London Baptist Confession 1689, Second Helvetic Confession 1536, 39 Articles of Religion 1571. Our Communion welcomes ministers and churches from this Columbia-sized river of biblical heritage.

NOTES

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Evangelical

The wonderful adjective *evangelical* comes from the Greek word for gospel: *euangelion*. Evangelical Christians are gospel believers. Every movement struggles, changes, fades, and has people show up among its members to sell insurance. The Puritans sought to purify the church in England where the Reformation hadn't gone far enough. In the 1700s John Wesley, George Whitefield, and Jonathan Edwards were evangelicals who profoundly influenced America. Evangelicalism can be defined by four marks: conversionism, biblicism, crucicentrism, and activism, better described as the new birth, the centrality of the Bible, the cross of Christ as the only way to salvation, and a faith that works by love. Men like Whitefield, Edwards, and Spurgeon preached a full gospel that required whole-life conversion, as in repentance and belief, not sign-a-card ask-Jesus-into-your-heart so you can move along with your schedule. Like a newborn child, the converted heart desires the pure milk of the word (1 Pet. 2:2), so Christians read the Bible not just for information but nourishment and transformation. Scripture is our only infallible rule of faith and practice, entirely sufficient for what we need (2. Tim. 3:16-17). We don't graduate from the cross into deeper spiritual things, but know everything through Christ and Him crucified (cf. 1 Cor. 2:2). Last, evangelicals see the extent of the great commission, the call to baptize the nations and teach them everything Christ commanded, so we live out the gospel in every sphere. We are not trying to bring everything under the authority of the church, but we are bringing everything into Christ's kingdom.

Covenantal & Optimistic

God's grace is His undeserved favor and kindness. When the Lord makes a covenant with Abraham, He says "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great reward.... And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you in their generations, for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and your descendants after you" (Gen. 15:1, 17:7). We are part of God's people and His promises are given to us and our children (Acts 2:39). Grace is practical. It changes the way you live every day, confessing sin, rejoicing in salvation, being grateful for the food, growing in love for your neighbor, working your job and doing everything for God's glory. It's an enormous blessing to have so much truth and grace given over 2000 years to the church—to know where you are in the story—to see the Great Commission beginning to be fulfilled. Our job is to believe God, receive all of it, and know that we deserve none of it. This is the kind of humility necessary for true and lasting hope.