

Fellow Workers

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[0 : 00] If you would open your Bibles to the book of Philippians on page 184, in the back. 184. One of the very few happy news items that came from Iraq this week is a story that's centred on the celebrated dolphins that are working for the US Navy in the Gulf.

These dolphins are trained to use their natural sonar to search for underwater mines and when they find the mine they mark that mine. The only problem is that one of the dolphins, whose name was Tacoma, who I understand was the first one in the water, promptly disappeared after being released and then turned up two days later after not fulfilling his mission.

This did not please the Australian military divers. And I know, you know you've lived outside your country for long enough when you start to see your own people through foreign eyes.

Australian divers have gone to the Gulf and what happened was, when Tacoma went missing, the US military bumped the Australian surveillance equipment from helicopters and put more dolphins on helicopters.

So the Aussies are being kept out of the water. And on the newswire, I read this. One Australian diver was quoted as saying, quote, The bottom line, mate, is it's a fish.

[1 : 38] I just... I love that. Another diver said, If you put one of these to work in the Sydney harbour, it would mark a million things because it can't tell a difference between a washing machine and a mine.

And then someone else who I think knows more about dolphins says, It's also a very smart fish. So how do you know it hasn't just gone off for a feed instead of working and then thought, Hang on, I better mark a few things or they're not going to give me any fish when I get back.

The US Navy has released a statement at the end of the week indicating that Tacoma was never officially AWOL. Now the reason I mention that is because I think that's a brilliant picture of how many congregations feel about their clergy.

Expensive, unnecessary, and if you gave us the equipment we could do a better job anyway.

Actually I think throughout church history there have been two attitudes, two opposing attitudes to leadership within the congregation which have been unhelpful.

One is anti-clericalism where the clergy are seen as a kind of a medieval hangover and a bottleneck to ministry and the church would be healthier without them. And the opposite extreme is clericalism which I think Anglicans are much more prone to.

[3 : 08] Where clergy are put on a pedestal where all decisions must be made through the clergy and they can't really be questioned in front of them and where every success and failure of the church is the responsibility of the clergy.

And the reason I'm saying this is because one of the most important issues in the book of Philippians is the place of leadership in the church. And the letter reveals the radical and remarkable leadership that God intends for his people whom Christ has bought by the price, by the blood of the cross.

And I want to summarise this teaching under two headings and the first one is this. Philippians reveals a church with leaders. Let's look at verse 1.

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons.

So a local church consists of two things. A fellowship, the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, and a leadership, in this case, bishops and deacons.

[4 : 22] It is not a fellowship under bishops and deacons, but with. That's very important. The leadership in the church at Philippi was not imposed from above or from the outside.

The leadership is an extension of the fellowship itself, of the communion of the gospel. The saints are not beneath the bishops and deacons.

They are in company with them. And that is why the Apostle Paul calls the Christians saints.

Because they belong to God and they don't belong to any leader.

They are God's holy people. You know that the word saint simply means holy person. But saint does not refer to a select group amongst Christians.

Saint doesn't refer to a specially treasured little corner over here, even though this corner is specially treasured. That's not what it means.

[5 : 27] You don't become a saint by being canonised by a committee of the church. In the New Testament, saints are all those who believe and obey the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Everyone who's turned to God in repentance and faith. And in the scriptures, holiness is a relational term. The clergy jam jar, which I think we ought to have some rules about, the clergy jam jar that Dan was talking about this morning is a holy jar.

There's nothing unique about the jam. It's that it's been set aside with a large pink sticker on it saying, clergy jam. It's the same. I've said this before. In the Old Testament temple, there were all sorts of things were holy.

There were holy barbecue tongs and there was a holy all sorts of things. And there was nothing unique about those tongs except that they were set aside for a particular purpose. And so are you and so am I.

We have been set aside by God for a particular purpose. God's people in the Old Testament were called a kingdom of priests, a holy nation, which didn't mean they were magnificently well behaved.

[6 : 36] God had set them aside and because his relation to them, they were placed in this world and were holy. Through Jesus' death and resurrection, God has done the same thing to you and me.

And although we are weak and disobedient and fearful and spiritually sluggish, yet we are saints.

That's the way the New Testament speaks about us. And this is where we must begin if we're going to talk about leadership in the church because this is the nature of God's church.

Church is comprised of those whom God has set aside to be holy. Those who look to Christ as saviour and redeemer and lord and master.

Now you know that in the Old Testament Israel failed to be a kingdom of priests. And so what God did was he delegated the priestly function, which was supposed to be for all the nation, to one tribe, the tribe of Levi.

But we are in a different place. Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, all of us are now welcomed into the presence of God.

[7 : 46] We all have complete and equal right of access to the throne of grace. There is no longer one tribe within God's people or one caste of priests.

All Christians are priests. So that the chief agents of God's work in the world is not some spiritual elite, appointed officials, a special group of holy Christians, but all believers because we are saints. The New Testament picture of the church is not a society that comes together because of our taste for church music or our mutual interest in Jesus. It is a body of people who belong to Jesus Christ, set in the world which is opposed by God, to hold forth the word of life, to know him, to serve him, and to proclaim him, to make disciples of all nations.

And you can search the New Testament from beginning to end to find any distinction between the laity and the clergy. It does not exist. In the New Testament, Dan and I and Harry and Jim and Felix and Neil are called laity and you are called priests.

I'm sorry to tell you that if that's a surprise. But that is why the church is a church with leaders.

Because God raises up ministries and ministers within the church and the task of the ministers is not to rule and to dictate or to dominate God's people, but to equip and to energise.

[9 : 15] And wherever a ministry arises and whenever you find a minister, they must exercise their ministry in a way that fits the nature of the church. I want to show you this is a deeply Anglican doctrine.

If you would pull out the Book of Common Prayer, please, and turn to page 706. Page 706, article 19 of the 39 articles.

I think we should read together the first paragraph of this article to make sure we're all awake. Of the church. Let's read this together. The visible church of Christ is a congregation of faithful men in

the which the pure word of God is preached and the sacraments be duly ministered according to Christ's ordinance in all those things that of necessity are requisite to the same.

This is a lovely picture. It's not a definition. It's a description of the church. And we begin with the very nature of Christ's salvation.

It is the nature of Christ's salvation to create a community. That is why the first phrase is there. That is why when we say the Apostles' Creed, as soon as we say we believe in the Holy Catholic Church, the very next phrase is the communion of saints.

[10:50] Because you see, an individualistic Christianity is a contradiction in terms. You and I are made right with God one by one, but we grow in connection and community with other people.

Christian character needs the Christian community for its development and its progress. When we come to Christ, we are like precious stones which are uncut with all sorts of sharp edges.

And we are thrown together into the church which is like a tumbler and it turns over and turns over and our sharp edges are knocked off and we are polished and polished until Jesus himself can see the reflection of his face in us.

And I think one of the temptations of mysticism is to quarantine ourselves from the contamination of those other irritating Christians who are dreadfully unhelpful to my spiritual poise.

But the New Testament knows nothing of an unattached Christian, of a Christian who is not a member and a participant in a congregation, a Christian who makes their way in the world without a deep connection with the Christian community.

[12:01] Do you remember at the end of Acts 2 on the day of Pentecost we read that Christ added to the church all those who are being saved. We don't add to Christ, Christ adds to his church.

And if you look at the article of the church there are two marks. The first is where the pure word of God is preached and where the sacraments are duly administered.

In other words, what creates the Christian community is the word of God, the preaching of God's word. As Jesus said, I am the good shepherd, I know my own and my own know me. My sheep follow their shepherd, they know his voice.

A stranger they will not follow. What's important here of course is that the article doesn't call on us to say who's in and who's out of the church. What it does is it tells us how to tell what a true church is.

Where the pure word of God is taught. Where God's word is taught without distortion and where there is an outward order of ministry controlled by God's word.

[13:09] And notice please, he's not speaking institutionally or organisationally. It's a company of faithful men and women. Nor is it an abstract concept.

It's a living organism of those who belong to Christ. That is why a Christian church is a church with leaders. Now, there are two words for with in Greek.

And one is weak and one is strong. And the strong word is the word that's used here and throughout the book of Philippians. And it's a relational word. It means in companionship with, together with, taking the part of the other person.

And it usually has a spiritual significance. becoming a Christian is described as dying with Christ, being made alive with Christ, being raised with Christ.

And in chapter 1 the Apostle Paul says, my great desire is to depart this life and be with Christ. This deep personal connection with Christ extends into our fellowship with one another.

[14:23] and that is why the Apostle begins all the saints in Christ Jesus with the bishops and deacons. Now, this has a number of very practical applications.

And I want to show you how it applies in Philippi. So I wonder if you just put your prayer book aside and turn over to Philippians chapter 4 for a moment. I want to show you an astounding section.

We're going to read verses 2 and 3 and you need to know that this letter, Philippians, all the letters in the New Testament were written to be read out loud in the congregation.

So here is a congregation at Philippi. There are two leaders in the congregation, two women, one named Euodia and one named Syntyche. And here comes a letter from the Apostle Paul and when they get to chapter 4 we read in verse 2, I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.

And I ask you also, true yoke fellow, help these women for they have laboured side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and with the rest of my fellow workers whose names are in the book of life.

[15 : 31] Is that not an astounding thing? It would be like me choosing two members of this congregation and saying, and naming you and saying, you need to get along, which is very tempting at times, but I'm not the Apostle Paul and I don't think you're mature enough to take it.

But clearly Paul thinks these women are. It's not a personal squabble between two prickly women. We don't know the precise nature of the difficulty but it was clearly a threat to the unity of the congregation.

And because the congregation is the people of the saints of God, it needs to be dealt with. And it's fascinating to see how the Apostle handles it, don't you think?

I mean, as the great Apostle, he could come and he could command them to do something but he doesn't. He doesn't stand above and order them. He comes beside them and he beseeches them. And he doesn't say, well, you know, just bury the hatchet, let bygones be bygones. He says, agree in the Lord. And the word agree is literally to have the same attitude of mind. In the Lord.

[16 : 47] In other words, what is to bind them together is their mutual submission to the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Because ultimately the issue is not the reputation of the women or the church but of Christ.

But most important of all, I want you to notice, the Apostle invites other members of the congregation to become involved. In verse 3, the little word, with, is used four times as a prefix to four separate words.

Let me just show you those. If you look down at 4.3, the word, yoke fellow, means it's with yoke fellow. It's two people in harness together and if one person pulls away, we're not going to move in a straight line.

The word help in verse 3 is companion help, with help. The word laboured, side by side, has with and the word fellow workers has the same prefix.

Partnership in the Gospel is not just a missionary enterprise. It means being involved with others in the body of Christ. And we are so afraid of meddling, aren't we?

[17 : 59] We're so afraid we would leave, we think it's better to leave wounds untended than to transgress some unwritten rule of social etiquette. We spend so much time and energy pretending that we have it all together.

But God has made us to need one another. And when we live just to ourselves, we miss out on a vital element of communion and our lives become shallow and trivial and self-focused.

Part of being the holy people of God means being engaged in that very serious dignity of the difficulties of other people to the glory of Christ. And I'm not sure how all we apply this, but I know we need to.

So let me turn to the second issue. Philippians not only reveals a church with leaders. I want to look at it from the other side. Philippians reveals leaders with the church.

Go back to chapter 1 verse 1, please. Paul and Timothy servants of Christ Jesus. Isn't that remarkable? Paul includes Timothy as one of high privilege.

[19 : 16] To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons. Don't you find it wonderful that he does not begin with the bishops and deacons? Starts with the saints.

It indicates how leadership is to be exercised in the church. There's no posturing, no power games, no pretense. There is to be a companionship leadership.

And the reason for that is that the leaders who lead and those who are led all share the same spirit, all share the same salvation. I know none of you are tempted to think this, but it's not that the leaders have more of the Holy Spirit or more of Jesus Christ.

But we all depend upon the same grace of God and the same mercy of God. We all submit to the same word of God. And it's very important that we clergy see ourselves first as members of the body of Christ before we see ourselves as leaders.

We stand in equal need of God's kindness and his forgiveness. We are equally at the disposal of God as you are. And I need to tell you on Monday as I was preparing this I wrote in my notes this involves a willingness to be overruled.

[20 : 32] And I don't want you to tell the trustees this, but twice this week I was overruled by the trustees. And I think it was probably good for me but not for them. Now here is the question in verse 1.

How many bishops were there in Philippi? Can someone tell me? If you look at verse 1 please can someone tell me how many bishops there were at Philippi?

Excuse me? More than one. Thank you. Yes. How many deacons were there? More than one. The unvarying pattern in the New Testament is that the local leadership is not committed to one person but to a group. In Acts chapter 14 when the apostle Paul goes back and visits the very baby fledgling churches that have just been created we read this.

He appointed elders plural in every church. There was no one single authoritarian leader in place. Leadership was vested in a group and that group took different forms in different places and demonstrated a flexibility to serve the gospel.

[21 : 59] Now I don't know if you're aware of not but in the New Testament there is no difference between bishop and presbyter. Bishop and what we call priest today. Let's have a cross reference.

Keep your finger in Philippians and turn back to Acts 20 for a moment on page 133. Acts chapter 20 verse 17 from Miletus the apostle Paul he's speaking of sent to Ephesus and called to him the presbyter the priests plural of the church one congregation in Ephesus and said to them and you look down in verse 28 take heed to yourselves and to all the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made you bishops.

in other words there's no three tiers of ministry leadership in the New Testament one bishop two presbyter priests three deacon there are two the bishop and the presbyter are the same person in the New Testament there's no one structure there's no one hierarchy leadership shifted to serve the gospel and there was only one function in common that we know of in the New Testament between the leaders and that was the ability and commitment to teach God's word that is why it is biblically speaking completely untrue to say that the bishop is the essence or the being of the church or that without a bishop or without a priest or without a deacon you don't have a church I mean even after the apostles died out there is no uniform pattern when you look at the early history of the church in Palestine in Asia Minor and in Africa there were bishops evolved early but in Greece and Macedonia and in Rome it didn't evolve until much later it's interesting when you come to the 4th century and you look at the lists of names of bishops in Rome it's clear there's contradictions and the bishops a number of bishops were operating at the same time and when you read the history of the early church again and again it is clear that the structures were there they were put in place for the purpose of maintaining the church in the truth of the gospel it was the job of the presbyters and the deacons and the bishops to preserve and teach the apostolic doctrine

I need to say to you I am not trying to be controversial here but what constitutes the church is not a bishop not a priest not a deacon it's the gathering of the saints of God around the word of God with the ministry that serves the apostles teaching now I don't want you to misunderstand me if I can say secretly there was a presbyterian minister here at the other service and he was mightily pleased by the sermon I want to say that the structures that we have inherited the three tier bishop priest and deacon are very useful and very helpful when they're employed to promote the gospel they were set up to plant new congregations that focused on the word of God they were set up to train and raise up new people who would teach God's word and to maintain the church and the truth of the gospel and if there's a prayer that you ought to pray for the leaders of this congregation of this church of any church it comes in the prayer book in the consecration of the bishop and I wonder if you might turn back to the prayer book to page 666 666 you're a naughty congregation for that this is straight after the consecration of the bishop where hands are laid at the bottom of the page 666 and I read this because this is the biblical model of leadership in the church for all levels of leadership the bottom of the page give heed they're given the bible give heed unto reading exhortation and doctrine think upon the things contained in this book be diligent in them that the increased coming thereby may be manifest unto all men take heed unto thyself and to thy doctrine and be diligent in doing them for by so doing thou shalt save thyself and them that hear thee that's from 1 Timothy for the presbyters and the bishops be to the flock of Christ a shepherd not a wolf feed them devour them not hold up the weak heal the sick bind up the broken bring again the outcast seek the lost be so merciful that you not be remiss so minister discipline that you forget not mercy that when the chief shepherd shall appear you may receive the never fading crown of glory through Jesus Christ our Lord and the end of that prayer is most important because in the book of Peter

Jesus Christ is called the shepherd and bishop of our souls the church is his he bought it with his own blood he is our overseer he calls us by name and he guides us and guards us and gathers us to himself and I want to finish just by pointing out one simple thing there's such a need for this kind of leadership in the church today and at the heart of the letter of Philippians as we've looked at it

over the last months is the person of the son of God who demonstrates this kind of leadership who doesn't seek his own position and his own influence but he gives it away he gives it away for our sake and he humbles himself to death on a cross and by doing that he opens the gate of heaven to all who will follow him and trust in him and we gather today as we gather every week around God's word with a form of ministry we gather to confess

[28 : 18] Jesus Christ as our Lord because he is Lord to hear his word today to receive the tokens of his death the bread and the wine and to feed on him in our hearts by faith with thanksgiving
Amen