

A GOD-CENTERED MINISTRY AND RESPONSES TO CONFLICT BETWEEN PEERS: PERSPECTIVES FROM THE APOSTLE PAUL¹

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A CRUCIAL ASPECT of the Reformed tradition is its effort to give consistent focus to God's glory. Think, for example, of the first question and answer in the Westminster Shorter Catechism: "What is man's chief end? Man's chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy him forever." Or we can also think more broadly of the five "solas" of Reformed thought: *sola Scriptura*, *solus Christus*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide*, and *solus Deo gloria*. Four of those phrases highlight something that human beings cannot do, which God must instead do for us: his Word alone reveals his will and provides ultimate authority in our lives due to our ignorance and unbelief; he saves us solely by the work of his Son due to our spiritual deadness and inability to meet our own needs; and this salvation comes to us by grace alone and through faith alone due to the impossibility of our meriting his favor on account of our sin. Then following these, the final *sola* draws the proper conclusion from the prior ones: the whole monergistic work of God's power and grace also redounds to his glory alone, which makes that glory one of the great and transcendent results of the whole course of history and of his salvific work. Truly, then, as we reflect on our Reformed heritage, we do well to remember this important aspect of its essential genius, namely its programmatic focus on God's own all-encompassing power and glory. Indeed, it is a privilege to stand within a theological tradition marked by this emphasis, ultimately because such a God-centered focus reflects what we are taught in Scripture itself.

And yet, even as we pause to appreciate the God-centered nature of our theological heritage, we also need to ask ourselves whether and to what extent we actually live in a way that is *consistent* with it. If we confess *solus Deo gloria* with our mouths, do we also, particularly as ministers of the gospel, live in conformity with that confession in our actions? And in particular for our purposes in this address, do we live in conformity with that confession when encountering situations of conflict with others in the ministry?

One of the ironies involved in our being Reformed is that we *ought* to be the most humble of all God's people. Indeed, we *ought* to be willing to submit ourselves to criticism from others, given what we profess about our own sin and its deceitfulness. We also *ought* to be ready to engage conflict courageously when necessary, trusting that God will fight the battle through and for us, rather than fearing reprisals and repercussions from people. Likewise, we *ought* to be ready to give up our own interests for the sake of others, being content to fill a little space

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ourselves if God be glorified through it since the efficacy of our ministries and the goal of our ministries centers not in our own glory but God's. Yet how many of these things, which ought to be true, really *are* consistently true of us, either individually or collectively? The painful truth is that occasions of conflict with other people often prompt the God-centeredness of our creed and confession to vanish in actual practice.

In what follows, then, I want us to consider what I believe to be one of the most palpable and telling barometers of our *actual* God-centeredness in the ministry, namely whether we are really God-centered or man-centered in the way we handle conflict with other people, and especially with our peers. And to do that we will reflect together on three different episodes recorded in Paul's life where he faced three different conflicts with his peers in the ministry (i.e., apostles and other ministers) and responded in three very different ways to each. These episodes can be found in Galatians 2:2; 2:11-14; and Philippians 1:12-18.

Now admittedly the choice of these particular passages has its limitations. No doubt many other passages could also be consulted along with these, which I expect would show even more diversity both in the types of conflicts Paul faced in his ministry and in the ways that he responded to them. But I select these passages especially for two reasons: one is the very *different* way in which Paul responds to each conflict; another is the very *consistent* attitude that guides him when rendering those different responses. This attitude is one of God-centeredness. Or we could also call it gospel-centeredness or Christ-likeness. But whatever we call it, what should become clear is that Paul responded very differently to different types of conflict in the course of his ministry and yet that what led him all the while was one and the same focus, not upon people (including himself!), but upon God's power and glory in Christ alone.

In addition, we should not forget, while approaching these passages, that the context surrounding each of them makes clear that Paul did not recount his experiences in these events merely out of autobiographical interest—that would be a bit ironic, wouldn't it?—but to describe a devotion to the gospel that he also desired his audiences to imitate as well. In other words, what we see at the heart of these passages is not meant to be unique only to Paul but is meant to guide us also. This fact is especially clear in Philippians 1, where Paul reminds the Philippians that they too experience the same conflict as he does (v. 30) and so urges them to live a life worthy of the gospel of Christ (v. 27). But it should also be clear in the context of Galatians 2, where Paul describes his ministry as something in which the basic and abiding nature of the gospel comes to expression (e.g., Gal. 1:15-16, 24), the same gospel that he also urges the Galatians—and all Christians everywhere—to believe and obey (cp. Gal. 5:7).

With these things in mind, then, we will look below at each passage in turn, with particular interest in the theocentric nature of Paul's responses to conflict and how it displays a pattern for ministerial conduct that should also make its mark on us.

1. Galatians 2:2 – Submitting to one another out of reverence for God

When turning to Galatians 2:2, we should immediately remind ourselves how a resolute focus on God, rather than man, characterizes Paul's letter to the Galatians from the outset and is particularly brought into view for what it shows about the source and nature of Paul's calling as an apostle. Right off the bat in Galatians 1:1, Paul introduces himself with the words, "Paul an apostle, not from men nor through man, but through Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead." Then a few verses later in 1:11-12, he emphasizes, "For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel. For I did not receive it from any man, nor was I taught it, but I received it through a revelation of Jesus Christ." From the letter's opening, then, Paul pointedly pits human agency against divine agency in a fairly stark and unqualified way, and he does this especially to emphasize how his vocation and his message have their source in the monergistic work of our great God.

Given this emphasis upon his independence from other people, though, it might surprise us to see what Paul then goes on to describe in Galatians 2:2. The text reads: "I went up because of a revelation and set before them (though privately before those who seemed influential) the gospel that I proclaim among the Gentiles, in order to make sure I was not running or had not run in vain." The great apostle to the Gentiles, whose ministry and message are from God and not people, takes his message and ministry and purposefully submits them to the scrutiny of the leaders in Jerusalem when experiencing a conflict with them.

At first blush, this might seem like a significant inconsistency in Paul's self-presentation, a bit of a gap in the letter, and a liability for his larger point about his ministry being from God and not men. However, further reflection actually suggests just the opposite. In fact, here is a crucial starting point for considering God-centered interaction with our peers—a more radical form of God-centeredness than we might at first be inclined to consider: Paul's concern in the ministry was *so* theocentric that his actions were not directed by the concerns or interests of *any* man...even himself. What Paul sought to protect in his ministry was the fidelity of his content, not his own pride or a concern about his own appearance before others. In essence, then, Paul's submission and deference toward his heavenly Father means that he does not think about his own stature in the ministry as something to promote or defend in itself. He does not feel that protecting or promoting his *ministry* requires protecting or promoting *himself*. Instead, his devotion to God leads him to humble himself before others also, voluntarily offering himself up for their critique.

Really this is a remarkable text, if you step back to think about it. After all, by this point in his ministry Paul was already a seasoned and successful missionary. He'd been serving for many years, as earlier sections of Galatians recount. He had certainly opened up far more territory to the gospel than those in Jerusalem had. And he had done all of this on the basis of a direct commissioning from Jesus Christ himself. It would have been very easy, then, just to soldier on independently.

In fact, practical human wisdom would also have told him to do just that. "It's going to damage your reputation and your ministry, if you go subject yourself to the Jerusalem pillars, Paul. It's going to look like you're unsure of yourself and like

you're underneath them. People won't look at you as an authority any more. You won't project the same appearance of confidence. Others will become more hesitant to follow you." And frankly, such ideas or misgivings may well have some truth to them, practically speaking. People often do want to follow a strong, self-made leader, and so projecting self-assurance may help procure and keep a larger following, according to the way things actually work in this world.

But even if that is true and submitting to others would damage Paul's "effectiveness" in human terms, so be it. Paul does not operate here on the basis of such human wisdom, practicalities, or probabilities. He doesn't act toward his peers on the basis of what is smart, politically speaking. He doesn't even do what might *seem* on the surface to be consistent with his own theology: trusting in God alone. Because, in the end, pitting trust in God against godly submission to one's peers is simply a false dichotomy. It is a smoke-screen devised by the flesh for self-protection. And that is really the issue here: the temptation to self-protection, rather than a commitment to God-centered transparency before other divinely called ministers.

What Paul does here, then, is truly to practice what he preached in one of the most profound of ways. The gospel is not from men or about man. It is God's work. And so it is not about *me* either, other than as a mere servant. The gospel does not have power because of the "alpha males" who propound it. Nor does it work in and through the established pecking order of human society and influence. So if I am diminished in the eyes of others by submitting my message and my methods to the scrutiny of others, rather than defending myself, stonewalling, or avoiding scrutiny, so be it! My vocation is from God! He will make my ministry successful, if it is to have any true success at all anyways. And it is precisely because Paul understands such things that he takes the initiative, in response to revelation, to submit himself and his ministry to those who were qualified to examine it—his peers—even though those same peers might seem to be (and sometimes might even act like) his competitors. But what they seem to be or act like is ultimately not Paul's concern. Their calculation about what this means politically is also not his concern. No, his concern is not political or practical but principal: to walk consistently with the gospel itself so that he himself would not run or labor in vain, as Galatians 2:2 itself makes clear. With his fidelity to God foremost in his mind, then, Paul purposefully and actively subjects himself to the scrutiny of those in Jerusalem.

Here, I say, is the Reformed principle of theocentricity finding very challenging expression in how Paul related to his fellow ministers. It is so easy *in practice* to treat the church of Jesus Christ as a mere human institution, even though we know *in theory* that it is not. It is so easy, for example, to try to avoid scrutiny or to take pride in our own abilities or accomplishments and so feel we are above submitting to others. It is easy to cover over potential problem areas in our ministries in order to maintain the appearance of confidence and authority. And it is also easy to come up with the most pious-sounding reasons for doing this: "Well, this church needs a leader, and so I have to look respectable." No, brothers, the church doesn't need a leader. It already has one. His name is Jesus Christ. And he is sufficient for its needs. Or, we may say to ourselves, "Well, the Lord didn't give me this position for no reason." Or, "I've served just as long or a lot longer than that other guy. Let Peter come try church-planting as long as I have, and then I'll listen to him." But all these

obfuscations and excuses simply amount to different forms of self-protection, which is nothing more than a particular kind of man-centeredness, namely self-centeredness. Yet if Paul, who had received a direct revelation from Christ, needed to subject his ministry to his peers, how much more do we?

And so I ask you, brothers, as I ask myself, do we think and act in accordance with what we confess is true of God and the church? Do we actively subject ourselves, our actions, and our words to the scrutiny of those called to give it? Or do we make excuses to protect ourselves from this? In other words, do you really just fall into thinking of the Christian life competitively on the basis of comparison to others and the church as just another human pecking order? Or do you actually assess yourself and your ministry in a God-centered way? The gospel is not about human comparisons, after all. The gospel is not about self-preservation. It is not about our names or reputations. It is certainly not about appearing quite formidable or important before people—even for the sake of an “effective ministry.” No, the gospel is about humility and self-sacrifice in the pattern of Jesus Christ. It is about submission to God himself and because of that to one another. Paul gives us an example here, then, of *true theocentricity working itself out at the horizontal level*. Genuine theocentricity should lead to relativizing ourselves and our own importance, to sacrificing human pride on the altar of Christ, and so to voluntarily submitting ourselves to scrutiny from one another.

Why is it, though, that ministers are often especially difficult to disagree with or confront? Too often we treat our churches as our territory and our ministries as something to defend, do we not?

I was corresponding with a ruling elder just recently who was exhausted from the emotional turmoil of having to tell his pastor that he had made some errors in the pulpit. Now this elder really loves and appreciates his pastor, values his ministry, and works hard in support of both that pastor and the church as a whole. Yet, he said to me, lamenting the situation: “Really, Marcus, my pastor just doesn’t take criticism well.”

Brothers, I suspect that we all find ourselves implicated to a considerable extent in this story. But, of course, this should not be the case.

In Reformed circles, we have a tendency to idealize certain figures from our past. In fact, I think there is a temptation for us to misunderstand the legacy of a Martin Luther, a Guido de Brès, or a J. Gresham Machen and in so doing to think that the Reformed ministry is about strong men who won’t budge in the face of opposition! No, not exactly. The Reformed ministry is more properly about a God-worked humility before the Lord of glory, Jesus Christ, and his truth, whoever it may be that speaks that truth. And that humility means submitting ourselves to each other’s judgments just as much as it means defending the truth in stalwart fashion.

Why is it, then, that no one tells heroic stories about how a Luther or a de Brès or a Machen was confronted by someone else... and gave in? We have a penchant for human heroes, do we not? A penchant which Paul and Luther and these other “heroes” of the faith would not even want us to have.

To the contrary, truly God-centered bravery means being willing to be criticized and actually *listen*—even submitting ourselves to such criticism voluntarily—knowing that we have no consolation other than to minister the truth and to submit *ourselves* to the truth, no matter who speaks it.

Brothers, the ministry is not about us, our accomplishments, or our reputation. It is about the Lord and his strength and his pattern of God-centered humility working itself out in us by his grace. After all, even Christ himself lived a life of perfect, God-centered submission. He came not to do his own will but the will of the one who sent him (John 6:38). It is he who said, “I do nothing on my own authority but speak just as the Father taught me” (John 8:28). How is it, then, that we, as mere servants of Christ, do not reflect this same sort of God-centered humility? May God grant to us that we will do so more and more by his grace through the working of his Holy Spirit, and that because of this we will also be ready to submit to one another actively out of reverence for God.

2. Galatians 2:11-14 – Confronting one another out of reverence for God

One often-overlooked facet of Galatians is how the root of the problem that Paul addresses in the letter involves people’s inappropriate desire to please other people, particularly as this comes to expression in leaders desiring to gain recognition and praise from others and so conducting themselves in the church in merely human and fleshly ways. In fact, Paul states quite plainly in Galatians 6:12-13 that this sinful desire is what motivates his Judaizing opponents: “It is those who want to make a good showing in the flesh who would force you to be circumcised, and only in order that they may not be persecuted for the cross of Christ... They desire to have you circumcised so that they may boast in your flesh.” Here in these verses we can observe both sides of man-centeredness operating in tandem: fear of people, on the one hand, and desire to gain glory and recognition from people, on the other. Yet it is precisely because of their *own* man-centeredness that these Judaizers also seem to have accused Paul of the very same thing. Paul’s words early in the letter show that the charge of desiring to please people has also been laid against him. In Galatians 1:10, he asks a question seeking to defend himself: “Am I now seeking the approval of man or of God? Or am I trying to please man? If I were, I would not be a servant of Christ.” The larger context of Galatians 1 and 2 suggests that the particular accusation against which Paul defends himself here revolves around alleged inconsistencies in his conduct as a minister, that he would change what he said in different situations in order to please different sets of people. The sting of this accusation therefore forms a big part of the reason why Paul goes on to provide a lengthy account of his own conduct in Galatians 1-2 as a whole, to show how he was not in fact unduly influenced by people’s opinions of what he should say but instead spoke and acted with a consistent message all along.

But of course, while Paul insists that his message and his guiding interests were consistent—in other words, that his commitment to God in Christ was unswervingly the same at each juncture—still we notice as we compare Galatians 2:2 with 2:11-14 that this unswerving commitment did in fact lead him to very different actions and very different ways of handling conflict at different times. On the one hand, then, we saw in Galatians 2:2 how Paul’s God-centered commitment to the gospel led him to submit himself to others, not in order to please those people *per se* but in order to please God himself. Yet on the other hand, when we turn to Galatians 2:11-14, we see this same commitment to pleasing God, rather than people, leading Paul to

confront some of the same people he submitted to earlier, because now they are implicitly undermining the gospel of God's free grace through their actions. As Paul says in verses 11-12, "When Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. For before certain men came from James, he was eating with Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party." Then as verse 14 says, "But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, 'If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?'"

So then, here in Galatians 2:11-14 we see quite clearly that just as Paul himself was not at the center of his own ministry, neither were his peers. The content of Galatians 2:11-14 therefore helps demonstrate that Paul did not submit himself to Peter and others in Galatians 2:2 because he was entangled in the fear of man or because he was drunk with the desire to please people and to gain from their approval, either of which would simply amount to different kinds of man-centeredness. Rather, he both submitted himself to Peter and confronted Peter for the same reason: his commitment to the truth of the gospel and God's glory in it.

You see, it is one thing to be self-protective or arrogant, refusing to be criticized or to submit yourself to others' evaluation. It is another thing to be consumed by the opinions of others. But both are equally man-centered, even if they express themselves in quite different ways.

Certainly a preoccupation with others' opinions and how to please them could stem from a fear of their opinions, negatively; or it could reflect a desire to gain from their opinions, to receive praise and influence through them, positively. Yet in either case, whether motivated negatively or positively, the main thing to avoid in either case would still be *confrontation*. Instead, preoccupation with others' opinions leads to downplaying problems that really need to be addressed, to delaying, to hiding, to avoidance. By contrast, though, Paul's confrontation of Peter and others in Galatians 2:11-14 is guided by something quite different, again showing how oriented he was toward God himself and his glory, rather than to practical expediency or to human networking or simply to his own peace and quiet in life.

Clearly, the stakes in this confrontation in Galatians 2 are quite high for Paul. He says repeatedly in the chapter that these men in Jerusalem are highly influential and revered in the church. They were established. Everyone already thought highly of them and looked to them for leadership. As a result, Paul is risking quite a lot in this confrontation. He's risking Peter's approval of his mission (and by extension James'), the financial support of churches that looked to Peter and James as leaders, and possibly greater persecution as his opponents gain more fuel for their resistance to him.

Surely if Paul could simply be more political, or, we might say, more "savvy," there would also be much to gain, humanly speaking, from currying Peter's good favor. Is Paul not walking away from a great opportunity to promote his mission, if he could just get along with others better?

But when the issues at stake in a conflict concern consistency with the gospel message itself and threaten the very unity of the church in the truth, then avoiding confrontation is sinfully man-centered and so self-serving. Yes, we may concoct many explanations for how either man-centered fear or man-centered opportunism is

really serving the gospel. But Paul obviously does not do so here. Instead, he once again remains consistent, acting out of theological principle and conviction, not out of practicality or what was comfortable for him. On the one hand, if there is a question of *his* fidelity—that he himself might be running in vain—he actively submits himself to others for scrutiny in Galatians 2:2. But on the other hand, if others are living inconsistently with the gospel, calling the full legitimacy of Gentile Christians into question by their actions, then Paul rises to defend those Christians and to defend the integrity of the gospel, even at risk to himself and Peter’s opinion of him in Galatians 2:11-14. And so Paul went to Peter, directly, to seek his repentance.

As an aside, we might take note in our own day of two things about *how* Paul confronted Peter. First, he went to him personally. Second, he went to him to recover him, for the sake of restitution. In other words, Paul did *not* first get on his blog to blast Peter. And he did not proceed by bad-mouthing Peter to others. Those are ways either to get glory for yourself or to cower in self-protecting isolation, all the while playing a kind of ecclesiastical one-upsmanship. Indeed, if Paul had wished to play this sort of game, he might have conceived of this situation with Peter as a strategic opportunity to advance his own cause. What a great chance to show everyone how his cause is the correct one: “See! Peter is being inconsistent! This shows how he is inferior. Come to Paul’s church and Paul’s conferences instead of Peter’s.” However, Paul’s actual way of dealing with this confrontation shows what his true goal is and therefore shows yet again how he is not concerned for himself and his own gain in this matter at all. If he had wanted a following and recognition from others, he could have used Peter’s inconsistency to his own advantage. Or if he were fearing Peter, he could have gone and gotten others in his corner first—bringing a whole group of people to confront him. Yet Paul’s method is not man-centered in either of these ways. Instead, he takes that bold walk to Peter’s door to speak to him directly, come what may. A lot of other options, brothers, really just amount to cowardice or self-seeking.

We can also reflect here again on how Paul’s actions go against ordinary human wisdom. On the one side, in our self-serving wisdom we are so often tempted just to stand back in fear: “What will Peter think of me? What will others think of me? It will be a huge conflict and difficult to resolve. Better to let things lie. How big a deal is it anyway? Peter’s only *not* eating with Gentiles sometimes. He’s just trying to keep peace with certain men from James. Isn’t that wise to do? Does Peter really have to eat with Gentiles all the time?” Out of fear, we so often rationalize that a given problem is not really that consequential, when in fact it is. Or on the other side, human wisdom would say: “Well, you know, you get more flies with honey than with vinegar. After all, you need Peter’s support, don’t you? Look at the big picture, Paul! Having Peter’s support could really help the Gentiles in the long run. It’s really better to let this issue of consistency with the gospel go.” In fact, reasoning like this even sounds pious and gospel-oriented in some ways, doesn’t it? For the sake of the gospel’s effectiveness, I won’t confront someone with as much stature as Peter because it will do more harm than good. Isn’t that serving God’s kingdom purposes? No, it’s really just a form of man-centered pragmatism, focused either on myself or others. To the contrary, both the purity and the unity of the church are at stake here

in what Peter is doing. In such situations, it is not gospel-centered or God-centered to avoid conflict.

In the end, it is important to remind ourselves how Paul actually did *not* need Peter's support for his gospel, if it were to come to that. The gospel is the work of God, not of Peter or of Paul, for that matter. So all calculations of human risk or human reward are not really relevant to its concerns. Our job, brothers, is to be faithful to the Lord and his Word and to let him take care of the rest. We may *be* less effective when we are faithful—outwardly at least. We may perhaps become marginalized, as Israel's prophets of old were. But that is for the Lord to choose. Ours is to follow his revealed will, not to devise our own, pragmatic strategies for success.

And so again I ask, how do you do with this? Is having to confront others a bigger struggle for you than having to submit to others yourself? Do you tend to live in fear of others' opinion, finding excuses for not speaking up when it is a matter of substance, of consistency in practice with the gospel of God's free grace in Christ? Or do you like to play the angles, skillfully involving yourself in political gamesmanship "for the good of the church"? Truly, both of these approaches come down to living inconsistently with the God-centeredness we profess. God himself is not interested in our crafty designs, brothers. He is interested in his own glory and our Christ-likeness. And if we are too, as we should be, then we must be willing to go to someone—soberly but still courageously—to speak up for the peace and purity of the church, seeking their repentance and restoration, even when doing so is uncomfortable or threatens others' opinions of us.

You know, in a sense Dale Carnegie was right when he wrote his best-selling classic about how to win friends and influence people.² What he said is what actually does work so often in this world: essentially, you have to make people feel good about themselves in order to gain influence over them...that is, if you want to build a merely human enterprise. But the gospel is not a human enterprise, and so Galatians 2 reads almost like a rebuttal of Carnegie's thought. Clearly Paul did not seek to make Peter or Barnabas or James or even himself feel good. Instead, he served God on the basis of a different, self-denying principle that he saw in Christ (Phil. 2:5-11). This required not only submitting himself to the judgment of others but also confronting them directly, whatever the consequences, if in so doing he might serve and defend the interests of his Savior and Lord according to his own calling. Whatever Carnegie's practical wisdom may be, then, the gospel inculcates an entirely different principle and basis for interacting with others in the ministry, whether or not you will ever win them over as your friends or come to have any influence over them or anyone else by doing so.

3. Philippians 1:12-18 – Quiet rejoicing for the sake of Christ

Against the background of the two conflicts just considered in Galatians, we turn now to Philippians 1. Here again, we see a conflict between Paul and other ministers. And here we also notice yet another God-centered response to conflict, one that is

2. Dale Carnegie, *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936).

expressly modeled after the example of Jesus himself, which Paul will go on to describe later in Philippians 2.

In Philippians 1:12-18 we read:

I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to all the rest that my imprisonment is for Christ. And most of the brothers, having become confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, are much more bold to speak the word without fear. Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. The former proclaim Christ out of rivalry, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.

Interestingly, though, here in Philippians 1 Paul's God-centeredness does not express itself in activity, at least at the horizontal level between people. Instead, it expresses itself in his quietness, in the self-control and resolve of his private response to the Lord in his heart. He doesn't schedule a meeting either to submit his message to others' scrutiny or to confront others for their inconsistency. Instead, he simply pauses in the midst of conflict to rejoice for what God himself is doing even in the midst of others' sin, and even despite the negative effect that that sin is having upon him at the time.

Now to understand why Paul's response here is so different from the others above and what a profound example that response is meant to be for us, we have to look at some of the circumstances involved in this particular context. For one thing, it is important to consider the nature of the conflict Paul experiences here, which is different than the ones experienced in Galatians. In particular, we must note carefully how this conflict does not center around the message of the gospel itself. Paul is not dealing with a false gospel being preached by others, as he was in Galatia, or with disciples like Peter who were accommodating aspects of that false gospel through their actions. In fact, if we read Philippians 1:12-18 carefully, we notice how Paul does not question that those opposing him in this case are believers—or at least, we might say, that they are members in good standing in the visible church. After all, when Paul speaks about two groups of preachers in verse 15, in context both of those groups comprise a portion of "the brothers" he just mentioned in verse 14. Moreover, this passage also describes no substantial difference in *what* these two groups of Christian preachers were preaching. Rather, the content of both groups' messages is described in exactly the same way: they both simply "preach Christ." Evidently, then, there is nothing noteworthy that distinguishes what each group preaches, and Paul takes no exception to either's content as such. Moreover, this helps explain why Paul can say that he does in fact rejoice when *both* groups preach. Despite what some have assumed, Paul does not appear to be dealing here with a problem like that of the Galatian Judaizers. In other words, the conflict in Philippians 1:12-18 is not over doctrine or truth-content or with leaders' actions threatening to split the church and disunify it in a general way, as Peter's actions had threatened to do. Surely these

differences in Philippians, as compared to Galatians, also help explain why Paul responds so differently to this conflict than he did to the others considered above.

At the same time, though, while these differences between Philippians 1 and Galatians 2 help explain the particular nature of Paul's response here, it is not as if they suddenly make the conflict in Philippians 1 easy for Paul himself. In fact, in some ways what is different here may make the conflict in Philippians 1 harder for him, at least personally speaking, and also help pinpoint Paul's exact reason for describing the conflict to the Philippians at all. You see, while the rival preachers in Philippians 1 are preaching Christ, the problem remains that they are doing so with wrong motives, "out of envy and rivalry" (v. 15). The words Paul uses there suggest that these brothers are motivated by covetousness and resentment over the influence Paul has had in his own ministry. Put simply, these men struggle under the weight of their own ambition, desiring to obtain more of Paul's influence for themselves. Because of this, they even see Paul's imprisonment as an opportunity to exploit for their own gain, to increase their own following. Jumping into action while Paul is literally held captive in chains, they go about preaching Christ, but especially in order to gather people around *themselves*.

So what is Paul to do? How should he respond to this sort of competitive conflict initiated by others? Well, quite simply, he says that his response is to rejoice.

Now, to be clear, Paul is not saying that preaching out of envy and selfish ambition is fine. In fact, part of the whole thrust of this part of his letter is to exhort the Philippians themselves *not* to act out of envy or out of a desire for vain-glory or recognition (2:3). Instead, Paul wants the Philippians to be of one mind, to have unity, to be in full accord with each other (2:2); and he knows that to do this they must consider others' interests before their own (2:4) and *not* act out of envy. Paul's point, then, is clearly *not* that the motivation of the rivalrous preachers is of no concern.

Rather, his point is this: if all that someone else's envy and ambition produce is a trampling on my rights while Christ himself is still accurately preached, then I respond simply by taking my own interests out of the equation and rejoicing. Because the envious preachers in Philippians 1 are not preaching another gospel or compromising the full acceptance of Gentile Christians, the only problem in Philippians 1 is how these preachers' actions affect Paul himself: they seek to afflict Paul by insinuating themselves into his sphere of influence. And yet, their mode of operation in doing so is simply preaching Christ.

At that point Paul attests that his own concern is decidedly *not* with who has influence, who gets credit for a church's growth, or whose following is bigger. In essence, he says, my concern is not with which servant of Christ Jesus does which work or even *seems* to do which work and get credit in the eyes of others. Rather, *my* concern, when others succeed even because they are being competitive with me—*my* concern is simply with this: is Christ nonetheless being served?

Or in other words, if the real consequence of a conflict is that *I* lose something even as Christ does not, then I will simply rejoice. If the upshot of some circumstance is that someone else jumps in to benefit from or take credit for my work, if the outcome is simply that a group of people jump from my church to someone else's—but Christ is still preached to them and God's sheep fed, then this simply becomes my opportunity to give up my own interests in the cause of the

gospel, just as Jesus gave up his own interests to come to earth and die for us all. After all, if it is *really* the case (as Paul says of himself in Phil. 1:1) that he is nothing more than a servant of The Servant, Jesus Christ, who made himself nothing (2:7), then Paul's interests *are* Christ's interests, and any way in which they are not can be discounted and given up. If I am offended or mistreated or marginalized in a context where Christ's kingdom is still otherwise advanced, then what? Is that fair? No, it is not. But does it matter? Yes, but not as much as many *other* things matter to me, because I am Christ's own. Therefore, while waiting quietly for the Lord to do his work, knowing that he will settle all accounts justly on the day of Christ's return, I can still simply rejoice and give him the glory!

In short, this is what it means to be a servant in a household, does it not? A servant does not accrue his own property or serve his own benefit. He serves that of his master and of the household within which he works. And that is the overriding consideration here: a servant-like focus on God's own cause in Jesus Christ, not on my own gain. *So what* if someone else acted for the wrong reason? If all that that affects is me, then I let the Master deal with that. *My* concern is to advance the interests of his house. And at the end of the day, if those interests are being served, then I am happy. In fact, I am very happy, and I greatly rejoice.

In one sense, brothers, this may be the most difficult of the three passages we've considered, since it involves *not* actually solving the conflict at hand but contenting ourselves instead with the Lord's provision in the absence of such an immediate resolution. In this way, the situation Paul describes here serves to expose our own heart's intent and our private, religious response to the Lord. Do we rejoice before the Lord when his cause abounds, even at our expense? Even when we ourselves are wronged and must give up our own individual interests?

Often we are so worried about how successful other people are and how that compares to us. It galls us when someone else gets more credit than we do, especially if they seem to serve God for the wrong reasons. Whose church is bigger? Whose blog gets the most hits? Who gets the credit for helping someone in a counseling situation? Who is thought of as a really good student or teacher or theologian? Who gets acknowledged as making a good comment in a meeting? Who gets elected to denominational committees or is asked to speak at conferences or to write for magazines? Who speaks the most in Session or Consistory or Faculty meetings? Whose explanations or ideas are praised and then followed by others? Often we get upset when others pursue such things. But the fact that we get so upset really shows how much we care about exactly the same things ourselves. Isn't it especially man-centered people who find themselves galled by other peoples' man-centeredness? Isn't it especially competitive people who are so riled when others act competitively?

In the end, Paul says, none of these human accolades and degrees of influence matter. All that matters—all that *should* matter to us—is Christ's own cause. And in its service, I am called to give up my own personal interests. This is indeed a great test of our God-centeredness, is it not? Do we *really* seek God's glory, as we say we do, or not—even when the accomplishment of God's glory means my lack of glory and recognition, at least for now? Even when God's glory goes against my own personal interests at the present time?

But of course, the great reason that Paul acts in this self-emptying way is because of how Jesus Christ himself first acted for the sake of all of his people in his incarnation, life, and death. Philippians 2 makes this expressly clear: Christ did not consider his own self-interest. And he did not grasp after glory. Instead, he gave up his own interests and came to earth in servant-form, doing someone else's will, even at complete cost to himself—even unto death. Yes, this is where the gospel once again hits home to us and refocuses our attention. The greatest man who ever walked the earth, the God-man, who actually *deserved* honor and deference and recognition in ways that we never will—*this* one completely poured himself out on my behalf, on our behalf, to render an obedience to the Father that I could not and would not render. And he did this to provide me with justification and adoption and sanctification and, indeed, glorification. Here, then, is the One that I know I need, to forgive me for all my perpetual and inveterate man-centeredness, to wash me clean from my shameful self-service, and to enable me to die unto sin and self and to live unto righteousness. Surely if he has done this as the Lord of glory, not serving his own interests, should we not seek to do so as well through his empowering Spirit? Clearly that is Paul's point in Philippians 2, that we too should have the mind of Christ in this way (v. 5).

And so we come before our Savior—that perfectly God-centered one—and we confront both our man-centered sinfulness and his gracious, God-centered provision for us time and again as we fail. Brothers, the self-emptying cross of Jesus Christ shows us the depth and desperateness of our own selfish condition apart from him. But it also shows us the fullness of his provision to remedy that condition. And it even shows us something else as well: it shows us God's plan and design that glory come to all his children in and through God-centered self-denial. When we act in this way, emptying ourselves, then our glory truly is God-centered, because it is not something we grab for ourselves through human ingenuity, political maneuvering, self-protection, or self-assertion. It is, instead, something we receive only from him and only as his interests are served. *Solus Christus. Sola fide et gratia.* And, indeed, *Soli Deo Gloria!*

4. Concluding Reflections

To close, then, I would like to ask you this question: which of the God-centered responses to conflict that we've looked at above do *you* find most difficult yourself? Is it submitting yourself to criticism? Is it confronting others? Or is it remaining inactive and simply rejoicing when only your own interests are being trampled? Maybe it is a mix of all three, but I would suggest that the answer to this question may be helpful diagnostically as you confront your own sin in the Christian life. And it may be especially useful as you confront your own sin in the ministry, because it helps pinpoint for each of us what form our own native propensities to sin most often take, so that we can die to them more actively and live unto Christ. Do I tend especially toward a self-protection or self-advancement that hides from criticism? Do I tend toward a fear of man or a trust in man that refuses to confront others? Do I tend toward a self-absorption or self-assertion that always stands up for my own interests as first and foremost?

In every one of these passages, Paul practices a God-centered self-denial that refuses the allure of pragmatic man-centeredness, and he tells us about this in order that we too might imitate him as he has imitated Christ. May each of us look to these examples, then, to help us put off the tendencies of our sinful flesh more knowledgeably and put on Christ's righteousness more earnestly and consistently, all by grace through faith and in the help of the Holy Spirit. And through this, may we each come to deal with conflict in the church less selfishly, for the greater good of the church, and ultimately for the glory of our great God alone in the gospel of his Son.