

# One Spirit

## Essay 5 in the series “Ode to Joy”

As we come to the heart of the Philippian letter (Philippians 1:27-30), we begin to see Paul’s driving concern that whatever happens to the believers in Philippi they’ll stand firm. And stuff is happening to them. They are, in fact, going through the same struggles Paul had when he was in Philippi and now is still having in Rome. Now none of this is surprising. The city of Philippi was a designated Roman colony, a little Rome in Macedonia, filled with retired Roman army veterans. Some hundred years earlier Octavian, later Caesar Augustus, had won a great victory just outside Philippi and in celebration he had declared Philippi a Roman colony. Its people were Roman citizens. They prided themselves on being Roman. They dressed like Romans. The rhythm of the city beat to the worship of Rome and its emperors and its gods. And heaven help those who couldn’t – who worshipped another God and could not enter into the Roman cults.

So Paul begins, “Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel.” And he uses a Greek verb derived from “polis” for “city,” with the undercurrent of citizenship implied. That is, Paul is urging them to take an active part in the affairs of the “polis,” not Philippi or Rome now, but their new city, the church now as a colony of heaven. And if his point about citizenship is subtle here – Is their real pride in being Roman citizens or citizens of heaven? – he expresses it more strongly later in his letter.

Paul goes on urging them to “stand firm in one spirit,” which makes perfectly good sense to us, though perhaps mistakenly. The French may have the concept of *esprit de corps*, but the Greeks didn’t. So Paul is likely saying: Stand firm in the Spirit, in the one and only Spirit that holds you all together. Then “Contend as one person for the faith of the gospel, without being frightened in any way by those who oppose you.” Your oneness, your fearlessness, will be an omen to them that their cause is lost and that you will be delivered by God.

So stand firm in one Spirit,  
contending as one person  
for the faith of the gospel.

Herein lies joy.

In soul brothers and sisters you can count on, spiritual companions on a great quest, who know the risks, who see the possibilities, who know what’s at stake, who are engaged in the same great mission to see that everyone everywhere knows that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting people’s sins against them, that this living God is the Savior of all people, and that we live in a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of this God, an enchanted and enchanting world where grace reigns, where somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good, and so our very lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God. Herein lies joy in spiritual companions you can rely on.

Regrettably these very words of Paul, and other words of his like this, have been turned into joy-stealers. I speak now of the notion that we must be identical in our doctrine and practice, that we must see all the mysteries of God in exactly the same way or we cannot be in fellowship or communion with one another. In some ways, it was the promise of the Enlightenment – that if all could be free to think for themselves they would all come to think the same things. Really? Does that really make any sense? Freedom to think for ourselves, and we'll all think alike?

Well, what it did do was rob us of our spiritual joy, turning us all into doctrinal vigilantes always on guard against those who saw things differently from us. It was a prescription for sectarian squabbling, for endless division, for competing citadels of orthodoxy each eventually with smaller and smaller numbers. And if only we few were saved, and if that excluded our mom or dad, our son or daughter, or our favorite aunt, so be it. It was a prescription for sadness, for religious melancholy, for perpetual fear that we too might be wrong, might be lost.

And it all came down to how we defined unity. In the church at first, there was substantial diversity. In its very Scripture, there were multiple perspectives. I didn't know that until I read Scripture, and quit the laborious and fruitless attempts to force square texts into round holes. But yes, from the very beginning there were multiple perspectives. The church of the second century was incredibly diverse. And if the emperor Constantine tried to enforce uniformity, he substantially failed. For over a 1000 years the church saw itself as one but there was a remarkable range of diversity in its doctrine, practice and organization. There was of course the ever-present human tendency to wish that everyone might see things "as we do," but that was impractical. Always has been.

So, yes, the church was one but it was unity in diversity, not unity as uniformity. It had no apparatus to structure itself in any other way. Until ... Until in the eleventh century the Papacy now armed with the tools of canon law and a near monopoly on education sought to impose uniformity across Europe, an effort that reached its climax at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 under Pope Innocent III. Innocent III was a formidable man, a medieval monarch in the fullest sense of the word. And when his great council determined that only those whose faith and practice were identical with that of the Church of Rome could be in fellowship with the Church of Rome, he had redefined unity as uniformity, as exact uniformity in doctrine and practice. And when 300 years later groups broke away from the Church of Rome, they carried with them Innocent III's definition of unity, unity as uniformity, so that those in fellowship must think and act the same. The inevitable consequence was division over and over and over again, and the religious melancholy that goes with it.

Now I am still a restorationist. I'm just not sectarian about it. I just figure we should all go back to our original texts and see them again in their living historical context. I figure good Catholics and good Protestants are all at heart restorationists. For our purposes right now, here's why this matters. Maybe we have it backwards how people come to faith. I have a friend who loves our church family but he's not sure he believes

everything we believe here. He's also not sure he's prepared to behave the way "we all" behave here. And he figures he can't belong here until he gets his beliefs and behavior "straightened out." It's the way he was raised. It's the way most of us were raised especially if we grew up in church, in any church. So for my friend, it's belief first, then behavior and then belonging. But what if belonging comes first, then changed behavior, and then consequent beliefs?

I love it when a whole new way of looking at things opens up. It was, I need to say, Diana Butler Bass in her book *Christianity after Religion* that opened up my eyes to this. She went back to the beginning, back to Jesus, and asked in what order people came to Jesus. Think about it. Did Jesus go around and find some people who had their doctrine and behavior all squared away and then allowed them to belong, appointed them apostles? Or did he walk along the Sea of Galilee and invite first this fisherman and then that one, and then a tax collector, to "Follow me." Did it maybe all begin with belonging?

And then what? Did Jesus' followers sit around a fire and listen to lectures on doctrine? No, they listened to stories that taught them how to behave, how to best act in this world, and they learned to take care of the sick, to feed the hungry, to pray, to wash feet, to serve, to love, to forgive. And this belonging and behavior opened up for them a whole new vision of God, a whole new experience of God in this world. And so from belonging and behavior came beliefs that made sense in the light of their new-found belonging and behavior. They came over time to see: that God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself not counting people's sins against them, that this living God is the Savior of all people, and that we live in a world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of this God, an enchanted and enchanting world where grace reigns, where somehow in absolutely all things God works for our good, and so our very lives expand and fill to the measure of all the fullness of God. And with this, they came to joy, to unshakeable joy, to radiant unshakeable joy, joy that lasts even if your next big interview is with the murderous Emperor Nero.

So we are called to be a band of brothers and sisters, soul brothers and sisters, spiritual companions engaged in the greatest adventure life offers, spiritual friends who can count on one another, bound together not by enforced uniformity but by the one Spirit of God who makes us all one. We are called to belonging to God and to one another, to learning to behave in light of this belonging, and learning and teaching those beliefs that follow naturally from this new life-transforming, life-enhancing belonging and behavior. My friend need wait no longer. The world lit by resurrection and open to the Spirit of God is his for the taking – and with all the joy that just comes with it. And with companions with whom he can stand firm, contending as one for this fabulous good news. Herein lies the way to lasting joy.

– Dale Pauls