

The Last Word

The Self-Emptying Life

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Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself.

Paul's words of admonition to the church in Philippi (Phil. 2:5–7a, NRSV) might have been easy to sing or recite as part of an early hymn or creed in the first century church, but Euodia and Syntyche might have found them hard to swallow. In the Epistle's fourth chapter, Paul asks these women to 'be of the same mind in the Lord' over some grievance between them that was not doctrinally significant, but was proving disruptive and distracting to the community of faith (Phil. 4:2–3).

Every time I teach Philippians, I wonder what the disagreement was about. (It probably had to do with what kind of music was best for the hymn!) Whatever it was, it was a dispute that did not concern the truth of the gospel as Paul never hesitated to deal with those sorts of disputes in the particular. No, this dispute was waged over preference or taste, something that smacked of pride and lent itself to power. Euodia (smells good!) and Syntyche (looks great!) were in some sort of power struggle over an issue that boiled down to influence, a preferred comfort zone or a preference for how something should be done. Even though Paul did not treat this as false doctrine or false teaching, neither did the Apostle ignore this fracture within the fellowship. Paul wanted these two women who had struggled with Paul in the work of the gospel to empty themselves for the sake of the other.

I often think that when the letter was first read, Euodia and Syntyche sat there across the room from each other and thought, 'I hope *she's* listening!' And then suddenly they each heard their own name and realised the need for the self-emptying life wasn't just for 'the other person'. Each of us has to hear our name in Paul's admonition. We might 'look great' and even 'smell good', but if we are not self-emptying servants, we can disrupt our communities of faith and impede our witness to the gospel. In Philippians 2:3, Paul, in fact, contrasts 'conceit' or 'vain glory' (lit. *kenodoxia* – *empty glory*) with the glory of Christ that is self-emptied in the incarnation. Every time we think a sermon is for someone else, it means we're full of ourselves. We are not emptied. We are not humble. We do not have the mind of Christ.

Self-emptying is incredibly challenging for those who consider themselves somehow endowed with a superiority compared to others, but it's even difficult for those who consider themselves as equals. From the Jerusalem Council in Acts after the Gentile Pentecost to the Judaizers of Galatia, from the Philippian church of Euodia and Syntyche to Philemon's treatment of Onesimus, from Mary's discipleship at the feet of Jesus to Phoebe's ministry in the early church, issues of self-emptying swirl around what it means that 'there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus' (Gal. 3:28). As the spiritual offspring of Abraham, all of us are to 'have the same mind ... that was in Christ Jesus'. We are to empty ourselves, 'looking not to our own interests, but to the interests of others' (Phil. 2:4). This costly discipleship should transform our homes, energise our mission, celebrate our gifts and inform our hermeneutical practice as well. When a person is marginalised in serving the church on the basis of gender and not the gifts given by grace, or when Scripture translation becomes an exercise of power over pronouns it smacks of *kenodoxia*, not the kenotic theology of the incarnation and the cross.

When my son was asked during pre-marital counselling to describe the foundational principle for relating to his wife, he began by relating the truths of Philippians chapter two. 'If Karen and I are equals in Christ, equals in personhood, equals in value, then our equality is not something to be grasped or exploited or turned to our own benefit. The only thing I can do is empty myself for her – give my self away for her, no matter the cost. To love her as Christ loves the Church'. And she for him.

If we won't even sacrifice our taste in worship music, our preferences in pronouns in Bible translation, or how Powerpoint should or should not be used in sanctuaries, how will we ever see the church unfettered from its empty glory to give itself away for the world God loves? Euodia and Syntyche regretfully merited a rebuke in Scripture because they were in a power struggle over a gospel non-essential. If Scripture were written today, would we read our names in a similar rebuke? If 'Euodia' were to truly bear the aroma of Christ (2 Cor. 2:15) in the world and if 'Syntyche' were to be an 'ornament' for the gospel (Titus 2:10), the self-emptying life is the only way to the glory that matters.