

Consider others better than yourselves, Andrew McCafferty, Nov 2007

Philippians 2:3 - Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. NASB

In Chinese, if you want to complement a child, you say that he or she is "hen guai". It means something like obedient, including respect for parents and a general spirit of cooperating with others. The Philippians church was "hen guai". It seems to have been one of Paul's best Churches. He had a deep relationship with the church. In Philippians 1:8 we read that he "longed for all of them with the affection of Christ Jesus". In Philippians 2:1, he tells us that comfort in Christ and love, fellowship in the Spirit, and tender compassion were the marks of the Church's relationship with Paul and among themselves. It was a good church.

However, it was not a perfect Church. There seems to have been some conflicts among them. The clearest sign of this is Philippians 4:2. He mentions two sisters who were having some conflict. He asks them "to be of the same mind". Philippians 2:2 also suggests that the church was not fully united in faith and purpose. After commending them in verse one, verse two tells them that they can make Paul's joy complete by being of the same mind. (Paul uses the same phrase here as in Philippians 4:2.) This naturally suggests they were not of the same mind on certain points of doctrine or practice.

Philippians 2:3 is Paul's antidote to divisions and conflicts in the church. In the first part of verse three, we see the source of divisions and tensions: selfishness and empty conceit. In Philippians 1:17, Paul has already used this word 'selfishness'. He tells us that some preach Christ out of selfish ambition. Paul and James often includes this word as a mark of earthly, sinful men (see Romans 2:8, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Galatians 5:20, James 3:14, James 3:16). The United Bible Society Greek dictionary gives three meanings for it: selfishness, selfish rivalry, and selfish ambition. From the context in which it is used, we can see that it has both the sense of selfishness and of ambition or rivalry. When there is conflict, there is almost certainly selfishness and ambition. When two people want to be first, there is going to be conflict. When two people are seeking to be the most influential, there is going to be trouble. When two people insist that the church does everything in their way, there will be strife. We all know from experience. Selfish ambition is the root of all sorts of evil. It blinds the eyes of the best of men. Most of our anger results from selfish desires together with someone who is standing in our way. Selfish desires produce quarreling. On the other hand, if there is no selfish ambition, there is not much to fight about. If no one insists on being first in line, on being most influential, on things being done in their way, there is little reason for conflict.

The second source of conflict that Paul gives in verse three is "selfish conceit". This word (in the Greek) literally means "empty glory". The first half of the word has the same root as the word translated "emptied" in "Christ emptied himself" (verse 7). The second half of the word is the standard word for glory.

The King James translates the entire word well: vainglory. By this vainglory, Paul means the "glory" that comes from money, talents, influence, a successful ministry, etc. It comes from all those things that earn us the empty praise of men. It is the glory a preacher imagines he has when he tells his fellow preachers how many people are in his church, or the glory a laymen exalts in when he is seen driving his Mercedes Benz.

By looking at the last half of the verse, we can get a clearer idea of what 'empty conceit' or 'vainglory' is. Paul commands us to put on humility, and to consider others as more important than ourselves. The word humility has the sense of "lowly-minded". The word "more important" literally means "surpassing". The NASB uses "more important"; most other translations use "better". Lowly mindedness is well illustrated by the phrase "considering others to be better or more important than yourself". A proud man naturally considers himself to be better than those around him. He naturally thinks that he is the most worthy of honor. He naturally thinks that his views are the wisest, that his ways are the best, that he understands all things. And worse than this, he thinks that he is the best Christian among his peers. He imagines that his Christian life is rightfully earning him the praise of both God and men. He imagines that he is worthy of a very high seat in the Church of God. He imagines himself to be "holier than thou". Little does he know that he is a stench in God's nose. (Isaiah 65:5 - "Stand by thyself, come not near to me, for I am holier than thou. These are a smoke in my nose, a fire that burns all the day".) Proud men can preach to others with a good deal of force, but they never can preach to themselves. An unconverted man sees the sins of others very clearly, and thinks of himself as almost perfect. A born-again Christian sees his own sins very clearly, and easily overlooks the sins of others.

At the Seminary, our garbage collector is a young woman. She comes in everyday just after lunch and takes out the garbage. She gives us a good example of what Paul means in verse three. She knows that she is not the most important person in Taipei. She does not think highly of her own wisdom. She does not boast that she is the garbage collector. She does not feel slighted if no one greets her. She is lowly minded, and she knows that the school (and Taipei) would run just fine without her. It would not be hard to find another garbage collector. Are you anymore important to the Church of God than she is to the Seminary? "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. "

Why does the Chinese Church need the Reformed faith? Let me give you one reason. Biblical Christianity includes a religion of the heart. It teaches us to know our hearts. One of the beauties of the Reformed faith is that it grasps this clearly. Beginning with Calvin and extending through the Puritans, the Reformed faith teaches us about the state of our hearts before God. In this way, it gives us a ground for humility. It confirms to us that the only way to be justified is by faith alone. On the other hand, shallow versions of Christianity focus almost entirely on outward actions. In these versions, a good Christian is one who keeps various rules and regulations. This sort of religion always leads to legalism and pride. It

easily produces conflict and divisions. It also produces cults, as leaders turn away from the gospel of justification by faith (which a proud man cannot understand) to different gospels.

I am afraid that much of the religion of the Church in China is shallow. This has led to cults, divisions, conflict, pride and legalism. They are in need of solid, biblical teaching about the heart. They need to be able to read Calvin, Watson, Edwards, Ryle, and other doctors of the heart in their own language. By the grace of God, this can bring them to a deeper knowledge of both themselves and God. It can call them back to justification by faith and not by works. That is one reason why the work of the Reformation Translation Fellowship is worth our time and energy.