

Discover Hour
Philippians 2: 12-18
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Having laid out Jesus as the supreme example of someone who humbled himself for the good of others, the topic of unity is still on Paul's mind as he continues in the application section of the letter. As he uses the image of an offering to describe his life and service, Paul continues the theme of selflessness and calls on the believers to mirror his efforts as they mirror those of Christ (v. 18). He uses the language of athletics, as he does in several other places in the New Testament (1 Corinthians 9: 24 – 27; 2 Timothy 4:8), to express his hope that in the end he did not “run or labor for nothing” (v. 16).

We will want to focus in particular on vs. 12 and 13. They are interesting because in a way they are contradictory. On the one hand Paul encourages the believers to work hard in living the Christian life, on the other hand he makes the point that it is God who is doing the work. What can this mean? How can we get up each day and have this make sense to us as we seek to live the Christian life? Below are five prominent traditions in American Christianity that relate to these questions as they each tend to produce particular focus in the living of the Christian life. We will use these to help us consider how best to understand Paul in this passage.

Holiness Tradition – Began in the 19th century through the influence of Methodism, and Methodist ministers trained by John Wesley. This tradition sees salvation as both an initial conversion and justification from sin, as well as an ongoing sanctification that, in its original formulation by Wesley and to this day in many holiness denominations, also results in sinlessness or freedom from sin, typically through the powerful working of the Holy Spirit. It is often the case that in these traditions regular response to “altar calls,” and the receiving of the spirit in a visible and public way accompanies the walk of faith.

American Liberal Christianity: Tends to view the Bible as a historically and culturally bound text from which we may draw ethical and moral lessons, but not propositional truth. Thus, the focus tends to be on Christian love, rather than the Lordship of Jesus Christ. The practical result in terms of Christian living is a focus on serving the poor and those in need and even political action, but not much of a focus on personal piety.

Evangelicals: The historical focus of the Evangelical movement has been on the sharing of gospel and conversion. The movement rejects legalism as inconsistent with the gospel message and includes vigorous support of missions both domestic and foreign. The result is a focus on sharing one's faith, support for missions, and personal piety.

Fundamentalist Tradition: In the American context the name comes from the publication of a twelve volume series published between 1910 and 1915 in Chicago called “The

Fundamentals. The volumes explicitly promoted the fundamental truths of orthodox Christianity but also responded to the attack against the Bible by higher criticism and the growing influence of Darwinism. The legacy includes, particularly in terms of living the Christian life, a firm commitment to the validity and study of the Bible as the chief mechanism for living the Christian life.

Catholicism: In the American context, and worldwide, places great emphasis on the sacraments as the principal mechanism for living the Christian life. God is active in the sacrament and his grace and blessing is communicated to the believer through them. The seven sacraments include Baptism, Confirmation, Communion, Confession, Last Rites, Marriage, and Holy Orders.

Discussion Questions

What would you take to be the chief, potential advantages for living the Christian life for each tradition?

What is the chief disadvantage?

Choose the one that best describes your current experience. If you could choose a different one to try for a year, which would it be? Which one would you least like to try?