

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



January 8, 2012

Resolving Personal Conflicts

An obscure reference to a personal dispute in the church at Philippi provides lessons on how to deal with similar problems in churches today.

“I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life” (Phil. 4:2-3).

Paul had a special relationship with the church at Philippi that he did not have with most other churches. Judging from everything we read about them, this group of believers was stable, well-grounded, and generous in their support for Paul and the gospel. Unlike most other churches to whom Paul wrote letters, the church at Philippi was not plagued by carnal attitudes, false teaching, or the usual Jew–Gentile frictions. They were what a church ought to be.

But even with all that, things were not perfect in the church at Philippi. There were two women in the group who had some kind of personal falling out. Paul does not elaborate on the nature of the dispute, but it was serious enough that he felt like he needed to address it in this letter.

No doubt, Euodia and Syntyche were embarrassed to hear their personal squabble read aloud before the congregation. But that’s how important it was that they fix the problem. The fact that Paul would bring up a personal issue in a letter intended for public consumption gives us guidance in how similar issues should be addressed today. Certainly not every private dispute needs to be aired in front of the congregation; ideally, personal conflicts should be resolved behind the scenes to minimize collateral damage. But when a private dispute escalates to the point that it is public knowledge, the stage is set for others to be drawn into taking sides, and a larger war can erupt. The issue must be addressed publically.

Paul had a personal friendship with both women (“who labored with me in the gospel”), so his appeal was that of friend to friend. Notice that Paul addressed each woman individually: “I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche.” If Paul could be there in person, he would meet with each woman individually to help her understand her

role in getting this matter resolved. Of course, he couldn’t be there, so he enlisted the assistance of an unnamed “true companion” to fill that role for him. Some commenators believe that the Greek word used here was actually a proper name, Syzygus, perhaps a prominent member of the church who knew both women well. Others argue that Paul is referring to Epaphroditus, the carrier of the letter (2:25-30; 4:18). Whoever Paul has in mind, the main point is that *a mediator needs to get involved*. The mediator’s role would be to “help these women” (v. 3) sort out their issues and restore harmony between them.

Many a church has been destroyed by “minor” personal disputes that got out of hand. But it doesn’t have to come to that, if churches would be more proactive in dealing with these matters. Generic teaching about the importance of loving each other is a good start, but when that’s not enough, the leadership must not hesitate to step in and mediate a resolution to the dispute. Even the best of God’s people need help now and then getting along with each other.

– David King