



The Friendly Congregation

During a visit to a friendly married couple in the congregation, they made a remark that stuck with me. "The congregation could well be a bit friendlier." The friendliness shows in a warm greeting when members go into and out of church together. Fortunately, there is much friendliness in the congregation. But it can always be better. Here are some thoughts about a friendly congregation.

The smell of friendliness is pleasant. It is a smell that lasts. You walk outside and you have an unexpected encounter in which friendly words are spoken. A sister in the congregation said that through such an encounter her whole day, in which she felt a little lonely, was improved. A brother or sister comes to church with a heavy heart. The friendly words of others do much to help. You take your seat in church with joy when first a few friendly words are exchanged. If you miss these words or if you feel cold or even unfairly treated, then you take your seat in a different way than when there is warmth in your heart.

Friendliness as mark of the congregation

The congregation is called to be friendly. The Lord is in Jesus Christ a friendly God. Where Jesus Christ is present, there friendliness toward one another also grows. The Holy Spirit works friendliness in hearts. Paul writes in Philippians 4:5 that the friendliness ["gentle spirit", NASB, or "reasonableness", ESV] of the church members must be known by everyone. Therefore this is a text that very much touché son our theme. On the basis of just this text it may be said that the congregation is a friendly congregation and that the Christians are friendly people. If that friendliness is not there, then we can ask ourselves if we really take part in God's grace, in Jesus Christ being the Shepherd, and in the work of the Holy Spirit. By definition it must be said that Christians have received a friendly attitude. A person's character has a role in it too. There are people who naturally have a friendly character. There are also people whose personality is put together in a different way. But the critical thing is that no matter what kind of character they have, everyone will, by faith, experience in Jesus Christ the working of his friendliness. After all, Christ renews us through his Holy Spirit. *You can call friendliness a mark of a healthy congregation.*

Missionary focus

From the text which I quoted from the letter to the Philippians, it appears that the friendliness of the Christian is worked out in two directions. It is the friendliness within. It is *equally* the friendliness to those outside. The friendliness of the Christian has, so to say, a missionary focus. It would be a terrible thing for the Gospel if others say this about Christians: "These people are so unfriendly." Or, "How self-absorbed these people are. You can't get to know them." It is not good if someone is known to be a Christian but with an addition: He is a grumpy man; she is an impatient woman. You can come up with other phrases yourself.

When there are circumstances in our own life that put the friendliness under stress, let us then work them out as much as possible and keep those circumstances to ourselves. It is advisable to discuss such situations in a small trustworthy circle of people. Such circumstances that put pressure in our life must not be allowed to simmer so that we are in danger of becoming one of the "unfriendly folks".

At the beginning of my ministry I asked a wise and older colleague (now long deceased) how he could always be so friendly and cheerful to others - and that was not an act -while in his personal

life there was much sadness. He answered, "Show your sadness to the Lord and your gladness to the people." I have always carried these words with me, and now share them with you.

Save and feed

How can the friendliness be kept and fed through the years?

Paul gives us the secret for that in the previously mentioned texts from Philippians 4. First is the call to look for and feed the joy in the Lord Jesus Christ. Joy in the heart produces friendliness. Are there then no worries? Of course there are! Many. Sometimes too many. And yet: "Do not be anxious about anything." You can surrender yourself to everything that worries you – then the worries have the upper hand. Many people let the joy in Jesus Christ, the joy through the Holy Spirit, be darkened because they keep looking at the waves of their worries. Then everything gets closed up on the inside and our soul loses the air and the room [life and breath] that is in Christ. The only help in such situations is that in prayer, with thanksgiving, we make all our wishes and everything that keeps us busy known to God. *This always gets through.* I do not give a further exegesis of the text here, but it is remarkable how many Paul mentions here, one after another. *Just as the worries totally occupy us, so also will prayer bring our soul before God.* In that manner all of life's challenges can be dealt with. Easy? Oh no. Sometimes very difficult. But there is no alternative.

The blessed effect of such prayer life is that peace from God fills our heart. The peace of God keeps our heart and our thoughts in Christ Jesus. That means: By everything we think and do, by everything we reflect upon, the Lord Jesus Christ stays in the center. He *lives* for us and in us. The peace of God exceeds all understanding. That expression can mean two things: God's peace is greater than people ever can imagine, and it surpasses everything human understanding is capable of.

It is remarkable that Paul *in this context* says: "Let your gentleness be evident to all" (NIV). This word "gentleness" is not so easy to translate. There are elements of goodness and empathy in it. In any case, the word says that Christians have to be accommodating towards everyone. In their surroundings they have to be known to be positive. They are not allowed to hinder the Gospel by their unfriendly disposition. Friendliness is a part of being a readable letter of Christ. In our outer friendliness, faith that lives in our heart will get an expression in public life. The words and deeds of friendliness are an expression and underlining of the word of faith that works and lives in us.

Self-denial needed

Especially in large congregations, members are sometimes far removed from each other. They don't know each other well enough. That *can* lead to a lack of friendly words and gestures when people meet. It does not have to be that way; I only point to the possibility. In the congregation we have to be vigilant that we do not create divisions. "He or she does not belong to 'our little group'". "He is just a simple man, and he does not have the (social) status that we do." "She complains a lot, and therefore we keep her at a distance." It requires spiritual maturity to keep seeing the church members with slightly less pleasant attitudes as brothers and sisters in Christ. Self-denial may be asked from us for the wellbeing of someone else. That does not mean that we need to affirm the other person in his less pleasant attitudes. We should not let the other keep going in unreasonable lamentations of self-pity. From the perspective of these members, they can feel harshness when others try to point those attitudes out to them in a friendly way. They can interpret this as a personal attack or as a rejection. Besides friendliness, we also need wisdom and sensitivity. In all these things love will work and serve. No matter what, the Holy Spirit tells *me*: Let your gentleness be evident to all. Words for ministers (also toward each other!), for elders and deacons and of course, for everyone. We can ask ourselves: What is the place and role of friendliness in my life? Do I sometimes try to see myself through the eyes of someone else? If it is like that, it will lead us to new prayers! Also the prayer to keep the friendliness of Christ in my own heart and life.

So, no more thoughtlessly passing each other around church services or when we see each other elsewhere unexpectedly. And when we get into a situation where someone asks for my friendly help, in a small or big matter, then my first reaction will be: How can I help him or her? Within the boundaries of reasonableness and propriety, of course, but my friendliness does not start with saying “No”, unless I have legitimate reasons for it at that moment. When every church member gets serious about the requirement of Scripture to be friendly, then there lives a *power* of friendliness in the congregation. Then it cannot but become known. And that is exactly what God wants.

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