

Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 (1984 NIV) ***Wisdom of Togetherness***

Introduction

One time in 1994, the local newspapers “The Straits Times” flashed a headline across its front page, proudly announcing that Singapore had been rated as the world’s 2nd most competitive economy, just behind the US. For a small nation only in its 29th year of independence then, we had indeed come a long way.

I recall the time when Singapore put much stress on productivity in order to increase our economic competitiveness, the by-word then was “teamwork”. And part of the lyrics of one of the National Productivity songs went like this:

Work, study or play
Night or day
If what you feel is better
If what you feel is only better
Could with teamwork be the best
Teamy, Teamy for the best
Good, better, best
Let that be your quest
Thro’ productivity a better,
Safer, happier life.

“Teamy, Teamy for the best ... good, better, best”—these words express a determined spirit to excel as a team by working together. What about the church? Is the church just as determined to excel for the Lord as a people together?

Interestingly, this idea of higher productivity by working together is not an invention of the modern world. In fact, this wisdom of togetherness is embodied in one of the ancient wisdom books of the Bible in Ecc. 4:9-12, which is our text for today.

Let’s me first briefly introduce the Book of Ecclesiastes.

- Author: Traditionally attributed to be Solomon.
- Occasion: Solomon was writing in his last years. He wrote as one who had accumulated much wealth and was beginning to experience the onset of old age. He wrote so that others might learn from his experiences.
- Purpose: To teach how a person can live beyond one’s natural circumstances in this life in order to demonstrate the evidences of higher spiritual realities.
- Chapter 4: The overarching concern in this chapter is that of power complex and how to respond to it. Three problems are featured—oppression, envy, and individualism. In particular, Ecc. 4:9-12 addresses the problem of individualism in us. It applies the importance of

togetherness rather than individualism to all relationships, including that among members of the church. Indeed, the importance of togetherness can never be overemphasised in the church today because:

- Togetherness is God's idea. He does not want a person to isolate himself in life ("not good for man to be alone"). He has created us to be not only human beings, but also social beings. He wants us to live, work, and relate with one another.
- The church is a community. It is the Body of Christ where people come together under the headship of Christ. The church is God's people of different strengths, weaknesses, and personalities coming together not as separate individuals, but together as a people of faith.

In view of this, the church will only fulfil her tasks to the extent that her members are willing to serve together. So, what then are the evidences of a church serving together?

I. Committed Partnership (v. 10)

10 If one falls down, his friend can help him up. But pity the man who falls and has no one to help him up!

The word "help" here has the idea of camaraderie or partnership. It literally means "raise up"—to raise up a comrade or partner who has fallen. It implies that we are not afraid to fall because there are others around to help us up; not afraid to take hard knocks because there are others around to help keep us on our feet. Thus, such help gives us the courage to walk that difficult path because someone is walking with us; the courage to face our mistakes because someone is helping us improve.

Today, there are at least two ways that will tear down rather than build up such a helping spirit of togetherness.

- One, make a person feels that he is on his own and alone.
- Two, make a person feels that there is no room for error.

Indeed, it is when we want to do things together that we must all the more guard this helping spirit of togetherness. Such a spirit entails:

- The willingness to complement one another in order to reach a common goal.
- The willingness to bear one another's burdens and shortcomings with love and understanding.

Let's look at an example in Acts 6:1-7.

- The welfare of the Greek-speaking Jews was neglected.
- The apostles assembled the others and instructed them to choose seven suitable people to attend to the matter.

- Question: Why didn't the apostles attend to this matter themselves—they were lazy, or incapable, or think they were too important for such menial task?
- Answer: They knew the importance of partnership in ministry.
- Acts 6:5-7 tells us that seven men were chosen; the Word spread and the number of disciples in Jerusalem increased substantially and rapidly.
- Evidently, one of the factors contributing to the vitality of the church is the willingness to be partners in ministry.
- This implies that some must be willing to let go and others must be willing to step up—with more teamwork, more work can be done.

As it was in the days of the early Jerusalem church, so it is in the church today. The church today needs committed partnership because it is about Christians coming together not to live individualistically, but communally as the Body of Christ. Paul says in Rom. 12:5 that “we are individually members one of another”. This implies that we watch over and back up one another by helping one another.

- I can be a pair of eyes to someone who cannot see.
- That person can be my pair of ears if I cannot hear.

Thus, the word “help” in Ecc. 4:10 becomes the very antithesis of the idea of individualism. It does not support the idea of independence that puts the interest of self above that of the group. Rather, the word “help” points to the importance of interdependence whereby the sense of camaraderie or partnership makes us each responsible in supporting one another.

As we participate in the life of the church, it is not God's desire for each of us to go solo; neither can each of us go solo all the way, even if we want to. There will be times when we fall; when we need help to pick us up so that we can press on and continue what we are doing.

The church needs committed partnership among the members of the Body to move on and to move together. But one threat to this is our tendency to magnify our differences.

- Of course, we cannot deny that we are different in many ways.
- However as Christians, we must remember that in spite of our differences, we don't serve a different Lord.
- Thus, we must not let our differences be bigger than our Lord.
- Rather, we serve this one, same Lord together.
- We do not allow our differences to stop us from partnering in the Lord's work together with Him and with one another.

Individualism undermines progress because the church can only fulfil her tasks to the extent that her people are willing to serve together. And one evidence of a church serving together is that of committed partnership.

A second evidence is that of ...

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II. Caring Relationships (v. 11)

11 Also, if two lie down together, they will keep warm. But how can one keep warm alone?

Togetherness conveys the idea of closeness, not distance. Though we do not have the opportunity to experience winter here in tropical Singapore, we can imagine how comforting it is for two persons to keep warm by keeping close together in the wintry chill. In a relational sense, keeping close to one another is what we need to work at if we are to experience warmth in our Body life in church.

- We need to be close to one another's need.
- We need to be close to one another's pain.
- We need to be close to one another's burden.
- We need to be close to one another's joy.

Such closeness does not come by chance. It needs to be cultivated intentionally. In other words, caring relationships do not happen by chance; they happen by intentional effort. The closeness in a caring relationship allows for openness without feeling threatened.

- The openness to give and to receive.
- The openness to correct and be corrected.

This openness in the context of relational closeness reminds us that the church is a family. Thus, there is responsibility not only towards self, but also towards the group in church life. The church needs caring relationships because we are to serve one another in love. This means we don't serve one another with the motive of exploiting one another. Instead, we serve one another so that our mutual needs can be met in ways pleasing to God—i.e. in the course of giving and receiving; correcting and being corrected, we develop satisfying and lasting relationships because we want to stand by one another in the name of Jesus Christ.

Yes, the church needs caring relationships. But one real threat to this is the fear of admitting vulnerability. Someone once said, "Individualism is the father of self-sufficiency and the mother of isolation."

- When we think we are self-sufficient, the natural thing to do is to isolate ourselves because we think we don't need other people.
- To admit that we need other people is to admit our vulnerability.
- The world often think lowly of us when we say, "I can't. I have a problem."

However, we must not carry this thinking into our relationships with the Lord and with one another. The Lord wants to help those who cannot do it on their own. The Lord also wants us to help one another to do what we cannot do on

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our own. Thus, statements like—"I am OK"; "I don't need anyone"; "I mind my own business, and you mind your own"; "Leave me alone to my own privacy"—are often great barriers to building caring relationships and breaking down the fear of coming close. Indeed, coming close often means to stop being superficial, and start being interested in and accountable to others.

The church can fulfil its tasks only to the extent that the people are willing to serve the Lord and one another together. Committed partnership and caring relationships are two evidences of a church serving together.

A third and final evidence would be ...

III. Christ-Centred Fellowship (v. 12)

12 Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken.

To be sure, big numbers alone do not necessarily give strength. You can have big numbers, but that doesn't automatically mean you have group strength because this has more to do with unity of people than size of numbers. In other words, size and strength are not necessarily synonymous.

Looking at this church today, it would be nice to see all the empty pews filled up. But then, we must remind ourselves that we are here to build a church, not a crowd.

- In a church, people ought to see themselves as worshipping one God, and being one in Christ—i.e. united in faith and fellowship.
- In a crowd (e.g. people in a shopping mall), people don't have such an identity. They come just to serve their own purposes; they isolate themselves and their interests in their own world.

Thus, size does not necessarily impart strength because strength comes by being close, being real, and being available to one another much more than being merely big. And the fellowship of believers is thus important because it speaks of our oneness in Christ. We call this Christ-centred fellowship in the Body of Christ.

Yes, the church needs Christ-centred fellowship so that we will not isolate ourselves, but identify ourselves as one in Christ. But to say that the church needs Christ-centred fellowship does not mean there are no differences within the church. Rather, Christ-centred fellowship means we value our oneness in Christ, and under the headship of Christ, we learn to submit and to be sensitive to one another. We learn to regard others as more important than ourselves.

- To regard others as more important than ourselves does not necessarily mean they are better than us.

- Rather, it means to regard them as more important than us in the sense that we are willing to give them the right of way in a spirit of Christ's love.
- The spirit of individualism would often lead us to hold on to our rights no matter what—"It is my way, or no way!"
- But Christ has shown us a different way—He didn't hold on to His right for heavenly glory, but He emptied Himself to come as a man for our sake (Phil. 2:5-8).
- When we are self-centred, it is difficult to look away from ourselves and our needs.
- But when we are Christ-centred, we not only could turn our eyes on the Lord, but also turn our attention away from ourselves and onto others with their needs, considering them as more important than ourselves.

Conclusion

The church can fulfil its tasks only to the extent that the members are willing to serve together. Three evidences of a church serving together are:

- One, committed partnership.
- Two, caring relationships.
- Three, Christ-centred fellowship.

The spirit of togetherness among us cannot be taken for granted. Let me close by suggesting three things that you and I can do to guard and enhance it.

- One, be a partner in ministry. Help meet a need both inside, and even outside the church.
- Two, be available in relationship building. This implies that we must be ready and prepared to be interrupted time to time to attend to others in need.
- Three, be centred in Christ in our fellowship. This simply means we need to intentionally encourage one another in the things of the Lord whenever we come together, and not be singularly side-tracked by other interests—e.g. food, sports, travel, entertainment, health concerns (though these are all not necessarily unimportant).

Let's seek the Lord for wisdom not only to know, but also to cultivate the spirit of togetherness in us as we gather as God's people to worship, witness, and work for the sake of His Kingdom.

Amen!