

Some Words About...

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This article appeared in September / October 2007 • Volume 23 • Number 5

***Epechein* (to focus on)**

The Greek word *epechein* meant to focus one's attention on something or someone. In 2 Maccabees 9:25 the wicked king Antiochus wrote a warning that the neighbors of the Jews "focus attention and observe what happens" to them. He was probably right, but his warning was more self-serving than written out of any desire to help the Jews. But Antiochus died and Maccabeus took Jerusalem.

In Sirach 34:2 we are told that "the man who focuses on dreams" is like someone chasing the wind. I'm not sure that Sigmund Freud would have appreciated those sentiments, but they have recurred throughout the centuries, expressed by people who probably never read Sirach. A modern song phrased the idea as "dreams are dust."

New Testament

Luke calls the passage 14:7-11 a "parable addressed to those invited when he observed that they focused attention on the places of honor" (14:7). These were Pharisees invited to dine with an important official. There were many things in the situation deserving their attention: their host, fellow guests, the meal itself, and the occasion. But they focused attention on the places of honor, which, as Jesus pointed out, were properly given, not sought.

Focusing attention on personal advantages or personal status is not Jesus' way. It isn't as if there was anything wrong with status or honor or popularity. It is the focusing on such things that is wrong. It isn't wrong to be number one; it is wrong to lie, cheat, or degrade others in order to be considered number one. How you endeavor is more important than what you achieve.

Acts 3:1-10 is a preview of what the church could do in Jesus' name. Peter and John were the church in miniature, the church preparing for prayer. But that wasn't what the lame man saw. He saw two poor fishermen joining the crowd that was going into the temple. They were not good prospects for a professional beggar. But when Peter said, "Look at us," he "focused attention on them" (3:5). And it was a good thing he did. Peter's words that he had no money to give may have been no surprise, but what followed was.

The nineteenth chapter of Acts describes Paul's remarkable activity in Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia. After two years there he made plans for work in Macedonia and Achaia before going to Jerusalem. He sent two missionaries ahead of him, but he decided to "focus attention on Asia for a while" (19:22). Events sent him on his way.

The letter to the Philippians overflows with unmitigated appreciation for all that the Philippian congregation is and does. The joy and even exuberance that he expresses does not spring from any holiday atmosphere enjoyed by Paul or from any bright joy envisioned for his friends in Philippi. Paul was in prison facing possible execution. The Philippians were "having the same struggle that you saw that I had and now hear that I still have" (1:30). In spite of all this, Paul and Timothy can proclaim and repeat "Rejoice in the Lord" (3:1; 4:4).

In 1 Timothy 4:16, Paul urges Timothy to "focus attention on yourself and the doctrine." These two emphases dominate the letter: the teacher and the teaching. Timothy is to focus on living in such a way that his life expresses his commitment to Jesus and his teaching declares the same. Other things may have their place, but those two are to be central.

At the beginning of the letter Paul sets sound teaching of the gospel in opposition to a whole string of immoral acts including the killing of parents (1:10). He also cites the danger of false teachings (4:1). He

knows that Timothy himself follows sound teachings (4:6), and Paul exhorts him to concentrate on teaching accordingly (4:13). Timothy is not to be distracted by profane myths and unsubstantiated stories but is to keep his attention focused on himself and his teaching (4:16). Paul describes false teachers as having a morbid craving for contention (6:1-5). They probably sneered at Timothy's youth (4:12) and rejected his teaching with what Shakespeare called in *Hamlet* "the proud man's contumely." Paul bolsters Timothy's self-confidence and points out the incomparable importance of the gospel.

Today

In recent years, American Christianity has seen a gradual but unmistakable shift of focus from the gospel and toward the law. The focus has remained on the Bible, but on those parts of the Bible that condemn sinners rather than on those parts that offer salvation. It is what Jesus called focusing on the speck in the other's eye.

Paul's advice to Timothy to focus on himself and his message is applicable to the church today. We may differ on points, whereas we must focus not on them but on our common task and on our message, the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. If we focus on the ways we disagree with one another, we neglect the opportunities God presents us to show the non-Christian world the importance of Jesus Christ and the salvation he offers. We must hope that today's church will come to resemble the church at Philippi, which focused on the word of life.

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