



Don't Fall!

Christopher B. Harbin

1st Corinthians 10:9-17

“Stand on your own two feet!” We have heard that phrase hundreds of times. We want our children to become independent. We want our poor to live without need of the aid a society might lend. We want the disabled, the elderly, the young, the strong, and the weak to live with no need of another’s support. It is not a realistic ideal, but it informs our language, our expectations, our priorities, and our sense of self-worth. John Donne would tell us “no man is an island,” yet we struggle against that Renaissance motif, as though we might truly become independent, with no need for one another.

We dream of standing on our own as “self-made” individuals, depending on no one else and beholden to no one. At the end of the day, however, the loneliness of isolation and independence kills us. We are creatures of a social nature, against which we so often struggle. If half of all marriages end in divorce, division, and discord, why should we bother with marriage in the first place? Is it not due to our desire to live in unity, harmony, and intimate society with another? Do teens not take their lives over issues of relationship, belonging, and acceptance? We yearn for independence, yet we yearn for community, acceptance, belonging, and love at the same time. We are creatures of connection who likewise struggle to define our worth at once in contrast to and independence from others.

Paul addressed a church divided over many issues, a body struggling with questions of identity, a group of individuals positioning themselves for advantage over one another, a society whose members wanted to stand out above the rest. They did not want to depend on one another. They did not want to submit personal will and desire to the good of the larger group. They wanted independent self-worth, yet they wanted it in connection with one another.

Issues of sin raised their ugly heads, and Paul addressed them recalling experiences of the Hebrew people under Moses. Paul reminded them how the people had failed to depend upon Yahweh and relied on themselves. They tried to make their own way in reaction to God’s directions and in opposition to Moses’ instructions. They did not want to depend upon God. They were tired of following orders, but they did not yet know how to build a society amid their newly formed freedom. They wanted an independence of their own making, of self-reliance, and not submission.

We generally think of sin in the category of moral failure. To be sure, there is some truth in that assessment. Sin takes us down a path which is out of step with God’s standards of morality. In writing to the Corinthian believers, here however, Paul takes a different tack. He sees and defines sin both from the standpoint of falling from a moral standard, as well as falling out of fellowship in Christ. He casts it in terms of self-reliance, rather than dependence on God, or even interdependence.

Having just escaped Egyptian bondage, they wanted to chart their own course. We often miss that idolatry was very much about self-determination. It was about finding a means or pattern to control the outcomes of life by exerting some kind of influence over spiritual beings with power over the vagaries of life on earth. It was about manipulating the gods to obey the desires of human beings. Idolatry was concerned with finding the magic processes or incantations that would force the gods to listen and respond as a genie ensnared by a magic lamp.

On one level, idolatry was akin to the science and technology of the day. It was the grasping for a measure of control over one’s life and environment. Idolatry offered the practitioner a degree of

influence and power so he might stand on his own feet. Yahweh was having none of that. God wanted humility, submission, and dependence. Paul says we should not trust our own strength. We must be careful when we think we will be able to stand under our own power. It is a recipe for failure. When we trust our own strength, we are not only distrusting God, we are also struggling against God, just like those Hebrews caught up in idolatry.

Paul says that while our own efforts are insufficient to keep us on our feet, there is yet a path forward. God places a solution before us, but it is not the solution of self-reliance or self-determination. It is not a magical incantation to grant us power over some heavenly being who will intervene on our behalf. It is the same solution to the issue of idolatry.

Say what? The text makes it seem like Paul's argument was interrupted midstream. From talking about overcoming temptation, he suddenly says we must therefore run from idolatry! It would seem like a disconnect. We must remember, however, that idolatry is about our being in charge. It is about our becoming the masters of our lives and charting our own course. It is about gaining power over an unruly and uncertain world. It is about controlling our futures and our direction. It is about leaving God out of the loop and refusing to submit our will to God's.

Then Paul takes us one step further. The way out is in community. It is in fellowship with Christ Jesus and with one another. It is in this life of fellowship that God provides the way forward. The path is in shared experience, shared hope, shared faith, a shared journey.

There is no reason to compare ourselves to others, for we are one in Christ Jesus. There is no reason to build our lives in self-confidence, for our confidence must be bound in the identity and initiative of Christ Jesus. There is no reason to play to individuality and independence.

As John Donne wrote: *No man is an island / Entire of itself. / Each is a piece of the continent, / A part of the main. / If a clod be washed away by the sea, / Europe is the less. / As well as if a promontory were. / As well as if a manor of thine own / Or of thine friend's were. / Each man's death diminishes me, / For I am involved in mankind. / Therefore, send not to know / For whom the bell tolls, / It tolls for thee.*¹

Christianity is about us and God, not about myself. Life is not about my self-direction, my individuality, or my self-determination. That is simply idolatry and seeking to put myself forward at the expense of others and in denial of God. We participate in union as one body, the body of Christ Jesus. In Christ, our fellowship draws us beyond ourselves and our self-importance. It draws us toward a sense of community. We are called beyond idolatry and self-centeredness.

We were never called by Christ to stand on our own feet or under our own power. We were called to something more, something greater. We were called to place our selfish independence and pride aside to lay hold of a new mentality in which we are part of a larger whole.

When I attempt to stand on my own, that is when I am bound to fall. When I attempt to press my issues and concerns ahead of the concerns of others is when I miss the mark and goal of life in Christ Jesus. It is not about me. It is not about my worthiness. It is not about my strength, my will, my degree of self-control. It is rather about surrender to the body of Christ Jesus, becoming one in the cup of fellowship we share. If we would keep from falling, we must count on one another. If we would rise above our sin, we must do it in fellowship and community. Otherwise, we cling to an idolatry of self.

*_*_*

¹ John Donne, "No Man Is an Island." <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/no-man-is-an-island/>
<http://www.fbc-h.org/>