

“Spiritual Unity in the Church”

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Scripture Text: Philippians 2:1-4, ESV

Spiritual unity in the church is such a concern for the Apostle Paul for this church, a church he loves, is a blessed church, a church where there is a Gospel witness, and a church which is laboring for the sake of the Gospel. Yet, there is a strain within this church. It is a church which has the potential of breaking apart as a result of some conflict and Paul will introduce that conflict very specifically in Chapter 4. He introduces the theme of the value of spiritual unity early in this letter and it becomes the driving theme behind this letter.

Christ's Example of Humility

¹ So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Satan works diligently in this church to rob God of His glory by sowing seeds of discord and division among us. I know that to be true because, first, I have seen it and, second, because that is what the Devil does in every church.

My first experience with spiritual division in the church was painful. I was thirteen years old and growing rapidly in my walk with God. One of the instruments God used at that time in my life was a pastor who preached expository sermons. This is the first pastor I experienced who simply opened up the Bible, read a passage, and then walked us through the text, paragraph by paragraph, chapter by chapter, book by book. In those sermons, Pastor Rick helped us to observe the words God chose to communicate with us Himself and His salvation. Pastor Rick would explain what the passage meant and share life principles and practical applications to help us to grow in Christ.

Prior to this, the Bible to be a closed flower, but as he preached it opened itself for me. For the first time in my life I took notes with enthusiasm, as note taking may be to you. I did not want to miss a Sunday morning, a Sunday evening, or a Wednesday night service.

I keenly remember that year, my eighth-grade year of life. Pastor Rick taught through the Book of Jonah, the Book of Ephesians, the seven churches in Revelation 2 and 3, the Book of John, specifically chapters 13 through 17 which are the Upper Room discourse. I was so excited by the Word and these messages were really great and helpful, but far more impactful to me was the realization what the pastor was teaching was right there on the page for anyone to see who simply looked closely enough and had the help of God's Spirit.

The Bible was not a book which has a hidden key only pastors could use. I realized it was for me, so I began for the first time to understand the Bible and read it on my own. That began a journey which continues to this day of opening God's Word and reading it and knowing God's voice to guide me day-by-day. So, I thank God for Pastor Rick Hammond.

But, then on Wednesday night, in early December, 1978, my heart broke as Pastor Rick read his letter of resignation from the church. I could not understand why. He had only been there about one year of time. Why would he leave us? I remember shedding tears that night as I thought of the grief of the loss of this dear pastor.

As we discussed this as a family I came to understand many of the people in the church did not like Pastor Rick and they were doing some very mean things to him. They did not like that he spent whole month on a single book. They did not like that his sermons were saturated with sound doctrine. Some in the church preferred simple, evangelistic messages which bounced from passage to passage and ended with an altar call. That is not so bad, but, except, some individuals allowed their displeasure to become very personal. Some began spreading false rumors about him, his wife, and his family. The leadership was not united in their support of Pastor Rick in the midst of this criticism. Sinful communication against this young pastor overwhelmed him and he resigned.

What a sad story and, yet, it is not an uncommon one. Most believers have experienced some measure of discord in the life of the church. If you have been in the church very long you have experienced it personally. Perhaps details change from the story I just shared, but personal conflict and division within the church is one of the primary weapons the Devil uses to keep Jesus from being seen as beautiful, glorious, and Supreme. That is his primary methods.

Think of the damage the Devil might have done through the discord in my church, as a thirteen-year old boy. Others, and myself, might have turned against the church the rest of our lives. Thankfully God protected me from that. Yet, the Devil uses discord and conflict in the church to draw many of God's children away from the Gospel and away from the church Jesus loves.

The Devil hates Jesus and he hates for Jesus to be glorified in this world. So, he works against the one instrument God has set in this world to bring Jesus glory – that is the church. Beloved, this problem of discord within the church is not going to disappear. In fact, some of you might be saying, "Pastor, I am one of those who have grown disillusioned with the church. I am present, here, with my body, but I have grown cynical as I do not see the church being what the church is supposed to be in the New Testament."

If I can offer three words of explanation about the church, before we look into this passage, first, let me say the visible church will have problems with unity because unregenerate people will join the visible church. Jesus takes about this in Matthew 13, when He talks about an enemy sowing seeds of tares into a good field so that the tares grow up with the wheat. Jesus tells us we should not pull up the tares because we might mistakenly pull up some wheat. We should wait until the end of the age. Jesus is describing the Kingdom of God and He is saying, "In the church you would expect there to be unregenerate, unreborn people who are a part of the visible church of Jesus.

That should help us so that before we say to ourselves, "Well, believers are not suppose to act that way," and we get really frustrated with the local church. We should think to ourselves, "Maybe that person is acting that way because they are not genuinely born again. Maybe they need my patience. Maybe they need me to share more of the Gospel through my life and through my lips so they can see the glory of God in the face of Jesus."

Second, the visible church will have problems with unity because we, as believers, are not yet glorified. We are saved from sin's power and from sin's penalty, but we still deal with sin's presence in our life. All the way, until we stand before God in Heaven and are glorified and changed as we see Jesus, we will continue to sin and that means we will sin against each other and we are going to hurt each other.

I know being sinned against by brothers and sister in Christ hurts deeply. I know that inner voice which says, "I expected this kind of treatment from people in the world, but I did not expect it from brothers and sisters in Christ in the church." Beloved, as long as we are in this broken hurt and in this broken world, battling sins within our own heart, we cannot expect this not to happen. In other words, we must adjust our expectations to expect that in the church and in the community we will be sinned against and we are going to sin against others.

It happened to Paul, as we read in Chapter 1, where people in the church were seeking to afflict him. They were acting maliciously toward him.

Third, and this may be where we turn our focus to Philippians 2, the visible church will address the problem of disunity when each individual addresses the problem of selfishness and pride. That is God's remedy, not that we have big meetings together to discuss unity, but that each one of us grabs hold of the Gospel-truth regarding our life and the way we are to live, and then we begin to live out a life of humility before one another as we receive the grace of the Gospel each and every day. That is what Philippians 2 is all about, particularly our text in this study.

Verse 1 begins, "So..." Let's stop there for a moment because that is an important word. Other translations read, "Therefore..."¹ Whenever we see a "therefore" we look to see what it is there for. It is an important little word, "so", because it tells us to remember what Paul has just written in this letter.

We discuss this in the previous study. Paul has just written, for instance,

¹ New King James Version (NKJV), King James Version (KJV), New International Version (NIV)

²¹ For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. *My whole life's purpose is to glorify God. That is the reason God has placed us together in His church, for Him and for His glory.*²

Then, in a later verse, he writes the more immediate context,

²⁷ Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel,²⁸ and not frightened in anything by your opponents.

Paul's appeal to the church is: stand together in spiritual unity and strive together for the Gospel so that Jesus name will be advertised through you and among you. Our purpose together, as God's people, is to make known that Jesus is the Son of God who is wonderful, true, and glorious. Paul tells us to live our lives together in a way that would advertise that truth.

Jesus taught us our witness to the world rests upon our deep, peaceful, loving relationships with one another. In John 13, He taught this truth to His Disciples. It was the night before He would die and then be resurrected,

³⁴ *"A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another."*³⁵ *By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."*

The key spiritual truth God is driving home in our hearts, through Philippians 2, is this: spiritual unity is not simply a lack of infighting, but spiritual unity is a deep bond of love and friendship which permeates the spiritual family. It is not enough for us to say, "I am not in conflict with anyone. I am not fighting with anyone." We, as a church, must realize spiritual unity depends on this deep bond of love and friendship that would permeate this family. It is only then that Jesus Christ will be made known as "glorious" in our midst.

This spiritual unity benefits each person, but that is not the focus Paul drives in presenting this idea of moving and laboring for spiritual unity. God gives us a cosmic vision for spiritual unity that connects us to a purpose which is much larger than anyone of us and that is the purpose of connecting to God's eternal glory. God is very passionate about spiritual unity in the church because the very purpose of the church, bringing glory to Him, depends upon this spiritual unity. Spiritual friendships and spiritual unity in church is essential to God's glory in the church and that is why the Devil hates spiritual unity.

In our previous study, we talked about two obstacles which hinder us, as individuals, from moving our church toward spiritual unity. The first is detachment, simply removing the sharing of our life, personally, with other believers in the local church. We cannot have spiritual unity as long as believers are detached.

The second is conflict and both of these are obstacles.

Paul says, "So..." and then he presents, in Verse 1, before he even gets into the command and imperative he wants to drive this church forward, toward spiritual unity, he presents the motivation, a Trinitarian motivation to pursue spiritual unity. Why would we, as individuals, labor for spiritual unity and invest ourselves with spiritual unity in the local church? Paul says, to the Philippian believers,

¹ So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy...

He is basing his plea upon the grace and goodness of the Lord. He is telling them spiritual unity is essential for a church to glorify God and the strongest motivation we have to humble ourselves before one another and to love one another is the worthiness of God; it is His grace at work within us.

The right motivation is vital for us to do the will of God and that is why Paul begins with the right motivation. We do not work hard for spiritual unity simply so we can enjoy church more thoroughly, though, again, that is a great blessing. We do not labor for spiritual unity so other people's needs will be met, though that is an incredible benefit.

² Italic emphasis from Pastor Ritch

We are passionate about spiritual unity in the church because God is worthy of worship and that is where Paul begins. Paul presses the worthiness of the Triune God as our motivation to labor for spiritual unity.

First, he talks about the worthiness of the Son and then, I believe, he talks about the worthiness of the Father and, finally, the worthiness of the Spirit and we need to look at them individually.

First, “If there is any encouragement in Christ...” Paul is using the word “if” not in a questioning, doubtful way. He is using the word “if” in a way that would cause the readers to think of all the ways Christ has encouraged them. He is using a rhetorical device to make them think about the encouragement they have received from Christ.

At times it is right, as an illustration, for a dad to encourage sons and daughters to show love and honor and service to their mom. We, as dads, might say to our children, “If you mom has served you in any way, over the course of your life, from the time she bore you in her womb and delivered you through pain, then complete my joy by having a good attitude, speaking kindly and respectfully, and serve your mom.”

A dad is not saying “if” as if the mom has never done anything great. He is saying, “I am using ‘if’ to cause you to think of all the ways your mom has benefitted and encouraged you,” and that is what Paul is doing here.

Of course, there is huge encouragement because of Christ. Let us randomly ramble together.

Any encouragement in Christ? Jesus is the Revelation of God to us, the Mediator of a New Covenant, the Atoning Sacrifice who opens the door to fellowship with God Himself.

Any encouragement in Christ? Jesus frees us from our guilty conscious, frees us from the fear of any condemnation, frees us from slavery to sin, frees us from the fear of death itself.

Any encouragement in Christ? Jesus gives to us a whole new life, a clean heart, an eternal purpose, and an adoption into God’s family.

Any encouragement in Christ? Jesus is our High Priest who constantly intercedes for us, our Sacrifice who opens the way to God for us, our Good Shepherd who knows us by name, and who leads us as our Teacher who instructs us in the way of life.

Any encouragement in Christ? Through Him we have the hope of resurrection, the promise of future glory, the promise He will never leave us and never forsake us, the promise of joy everlasting, and an encouragement forever.

Any encouragement in Christ? He is the Light in the darkness, the Living Water in a dry desert, the Living Bread in the midst of famine, and our resurrection at our funeral.

Any encouragement in Christ? Paul says, “Think! Think about how much encouragement there is in Christ, and as you do, you will become motivated to bring Him glory and you will recognize how important it is to have spiritual unity in the church.”

Furthermore, Paul says, furthermore, “...if there is any comfort from love...” I believe this is a reference to the Father’s love.

- The Father, in love, chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world. The Father, in love, predestined us for adoption into His family.
- The Father, in love, created us in His image to enjoy Him and to know Him.
- The Father, in love sent His Son to die upon the cross for our salvation.
- The Father, in love, sent His Spirit to guide us and to comfort us.
- The Father, in love, blessed us with every spiritual blessing and heavenly places.
- The Father, in love, keeps us in His hand so that, though we sin and fail Him, yet, He is faithful still.
- Our Father, in love, provides food for our stomachs, clothes for our back.
- Our Father, in love, listens to the cries of our heart and He meets our every need.

If there is any love from the Father? Paul tells them to think about the ways the Father has loved them. Is not His reputation and praise worth the labor to bring spiritual unity in the church?

Finally, Paul says, "...if there is any participation³ in the Spirit..." The Spirit of God's very focus is unity in the church. That is one of His ministries He advances. The Spirit of God works in our heart in such a way so as to draw us together as a family. We cannot act as though others in the body of Christ are inconsequential because the Spirit of God gives us a shared life together.

- If there is any fellowship with the Spirit, by the Spirit we are born into the same family and share the same life.
- By the Spirit of God we are baptized into one body, each part functioning with the other parts under the authority of Jesus as our head.
- By the Spirit we are placed together as living stones so that, together, we make a spiritual house of worship for God.
- By the Spirit we are given specific gifts to use in conjunction with other gifts given to others to accomplish God's work together.
- By the Spirit the Word of God is given to us in the Bible so we read the same Book and we submit to same Truth.

If there is any mutual participation in the Spirit, think of all of the ways God's Spirit draws us together. Ephesians 4, says this,

³ Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit...⁴

The Spirit's ministry is unity and we are to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. Why? Ephesians 4, continues,

⁴ There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope when you were called; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism; ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.

Paul is simply saying, in Verse 1, "Think of how much the Holy Spirit does to bring you into this fellowship together for the sake of His name, and as you think about that you cannot help but be motivated and moved to say, 'I need to do my part to fulfill the glory of Christ, the church. I need to labor and work hard for spiritual unity here, in this body.'" Why? It is for the glory of God. He is worthy.

Verse 2 tells us the true meaning of spiritual unity,

² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.

Paul is reminding them that for him to live is Christ and he is asking them to pursue spiritual unity because that will complete his joy. His joy is all about God's glory. Paul suggests two specific aspects of spiritual unity. First, there is a unity of attitude, by being of the same mind. Literally thinking the same thing and being like-minded.

Later, Paul restates this quality,

² ...being in full accord and of one mind.

Paul is telling the Philippian church to adopt the same viewpoint, the same attitude, or the same approach toward life. This is not so much doctrinal unity as it is a way we think about life together. Paul expressed this mindset, this approach to life, again,

^{1:21} For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

³ Or "fellowship"

⁴ NIV

If they could just think that thought together, that Christ means everything to us, o, we would respond to one another differently.

Our problem with spiritual unity is that our point of view is too low and too earthly. It is not exulted enough and we need to exult our minds and lift up our minds together to share this exulted of life together. Once we are able to bring ourselves to the right and shared mindset, then unity will flow from that. As a church we are to be of a same mind.

But, it is not just a unity of attitude, but it is, also, a unity of affection,

² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love...

The principle we learn is: spiritual unity pushes us beyond simply having the same attitude and the same mindset. Spiritual unity in the church pushes us into deep spiritual relationships with one another. God cares that we care for each other.

Have you noticed two believers in the church may share the same passion for Jesus, sort of the same mindset and the same approach to life, be in agreement regarding doctrinal issues, and, yet, not love one another personally. They get a sour taste in their mouth when the other is around and they simply try and ignore the other person. That is what is happening here in the church in Philippi and that is why Paul is addressing it right out of the box.

We will get to the specifics later, in Philippians 4:2,

² I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.⁵

You can imagine this church, hearing this letter being read for the first time, and they hear this theme of unity being presented in Chapter 1, Verse 7, and they know there are problems in the church because these two women are influential in the church. People are beginning to pick sides because the conflict of these two women is breaking out in the church, and they are saying, “I wonder if Paul has heard about....?” But, Paul does not say anything specifically yet, but he drives home the idea. It not because he is afraid, but it is because he is wise.

Later, as they are listening to this letter being read for the first time and they are hearing all the good doctrine and the message about unity, he is not addressing individuals, yet, and he is not addressing the specific problem, yet, but later, in Chapter 4, Verse 2, he will say, “Okay, I have been talking about these two women and you know who I am talking about,” and he names them. And, he says,

³ Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Why would Paul care about two women having a right relationship with each other? It is because two women, in conflict in the church, can tear apart spiritual unity and rob God of His glory in the local church. Paul says this is too important. There must be not only a mutual mindset, but there must be a mutual affection.

Are your relationships reflective within this church, as God has called you to this church, of the kind of relationships that are necessary in order to build spiritual unity within the church? In our modern context, it is easy to come to a church and the church becomes a place to go to, as opposed to being a family to be a part of, and sit outside of the community and not share a life with that community.

At Bethany Baptist Church we work hard to put some ministries in place to help people, but that is all they can do. They cannot create spiritual unity; i.e., the ministry of small groups, the ministry of Adult Bible Communities (ABC), the ministry of Mothers of Pre-Schoolers (MOPS), the ministry of Bible studies. We use all of these to try and help people connect with each other in deep spiritual relationships so the commonality is not hobbies, not economic status, not race. It is not any of the other things which often draw people together – it is Jesus. Yet, all we can do as leadership is pray, model, and put some of these ministries in place, but it requires all of us, each one of us.

⁵ NIV

That is why this text is so interesting to me because it is not a group-think text. It is an individual text and it tells each one of us here is what we are to do.

This leads us to **the practice of spiritual unity**. Each person in the church influences the church's spiritual harmony or discord. It is like a person singing in the choir, either that person is a great help to the harmony or a great hindrance. One voice out of a choir of two hundred does not necessarily ruin it, but it does change it and it does affect it. If that one voice becomes discordant, it likely will affect another to become discordant. Soon it is completely ruined. That is why each person is so important to this issue of spiritual unity for the glory of Christ and the church.

Paul gives us three practical ideas. First, in Verse 3, do nothing from rivalry. The ESV uses, "selfish ambition or conceit". The first step to humility is to realize how selfish we naturally are. We are to avoid doing that which the flesh wants to do.

For me, I did not realize how selfish I was until I got married. Up to that point in my life, I could live according to my own desires. I did not have to make a peaceable place. If others did not like it they did not have to be so close to me. That was my attitude. Marriage said, "No, you must create peace and that means you must become unselfish. Put your interests aside and put other's interests ahead." Selfish ambition is listed first in the sins which destroy spiritual unity. Selfish ambition makes us think the church and the world is all about us and it is not. The church is about Jesus.

How foolish it is to hold onto selfish ambition when we begin to consider Jesus. Paul will get to that in Verses 5 – 11. Consider Jesus, if there is anyone who had a right to hold onto selfish ambition, it was Jesus. He would have been right to do that. He was God come in the flesh, yet, He did not. He emptied Himself by taking on the form of a servant. That is what He did and He is our Savior and our Lord.

We must remember the first sin that entered into God's perfect universe was the sin of selfish ambition. It was Satan saying, "I will be like the Most High God. It is not enough for me to be in my created place where God has set me. I want more than what God has given to me. I want to be like the Most High." Beloved, we are never more like the Devil than when we let selfish ambition rule our heart.

Second, Paul tells us to find greater significance in others,

³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves.

The Gospel provides the grace to help us to do just that. We need the Gospel. We cannot amend our own lives in this way. We need the Gospel. The Gospel brings us to the foot of the cross. At the foot of the cross, what do we see? We see the sinless Son of God taking our sin upon Himself and we see the ugliness of our sin when we stand before Jesus. That is why it is so important for us to fix our eyes upon Jesus. We see ourselves when we kneel before the cross. We see how ugly we are inside and when we are kneeling before the cross we look around at other sinners who are kneeling before the cross. But, guess what, as we look around at other sinners we realize there is not one sinner next to us who is more worthy of being condemned by God than we are. That is what the Gospel does to us.

We do not look around and think of ourselves as being superior to other sinners. No, we realize we deserve eternal torment and condemnation forever. That is the reason the Apostle Paul would say things like,

1 Corinthians 15:9 For I am the least of the apostles...

Ephesians 3:8 ...I am the very least of all the saints...

1 Timothy 1:15b ...I am the foremost of sinners...⁶

When we see ourselves for who we are before the Lord, we will begin to see others as God sees them. That is why the cross and the Gospel are so important for our lives everyday. We need to find greater significance in others. How do we do that? We do that by setting our self before the cross each day.

⁶ Revised Standard Version (RSV)

What, practically, might it mean to count others more significant than yourself? It may mean the offering of a listening ear to someone in the middle of a busy day. It may mean you allow others to receive the credit for something you did. It may mean we receive a word of correction without argument or counterattack. It may mean we forebear and forgive when another sins against us. It may mean we are generous in giving gifts of service and resources.

So, we slay the dragon of selfish ambition and we find greater significance in others. We begin to see with Jesus' eyes others in the church. We have the same perspective about others Jesus has as opposed to what we have in our own selfish, prideful heart.

Finally, what happens when we focus upon the needs of others?

⁴Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

I like the word "look". It is the Greek word, "*Skopeo*". It means, "scope it"; take a scope, whether a microscope to look at the details or a telescope to see broadly and far. We are to scope it out so we see the needs of others as well as we see our own needs.

We all, naturally, see our own needs very clearly. Our scope is set, but Paul is telling us to take that and use it as our measure compared to how we are doing in relationship to other people in the body, so we look out for their needs and interests as much as we look out for our own.

The care for others is at the heart of a right relationship with God and this does not happen without deliberate effort.

I want to close with a story which Watchman Nee, a Chinese Christian, used to tell of a rice farmer who was a Christian living in China. He was not a wealthy man. He was living from day-to-day. His field lay high in the mountains. Everyday he would have to pump water into his field so the rice would be able to grow. At the end of the afternoon, he would go out into his field and he would see his field would be drained. There was a neighbor who lived lower on the mountain and the neighbor would open the dyke so all the water would drain into his field. It happened everyday. He would pump water into his field, then he would go out in the afternoon and his field would be drained and his neighbors would be watered.

He did not know what to do. He was becoming very disturbed and irritated. He recognized this could lead to disaster for his family. He needed this rice crop. He got together with other believers and he asked them what he should do. They prayed together and God revealed a solution. At the beginning of the day, he would first pump water for his neighbors field and then he would pump water for his own and the water stayed in his own field.

A little later, that neighbor who had been stealing water all that time, became a believer in Jesus Christ. It is all simply because this farmer took the mind of Christ, the attitude of Christ, the heart of Christ, and the humility of Christ and he applied it in a real-world situation.

Will we pursue spiritual unity in Jesus' church for the glory of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit? He is worthy, beloved. He is worthy.