

## **The Unity of the Gospel**

Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved. <sup>2</sup>I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life. (Philippians 4:1–3)

In the nineties there were three superstar tenors Jose Carreras, Placido Domingo, and Luciano Pavarotti. They each had very successful careers separately. But at some point, someone had the bright idea of bringing them together and creating the concert The Three Tenors. Their concerts were wildly successful. At one point they were performing in Los Angeles, and a reporter was asking them about competitiveness amongst them, trying to see if there was a rivalry underneath the surface.

"You have to put all of your concentration into opening your heart to the music," Domingo said.

"You can't be rivals when you're together making music."

I thought Domingo's words would be appropriate for many churches. You can't be rivals when you're together making music. Not just the music of our hymns, but the music of knowing and teaching the Word, of ministering to each other, of taking the gospel to the world. A church that is a true symphony, which literally means "one sound", is a church tuning their minds and attitudes to our one Lord. Such a church is not given to rivalry and contention, because it is trying to stay in harmony with the mind of Christ. The gospel brings unity, and being preachers of the gospel requires unity. This is what chapter 4 begins with.

Paul has reached that place in this epistle, which he usually reaches halfway in most epistles, where he turns from theological to practical. And the order is very important. Paul always first tells you who you are in Christ, your position, then he tells you what to do, your practice. He never reverses those, because to reverse them is to put works before grace. But grace always comes first: what God has done, and what God enables, followed by what we do, and how we respond. First the indicative, then the imperative.

Philippians has been a little different in that the theological section has been very personal and historical. He has been building a theology from the example of Christ and his companions and himself. But now he turns practical, and all through chapter 4 are practical exhortations.

### **I. The Call to Commitment**

Therefore, my beloved and longed-for brethren, my joy and crown, so stand fast in the Lord, beloved.

Flood of affection, not found in any other epistle.

Paul calls the Philippians by five titles. They are his brethren, a Greek word which means brothers and sisters. They are family to him. Remember, this is the Hebrew of the Hebrews, but he now finds a deeper unity and family with these Gentile Roman citizens than with many of his blood relatives.

They are beloved. Agapatoi is simply another way of saying, I love you. You are dear to me. I delight in the good that is in you, and I delight in good for you. He uses this term twice in this verse, just pouring out affection.

They are longed for. He misses them terribly, and wishes he could be with them.

They are his joy and crown. The word for crown is not a king's diadem, but the stephanos, the wreath or reward given to those who won at the Games. The Philippians are a source of joy for Paul, and they are his future reward. To think of them is for Paul to be filled with both joy and

heavenly expectation.

To these beloved, longed-for brethren, who are his joy and crown, he simply has one command: stand fast in the Lord.

Stand fast. This is a favourite term of Paul's, and it means to be firmly committed, to have an unmoving and unmovable position. We still use this language when we say, "take a stand" "stand up to the opposition" "stand your ground" "be the last man standing".

We could paraphrase this as, "Be faithful", "Be uncompromising", "Bravely guard and maintain the faith" "Defend the doctrine and practice of Christianity". And the word *therefore* links it back to chapter 3 – that kind of Christianity, the kind that wants to know Christ above all, that's the way you stand and live out your faith.

You don't stand fast on your own or in your own power. As he says, stand fast *in the Lord*. He supplies the power, and the position in which you live out this kind of Christianity.

It's what he said in 1:27, which we identified as the central verse of the whole book:

<sup>27</sup>Only let your conduct be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of your affairs, that you stand fast in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel,

You see there that Paul wanted the Philippians to be faithful, uncompromising Christians, but he wanted them to do so in one spirit, with one mind. That really summarises the central idea of the book. Paul wanted these Philippians to really grasp the shape of the gospel, the J-Curve, cruciform, dying and rising kind of life, so that they could have unity within their church, and a clear testimony to everyone outside of it. He did not want the Roman culture of competition, rivalry, envy, personal pride and ambition to infect the church. So Paul has filled this epistle with examples of the humility that dies to self so as to serve others. Christ Himself, Paul himself, Timothy, Epaphroditus, these all died to self to serve. They gave up the pride that causes disunity. For Paul to stand fast is to stand together. To be standing in the J-Curve kind of life is to be living in unity. That leads to his most personal and practical exhortation in the whole book.

## II. The Call to Concord

<sup>21</sup>I implore Euodia and I implore Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord.

Paul says I implore, or encourage, or urge, or appeal to Euodia and Syntyche. Paul lovingly urges two women in the Philippian church, to be of the same mind in the Lord. He wants unity, and calls on these two women to live out this gospel humility he has been exhorting throughout the book.

Euodia was a pagan name meaning prosperous journey or success. Syntyche means *with luck*; it uses the name of the goddess Tyche (the Greek form of the Latin Fortunatus), you also find it in the names Tychicus (Col 4:7) and Eutyches (Acts 20:9). Women here in Macedonia seemed to play a more prominent role in life and commercial affairs than in other areas, so it is not unlikely that these two women were well-off, and had some social standing. A conflict between them, particularly in a small church, would have been a very grievous thing.

Paul refuses to take sides, because he says he implores both of them. It is highly unusual for Paul to name the disputants in a conflict in a public letter to be read to the whole church. Usually Paul would issue a general call for unity, like he does in the letters to the Corinthians or the Ephesians. But here he names them, meaning their dispute had obviously become public and known to everyone.

He also honours them, by saying that these women were true fellow-labourers with him. They were faithful, true believers, who were now unfortunately caught up in some kind of dispute.

We have no way of knowing what their particular dispute was.

But there are several places in the New Testament where Paul does give us the details of church conflicts, and they are in the Bible for our learning. Here are four common ways that conflicts spread in church.

- 1) **Being careless with our liberties and convictions.** Paul used pages of ink on this one. Romans 14, all of 1 Corinthians 8 through 10 is devoted to teaching believers to come to their convictions carefully, and then respect the differing consciences of others. On matters that are debatable, that is, things which could be used for good or evil, matters where believers can both partake or abstain for the glory of God, God expects His people to not judge or despise one another. To be careless or unloving is to insist that your conviction is the right one and to criticise harshly those who disagree, or to regard them with contempt. It is parading your conviction in front of those who are not ready for it, or flouting your liberty in front of those who disagree. In our day this includes our convictions on food and drink, on the use of the Lord's Day, on Christmas and Easter, on certain entertainments. And Covid has brought a whole section of them: to wear or not wear masks, to be vaccinated or not to be vaccinated. Christians must not allow this to destroy their unity.
- 2) **Developing cliques and personality followings.** The church at Corinth had this problem. <sup>3</sup>for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not carnal? (1 Corinthians 3:3–4) The church at Corinth had begun to coalesce into the Paul followers and the Apollos followers. It happens in churches when people gravitate to one leader over another, one speaker over another. Unfortunately, some people are intoxicated with the idea of people following them, hanging on their every word, looking to them as the source. I have seen enough times the man who sets himself up as the quiet alternative source of wisdom to the pulpit, and steadily builds a following, or the matriarch who benevolently showers her advice on searching young wives and mothers. Very steadily, they build a group, and like Absalom, they steal the hearts of the men of Israel. This is shameless rivalry, a self-seeking competition for the hearts and loyalty of God's people. And sometimes it is not always a person, but a position. The use-only-the-King James group, or the no genetically modified foods group, or the only homeschool your children group, or tragically in some churches, the white believers group or the black believers group. When the church allows something other than the supremacy of Jesus Christ to reign, then all sorts of other petty rivals start to mushroom up. Before you know it, you have multiple churches under one roof. Listen to the words Paul gives to this behaviour in 2 Corinthians: 2 Corinthians 12:20 contentions, jealousies, outbursts of wrath, selfish ambitions, backbitings, whisperings, conceits, tumults”
- 3) **Partiality and favouritism.** James tells us not to hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ of glory with partiality. When a church gives special recognition, special seats, special voting power, special permissions, and special blind eyes to the sins of some, it is ripe for conflict. The church at Jerusalem began to feel this conflict when the Greek speaking widows were overlooked or neglected in the mercy ministry, probably because the Aramaic speaking widows were well-known and easier to communicate with in Jerusalem. Whether it's intentional, accidental, or just careless, some are favoured, and some left out in the cold. Those favoured are usually the wealthy, or those particularly friendly to the pastor, or even

just those who are good looking, funny, attractive, enjoyable. The socially awkward, the uneducated, the poor, the single, the elderly, the disabled, the widowed, the divorced, the weak are sidelined and ignored. They don't get the ministry, the attention, the prayers, the discipleship. Some churches favour the young and style their services, and their music and their ministry around the young and upwardly mobile. That's a form of partiality. Some churches favour a particular subculture and appeal to that group. That's partiality. Let partiality spread in a church, and conflict will not be far behind.

- 4) **Destructive speech about one another.** James says “Do not speak evil of one another, brethren. He who speaks evil of a brother and judges his brother, speaks evil of the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but a judge. There is one Lawgiver, who is able to save and to destroy. Who are you to judge another?(James 4:11–12). Whether it is destructive gossip of other people's problems, or murmuring and complaining about how things are done, or simply criticising and backbiting another brother or sister, it all amounts to speaking evil. It eats away at your soul, changing your opinion of others, and forcing you to be fake friendly when with those people, and eventually what has been cultivated in the heart will come out in open conflict.

We don't know if Euodia and Syntyche had become rivals in ministry, or one had shown partiality and excluded another, maybe one had offended another through a very different conviction, maybe one had not spoken kindly or carefully about another. Maybe it was none of these.

But whatever it was, Paul now enlists those words he has used throughout this epistle: be of the same mind in the Lord. Eudonia and Syntyche are to now apply this letter to their dispute. That same mind which was in Christ Jesus when he humbled himself and became a slave, that same mind that was in Paul when he counted his whole life as rubbish to gain Christ, that mind must now be in both of them. These two are in the Lord, they are Christians, they both submit to Christ, therefore they can both heal this conflict by having the same mind.

### III. The Call for Cooperation

<sup>3</sup>And I urge you also, true companion, help these women who labored with me in the gospel, with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the Book of Life.

Paul now turns his attention to someone else and asks for assistance in healing this rift. This person is more of an equal with Paul, and the word for urge is a word you use with peers, whereas the word for implore in verse 2 is more one that Paul can use as an authority over these women. A few commentators think that the Greek word for companion, *syzygos*, is actually a name. In Greek manuscripts, they are either all in capital letters or all in small letters, so you can't identify names as we do with capital letters. The problem is that there is just no evidence of anyone named *Syzygos*, and so the chances are, this just means my true companion. We don't know who this is. It isn't Timothy, because he is still with Paul. It isn't Ephaphroditus, because he has already been named, and Paul would just name him again. One possible contender is Luke, who might have returned to Philippi after Paul wrote Colossians, but before he wrote this letter. But we don't know; whomever Paul was addressing obviously did know.

But Paul says to this person, help these women. Perhaps this means they had already tried to resolve their conflict but failed. Paul says support them, give them aid. Why? These were women who had been on the front lines with Paul. They had laboured with Paul, with Clement, with other fellow workers, and all of them, including Euodia and Syntyche, Paul is certain, are in the book of Life. In other words, these are believers. They are not goats among the sheep.

Shepherds tell us that one of the chief differences between sheep and goats is that sheep are not aggressive, but goats continually look for fights, head butt, and harass each other. God's people, His true sheep, actually just want to graze on the Word and follow the Shepherd. When you have someone who seems to quarrel with everyone, starts fights regularly, is always needing mediation, you may actually have a goat among the sheep. Repeated and unrepentant conflict eventually call for church discipline, to get the goat out of the sheepfold.

But when you have true believers, with real track records of fruitful godliness, then an unresolved conflict is a grief to everyone. The fruit you should be looking for is that both parties want to reconcile, but have just reached a stalemate. They have gotten lost in the maze of the conflict, the conflict itself has now produced more conflict, and now the fight has even become about the fight.

With Paul reaching out to his true companion, he is showing that sometimes resolving conflict and building unity is something that requires other believers. Unity concerns all of us, and though conflict is a private matter to be solved privately, it is not a secret matter, nor can it remain so when unresolved. In fact, unresolved conflict is like mould: leave it and it only gets worse.

What did Paul expect this true companion to do? And what does God expect us to do when there is conflict amongst us? What would Paul's true companion do once he had sat Euodia and Sytyche down?

First, he would insist upon biblical communication by both of them. He would act as a traffic cop in that meeting, telling people to stop, halt, and proceed if they became angry, hurtful in word, accusatory, sarcastic, exaggerated or untruthful. If one began raising the tone of the voice, interrupting, jumping to conclusions, he would correct those actions right there. He would train them to ask each other questions: "what did you mean when you said, such and such". Part of the way people get into conflicts is by communicating badly or even sinfully, and the mediator is training them right there to speak to each other in Christlike ways.

Second, he would look to clarify any misunderstandings. Much conflict is misunderstanding motives, meanings, intentions, and he would have them communicate clearly what they meant and intended. Where there are small offences, he would encourage them to quickly forgive or even overlook.

When communication is biblical, and misunderstandings are cleared up, there is now what needs to be forgiven. Perhaps an offence, hurtful words or actions, insensitive responses. Here is where the mediator's wisdom has to come in. Maybe someone was hurt, but it was their own immaturity and oversensitivity. Maybe someone feels justified, but he is being quite cold and insensitive to others. Here the true companion would apply the book of Philippians to them both. Where do you need to humble yourself, and accept reproof? Where do you need to admit you were wrong, and ask for forgiveness, without qualifying it or quibbling over details? Where do you need to die – denying your own pride, submitting to God, reaching out in love?

Once forgiveness has been asked and received, the original problem might still remain. The options are to talk till you reach a mutually agreed conclusion, compromise by splitting the difference, or agree to disagree and defer to the final decision of the mediator.

Before a mediator is called, give people time to work it out. Unless the conflict has become vocal and ugly and is appearing during the services of the church, sometimes we need to give people time. Godly Christians in the same church will not be content with living at enmity with another believer,

particularly if they are coming to the Lord's Supper. And if they are members of this church, they should be. Time doesn't heal unresolved conflict, but time does give people the space to think about how to rightly handle it, to check their own hearts and confess their own sins. It gives them a chance to meet in private, one-on-one and try to resolve it that way. We don't need to frog-march every two Christians having conflict in church straight to the pastor's office. Let them try out their wings; let them apply what they do know. Sometimes mediation comes too late; but often enough it comes too early, before the Christians have actually applied the tools they already know. Mediation is not a boxing referee who pulls the two sluggers apart; mediation is coaching two Christians to resolve their conflict biblically.

Mediation comes from a mature impartial believer who is asked. Euodia and Syntyche didn't get to enlist their own supporters or friends as mediators. The person should be experienced enough in understanding and resolving conflict, and have enough authority to tell either or both people to stop certain behaviours and begin others.

But all this shows that unity is not just a private matter. That we are one in Christ is a public matter. It is public because it has to do with how we are living out the humility of the gospel among each other. And it is a public matter because it testifies to the world that we have this kind of mind, this attitude that was in Jesus.

In 1747 disunity broke out among the Moravian brethren. Count Zinzendorf, with elders from each group, arranged to hold a Conference at which the differing views might be aired and discussed amicably among themselves. The leaders came—some from long distances to the place at which the Conference was to be held, each prepared to contest the view he supported and confident that it would receive the acceptance of the majority. They arrived about the middle of a week.

In his wisdom Count Zinzendorf proposed that they should spend some time over the Word and in prayer, and suggested a Bible Reading. The book chosen was the first Epistle of John, and they spent the remaining days of that week reading 1 John and being reminded that one of its main lessons was 'love for all the brethren'. They decided that on the Sunday, like the early Church, they should come together to break bread. One body, one loaf, as Paul taught. The reading and study of God's Word and the fellowship at the Lord's Supper affected them all. The result was that when, on Monday morning, they met to discuss and debate the matters of contention, their differences and disputes were quickly settled, with each bowing to the Word of God and each one determined to 'keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace'.

If this gospel has truly captured us, there is no conflict that cannot be resolved between two Christians. All it requires is that both Christians adopt the humility of Christ, empty themselves and seek only to please God. And when, like Euodia and Syntyche, they find themselves still stuck, the body of Christ comes to their aid, helps them to apply the mind of Christ, and displays that the gospel brings unity, and the gospel requires unity.