

Week 5—Unity Philippians 2:1-4

Welcome to week 5 of our Healthy Church series. So far, we've talked about a number of characteristics that are found in a healthy church. Many of them are probably familiar to you by now: getting the gospel right, reserving membership for believers only, practicing restorative church discipline, and having a biblical structure of church officers.

Today, we're going to look at a fifth characteristic of a healthy church that we see in Scripture: unity. Before we launch into our text for this morning, I want to begin first by saying a bit about the biblical basis for unity between Christians.

It's important that we be clear about what Scripture means and what it doesn't mean when it speaks about unity. Unity in Scripture does not mean that all church members have to have the same opinions about everything. From time to time, they may have different opinions over the wisest ways to carry out the commands of Scripture. It is also not synonymous with homogeneity among the membership. It does not mean that we all have to have the same favorite style of worship music, or the same hobbies and interests in our spare time, or the same level of education, or the same skin color, or be the same age, or have the same amount of money in our bank accounts. Our unity is not built around any of these things. Members in a church can be very diverse, and in fact, God's glory shines through most brightly in saving a diverse bunch of pardoned rebels, who live in love and unity together.

But if this is not what a church's unity is built around, what *is* unity built around in Scripture? We see the answer in Eph. 4:3-6 in the apostle Paul's 7-part confession of our faith: we are one body in Christ, we are indwelt by one Spirit, we have one hope of our calling to salvation, we have one Lord (Jesus Christ), one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father who is over all and through all and in all. So, in a regenerate church, what common ground would you have with fellow members for unity? Only everything that really matters: the same God, the same gospel, the same common salvation, and the same indwelling Spirit who is conforming us all into the image of Christ. That's a pretty good start, I would say, and it makes, for instance, your favorite sports team or the kind of car you drive seem pretty insignificant in comparison. Yes, believe it or not, there can even be unity between Tar Heels, Blue Devils, and Wolfpack fans.

Why do I say that? It's because unity is already true of us all theologically, based on what God has done. According to Ephesians 2, we have all been made into one new man in Christ, reconciled to God in one body through the cross, and are all fellow members of God's household. According to Gal. 3, the gospel abolishes all distinctions in salvation between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Folks, the theological reality of our unity is settled. God has done it. Now we must simply make our experience conform to what is true of us already. We must make our practice match our doctrine. We must live like who we actually are. God has made us one; now we must act as one.

And here is the tragic thing: when we deny our unity, we deny what God has done in the gospel in making us one. When we don't live at peace with one another, we deny that God has made peace with us all through the blood of His Son. Living without unity is

a gospel issue. It denies gospel realities. It says by a church's actions that what God has declared to be true is not, in fact, true.

So, let me assume this morning that you understand the importance of unity and are committed to loving your church family and maintaining unity with them. But did you know that even in a healthy church this isn't always easy? This morning we're going to take a look at one of the healthier churches that we see in the NT, the church at Philippi. However, the Philippian church had a problem. It was struggling to maintain unity among its members. The culprit was some "me-first" attitudes, some conceited, self-centered thinking among some of the members, in which everyone was putting his own interests first. Of course, this led to bickering and complaining. Now, the dissention wasn't out of control at this point, and the Philippians weren't threatening a church split yet, but Paul realized that seeds of dissention grow into giant weeds of disunity one day that can choke out a church's gospel witness. The formula to make them grow is plenty of self-love and self-interest. Focusing on self, rather than others, is like fertilizer for disunity. And Paul realized that he needed to spray a good dose of Round-up on this kind of thinking. So, in 2:1-4, he commands believers to have the same mindset, one that is focused on mutual love and selfless humility. Love and humility are the soil in which unity grows and flourishes into a fragrant display of God's glory for the world to see.

Our text for this morning will be Phil. 2:1-4, but let's begin reading this morning in 1:27 to pick up the flow of Paul's thought.

Notice in 1:27 we see the command to "conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ." That is, the Philippians were to live a life in keeping with the great calling to salvation that they had received in the gospel. But notice specifically in v.27 what Paul has in mind when he says this. For Paul, conducting themselves in a manner worthy of the gospel involves them "standing firm in one spirit" and "with one mind." In other words, it involves unity. It is impossible to conduct yourself in a manner worthy of the gospel if you are not living in unity with your fellow church members.

Notice also in v.27 what's at stake in a church's unity: "with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel." I think that phrase "the faith of the gospel" refers to both their efforts to defend the gospel and to advance it in the city of Philippi. It referred to both their apologetics and their evangelism.

These Christians wanted to see the lost won to Christ. In fact, the book of Philippians speaks about their partnership with Paul and one another to advance the gospel. They also needed to band together to defend it, because as vv.28-30 make clear, they were being persecuted for their faith in Christ. And here's what Paul was trying to get through to them: All their grumbling and bickering really only does two things: 1) it dulls their witness to the lost within that city. After all, why would a lost person ever want to be a part of church that can't get along? What authentic display of God's glory is in that? And 2) disunity with one another erodes their ability to contend side by side for the gospel in the face of persecution and opposition. If they can't support and lean on one another, then whom do they have to lean on during times of persecution? Satan loves to use the divide and conquer tactic with churches, and that was what was in danger of happening to the Philippians.

So, Paul was warning the Philippians that they needed unity because the effectiveness of their gospel offense and their gospel defense depended on it.

And here's an overview of how he makes his case: First, in 2:1 he summons together all the reasons that they should have unity, all the things that knit them together. Paul wants them to see that they have every reason for being united. Then in 2:2, he commands them to be united, and he does it by telling them to have the same mindset. In other words, unity of thinking (when it's centered around the right thing) produces unity of action, unity of result. After that, he explains that this mindset consists of two things: mutual love and selfless humility. And if they want to see the perfect example of this humility and love lived out, it's found in vv.5-8 in the person of Jesus Christ.

Let's begin by looking at the grounds, or reasons, for unity in v.1. By the way, notice that the word "therefore" links it back to what Paul has just said in 1:27-30.

v.1 **¹Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion,**

Paul gives four reasons, each of which begins by with the word "if." However, it's important to understand that Paul didn't mean "if" in the sense that he wasn't sure that these things were true. In fact, he assumed that they were true. In light of this, it might be better to understand these as meaning "since" rather than "if."

Let's look at each of the reasons he gives for unity. First, the Christians at Philippi are knit together by "**encouragement/consolation in Christ**" – this refers to the encouragement and comfort that is given to them by Christ while they are suffering because they are united to Him. This is Christ's comfort to face a common persecution.

The second is very similar to it. They are also knit together by "**consolation/comfort of love**," that is, Christ's love, which was bringing them comfort during this time of persecution.

Now, why would Paul list these things as aspects that bring them together? Why would he appeal to them as reasons for unity? I think the answer is that Paul realized that when you go through something as difficult as persecution for your faith and then experience the same overwhelming encouragement, comfort, and love from Christ necessary to endure it, it builds solidarity together. It knits your hearts together. You've shared a common trial and experienced a common sustaining comfort from Christ. Paul is reminding them of that.

It's not unlike the students at Union University in Jackson, TN, that were affected by the tornado recently. Many of them hunkered down in bathrooms and basements and closets while a fierce tornado ripped through the campus, destroying much of the campus housing. One student hid in a bathroom, and when she opened the door to exit it, she found that it now opened up to the outside, rather than the rest of the building. The building, except the part she was in, had all been blown away. But the miraculous thing was that in all of this, no one was killed. God had graciously spared them all from dying. The students had experienced a common trial and the common blessing of God through it. I would dare say that this will unite them for the rest of their lives. Think about when they see one another 30 years from now. They might say, "Do you remember that day when we hid in that bathroom and God spared us from that tornado?" Paul seems to be drawing on something similar here when he

reminds the Philippians of the common comfort they were receiving from Christ that sustained them in their trials.

The third reason Paul gives for unity is the “**fellowship of the Spirit**” – I think this is referring to their fellowship, or partnership, with one another that the Holy Spirit creates. In 1:5 the same word that is translated “fellowship” here is used there to describe the Philippians’ partnership together for the advancement of the gospel. I think Paul is referring in chapter 2 to just such a partnership.

You may laugh, but I’m a big fan of the Lord of the Rings movies. One of them is entitled “The Fellowship of the Ring,” and I think the word “fellowship” in that title is being used in much the same way Paul uses it here. In the movie it describes a partnership forged between an unusual group of characters who commit to a common goal: to destroy a certain powerful ring in the fires of Mount Doom and thereby save Middle Earth from destruction. Now, the movie may sound a little strange for your taste, but I think it does capture the idea of fellowship that Paul has in mind. It’s a partnership for a common goal.

So, Paul is saying here that the Holy Spirit has united the believers in Philippi with a common goal. They had partnered together to see the glorious gospel spread, and he was reminding them that they were still teammates in this endeavor.

Finally, he calls them to unity because they have “**affection/tenderness and compassion/mercies**” – In essence, Paul is reminding them that if they’ll stop and think about it, deep down inside they really do have love for one another. “Think about how much you care about one another,” he would say. “Think about what you mean to each other.” Sometimes, people we love deeply can be a source of frustration for us, and we simply need to be reminded of how much we really do love them. When your pet of 15 years chews up your sneakers, you may feel like shooting him, but when you stop and think about it, you really do have affection and compassion for him. Paul is saying the same thing here.

So, Paul has said that their reasons for unity include Christ’s comfort to face common persecution, their partnership with one another for advancing the gospel, and their feelings of love and compassion that they have for each other.

Now, he’s ready to give them the command:

v.2 ² **make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.**

The main idea, the thing Paul is shooting for in all of this, is that the Philippian Christians would have unity of mind. Remember that unity of thought leads to unity of action. Here, he calls this unity of thought “**being of the same mind/being likeminded.**” Literally, you could translate it, “so that you may be thinking the same thing.” In Paul’s sentence this phrase is the main thought, with everything else that comes after it in vv.2-4 serving to either explain or repeat what this unity of mind entails.

First, the repetition: in v.2 Paul repeats the idea of being united in mind in several ways. And what does that tell us? I’d venture to say that means it’s pretty important. Usually people repeat things that are important. Notice in v.2 that he speaks about being “**united in spirit, intent on one purpose,**” or your translation may say, “**being one in spirit and purpose,**” or “**being of one accord, of one mind.**” Literally, you could translate it, “together in soul, thinking the one thing.”

But what is the thing they are to be thinking? In what way are they to be likeminded? If unity of mind is what this passage is all about, then it would help us to know in concrete terms precisely in what way we are to be likeminded. I think we can find two facets to this common mindset.

The first is found in the middle of v.2: “**maintaining the same love**” – this means having a mutual love for one another. This is why Paul was interested in stirring up their affection and compassion earlier. He wants to remind them to love one another. And loving each other is the exact opposite of loving yourself first and foremost. Love is essential for unity. In fact, elsewhere, Paul calls love “the perfect bond of unity.”

Now, I mentioned that there were two characteristics of the common mindset he tells the Philippians to have. We find the second characteristic of this common mindset in vv.3-4:

vv.3-4 ³ **Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;** ⁴ **do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.**

The second characteristic, which sums up these verses, is selfless humility. Believers are to do nothing according to selfish, me-centered ambitions, nor are they to do anything according to a vain or exaggerated opinion of themselves. Love of ourselves and desire to serve ourselves is not to be our motivation in the church.

And here is a profound thought for us to understand: your church does not exist to make much of you. Your church does not exist solely to serve you. Your church does not exist to the end that you would be made comfortable, catered to, or exalted. The church belongs to God, and it exists for His glory alone.

So what about the person who says, “We’re doing things my way here. I run this church and I always will”? Folks, there’s only one Lord of the church, only one Head, and His name is Jesus Christ. I want to challenge all of us right now to acknowledge that. “I am not Lord here. This is Jesus’ church. I am not what is most important. Jesus is.”

So, if Jesus is most important, what would He have us do? I’m glad you asked. Look at the rest of v.3: “**but with humility/lowliness of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves**” – that’s what Jesus would have us to do. He would have us to consider one another as more important than ourselves.

Paul goes on to say more about this kind of others-first attitude in v.4: “**do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others**” – In other words, he’s telling the Philippians, and by extension, us, to quit thinking only about ourselves. The church is not all about looking out for what will make me happiest. It’s about considering what is best for my fellow church members, considering their needs to be more important than my own. And God has blessed us in our church with many good models of how this can be done. I have watched many of you put that attitude into practice at OMV.

But here’s the thing: Even the best human models will fail at times to demonstrate this kind of perfect unity based on a common mindset of mutual love and selfless humility. That’s why Paul points the Philippians toward the ultimate example of these things in Jesus Christ. That’s what he’s up to in vv.5-8.

Jesus is the ultimate model of selfless humility. Rather than selfish ambition, Jesus did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, even though He existed in the

form of God, but instead emptied Himself. And in contrast to empty conceit, Jesus took the form of a bond-servant, being made in the likeness of men. In fact, he even humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death on a cross. Vv.5-8 are written to show the exact opposite of the vices of selfish ambition and vain conceit are found in Jesus Christ. And as Jesus is, so should we be.

So, we've seen today that our basis for unity is God, the gospel, and the central truths of the Christian faith. And we've seen in Philippians that the importance of unity is the defense and advancement of the gospel. We've also seen that those with likeminded unity have in common a mutual love for one another and a selfless humility that puts one another first. The greatest obstacle to unity is not "legitimate differences of opinion, but self-centeredness" (Silva). It comes when we fail to esteem each other more highly than ourselves.

So, today I'd like to close by asking you, if you want to be a part of a church that has unity, are you willing to be the kind of person who selflessly loves and humbles himself before others? Are you willing to relinquish your claims that things be done your way, are you willing to stop looking out for Number One and start looking for ways that you can serve others? If we all have this attitude, God's glory will shine forth brightly. And after all, that's what we exist for.