

“The Strong Bond of Unity”

Today the apostle Paul begins to turn his attention to the Philippians and their unique situation.

In the first part of this letter Paul’s thoughts were focused on himself.

In the first part of chapter one he explained to the Philippians his situation and plight. He talked to them about how he was in prison and how God was using that situation to further the gospel in his life and in the lives of others. He spoke of persecution from the outside (those who were opposed to the gospel) and persecution on the inside (those in the church who were working to undermine his ministry). In the midst of all these troubles Paul talked about an inner struggle that raged within his spirit. Should he live? Or should he die? If he were to die he could be with Christ, but if he lived he could continue to minister to the Philippians. These kinds of thoughts dominate the first part of the letter, but now Paul begins to zero in on the Philippians and the unique challenges they face.

The Example of Paul

There is a reason why Paul began this letter by first explaining to them his situation and plight.

He began with himself because he wanted the Philippians to imitate him in his actions.

You see if the church was going to be able imitate Paul they first had to understand the kind of persecution that he faced in his ministry and how he responded to it. .

Paul often asked the recipients of his letters to imitate him and he certainly did it in this letter when he wrote in Philippians 3:17. “Join with others in following *my* example, brothers and sisters, and take note of those who live according to the pattern *we* gave you.”

It’s as if Paul is saying to them I am experiencing the same stuff you are going through and I want you to look at my life as a pattern for what you are to do as you face your own struggles.

On the surface, and without any context, this might sound a little arrogant to us, but it is not, because when Paul says look to me as an example what he is *really* saying is look to Jesus Christ.

Paul was all about Jesus, not himself. Paul knew he was a sinner. In fact he called himself the chief of all sinners and he knew that everything depended upon Christ. His salvation depended upon Jesus and his ability to grow in holiness unto God depended upon Christ. Jesus was the all consuming focus of Paul.

Paul was so focused on Jesus that he said in this letter, “For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain,” (1:21) and that everything else, when compared to Christ, is “dung,” which we translate a little nicer in English to be “rubbish.” (Phil. 3:8).

So when Paul says to the church imitate me, he says it because he knows that *his* life, *his* actions, and *his* words, will point people *not* to himself, but to the one who consumes him, Jesus Christ.

This means that when Paul tells the Philippians in v. 27 to “conduct themselves in a manner that is worthy of the gospel of Christ,” his words have credibility.

Why do they have credibility?

Because when Paul was thrown into prison by outside enemies of the gospel Paul chose to see the hand of God in his situation; for he knew that God was using his imprisonment to spread the gospel into the very heart of the Roman Empire. Paul believed that with every fiber of his being.

Second, when Paul was attacked on the inside by other Christian preachers he did not retaliate, but rather he rejoiced in the fact that the gospel was being preached by others, even if their motives were impure.

Now Paul wants the church in Philippi to do the same thing (in principle) that he did in the midst of his own struggles. He wants them to live lives worthy of the gospel.

The church needed to hear this exhortation because they too were having problems.

In fact, their problems were somewhat similar to Paul’s; for they were also catching heat from the outside world. In v.28 of the text Paul tells the Philippians not to be frightened by those who “oppose” them. That’s the people on the outside. And they were experiencing strife within the family. There was a divisive dispute going on in the church between two prominent women- Euodia and Syntyche.

All of these problems that the Philippians were facing are what drove Paul to first speak about his own situation, so that that he could first show them the way by his godly example. Paul was a man of incredible integrity.

The Strong Bond of Unity

Now there are a few things that the apostle offers to the Philippians in order to help them deal with their struggles, and today we are going to look at the first of those things-unity. It is clearly the main focus in this little portion of scripture.

In this text, in v. 27, after Paul tells them to “live lives worthy of the gospel,” he says that if they will do this he will then be assured that they (the Philippians) will be “standing firm in *one* spirit, contending as *one* man for the faith of the gospel.”

The point here is that unity is a fruit of “living lives that are worthy of the gospel” and if the Philippians will take the time to develop it then it will serve as a sign to their enemies that they cannot be defeated and that God will be faithful to them. (v.28)

For sure, God is the source of our unity. We Christians have been *united* to the Father through the Son’s death on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins, by the convicting power of the Holy Spirit who works faith in our hearts, but unity is still a two way street. We must work at it on our end. Does not Paul tell us in Philippians to work out our salvation with fearing and trembling?

That is why Paul gives the church this exhortation in Philippians 2:1. In that verse he tells them that “if they have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, (all of that is the God part of unity) then make my joy complete by *being* like-minded, *having* the same love, *being* one in spirit and purpose.” (*That’s our part*)

Did you catch those action verbs? *Being* like-minded, *having* the same love, *being* one in spirit and purpose? You have got to work at it.

How about the unity language? Did you get that? *Like-minded*, *same* love, *one* in spirit and purpose. Therein lays the key to unity in the church. Yes you have got to work at unity, but it takes more than just wanting to stay together. You have to be working *towards* the same *like-minded* goal or your work will be futile.

In the world of sports the teams that win championships are not necessarily the ones that have the most talent, but the ones that are most unified around a common game plan. You can have all the talent in the world but if one part of the team is trying to do one thing and another part of the team another, they will *not* win. There must be a common goal and game-plan to which all are working toward, lest they fail. The pressures and challenges of life, both on and off the field, will come upon that team during the season and unless they are united in purpose and mission they will self-destruct.

It is the same for a church. A church must be united in the same purpose. It must be like minded. It must have a common theology and mission to work toward, lest it self-destruct. If too much diversity in belief and practice is allowed on core things like the authority and inspiration of Holy Scripture, salvation in Christ alone, and sexual ethics, then you will have a divided church. Yes you need to have some room for diversity, but there must also be clear boundaries where there is no room allowed for compromise on essential matters.

When the boundaries become too broad or even worse, disappear, then there is *no* like-mindedness, standing firm in one spirit, or contending as one man for the faith of the gospel.

This is the problem that we are experiencing in our own denominational context. The PCUSA is a deeply divided denomination. That may bother some of you to hear that, but it is true. Our tent

has gotten so big in terms of what it allows for in belief and practice that there is precious little that is holding her together beyond property, pension benefits, and polity.

In one Presbyterian congregation you might have a minister who believes the Bible is the Word of God and the final authority in all matters in the life of the church, and in another a minister who believes the Bible simply contains the Word of God that only serves as one guide among many.

In one Presbyterian Church you might find a minister who is deeply grieved that the denomination recently changed its ordination standards to allow for homosexual ordination and is now on a fast track to redefine marriage to be between two people, instead of one man and one woman, and in another church a minister who is doing cartwheels down the aisles over such changes.

There is little like-mindedness in such overly diverse dynamics.

Well there are serious problems in the PCUSA and we will likely see a significant schism (division) instead of unity over the next couple of years because of mutually exclusive, incompatible worldviews contained within her. This will not be a division over something silly like the color of the carpet in the church, but rather it will be over something that is much more serious, like the fundamental meaning of marriage and family, our understandings of what it means to be male and female, and how we are called to live out our lives sexually. The sad thing is that as serious as these problems are, they are not the most serious problems in the church.

Unity is a precious gift and a delicate balance, but it cannot be maintained at all costs. If it could we ought to all go back to the mother church. Or better yet we could put a co-exist bumper sticker on the back of our car and join the Unitarian Universalists, or the Baha'i faith, or the church of Oprah. If we are going to maintain unity at all costs then let's put our money where our mouth is and go for broke. But to maintain unity at all costs would be to make an idol of unity, or even worse to pervert it.

You see, if we seek to maintain unity at all costs then truth gets compromised and that is not good. True unity has to be rooted in a common theology and common vision. That's why Paul said in the text to stand firm in *one* spirit, not many spirits. It is why he said contend for the faith as *one* man, not many men. It is why he said be *like* minded, not many minded. And it is why he said be *one* in spirit and purpose, don't have fifty million purposes.

Application of the Text

So the question for us today is how do we maintain unity in the church? What is it that we have to do on our end?

1. Stand on the Word of God. The Bible has to be our final authority or we are doomed. The moment we open the doors to letting our feelings or our dogged belief in "life, liberty, and the

pursuit of happiness” to be our final authority the whole deck of cards crumbles and each person will begin to do what is right in his own eyes. We have to trust that the playbook has got it right. We have to trust that the Bible is the Word of God and that it shows us the way for everything we need to know in terms of how we are saved and how we can live lives that are in accordance with the will of God.

2. Pray. This may be the word that we Americans need to heed the most. Prayer is not in the psyche of most Americans. We are a “rugged,” “self-help,” “individualistic,” “pull yourself up by the boot straps” kind of people, and prayer in many ways cuts against that kind of mentality. But if we are to have unity in the church then we must constantly beseech God for the blessings of unity in our midst. We do well to remember that John 17, the most significant chapter in the entire Bible on the matter of unity, is a prayer by Jesus to the Father for his people to be one as he and the Father are one. Let us all recommit ourselves to praying for unity in the church.

3. Stick Together. I would say two things about this. First to stick together means to be together. The Bible exhorts us to “not neglect meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another all the more as we see the day coming.” Being together as a body builds unity. When people come together for worship, Bible Study, and fellowship friendships are formed and love is deepened and this builds unity in the church. The second thing I would say is this: The PCUSA, both corporately and as individual congregations from within her, is already and will be undergoing major seasons of discernment as it concerns herself as a denomination. Some of this will be because of serious theological impasses and some of it will be simply because the way we do life in denominations will radically change in the 21st century. I do not know how all of this will shake out and I do not know how we as a session and a congregation ought to respond to all of this yet except to say that we ought to stick to the Bible and we ought to stay together and not divide as the church navigates through these uncharted waters. More important than the preservation of the PCUSA is the preservation of this body. We are the church. The PCUSA is simply a denomination or entity that contains churches within her.

4. Major on the Majors. I am amazed at what some churches and people will divide over. Folks will get mad and split over things like the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, what hymns are sung, how the preacher preaches, order of worship, the length of the service, or whether or not there is contemporary music in the church. The list could go on and on, you fill in the blank. I would also add that in light of what we will divide over, it is equally amazing to me what we will tolerate in the church for the sake of unity. Friends, we ought to major in the majors. Are we as concerned about reaching people for Jesus Christ and living lives of Christian discipleship as we are about the color of the carpet in the church? Some of us are not and we need to repent.

5. Be Quick to Reconcile. Friends, the church is comprised of sinners. Every one of us is a sinner. You pastor is a sinner. He struggles with the flesh and sometimes he falls short of God’s glory. I am a broken man and you are broken too. If you are looking for moral perfectionism then you are in the wrong religion. Christianity, more than any religion in the world recognizes man’s

depraved nature and his need for a God of mercy who saves sinners on the grounds of God's grace given to us in Jesus, on the cross. Because we are all sinners sometimes we will hurt one another and let one another down, even in the church. When this happens be quick to reconcile. Because if you don't you will give the devil an opportunity to stir up division in the church. To be reconciled is to be unified. That is one facet of what unity is; it is reconciliation. Jesus said if your brother has something against you drop your offering on the altar and go and be reconciled with your brother. (Mt. 5:24) Don't wait. Even if you are the innocent one, the offended party, go and seek reconciliation. Don't let the sun go down on your anger. This is part of what Paul was trying to accomplish in his letter to the Philippians. He was urging Euodia and Syntyche to be reconciled.

If we will do these five things then God will build strong bonds of unity within our midst. Nothing shall prevail against a church that grounds herself in these five things, not even the gates of hell.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.