

Of One Mind

Philippians 2:1-4

We come to a text this afternoon that is pretty easy to understand. There are lots of interesting individual Greek words that are more fully understood with a knowledge of Greek, but the overall idea is very simple. Uncomplicated. It doesn't take any great level of educational accomplishment to figure it out, and it certainly doesn't take a seminary education to interpret and explain the truth of what we find here.

The main idea is unity, unity among Christians within the church. And how that comes about.

But as simple as the main idea is, it is very far removed from the actual experiences of many people and many churches. How sad it is when churches split, when people divide, often with great rancor and bitterness, with hard feelings that keep them apart personally as well as ecclesiastically.

In addition to churches that have divided, I've known of situations where there hasn't been an actual split, but the unity maintained still fell far short of biblical standards. Such as unity based upon the dominance and authoritarian leadership of a single man, who say things like, "Lead, follow, or get out of my way." I've known men in the pastorate whose idea of unity was to attract and recruit people who thought exactly like they did. And when differences of opinion might arise, the one in charge became defensive and even hostile, maintaining unity either by enforcing outward uniformity or driving people away in the anguish of frustration.

Sad to say, that some of the most notable leaders of the church of Jesus Christ as afflicted with such insecurity, whose

leadership can be maintained only when people under their leadership agree with them about everything.

And then there are those who maintain unity by watering down or eliminating any real sense of conviction of conscience. That is to say, unity is based upon the naive assumption that everyone can think and believe however they want, and do whatever is right in their own eyes. Unity based upon the non-judgmental and ecumenical spirit of our age, a spirit produced by the belief that there is no absolute truth. What you believe is fine, and what I believe is fine. And we can all get along together believing different things, because what you believe isn't nearly as important as the sincerity with which you believe it.

For many people, many churches, that's unity.

But neither of those two models of unity are proper. Neither are they biblical. And neither will sustain real, genuine, Christian unity. Not authoritarian domination nor ecumenical tolerance. There has to be a third path toward unity, and there is. It is the pursuit of unity defined in Philippians 2. The goal is clear.

I. THE GOAL IS UNITY.

First, let's look a bit at what that means.

v.2

There is, in that verse, a redundant use of words. And rather than criticize Paul for that grammatical impropriety, we ought to see the intensity of his sincerity. He is setting before the Philippian church a great and marvelous goal. A very high standard, something so great that it would make his joy full! This unity would be the thing that we most fully bring a satisfied delight to his soul.

Not external uniformity, not outward conformity to a set of superficial standards. Nothing of the sort. What he proposes is a matter of the heart, something that is possible only when the human heart is supernaturally transformed by the saving power of God Almighty! It is, first of all,

A. A unity of love.

v.2 “having the same love.”

We might say, “Maintaining the same love.” Maintaining and preserving, by constant and repetitive effort, genuine, biblical Christian love! Love is what defines unity. Love is what provides the glue necessary for unity. Love is what keeps unity from degrading into external uniformity.

Paul is calling upon the people of the church to love one another. And that biblical love is well defined,

1 Cor. 1:4 “Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; 5 does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; 6 does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; 7 bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.”

There can be no unity without such love. There can be some counterfeit appearances of unity, but not the real thing. That’s why the compulsion of external conformity doesn’t promote love, nor overbearing authoritarian dominance. Or ecumenical tolerance. Unity comes to a body of God’s people when they determine that they will love one another.

Paul says the very same thing to the church of Ephesus,

Eph.4:1 “I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you to walk worthy of the calling with which you were called, 2 with all lowliness and gentleness, with longsuffering, bearing with one

another in love, 3 endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 one God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all.”

The application for us is obvious, isn’t it? Love one another. Be joined together in love, love that demonstrates itself in action and commitment. Love that is obvious, evident, and expressed by word and deed. And so Jesus would say to his disciples,

John 13:34 “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; as I have loved you, that you also love one another. 35 By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”

With that love then, let me speak about,

B. A unity of purpose.

Actually, Paul speaks of that with several different Greek words, translated in,

v.2

First, like-minded. Being of the same mind. It means to hold the same opinion or attitude, to be minded or disposed in the same way. Surely, that doesn’t refer to every detail of life, but rather to the things of greatest priority. And like-mindedness is necessary.

Indeed, there are certain things that we as a church identify as requiring like-mindedness. Things like the inspiration and authority of the Bible. The substitutionary work of Jesus Christ as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. The truth and validity of the miracles and God’s providence in all of life. And in a formal sense, in the sense of official teaching and doctrine, including the

fullness of doctrine required for all officers and the standard for all teaching, there is a substantial like-mindedness provided by our confessional standards.

In our own circumstances, there is a basic like-mindedness, which isn't contradicted by differences on secondary issues, but rather that there is a basic foundation upon which our unity can be based. And that is the value of having a confessional standard. It serves as the mind of the church. And those who say, "No creed but Christ," are naive, in thinking such broadness could achieve the depth of the unity of mind referred to here. And they are naive to think that an unwritten creed doesn't exist, even if there is no written one.

We need to be like-minded, and one of the great challenges of the church is to define issues of conscience that need to be kept uniform for the sake of the unity of the church, and issues of freedom or even legitimate disagreement where differences are kept and respected in a way that doesn't hinder the overall like-mindedness or unity. In our own case, it certainly seems that the issue of infant baptism would fall into that category.

The church needs to be like-minded. And also "of one accord." Literally, one in spirit. United in spirit, united in soul.

Sometimes that expression "soul-mate" is used to describe a particularly profound example of such unity, those special friendships that grace our lives seemingly very seldom. But what a treasure when God gives such a blessing. Soul-mates.

In a real sense, to a certain degree, members of the church are to become soul-mates. Of one spirit. And there is a subjective sense to that as well as the more objective ideas I've just mentioned.

Thirdly, in verse 2, Paul mentions being "on one mind." Here, I think the clear emphasis is purpose. One purpose. Not a group of people each with individual agendas. But one agenda. A shared agenda. A shared purpose.

That's unity. But where does it come from? What is the characteristic of people that produces such unity? I have a one word answer. Humility. In all of this, that is,

II. THE PRACTICAL APPLICATION: HUMILITY.

You will never achieve this like-mindedness with humility, which is so well defined by those words of literal translation in verse 3, "lowliness of mind." Lowly thinking. A recognition of the personal insufficiency of one's self along with the powerful sufficiency of God.

Lowliness of mind is what produces humility. The cross-references all say the same thing.

Col. 3:12 "Therefore, as the elect of God, holy and beloved, put on tender mercies, kindness, humility, meekness, longsuffering."

Humility is a primary Christian virtue! It is not an optional pursuit, not a spiritual gift given to some. It is a basic, fundamental aspect of true Christian character. It is part of the definition of godliness and righteousness. Without humility, you cannot claim growth and advancement in Christian maturity. It is an absolutely essential element of sanctification and holiness.

And it is rejected by the world, which promotes pride and self-advancement as a virtue. Self-advancement, self-assertion, self-promotion is the call of our age. As it was for the proud and rich Roman colony of Philippi with its well ordered social scale and values. But the lowliness of self-denial is the call of the gospel.

In one of the chapters of Mere Christianity, C.S. Lewis discusses the problem of pride, asking at the end how it is possible to acquire a character that will truly deny itself for others. He calls it humility. “If anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell him the first step. The first step is to realize that one is proud.” He adds that it is a “bigish step, too. At least, nothing whatever can be done before it.”

Humility can be such an elusive thing, too, for it is a grace that, when you know you have it, you have lost it. For you can never boast in your humility! You can never be proud of your humility, not without losing it altogether.

Let me define that lowliness of mind a bit more specifically. In the words of an exhortation, you must,

A. Put an end to your selfish ambition and conceit.

With those words, humility is defined by its opposite.

v.3

Selfish ambition, a Greek word denoting the attitude of self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means. It refers to the sort of ambition which has no conception of service and whose only aims are profit and power. It could refer to contentiousness, the spirit of rivalry in which a man will seek to promote his own interests. We know a little about that in our own national politics.

And the word for conceit is clearly related, literally “vain-glory,” or empty, vain boasting. Empty praise. Personal vanity. Put an end to that, and instead,

B. Consider others more important than yourself.

This is where it becomes very practical.

v.3

“Let each esteem others better than himself.”

Now, that contradicts all the nonsense of self-esteem teaching that the secular world developed and which the church tried to incorporate a couple generations ago. You hear all sorts of ridiculous claims, like man’s greatest need is for greater self-esteem. And that just doesn’t connect with what Paul is saying here.

Man’s basic need, his basic problem, is that he needs to learn to esteem others better than himself. He needs to consider others first. He needs to consider others more important. And think less of himself.

And it isn’t that he thinks meanly of himself, it isn’t that he hates himself, it is just that he doesn’t think of himself at all! And the great and tragic consequence of self-esteem teaching is that it causes you to focus upon yourself, and that is inherently destructive! And all the proliferation of self-esteem theories, in education especially, have just created a society of insecure people, so busy looking at themselves that they are overcome by their own insecurity. Either that or inflated with egotistical arrogance.

Stop looking at yourself. Consider others more important than yourself. And in a very practical sense, in an obvious consequence of that,

C. Pursue what meets the needs of others.

Not your own needs. Not your own felt-needs. Not your own sense of importance or value. Pursue the needs of others.

v.4

Now really the words “only” and “also” aren’t in the original.

The statement is a bit stronger. “Do not look out for your own interests, but for the interests of others.”

There is only one sense in which you need to look at and evaluate yourselves, psychologically, and that is as the recipient of God’s grace. Consider yourself the object of God’s redeeming love, consider yourself the object of his great affection. Consider his love for you, know and understand, and experience, that you are beloved by the heavenly father, and these other psychological maladjustments tend to be much easier resolved.

Consider God’s love for you, and seek the benefit of others. That’s humility! As Paul writes to the church at Rome, Romans 12:10 “Be kindly affectionate to one another with brotherly love, in honor giving preference to one another.”

Please let these exhortations sink in. And please search your own heart, because so often disunity is actually caused by selfish ambition and selfish insecurity, when we fail to heed the very simple and straightforward directives of these verses.

But let me put all of this in context, because I’m not merely giving some pious advice. I’m not merely offering an alternative model for psychological counseling or therapy. There is a context to everything I’ve said tonight, and that context is Christ.

Don’t separate any of this from Christ. Don’t separate any of these exhortations from their foundation in Christ. This is not just a philosophy of life, not just a support group lesson. These things aren’t intended to be applied in a secular context. For everything that Paul says here is directly connected to Christ.

It’s not just pragmatic counsel, for all that he says about humility is built upon,

III. THE MOTIVATION. WHICH IS UNION WITH CHRIST.

In other words, this sort of like-mindedness and humility will flow only from the heart that has been regeneration, from the soul that has been born again by the living word of God. This is not simply a sermon where I say, “Do good, follow the golden rule. Do to others as you would have them do to you.”

Now, that is good advice. The problem is, apart from Christ there is no adequate motivation to do it! Or ability. It’s all well and good for me to say, “Stop thinking so highly of yourselves and consider others more important than yourselves.” But such moralism, separated from the gospel of Jesus Christ, is dangerous, for it leads you down the path of thinking that you can just live a good life and when you die God will let you into heaven.

There has to be more. There has to be a union with Christ. A commitment of faith. A trust and surrender to Christ in all of life. Then there will be the strength and encouragement to do the things I’ve exhorted you this afternoon.

Notice how Paul starts off these exhortations.
v.1

Let me emphasize that there is no uncertainty in that word “if.” It could be well translated “since.” Or perhaps, more fully, “If there is any consolation in Christ, and there is, if any comfort of love, and there is...”. Humility begins with,

A. The encouragement of being united with Christ.

The encouragement, the consolation, the comfort and assurance of being joined together with Christ. That’s where it has to start.

Before you can begin to faithfully work to consider others more

important than yourself, you have to be fully confident that you are, by faith, inseparably and eternally united with Christ.

And along with that, to have,

B. The comfort of Christ's love for us.

It's a very similar thing, but Paul divides it into a separate phrase, "If any comfort of love."

Of course, as I've been saying, there is great comfort in love. Great support and psychological well being that comes from knowing that you are loved. And it has surely been my consistent observation that incredible and often never-ending psychological damage is done to children who are not able to fully experience being loved by their parents. Indeed, so many adult problems, from the extreme examples of sociopathic crime to the multiplied examples of emotional insecurity, all come from an inadequate sense of being loved.

And pastorally, dealing with adults, I could recount example after example when the real difference in spiritual well-being and maturity came as the result of understanding and believing that God loved them. And it is the awareness of God's love that stirs the heart and motivates the soul to do the very things Paul mentions in verses 2, 3, and 4.

"If there is any comfort of love, and there is, then do these things, knowing that you are loved."

It is the love of God, the knowledge and experience of the love of God, that will compel and constrain you to love others. Not the wrath and justice of God. That might restrain some sinfulness, but it is the love of God that produces the maturity and depth of experience of a heart that is truly transformed.

That idea is so well expressed in the words of the familiar hymn, "Amazing love, how can it be that thou my God should'st die for me." Amazing love, how can it be?

Humility begins with the knowledge that you are loved! And in that, there is,

C. The benefit of Christian fellowship.

The third item in,

v.1

And there is fellowship of the spirit, the fellowship of the saints joined together as a church by the sovereign work of the Holy Spirit.

Now, that fellowship must be spiritual fellowship, fellowship produced by the spirit. Not just a club, or fraternal organization. Not just a civic or social gathering. But the joining together of people in Christ. There is great benefit and motivation in that.

And I need to challenge all of you continually in that, to fully consider yourself joined and connected to one another. Not just going through the motions of coming to church, not just superficially relating to one another in shallowness and external appearances, but really sharing your lives together in the fullness of your heart and soul.

And lastly, most precious of all, I believe, the greatest motivation for genuine humility and unity is,

D. The realization of Christ's tender affections.

v.1

Affection and mercy. Tender affections. Compassion. I

believe these words refer to Christ, and it is these qualities of Christ that promote humility in us. It is this knowledge of God, not as a harsh taskmaster, but as a tender shepherd, that will most strongly stimulate the grace of humility and lowliness of mind in you. And most fully stir you to consider others more important than yourself.

It's not the command of a military general, barking orders and demanding instant and unquestioning obedience. It is the gentleness and meekness of Christ that compels you to follow him.

Perhaps you've never thought about these things, or thought about them deeply enough. It is these things, the things mentioned in verse 1, that keep your obedience from the mere performance of duty, from the merely external obligation of a slave. Instead, you are a son. A daughter. Deeply loved with tender affection and compassionate mercy of a loving father, of a devoted mother.

As you work toward the unity of the church, as you put away selfish ambition and learn to consider others better than yourself, as you do all those things, remember the tender mercies of your loving, heavenly father.

v.1-4