

Philippians

Part 8 – The If/Then of Christian Unity

Philippians 2:1-11

Verses 1-11 make up a single unit. Over the next two weeks we will be somewhat artificially dividing the passage by focusing primarily on the first four verses this morning and verses 5-11 next week. The connection between the first four verses and the remaining portion of the paragraph is quite clear. The main point of the paragraph is stated in the first four verses, the remainder are given to illustrate and confirm that point, so the main point can certainly be treated on its own; and *second*, the immortal *Carmen Christi*, the “Hymn of Christ,” which is found in vv. 6-11, is too important in itself to be treated simply as an illustration of the main point of the paragraph. That is its use in the context, without a doubt, but it is, in fact, one of the most important Christological passages in the Bible. It deserves separate treatment.

In this section (2:1-4) Paul supports his call to unity with a series of *If/Then* statements: “If there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy...” (2:1). Paul’s “if” is a rhetorical device intended to mean “since.” And since Christians do indeed have the encouragement of Christ, comfort from love, etc they are uniquely positioned to “do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (2:3).



The exhortations of verse three are not meant to be taken as something easily accomplished. Such selflessness is hard won. And Paul wastes no time in drawing attention to the only rationale that will ultimately suffice to accomplish such selfless love: the Lord Jesus’ own incarnation and self-humiliation culminating in his death on the cross. Only Christ and Him crucified can produce a willingness to “count others more significant than yourselves.”

Main Idea: Jesus Christ crucified is the source and rationale of Christian unity.

Vs. 1 – The “So” (or “therefore”) forms a direct connection with the exhortation in 1:27. It is that thought that Paul is picking up as he proceeds into the main body of his exhortation. The seeds of disunity had been sown in the church. The problem was not yet so bad as it was elsewhere (Corinth, for instance). But disunity is being experienced. Near the end of the letter Paul will appeal directly to two women in the church who were at odds.

The four-fold “if” is rhetorical. Of course they have experienced such encouragement and comfort. It is an appeal to their Christian experience and their Christian feelings and affections. The way this first verse functions in Paul’s exhortation is this: the Philippian Christians know very well the comfort they received when they believed in Jesus; they found consolation in suffering and trial in the love of God; they have experienced the fellowship of the Holy Spirit and felt his power in their hearts and lives; they have experienced the tender mercies of God; and because they have they will have every reason to heed the exhortation that follows.

Vs. 2 – Grammatically vv. 1-4 are one sentence with the main clause the imperative of v. 2: “make my joy complete.” Paul’s primary concern is not his own joy. Rather Paul’s priority is the Philippian’s unity in love. It is Paul’s gentle way to appeal to them. Rather than rebuke them for disunity he appeals to the fact that they love him and their sacrificial actions on his behalf have recently proven the depth and power of that love. So it is natural for him to appeal to their concern for him and for his happiness as a way of motivating them to pursue holy things. Nothing would make *him* happier than to see his brethren in Philippi living in loving unity.

Christian unity is the focus of the four brief clauses that complete verse two. Often in the New Testament emphasis is conveyed by repetition. Saying the same thing in different ways is called tautology. One great New Testament scholar referred to Paul's four-fold exhortation here as a "tautology of earnestness." [Lightfoot, cited in Silva, 87] Paul wants to be sure his readers get the point! By "being-likeminded" Paul does not mean that they think precisely the same way about everything – the Greek term isn't so much an expression of uniform agreement on every conceivable issue – but that they are one in intent and disposition. [O'Brien, 178]

Vs. 3 – The true obstacles to Christian unity are in the human heart.

Vs. 4 – Shifting attention away from ourselves to others – which, of course is what Jesus Christ did, as the following verses will remind us – is the key to Christian unity.

1. The fuel which fires Christian unity

Vs. 1

- The four "ifs" in verse one are actually statements of certainty regarding the Philippian believer's Christian experience. Before he tells them to act and think in a certain way he first reminds them of what belongs to them by virtue of their union with Christ.

a) United with Christ – To be "in Christ" is to be an heir to all the blessings of Christ's love. It means that we are united with him in his dying to sin and resurrection to new life.

b) Comfort from love – Certainly this is a reference to the love of Christ. Shall we not comfort others with the same love with which we have been comforted?

c) Participation in the Spirit – It is the Holy Spirit who binds us to Christ together. Our unity in experience is merely an expression of the unity given us through the Holy Spirit.

d) Affection and sympathy – This is in contrast to anger and ambivalence which characterizes division. Our Lord was "gentle and lowly" (Matt 11:29). He would not snuff out a smoldering wick or break a bruised reed (Matt 12:20).

2. The deeds which characterize Christian unity

Vv. 2-4

- Christian unity is not a given. It is hard won and requires careful tending. So Paul identifies specific actions and attitudes required for its cultivation.

a) Prioritize the joy of others (vs. 2a) – "Complete my joy" – This is Paul's gentleness coming through. Rather than rebuke them he motivates them with a desire to bring him joy just as their good is his joy.

b) Agree with one another (vs. 2b) – Be of "the same mind," have "the same love," and be "in full accord." This does not necessarily demand full agreement on every conceivable issue. But we are certainly to affirm the same gospel and be committed to the same goal.

c) Treasure one another (vv. 3-4) – Replace the world's system of value with that of Heaven.

3. The foundation which supports Christian unity

Vv. 5-11

- Jesus Christ in his willing humiliation and sacrificial death is the only rationale that can ultimately serve to make us willing to "do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others as more significant than" ourselves.