

Philippians

Part 18 – The Bond That Trumps Division

Philippians 4:1-3

In the opening verses of chapter four Paul takes the rather unusual step of calling out by name two members of the church who were at odds. We do not know the cause of the division nor does Paul show any interest in rehearsing any of the details. He simply calls upon them to “agree in the Lord.” He also instructs the church to help them bridge the divide.



Division between brothers and sisters in Christ is never a strictly personal matter. Because of the effect division has upon the church’s health and witness it is a matter for the church to address. Clearly this must be done with wisdom and grace. Paul does not approach Euodia and Syntyche with a rhetorical club as he does with false teachers. Rather he appeals to them as a brother in Christ and co-laborer in the gospel. Unity in the church is never simply about personal comfort. It is directly related to the church’s ability to stand firm in the midst of attacks from without and within.

Main Idea: Union with Christ creates a unity among Christians which must be maintained for the sake of the church’s health and witness.

Vs. 1 – This statement marks a point of transition. Given the presence of those who “walk as enemies of the cross” (3:18) it is necessary for the church to stand firm. This same resolve is needed to help those within the church who are at odds with one another. Paul’s language toward the Philippian believers is once again tender and affectionate. By calling them his “joy and crown” Paul continues prominent themes already introduced. Joy is front and center in the letter. By calling them his “crown” Paul is continuing the athletic references introduced in chapter 3 (the crown refers to the prize won by a victorious athlete).

Vs. 2 – The fact that Paul felt it necessary to mention these women by name is some indication of how serious Paul took the situation to be in Philippi. The disunity in the church, to which these women obviously were contributing in some significant way, was a problem that had to be dealt with directly.

Vs. 3 – Paul does not name the “true companion.” But along with naming Clement we may draw the inference that the work of healing division is a task for the church together. Whatever has divided these two sisters in Christ is not a sin of a scandalous sort or else church discipline would be called for. The disruption in their unity appears to be the sort that attacks friendships commonly. Paul’s reference to “the book of life” is meant to remind all involved that the unity that has been secured for God’s people in the age to come is meant to be reflected in this fallen world.

1. Stand firm in the Lord.

Vs. 1 – “Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.”

- In this verse we see a transition in Paul from tears of grief over those who “walk as enemies of the cross” (3:18) to exultant affection for the Philippian church “whom I love and long for, my joy and crown...my beloved.”
- It is remarkable that this “Hebrew of Hebrews” (3:5ff) who had risen to the heights of the religious hierarchy of his people now calls these Gentiles raised in pagan homes, “brothers” and “my beloved.” He understands that the bonds he once honored were now slight compared to the bond that Christ creates among his people.
- When Paul calls them his “joy and crown” he is demonstrating that the goal toward which he is running (3:14) is not about his individual salvation. He has no intention of gaining Christ alone.

Paul runs for the sake of the church. He strains forward with all his might for the sake of his beloved siblings in Christ. In this way, they are a sort of victory wreath much like that which was placed upon the head of those who prevailed in the Olympian Games of the day.

- The command to “stand firm” echoes what he has already written in 1:27-28. This is an allusion to military combat. In 4:3 he refers to Euodia and Syntyche as those who have “striven side by side” with him for the sake of the gospel. Battle imagery is not unusual for Paul. But the battle to which the church is called the weapons her Lord has given are unlike anything in the world. The tactics of the church’s warfare are in keeping with her union with a crucified Savior.

2. Agree in the Lord.

Vs. 2 – “I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord.”

- Remember that Philippians, like the other New Testament epistles, was to be read to churches as they gathered for worship and fellowship. There is little doubt that Euodia and Syntyche were present in the gathering as this letter was read. This seems odd and perhaps even rude to modern westerners who are accustomed to a church culture which provides little or no accountability. However, for these first century Macedonians to be named was likely seen as an act of affection. To not have named them would have been to keep them at arm’s length. That Paul names his sisters in Christ is evidence of friendship and respect. He does not patronize them or the church by treating anonymously what was well known in the church.
- “Entreat” is a softer word than “command” Paul does not need to flex his apostolic “muscles” in this case (Such was necessary with the Corinthians and Galatians!). With these two co-laborers in the gospel no such hard word is needed. His brotherly appeal will be sufficient.
- The entreaty “to agree in the Lord” may be translated more literally as “the same thing think in the Lord.” Agreement among brothers and sisters in Christ is a good and pleasing thing. While we will certainly not agree completely on all matters this side of glory, we ought to seek to agree on as much as possible. One of the values of a comprehensive confession of faith (such as the *Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms*) is that it maximizes, as much as possible, our unity through agreement. Ultimately this agreement is the fruit of our shared union with Christ.

3. Help those to whom you are united in the Lord.

Vs. 3 – “Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.”

- Paul does not name the “true companion.” It could well have been the recognized leader of the Philippian church. But as this letter was read to the entire congregation, the whole group was enlisted to join in reconciling their sisters. Paul does not name the cause of their division nor does he place blame at anyone’s feet. Those details, if need be, can be sorted out as the work of reconciliation begins.
- Paul identifies Euodia and Syntyche as those who have labored with him in the advance of the gospel. They are mature sisters in Christ which is reminder that division is not a sin confined to the immature or ungodly. Divisions can occur between those who labor for the sake of the gospel.
- “Whose names are written in the book of life” – Once again Paul draws his hearers to an eternal perspective. What has divided these sisters in Christ and co-laborers with Paul is insignificant in light of eternity. The unity of the age to come is meant to be reflected in the church in this present age.