

(Sermon 19)
Maintaining Church Unity
Philippians 4:1-3

Lord's Day, 6/4/17 * Christ Reformed Community Church * St. Johns, FL

Intro

If one hundred years from now, your name were to be found in an old document, what one thing would you want the finder to reveal about you? That you were kind? Smart? Funny? Godly? How would you like to be remembered?

Just a few years ago, after both my grandparents passed away, we found a trunk of old letters they wrote between one another over a period of nearly 70 years of marriage. Letters were written from my grandfather to my grandmother before they were married while he was stationed in Deenthorpe, England where he flew B-17 Bombers to defend our country during WW II. Love letters were also written between them in more recent years on the occasion of anniversaries and birthdays. I, of course, knew them both very well so that the letters themselves though they may tell me in poetic terms how strongly their love was for one another (my grandfather was known as a prolific poet) do not introduce anything especially new to me about them.

But what if you found a letter that mentioned two people who were Christians who went to church together and involved in gospel ministry, but the only other thing you knew about them was that they couldn't seem to get along? You knew nothing of their kindness, intelligence, or godliness- just that they couldn't get along.

- Well, that's what we have recorded in Paul's letter to the Philippians: two women named Euodia and Syntyche who could not get along. This is all we know about these women who honestly probably had far more positive things marking their lives than negative. And yet, their names are forever associated

with conflict, permanently written down and sealed by inspiration of the Holy Spirit appearing in your Bible today.

- As we move into chapter 4 and learn of these two women and how their personal conflict affected their entire church, it will serve as a strong reminder that we should not want ourselves or our church marked by conflict. Out of all the things you want to be remembered for as an individual Christian, and of all the things we want our blessed church to be remembered for, there is one thing for sure, conflict should not be one of them! Paul helps us move toward maintaining unity as a church as we study his words written to the Philippian congregation many years ago. Notice Paul's words in vs 1-3.

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved. I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. 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.

And though we will not look at it today, note with me v4:

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice."

- I read v4 because as we turn to the final chapter of Philippians, we see once again its theme of *joy in Christ*. We have learned through our study that joy is *only* found in Christ, and joy is *always* found in Christ. Chapter 1 showed us *joy in the practice of Christian living*. There we saw that *Christ is our life*. He is the

one in whom we should center our very existence around. The motto of our lives should be 1:21:

“For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

- Chapter 2 was then about *joy in the pattern of Christian living*. Here we saw that Christ is our example to follow as we live before God. We learned that above all Christ was humble, and that we too are to have the mind of Christ and walk in humility. Those like Timothy and Epaphroditus followed Christ’s pattern of humility and so should we. Chapter 3 was about *joy in the prize of Christian living*. He is the prize we receive at salvation and Christlikeness is the prize we run for, pressing toward the finish line of life to receive it. As Paul said in 3:14:

“I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.”

- So if chapter 1 is about joy in the practice of Christian living and chapter 2 is about joy in the pattern of Christian living and chapter 3 is about the joy in the prize of Christian living, then chapter 4 is about *joy in the power of Christian living*.

- And chapter 4 opens with an important word about how to have power in Christian living. Spiritual stability in your life will be dependent on the spiritual stability of your church. Power, or spiritual strength and stability is partly connected to the strength of your church. Of course, it goes without saying that doctrinal stability is foundational. Apart from it we are like “*children*,

tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Eph 4:14).

- But what is also dangerous to the spiritual stability of the church, and thus to your own spiritual stability, are the winds and tidal waves of church conflict that will toss God’s people to and fro. A church carried about by conflict is a church that is distracted from gospel ministry. And such a church will have limited impact on your spiritual stability, strength, and power. Thus, maintaining unity in the church body is critical.

- The church has 3 enemies: the world, the flesh, and the devil. The attacks from the world and devil come from outside the church. The world tempts us to compromise in order to be accepted by them, and the devil directly assaults the church through false teaching. But the flesh attacks from within the church arising from self-centered desires that damage the unity of Christ’s body.

- The flesh causes friction within the church and to some degree this is impossible to avoid. We still carry about the unredeemed flesh as believers (cf. Rom 7) and such an old nature will rise up from time to time showing its ugliness even within a Christian fellowship. Where there are people, there is the flesh and the ever present danger of conflict. But when conflict arises due to fleshly ways, it must be squelched immediately.

- We are blessed to have a unified church. This provides me the freedom to preach on this without having to awkwardly address specific conflicts within our church. To my knowledge we have none. But this should not be taken for granted. I have pastored churches where this was not the case. In one church I was called to pastor, I inherited a church rife with conflict. There was conflict between the staff and the congregation, between the lay leaders and the congregation, conflict between the family units within the church, and conflict with the community outside the church. It was so bad that I was assigned a different body guard each week to shadow me for the first several weeks walking with me from the parsonage to my office and then to the sanctuary so that I would not be accosted by angry church members who were intent in bringing up past conflicts in the church that occurred before I was ever around. Such confrontations with their pastors over the years resulted in verbal attacks, which resulted in these pastors leaving the church due to unrestrained anger and a lack of forgiveness on the part of a few members. Some churches reach the point of no return. Trust me, the best way to maintain unity is to avoid disunity.

- The church at Philippi was a healthy church, certainly one of the healthiest Paul ministered in. They were the only church who supported Paul financially at one point (4:15). They were not sharply rebuked for harboring false teachers like the Galatians. They were not guilty of tolerating sin like the Corinthians.

Nevertheless, it contained strife. And the strife was centered on two women primarily. That is usually how conflict begins. It begins as a small problem with a couple of people and then it explodes.

- Paul has provided hints throughout this letter revealing exactly how the conflict between these two women was quickly escalating into a brewing church storm. For instance, Paul said:

“Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel” (1:27)

“complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (2:2-3).

“Do all things without grumbling or questioning” (2:14).

- Paul knew that apart from a strong church there would not be strong Christians. Strong churches produce strong Christians. The church is to be a place where we bear one another's burdens (cf. Gal 6:1) and where we *“admonish the idle, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with them all”* (I Thess 5:14). But such an atmosphere cannot exist unless an atmosphere of unity exists. This is why any threats to the church's unity must be confronted head on. Paul knew that unless he addressed the conflict, this precious congregation would be marked by bitterness, rivalry, backbiting, and proud spirits. Such a church would turn out like the divided Corinthians who were broken up into different factions.

- Indeed, this passage echoes Paul's plea in Eph 4:3 for us to be: *"eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"*.

Proposition: But how do we maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace? Philippians 4:1-3 reveals 3 *attitudes* that should be cultivated by every member of the church. Such attitudes will mark a church that maintains unity and avoids a fractured fellowship. An attitude is found in each verse of this passage.

Trans: The 1st attitude we should adopt in order to maintain unity in the church and avoid a fractured fellowship is that of...

I. Genuine Affection (1)

- As is usually the case, Paul himself serves as our model for this first attitude. Paul was qualified to confront church conflict because of his genuine affection for the church. Notice he says:

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown.

- The word **Therefore** is a transitional word connecting chapter 3 with chapter 4. Chapter 3 emphasized doctrine, specifically the doctrine of union with Christ (being found in Him, v9) and striving for perfection in light of such union. But all doctrine must be followed by a **Therefore** because all truth has practical implications. One of the lessons we learn is that the great doctrine

of being transformed into Christ's perfect image (20-21) when He returns and we arrive as heaven's citizens is that we will view our fellow believers as citizens of heaven who will also be perfected someday. Such a mindset helps us love them more and forgive quicker.

- So Paul goes on to speak of the Philippians as those **whom I love and long for**. This is a very strong statement of affection. It is not contrived either. It hearkens back to 1:3-7a:

"I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always in every prayer of mine for you all making my prayer with joy, because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now. And I am sure of this, that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart..."

- Paul's affection for them is rooted in Christ's affection for them and they know it because he is not shy in telling them. He can confront this conflict within the church because the Philippians know of his great affection for them.

- And he continues with the most affectionate words ever written by one Christian to other Christians. He calls the Philippians his **joy and crown**. Every time he prayed for them it caused **joy** to well up within his heart (1:4). They had the ability to complete his **joy** as he said in 2:2. He said in 2:17 he would gladly be poured out as a drink offering for them, the church, and would *rejoice* in it. In 4:10 he will remark how he had **joy** in *their* love for him.

- But they are not only his **joy**, but also His **crown** (στέφανος). Paul has been speaking about running the Christian race, an image he drew from athletics. The **crown** was the victor's crown given to the runner who won the race, which was a laurel wreath (cf. I Cor 9:25). It was like a trophy in today's world. Paul viewed other Christians as his trophies because he knew that when the Lord returned it would be made evident that their salvation and spiritual growth was the result of his ministry to them. On that day, they will be the wreath he wears on his head, the crown that proves he ran the Christian race victoriously. When he thinks of them he is filled with love and joy because it reminds him that his labor is not in vain in the Lord.

- By all accounts, Paul was someone who found joy not in circumstances because they were often bad for him, not in wealth because he was often poor, not in fame because he was more infamous than famous. No, Paul had joy in God's people whom he loved. He told the church in I Thess 2:19-20:

"For what is our hope or joy or crown of boasting before our Lord Jesus at His coming? Is it not you? For you are our glory and joy."

- APP: What is your attitude toward the saints? Someone once quipped:

To live above
With the saints we love;
Oh, that will be glory!
But to live below
With the saints we know;
Now that's a different story!

- Do you truly love those in the church? Do you invest in their lives? Do you sacrifice for them? Do you pray for them? Do you ask them how they are doing spiritually?

- This is important because such a genuine affection for the church gives you the opportunity to address conflict when you see it. Often when conflict arises in the church, it arises in an atmosphere of coldness where love seems to be absent. When this happens resolutions to conflict almost never happens. Every Christian in every church bears the responsibility of setting the spiritual temperature of the church? Lukewarm love will result in lukewarm resolutions to conflict. Hot love for one another, on the other hand, provides an atmosphere where conflict can be resolved when it arises because each person understands they truly care for one another. Love warms the church up to one another and builds trust so that when conflict enters it can be dealt with warmly, affectionately, directly, swiftly, and resolutely.

- That is why only after Paul declares his genuine affection for them does he then go to address the conflict itself. Notice v1. Paul says: **stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.**

- Now it is true that this phrase **stand firm** (στήκετε) is the main verb in vss 1-9. That is, Paul is calling Christians to **stand firm** in a number of different ways seen all the way through v9. But

Paul's first area of application to **stand firm** concerns the area of church conflict.

- To **stand firm** is military language used by commanding officers to their soldiers. Its used three times in the famous spiritual warfare passage in Ephesians 6 where we are told to stand against the schemes of the devil. (cf. Eph 6:11, 13, 14). Paul is commanding the church to **stand firm** against disunity and conflict in the church. As soldiers of Christ we are charged by Scripture to hold our position on the battlefield. Disunity in the church is a matter of spiritual warfare. Therefore, the church cannot afford to retreat. Giving up the high ground of unity under intense pressure from the enemy is unacceptable. We have a responsibility to guard the church's unity.

- But notice that Paul doesn't just say **stand firm**. He says, **stand firm thus in the Lord**. This probably means that our strength in remaining united comes from resources found only **in the Lord**; ones He can provide. This is true enough because only the Spirit of God can heal a church from disunity. But I think it's also true that this phrase refers to the believer's status **in the Lord**. It's another reminder to us of our union to Christ. Since we are "*found in Him*" (v9), we are one with each other. Eph 4:3-4 says we are to be:

"eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit."

- To be involved in church conflict and be a guilty party in the church's disunity is to deny the essential oneness of Christ's body. It is to betray the Spirit's work of putting redeemed sinners together as one. Such an act is one of treason- to sever the body of Christ into pieces. The church is a military of soldiers who must stand strong together against the enemy, not allowing Satan to divide the church. Otherwise, she will become her own worst enemy as Paul warned the Galatians:

"But if you bite and devour one another, watch out that you are not consumed by one another" (5:15).

- APP: But once again, what is the secret to standing firm together in unity? It comes about by building, cultivating, and pursuing a loving church atmosphere. It comes about by showing genuine affection for one another.

- Paul addressed this conflict only after 3 chapters much of which was spent telling the Philippians how much he loved them. He then prefaces the confrontation of this conflict with more words of love and affirmation. We too should adopt such an attitude if we want our church to be marked by a unified spirit. And if we currently loving others, we aren't too stop. Scripture never accuses any Christian in the church of loving too much.

<p>A woman once asked Harry Ironside to which denomination he belonged. He responded, "Well, I belong to the same denomination David did." The lady said, "Which one was that? I didn't know David belonged to any." Quoting from Ps</p>
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119:63 Ironside answered, “David said, ‘I am a companion of all them that fear Thee and keep Thy precepts.’”

Of course Ironside targeted his remarks toward those who take so seriously their church affiliation or denomination that they scarcely interact with Christians of a different stripe. Still yet, how many Christians are guilty of not taking their church fellowship seriously enough? That is, how many Christians just don't view their relationships with those in their church as that important all together?

Conflict is an inevitable reality within the church. The church is not properly arming herself when the members do not go out of their way to build relationships and demonstrate genuine affection toward one another. Love not only wins over the hearts of others in the church helping to prevent conflict, but also builds a trust that allows honest resolution to take place if conflict does arise.

Trans: If a church wants to maintain unity and avoid a fractured fellowship, then its members need to adopt genuine affection. But there is a 2nd attitude to adopt. We will call it...

II. Gracious Agreement (2)

- Paul says in v2: **I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord.** Notice the simple, straightforward, and direct plea Paul makes to them. He tells them to **agree in the Lord.** And if you back up and notice the language at the beginning, you will find that the responsibility to **agree in the Lord** lies with both of them. He says: **I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche.** He could have simply said, “You two need to get along.” Instead, he singles both of them out by using the word **urge** twice. He urges both of them to do their part. It's a reminder, isn't it, that in any conflict, both parties have responsibilities to make things right?

Also, the word **urge** reveals Paul's great desire for the conflict to be resolved. He's literally begging them to get along.

- Now we don't know the details of the situation so we have to piece together a probable scenario by the evidence we have. *Who* were these women? *What* was the conflict? *Why* does Paul simply tell them to get along without working through the details of the conflict itself? Answering these questions helps us understand what type of conflict we are dealing with. They also help us answer what Paul exactly means when he tells these women to **agree in the Lord**.

- *First, we need to understand the identity of the women.* Paul calls them by name here: **Euodia and Syntyche**. These women were church members, not outsiders in the community causing trouble. They weren't "*enemies of the cross of Christ*" (3:18) like the false teachers Paul identified. They were prominent women because Paul mentions in v3 that they "*labored side by side [by him] in the gospel*". They had the character of Lydia who opened her home to Paul and his companions as the first meeting place of this church. They may have been huge financial givers; well to do businesswomen like Lydia. In fact, they may have been present with Lydia and the other women when Paul preached on the banks of the River the day Lydia was converted (cf. Acts 16:13). If original members of this little church plant, then their conflict would undoubtedly have broad effects on this church. Any

disagreement between founding members or leaders in the church always has a profound impact on a church.

- We must bear in mind that though these are just names to us, they were real women in this church. One commentator captures the essence of the drama as the letter was read for the first time before the Philippian congregation:

[I]magine the reaction in Philippi. The church had welcomed Epaphroditus back home, and he had called a meeting for the first reading of Paul's letter. Everyone was there; the place was packed. Epaphroditus or one of the...elders broke the seal on the scroll to show that the letter had not been tampered with, and he began to read. Sentence by sentence the Epistle unfolded. Here and there were hints that Paul knew about the squabble. Euodia and Syntyche looked furtively at one another and just as uneasily looked away. They darted angry looks at Epaphroditus. *Did he go and blab to Paul?* one of them wondered. *I'll give him a piece of my mind.* Then they heard Paul's words regarding Epaphroditus: "Receive him therefore in the Lord."

And suddenly like a bolt from the blue the two ladies heard their own names being read: "I urge Eudia, and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord [ESV]". Like a flash of lightning and a thunderclap the squabbling pair were named-bluntly, inescapably, shockingly. Every eye was on them. They felt like curling up and dying on the spot; they wished the ground would open and swallow them up. The atmosphere in the meeting room was charged. A deathly hush fell on the gathering. One of the ladies flushed a crimson red and burst into tears. The other bit her lips and turned as white as a sheet.¹

- So this was a real conflict. I don't imagine it's hard for any of us to put ourselves in their shoes. We've all been in similarly awkward church meetings.

- *Second, we need to understand the nature of the conflict.* It's clear both by the fact Paul doesn't take sides, as well as the fact that he moves past it on to something else rather quickly, that this

conflict was not doctrinal, but relational. Had it been doctrinal, Paul would have stayed on the subject. He addressed 2 kinds of false teachers in chapter 3: the legalists and the libertines. If either one of these women were trending toward one of these heresies (or another one), Paul would have rebuked one woman and taken sides with the other. This wasn't a black and white doctrinal issue. He is not telling them to just bury the hatchet and agree to disagree over doctrine. That's not what he means when he tells them to **agree in the Lord**. He would never do that. This is relational, not doctrinal.

- *Third, we need to understand the remedy to the conflict.* The remedy is so simple that he scarcely spends one verse on it; a little verse at that. The remedy is wrapped up in one little phrase of this one little verse: **agree in the Lord**. The Greek word for this phrase (ὁμοψύχω) literally means “to be of the same mind”, or “to think the same things”. Paul has used this word several times already telling the Philippians to be “*of the same mind*” (2:2), “*have this mind among yourselves*” (2:5), “*let those of us who are mature think this way*” (3:15). Paul is calling on these women to get on the same page and to have the same *mindset* when he tells them to **agree**.

- But how exactly can people within the church who are fighting be brought to think the same way when they are disagreeing over something? The answer is found in that little phrase: **in the Lord**.

It's only as Christians remember who they are **in the Lord** that conflict can be resolved. Both **Euodia and Syntyche** were **in the Lord**. They were both His, not their own. How can two Christians insist on their own way once they realize that their Lord did not insist on His own way but humbled Himself (cf. 2:5-8)? Paul has already urged the church to follow the example of our Lord in this letter. The church is one body. How could they fight against one another since they were in union together in Christ?

- APP: Christians are to learn to be agreeable in the church, not in doctrinal areas of great importance, but in relational areas. Paul confronted Peter to his face publicly over a doctrinal issue (Gal 2:11). The apostle John similarly confronted Diotrophes whom he says "*loves to be first among*" the brethren (3 John 9). Diotrophes was a man who was self-centered, self-seeking, and self-promoting desiring to serve no one and expecting everyone in the church to serve him. Such a man is dangerous, and in fact, for Diotrophes part, John says that he doesn't "*acknowledge our authority*" (3 John 9), a reference to the fact that Diotrophes was trying to run the church apart from Apostolic authority. Today, we would say someone who ignores the authority of Scripture. So there might be extreme cases of aberrant relational dynamics that one person in the church needs called out for. In some cases such a person even needs removed from membership. Paul said:

“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned” (Titus 3:10-11).

- Such men like Diotrophes are self-centered, self-seeking, self-promoting, and ultimately self-condemning. And the church must deal with those who are stirring up the relational dynamics of a church in a sinful manner.

- But Paul was so swift to mention this conflict and then move past it after v3 because it was probably an issue of feelings being hurt or something of that nature. Christians must learn to look past unintended offenses and even sometimes intended offenses.

“Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (I Cor 1:10).

“All of you be harmonious, sympathetic, brotherly, kindhearted, and humble in spirit” (I Pet 3:8).

- Simply put, a church is to be marked by a spirit of forgiveness and gracious agreement with one another. Christians must be both willing to be offended and willing to forgive- and often.

“Know this, my beloved brothers: let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, slow to anger; for the anger of man does not produce the righteousness of God. Therefore put away filthiness and rampant wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls” (Js 1:19-21).

“And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Let all bitterness and wrath and anger and clamor and slander be put away from you along with all malice. Be kind to one another, tenderhearted forgiving one another, as God in Christ forgave you” (Eph 4:20-32).

- Church conflict can be highly complicated, but it doesn't have to be. It doesn't have to be when there is forgiveness. John MacArthur said one time:

It's hard to destroy a relationship when you continually forgive every offense...Forgiveness is required of every believer because forgiveness is the most godlike act a Christian can do. No act is more divine than forgiveness. Never are we more like God than when we forgive.

- When each member of the church continually demonstrates forgiveness they are standing firm in the Lord and Satan can't break through the unity.

Trans: But there's a 3rd attitude we must adopt. If we are going to maintain unity in the church and avoid a fractured fellowship, we must adopt several attitudes. First, we must demonstrate a *genuine affection*. A church's culture must be that of love. Second, we must participate in gracious agreement. We must be quick to forgive and move on from relational (interpersonal) offenses. But a genuine affection and gracious agreement must also involve a...

III. Guided Assistance (3)

- Sometimes offenses within the church reach such a level of unresolved conflict that help is needed. Knowing this, Paul says in v3: **Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women.** There is much discussion and debate on who the **true companion** is that Paul calls upon to help these women resolve their conflict. The old KJV says "true yokefellow". The Greek word used is

σύζυγος, which refers to someone who shares a common burden. A **companion** obviously is one that does that. But I like the old translation of “yokefellow” because the Greek word pictures one of two oxen pulling the same load under the same yoke.

- Some believe **true companion** (or yokefellow) is a description of a type of person, namely a peacemaker who takes the yoke on his shoulders to help resolve tension in a conflict. Others see **true companion** (the Greek word σύζυγος) an actual persons name. Greater evidence suggests **companion** (or yokefellow)- the Greek word σύζυγος is a person’s name since Paul has no problem pointing out the specific names of others like **Clement** in v3 and even the women at conflict in v2.

- The fact that Paul calls him **true** means that he is using a play on words. In other words, this man whose name was σύζυγος lived up to his name. He indeed was a **true companion** or yokefellow. He had an ability to help others arrive at peace. Paul was fond of using play on words. In Philemon 1:10-11 he tells Onesimus’ master that Onesimus (whose name means “useful”) was formerly “useless” to his master, but is now “useful”.

- The man Paul calls upon must have been an elder who needs to **help these women** as v3 says. The word **help** is a lively term. It means “to seize, grasp, or apprehend”. It can even mean “arrest”. It was used this way to refer to Jesus’ arrest by the Roman

soldiers. So, Paul is telling this man that he must take hold of the situation, brokering a deal where these women can come to terms of peace.ⁱⁱ Since the elders had not resolved this, Paul reminds one of them of their duty to seize the situation and help resolve this conflict. Why just one elder? Because as Hendriksen says, “he must have been a man of extraordinary tact.” This peacemaker named σύζυγος was highly respected by the people. He was one that could be trusted and he had exemplary interpersonal skills.

- Paul needed the most qualified person to help resolve this conflict since as Paul says in v3 that these women: **labored side by side with in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.**

- These were not false teachers or rowdy church members causing problems that needed expelled from the church. These were faithful supporters of Paul’s gospel ministry. These women were Christians. And perhaps it was even kingdom work that caused the division. Perhaps they had strong personalities and opinions on ministry ideas that clashed. And before you knew it they were not listening to one another. They were talking past one another. And some in the congregation likely began taking sides. But notice Paul says emphatically that **their names are in the book of life.** Therefore, Paul is calling upon the leadership to help these women resolve their dispute. When earthly citizens

died, their names are erased from the records, but the names of Christians will never be erased from heaven's registry. Someday Christ will publicly acknowledge them as His own.ⁱⁱⁱ

- **The book of life** is the registry where God keeps the names of the redeemed (Ex 32:32; Ps 69:28; Dan 12:1; Mal 3:16-17; Lk 10:20; Rev 3:5; 13:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27). Such names were written down in eternity past (Mt 25:34; Eph 1:4; 2 Tim 1:9). These women gave proof of their election. They bore spiritual fruit, and yet they were still sinners. It's a reminder to us that we are not immune to conflict within the church. And the fact that Paul has to call upon guided assistance to help shows how wide spreading and damaging this interpersonal conflict between these women had reached in the church. What began as not speaking to each other turned into purposely walking past each other without making eye contact, which then turned into purposely going the other direction when either saw the other one coming.

- APP: How do you respond when you are called upon to help heal division in the church? Do you try and avoid it not wanting to get involved? This does not help resolve conflict? Or maybe you have the tendency to make it your business to know everybody's business in the church. This will not help resolve conflict either. What the church needs when conflict arises is guided assistance rooted in the Word of God. This will primarily come from the pulpit as we are admonished to love and forgive

one another. It may also come through a brother or sister putting his or her arm around two people in conflict and helping them to agree in the Lord. The point in all of this is that every church needs to be aware of conflict and every church member needs to be willing to help avoid it *before* it happens, and be ready to help resolve it *when* it happens.

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- How does the church maintain unity and avoid a fractured fellowship? First, by demonstrating a *genuine affection*. A healthy church has a culture of love. Second, by participating in *gracious agreement*. A healthy church culture is marked by an agreement to forgive often and regularly. And third, by recognizing the need for *guided assistance* when things get out of hand. There are times when the only way to resolve conflict is to address it head on with the help of a third party.

- Sinclair Ferguson writes on the importance of this passage for Reformed Biblical churches like our own. Commenting on this passage, he says:

Christian fellowships are often at their worst when dealing with differences of opinion. In some ways biblically-based churches find it easier to deal with false teaching. But personal differences can be almost deadly, dividing the fellowship, sowing seeds of bitterness, diverting attention from central issues to sometimes petty peripheral concerns, sucking energy that should be employed in building up believers and in reaching out to the community. How effectively we handle these differences may say more about the biblical character of our church life than how we handle heresy.^{iv}

- Such true words said rightly and wisely. May we pay heed.

Have you ever heard about the Carpenter's tools holding a conference? Brother Hammer presided. Several suggested he leave the meeting because he was too noisy. Replied the Hammer, "If I have to leave this shop, Brother Screw must go also. You have to turn him around again and again to get him to accomplish anything." Brother Screw then spoke up. "If you wish, I'll leave. But Brother Plane must leave too. All his work is on the surface. His efforts have no depth." To this Brother Plane responded, "Brother Ruler will also have to withdraw, for he is always measuring folks as though he were the only one who is right." Brother Ruler then complained against Brother Sandpaper, "You ought to leave too because you're so rough and always rubbing people the wrong way."

In the midst of all the discussion, in walked the Carpenter of Nazareth. He had arrived to start His day's work. Putting on His apron, He went to the bench to make a pulpit from which to proclaim the Gospel. He employed the hammer, screw, plane, ruler, sandpaper, and all the other tools. After a day's work when the pulpit was finished, Brother Saw arose and remarked, "Brethren, I observe that all of us are workers together with the Lord."^v

ⁱ John Philipps, *Exploring Ephesians and Philippians*, 157

ⁱⁱ Steve Lawson, *Philippians For You*, 188

ⁱⁱⁱ William Hendriksen, *NTC*, 192

^{iv} Ferguson, *Let's Study Philippians*, 100

^v *Nelson's Complete Book of Stories, Illustrations, and Quotes* (slightly modified by me)

* The sources listed here are not by any means a complete list of resources used in the preparation of this sermon. They are merely a sampling of resources cited in order to ensure that credit is given where credit is due.