
Maintaining Unity

Philippians 1:27 – 2:11

Devon Berry

Introduction

What do you think? Is Clearcreek Chapel a “good” church? This is how the Philippians, I think, would have described their church in Philippi. The church was planted by Paul himself, had been tested early on and had done well, they were recipients of other top shepherds that Paul had sent, they were generous, serious, courageous, evangelistic, their body life was functional... They were a good church. That thought, that evaluation, whether at Philippi or in Springboro, has in it both the echoes of angels and the whispers of demons. Angelic because it resonates with what God has promised to do in and through the church, ***And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ...*** (Ephesians 4:11, 12). Demonic because of the false sense of security it may foster in us, ***Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall*** (1 Corinthians 10:12).

You see, the church at Philippi, like all churches, had blindspots, weaknesses, vulnerabilities. And also like so many other churches, in the New Testament and today, their areas of concern fell into two categories – false teaching and disunity. Churches were, and are, in need of regular reminders in these areas for they are aspects of the churches life which must be constantly evaluated, maintained, and strengthened.

So, every once in a while, in addition to our steady diet of nutritious main courses, of book by book, chapter by chapter, paragraph by paragraph, exposition of the Word on Sunday mornings and evenings over the long haul, it is good for us to throw in an intermezzo. A short moment in a meal or in a concert (or in a sermon series) where we step back, clear our heads, our palates, by changing the composition of the music, the complexity of the meal, to reset, refocus, remember, refresh, realize... That is what tonight is. An intermezzo. And during this intermezzo we are going to think together about unity. It will be two weeks after this before we return to our current Sunday PM series in Samuel as we have some special events coming up. So this seems like a good juncture at which to take a slight detour and consider this issue of unity as it is presented in the book of Philippians.

[Let's Pray]

Background on the Church at Philippi

Since we are making a single stop in the book of Philippians with this sermon, it is important we get a bit of a running start and understand something of the background and context. In fact, we're going to spend what may seem like an inordinate amount of time on background. My purpose in doing this is to thoroughly familiarize you with church at Philippi so that when we come to discussing unity, you will have a good sense of the character of the church and thereby appropriately understand Paul's strong challenges to unity.

Conceived in Power and Born in Trial

If you will recall, Paul's visit to Philippi was precipitated by direct divine intervention. In Acts 16, Luke records a vision given to Paul of a man saying, *Come over to Macedonia and help us* (v.9). With this vision, there undoubtedly came a sense of anticipation with regard to God's work in this region. And at first, the visit to the "far west" of Paul's travels seems to go well. He meets Lydia in Philippi, her household is converted, and she offers her home as a headquarters for the ministry in Philippi (Acts 16:11-15).

But the trajectory of Paul's ministry changes quickly. Following a miracle in which Paul frees a slave girl from the possession of a demon, the city rises up against him for spreading ideas they felt were anti-Roman (not to mention they ruined someone's small business). Paul and Silas receive a severe beating and are thrown in jail (Acts 16:16-24). Remember this story? Around midnight, Paul and Silas are singing hymns... God sends an earthquake... all the prisoners' shackles fall off and all the cell doors open. The jailer, charged with the responsibility of keeping the prisoners safely, sure of his condemnation believing they will all escape, draws his sword to kill himself. But Paul yells, *Don't do it! We are all here.*

And thus, God adds to the church in Philippi that had started with Lydia's household. The jailer is converted, his household is converted, and no doubt many in that jail were confronted with the power and reality of the gospel.

After a single night that must have had the whole city talking, the authorities in Philippi decide to release Paul and Silas. Interestingly, on the way out of jail, Paul pulls out his Roman citizen card... *after* the beating and the imprisonment. This "card" if you will, could have prevented his beating and imprisonment – particularly in this city of Philippi which was very proud of its designation as a Roman city though it was not part of Italian homeland. He essentially forces the city officials to come and apologize for what was a serious error on their part. Though he is still asked to leave the city, he takes his time doing so and encourages the fledgling church as he goes. Why would Paul do that? An ego-trip? That would be hard to believe. There are a number of reasons that could explain it and we don't have time to go through them – but all of them wind up being based in the same motivation... the strategic *advance of the gospel* (Philippians 1:12) that shaped everything Paul did. *Can you imagine doing this?*

Knowing this background about the Church at Philippi we can make some observations. First, the church had its roots in clear evidences of God's power. The rapid conversions of Lydia and the jailer's households, the slave girl whose "spirit of divination" was cast out, and the earthquake – jail event, would have been convincing displays of the reality and truth of the gospel. Second, the church understood from the very beginning that it was counter-cultural, therefore not welcomed, and may be called to suffer at the hands of its community. Paul and Silas' beating and imprisonment and dismissal from the city would have been sobering if not frightening events for the very young and watching church.

Third, the church understood the life-risking importance of advancing the proclamation of the gospel into all parts of the world *and* society. These new Christians in Philippi would have witnessed (1) the arrival of the gospel from far east by some very ambitious tent-makers; (2) the gospel taking root among a group of women – who were by virtue of their gender 2nd class citizens; (3) significant personal risk being taken and sacrifice being made to get the gospel to hard to access groups such as prisoners and soldiers; and (4) personal power and sacrifice being used not for one’s own gain but for the gain of the gospel – for example, Paul maximizing the impact of his Roman citizenship by sharing it at just the right time.

The church at Philippi would not have been a group of silly young believers who had no idea what they were getting themselves into and viewed their faith as just another aspect of life among the many others. Rather, I think they had a very well-rounded idea of what the gospel was, what the gospel does, and what the gospel is worth. And this would explain in part Paul’s affection for them, his confidence in them, their loyal financial and material support of him, and their receiving of significant attention from Paul’s “A-team” of co-shepherds.

As a quick capture of the character of this church and the circumstances under which they were formed, Paul says 1:7 that they both defended and confirmed the gospel. Defended – *striving side by side for the faith of the gospel* (Philippians 1:27) *...always being prepared to make a defense to anyone who [asked] for a reason for the hope that [was in them]* (1 Peter 3:15) even to those who would seek to oppress, persecute, or harm them. Confirmed – living in a way that *adorned the doctrine of God our Savior* (Titus 2:10) proving through their lives the power of the gospel to save and transform. As a church conceived in power and born in trial, it is reasonable to believe that the church in Philippi had matured quickly. Paul’s words throughout the letter seem to confirm this and in verses 3-11 we get a glimpse.

Partners, Partakers, and Practitioners

Let’s read those verses together [Read]. Beginning in verse 5, Paul tells the Philippians that there is joy in his praying because of their *partnership in the gospel* (v.5). This is a theme that he will return to throughout the letter. As partners, he continually brings them into his world, so to say, by allowing them understand the world through his eyes and ears. He is constantly constructing for them a world by assigning meaning and value to everything going on around them. How does someone who is a partner in the gospel see life? Whether it is the reason for his imprisonment (1:12), for their suffering (1:29), the meaning of Epaphroditus’ near death experience (2:30), the danger of the false teacher dogs – mutilators of the flesh (3:2), the argument for Paul’s superiority by earthly standards (3:4ff), the appropriate response to Euodia and Syntyche (4:2ff), Paul is creating a tapestry of meaning that that is all-encompassing for the Philippians. He is teaching them how to interpret life.

Perhaps it sounds a little suspect when you put it that way, like Paul is a brainwasher – but beloved, my wife and I are doing this every day at home with two little boys whom we dearly love. We are constantly, every moment, teaching them how to understand, in-

interpret, assign meaning to, respond to, the world. They are partners in the “Berry thing” which is hopefully very heavily shaped by the “gospel thing.” As partners then, the Philippians are actively living out a mutually shared mission with Paul – he sees it more clearly than ever from his prison cell and is writing to them in a way that he hopes will help them see it as well (3:15-16). This shared mission is all about doing the work of the Kingdom, by living as people of the Kingdom, for the glory and praise of God through Jesus Christ. So a simple question for the Chapel as we move ahead – do we view every last aspect of our lives, individually and collectively, as being shaped by our partnership in the gospel? By our mission to advance the gospel? Keep in mind that this letter was written to the church, not to a small segment of the church called evangelists. Do you view your life as a good work that God has begun in you and that is being completed a little more every day (1:6) in a way that in word and deed defends and confirms the gospel (1:7), *advances the gospel* (1:12), is *worthy of the gospel* (1:27)?

There is only one reason such a question can be asked with seriousness – it is because believers, Paul’s Philippian partners in the gospel in this case, are *partakers of grace* (v.7). This grace is the both favor of God in gifting us faith and it is the active enablement from God for living out faith (that is, a kind of enablement that finishes the good work God began in the Philippians, v.6) – it is what makes possible entry into the reality and the world of the gospel. Here is how the effect of grace sounded in Paul’s life (3:7ff): **7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ. 8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead** (3:7-11). Grace produces an all-consuming transformation through an all-sufficient sacrifice.

Partners in the gospel, partakers of grace, and then, practitioners of godliness. Ultimately, Paul prays that those who are on mission with him (partners in the gospel), who have benefitted from God’s work in their lives (partakers of grace), *would abound in love... be pure and blameless... and be filled with the fruit of righteousness* (vv.9-11) that is, be practitioners of godliness.

The culmination of being people on mission, empowered by grace, is the living out of a transformed life. Now this is both what Paul describes the church as being and what he is praying for it to be. Partners, partakers, and practitioners – you’ll see these ideas all over Philippians. These are not merely words to remember, notions to think about, or aliterations to be amused by, these are the substance of the reality that Paul is setting forth. It is who the Philippians are.

As we transition to discussing unity in the letter to the Philippians, there are two questions I want to ask us, the Chapel? First, are we partners, partakers, and practitioners... How do we understand the church and its relationship to ourselves? If we have some

anemic idea that is anything less than a total buy in to the portrayal here in Philippians, it is likely that Paul's calls to unity will strike us as over dramatic, overstated, and over the top. Radical sacrifice for the faith of the gospel will either sound delirious or sound like hyperbole for the purpose of window dressing. Second, as we're going to see, unity was a concern in the church at Philippi. It was a concern secondary to external pressures and it was a concern secondary to internal strife. If in a church such as this one the danger of disunity lurked near, should we not here at the Chapel be vigilant in our guarding against it? Reaping and sowing – it is an unbreakable force in all creation – but we can be lulled into a false confidence because the seasons are sometimes a long time coming.

A Church Marked by Unity is a Church Living Worthy of the Gospel

In the verses between where we left off (v.11) and where we'll pick up (v.27), Paul mainly says two things. First, he updates the church on what has happened since his imprisonment (vv.12-18). It should make us smile when we see how he talks about it, v.12 says, ***I want you to know, brothers, that what has happened to me has really served to advance the gospel...*** That's Paul, is it not? And the Philippians would have smiled knowingly to themselves because this story would sound very familiar to them. This story has already played out in their church's history and it is likely the jailer (recall) who came within an inch of going to hell, was sitting right there as this letter from Paul was read to the church. Paul is free to relay the events of his life this way because he knows the Philippian church gets it... they understand what this life is about.

Second, Paul alludes, in an almost sideways manner to the seriousness of his imprisonment (vv. 19-26). He says in v.19ff, ***...for I know that through your prayers and the help of the Spirit of Jesus Christ this will turn out for my deliverance, as it is my eager expectation and hope that I will not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death.*** You don't have to read between the lines too far to realize that this is a man who is wondering if he is going to live or die. This is not melodrama... Paul is honestly reflecting on what it would mean to physically die for Christ, for the sake of the gospel... and of course that is eventually what happened if the historians are right. Paul was beheaded. Yet even in this we see Paul's understanding of the purpose of his life expressed (v.26) ***...so that in me you may have ample cause to glory in Christ Jesus...*** (v.21) ***For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain.***

Unity from the Outside

Let's begin by reading 1:27 – 1:30 [Read]. So by the time Paul gets to this statement in verse 27 we've been given a fairly striking depiction of the church and the believer's mindset. So these next words, ***Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ...*** are almost jarring. ***Only let?*** I've been given enough to think on for a year already. But here it is, the camera jerks into position and zooms in at high speed. Let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ – I thought that was what we've been talking about in the past 26 verses. And surely it was, but Paul is going to take this to the next level. A church on mission – partnering in the gospel, a church fully empowered – partaking in grace, and a church actually living out the truth – practitioners of

godliness needs to be made aware of an issue of critical importance if it is going to stand. This issue, is unity.

This unity is not a “can we all get along” kind of unity. It is not simply being nice to each other and avoiding arguments and sensitive topics. It is not even agreeing to disagree. Far from it. Paul is using military/athletic language here to a military colony. They would have known immediately that Paul was calling for a battle-like mentality toward unity and the commander in chief to whom we’ve sworn allegiance is King Jesus himself and his on the ground representative is the Spirit. Form the phalanx, get into formation. Let nothing break than ranks. **[Stand] firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel...** We’re all in this. We’re all in this together. We’re all in this together for the faith of the gospel and the glory of the King. We’re all in this together for the faith of the gospel and the glory of the king up to, and through, just like Paul, death **...to die is gain.**

What are the practical results of this kind of unity? How do we know when we have achieved this kind of unity? What is its hallmark? In a nutshell, it is that in suffering, opposition, and persecution we do not break rank, abandon ship, or leave the unit. How is this possible? Because, we are not afraid. By Christ’s design, unity incites courage, bravery, strength. Don’t confuse this with strength in numbers, or strength in brotherhood, or strength in doctrinal correctness... this is strength in unity, God’s people **striving side by side for the faith of the gospel** as a church. This is why the unity of the church is so important. This is why gathering with the church is so important. It is a war out there. And our unity proves to the world and ourselves that our God is a rescuing God (John 17:20-23). Thus there is nothing more sad or dangerous than fighting in the ranks on the front line. It steals glory and creates vulnerabilities that the enemy invariably will expose.

When will this unity be most challenged – in suffering. Notice the two for one deal in v.29, For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake. Fissures in unity become crevasses in unity when stress is applied. Sometimes, those who were presumably believers fall in and are never seen again. This is why we must always be working to strengthen and maintain unity – for when attack comes, there will be no fixing the fissures. Planes are not built in the air, unity is not built in battle.

So if this is the outward facing aspect of unity, a strong formation or configuration of believers, a phalanx, that holds together for the faith of the gospel. Then the inward facing aspect – that is the infrastructure behind the solid façade – explains how this is created, how it is done in the church, through whom it is done in the church. Let’s read Philippians 2:1-10.

Unity from the Inside

As Paul begins to explain how unity actually happens, he begins with a series of ascertains – not assumptions. Paul is not writing *hoping* that the Philippians have experienced encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, participation in the Spirit, affection and sympathy (2:1). He knows that they have and therefore builds his call to them based on

the reality of their Christian experience. And the key here, this is their shared Christian experience. There is an accounting to one another that confirms these things are true. Because you have benefitted, oh Philippian church, from the experience of God's grace in the body that Christ and his Spirit have produced... make my joy complete by working to be unified.

This is the paradox and solidarity of biblical unity. We'll see the paradox again in verse 5 when Paul tells the Philippians to *have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus*. There is no perfect analogy here but it is a little like being selected to play on a sports team, getting the jersey, being trained by the coach, going through the conditioning, having the practices, learning the plays, hearing the pep talks, and playing the scrimmages... but refusing to finish the job by playing as a team when game time comes around. Your denying the reality of your experience as a team member if you refuse to play as a team in the game. Your teammates are completely justified in asking, "But I thought you were a part of this team...?" God has placed you on the team, you are a team, your experiencing what it means to be on the team, now, says Paul, play as a team: *Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind*.

Only let... complete my joy. Unity is a significant matters in Paul's mind. The Philippian church is to be marked by an earnest, genuine, from the heart kind of working together for the faith of the gospel... a high definition picture of what this looks like is supplied in places like Ephesians 4, Romans 16, and many places in Acts.

If suffering and persecution are the external threats to unity, then *pride* is the primary internal threat to unity. In vv. 3-4, Paul begins to specifically target those things that weaken and damage unity in the body as well as their antidotes. Rivalry and conceit, both of which have as their root pride, are brought to the attention of the Philippians. At the end of the day, both of these qualities lead to what pride always leads to, an attempt to usurp God, to put ourselves in the place of importance, attention, deservedness, notoriety, value, a bowing down to ourselves as Almighty and a demand that others do it too. This is not nearly rare enough in the church – case in point being Euodia and Syntyche (4:1). Beth and I have had the sad experience of watching unity engulfed in the flames of pride over the years and watched lives and organizations fall apart. There is no greater pity.

Paul *tells* us that the remedy is a sacrificial humility that counts others above ourselves and puts others before ourselves [Read vv. 3b-4]. Read the text carefully – the ESV has worked hard to get this right – it is not making a value judgment about who is more significant and somehow relegating your life to the worthless heap; it is not engaging in some monastic life of self-denial. Rather it is biblically understanding your place before God as sinner then saint (in humility) and from that position intentionally caring for others even when it requires that you make sacrifices.

And now Paul *shows us* what that remedy, sacrificial humility looks like. Yes, this passage of Scripture is best known for its theological significance as a proof-text for the incarnation and while that is certainly important, it is not the primary purpose of the text. Paul

tells us these things of Christ because his setting before the Philippians both the enablement for and the example of the sacrificial humility that undergirds biblical unity [Read vv. 5-10].

So I want to leave you with a final thought this evening before we wind up with some very practical application. I have not thought this fully through yet, but I want to ask you to consider what Philippians 2:1-10 suggests about the connection between the incarnation and unity. Consider it in this light, Jesus speaking in John 17: (vv.20-21): ***20 I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.*** Could it be that the best possible witness we can give to this world of the reality of who Christ is and all that he says is our own unity? And... could it be that the greatest blow we could deal to the testimony of the gospel is our disunity? Hmm. Recall that Paul said, ***Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ.*** This puts the stakes quite high does it not?

On that sobering note, let me ask a few pointed questions as sample applications of this text directed at the Chapel and then we'll close.

1. Elders, are your hearts fully at ease with one another? Are we of full accord and of one mind? What fissures would be exposed if suffering and persecution came? Could an internal attack such as building program, a church plant, a year of hard finances and hard choices, a personal rivalry, divide us? What are we doing to maintain and-strengthen our unity?
2. Youth, Young Adults, Single Adults, is there any rivalry or conceit among you? Does pride in the form of pettiness, over-sensitivity, under-sensitivity, dividing behavior, excluding behavior or domineering behavior have any evidence among you? Has it spread to your families or your parents? You see, this passage does not allow us to simply say that the absence of these things is enough... it calls for active efforts toward full accord... You are the Chapel's future and time will not fix the fissures... but sacrificial humility will born along by the mind of Christ that you have been given will!
3. Finally, deacons and deaconesses, ministry leaders, staff, is there a readiness and a sweetness about counting others more significant than yourselves, looking to the interests of others? Do you remind one another that as you exercise your speaking and serving gifts in a manner that carefully maintains and strengthens unity, you are giving witness the gospel story? Are you therefore quick to correct misunderstandings, unintended slights, offenses, sins, foolishness knowing that every second that ticks by is another second that disunity takes hold and the glory of God in Christ is stolen.
4. And finally, Clearcreek Chapel, do we realize that as partners, partakers, and practitioners we are called to advance the gospel, through thick and thin, til death do us part, and that the vanguard of our testimony will be our unity.

May God make it so. Let's Pray.

Title
Text