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Division and the Church

Philippians 4:2-3

In the aftermath of 9/11/2001, it was interesting to hear the public debate as to whether Islam was a “peaceful religion.” Many Muslims came forward and said, *“This does not represent Islam. Mohammed was a man of peace who preached peace.”* The irony is that the two or three times that I can remember that these claims have been questioned by a world-wide figure, mass rioting broke out in many Islamic countries. You’d think that if Islam was a religion of peace, your life wouldn’t be in danger if you suggested otherwise.

Such a contradiction. And yet such a contradiction can be found also in the church! It is only arrogance or willful blindness to suppose that the church has been free of bloodshed. History is strewn with the blood of saints, spilt by the church! Christ Himself said this to the Jewish leaders of His day:

Matthew 23:34-35, "...I am sending you prophets and wise men and scribes; some of them you will kill and crucify, and some of them you will scourge in your synagogues, and persecute from city to city, that upon you may fall the guilt of all the righteous blood shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar."

Stephen speaking to the same Jewish leaders noted this:

Acts 7:51-52, "You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? And they killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become."

Now we might say, *"Yes! But those who did such things were NOT serving God, BUT themselves!"* And that is correct!¹ BUT here is the clincher: the church is filled with people who are NOT serving God, BUT themselves.

Paul exhorted the Galatians this way:

Galatians 5:15, "But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another."

Truly, at the time of Christ and since, the New Testament church has included people in the service of self! Aspiring pastors are warned in seminary about "pastor eating congregations." But they are rarely warned about "people eating congregations"! They are out there. And if one is not careful, their congregation can become one of them!

In fact, the church at Philippi was a church on the verge of becoming a people eating congregation. It was rife with division. So much so that Paul addressed one such conflict head-on. Let's examine his exhortation lest we join the ranks of those who frequently diet on each other! We begin looking first at the characters.

Philippians 4:2a, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche..."

We know very little about either of these women. They are NOT mentioned anywhere else in Scripture, and Paul gives very little here. Yet, what Paul says is significant.

FIRST, we know that they must have been dear to Paul. In all of Paul's letters when dealing with sin and the church, he does NOT mention names (unless a person must be signaled out for the sake of a warning). And so, for example we read this:

2 Corinthians 11:13, "For such men are false apostles, deceitful workers, disguising themselves as apostles of Christ."

Galatians 6:12a, "Those who desire to make a good showing in the flesh try to compel you to be circumcised..."

Philippians 3:18, "For many walk, of whom I often told you, and now tell you even weeping, that they are enemies of the cross of Christ."

In each of these passages, Paul mentions no names. Why? These men were NOT important to Paul! And yet the text us it is different. Paul directly addresses two individuals, by name! And notice, we do NOT see any derision, contempt, or disdain! RATHER, we read here of compassion and love! Truly, "Euodia and Syntyche" were the beloved of Paul, worthy of such an appeal!

SECOND, we learn from v. 3b that these women have shared [Paul's] struggle in the gospel συναθλέω (*sunathleō*). The word literally means, "to fight alongside of" or "to labor together with." It frequently was used in the context of an athletic competition, and thus referenced a side-by-side endeavor in which help and encouragement was shared.

Recall that in Philippians 4:1, we noted that Paul alluded to Phalanx warfare! Carrying that metaphor further, based on this word, "Euodia and Syntyche" were ones who stood in the trenches with Paul. They fought alongside him. It was their words which encouraged the apostle when he was at the breaking point.

Paul's language tells us that he was NOT talking about shallow, weak individuals, BUT women who walked with Paul in Christ!

THIRD, notice that Paul lists these women in the mini "hall of faith" of v. 3b. He says, "together with Clement also, and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life: we do NOT know who "Clement" was. Most likely he was NOT the "Clement of Rome" who served the church of Rome after the execution of Paul and Peter.² NOR does Paul mention by name "the rest of his fellow workers" in Philippi. Yet it is obvious that these men and women were the "rocks" of the Philippian church- ones:

- Who lived the life of faith and so "fought the good fight" and...
- For whom there was no doubt in Paul's mind that their names were recorded in "the book of life"!³

And so, that Paul references these ladies as among this group tells us that he is NOT talking about shallow “busy-bodies,” BUT solid women of God!

Thus notice, the very ones involved in this conflict were NOT “light-weights”! They were solid in their faith and commitment to Christ and His cause such that Paul could count on them in the gospel ministry!

How important this is for us to keep in mind! We must see that no one is above the conflict that we are examining here. You can be the most mature individual in the kingdom of God, yet on account of your “humanness” you could find it difficult to get along with another (think of Paul and Barnabas, Acts 15:36-41).

This is so important to understand, because the inclination is to take the conflict of this passage as the petty disagreement of two silly women who had nothing better to do than embroil themselves and the church in a mess. But when one considers who these women are, we must sit up and take note!

- Conflict is NOT an indication of one’s maturity in Christ.
- Thus, it doesn’t matter how godly you may be; everywhere we go and at all times we must be on our guard for conflict is only and is always one person away!

This means we must “look to ourselves lest we too be tempted” (Galatians 6:1)!

In light of this, notice the crisis.

Philippians 4:2b, “-I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.”

Once again, we have very little information as to the problem. However, it is clear from this exhortation that

- Euodia and Syntyche were NOT getting along AND...
- The problem was NOT an issue of heresy or moral failure!!

We know that Paul was one who jumped on doctrinal or personal sin! If EITHER Euodia or Syntyche were believing an aberrant teaching (as the believers in Colossae, Galatia, or Thessalonica to whom Paul wrote) OR living in moral failure in any way (as were the believers to whom Paul wrote 1 Corinthians), Paul would NOT have been passive or remained silent. RATHER, he would have penned an epistle of correction and/or exhortation. Yet here, he mentions NO sin NOR does he correct either one of these women! He simply appeals to them to “get along”/to “live in harmony in the Lord”!

From this we conclude that the issue — and I would contend, the issue that serves as the genesis in most church conflicts — was more akin to a conflict in personality (which itself could lead to sin BUT was not sin in and of itself). In other words, Euodia and Syntyche just didn't like each other! When they were in the same room, perhaps their personalities were like oil and water! And here too we derive application.

Recall Solomon's warning in the Song of Solomon? In chapter 2, he is discussing the love relationship of marriage to which a "chorus" gave this warning:

Song of Solomon 2:15, "Catch the foxes for us, the little foxes that are ruining the vineyards, while our vineyards are in blossom."

See, when it comes to a vineyard (and for that matter marriage or any relationship between Christians), it most often is NOT the frontal attack that destroys the crop — like disease, sabotage, or drought. These are things which can be seen and therefore addressed! RATHER, more often than not is it the sly fox who creeps in unnoticed and destroys the crop.

Such is the nature of the conflict that hampers most churches or ministries. At the beginning, you hardly notice the "problem." It's subtle.

- The rubbing of each other wrong.
- A perception of harshness or ungraciousness.
- An honest misunderstanding remembered.
- An unkind perception.
- Not thinking the best.

BUT then the "clash" becomes full bloom and

1. sin is committed,
2. feelings are hurt,
3. people are forced to take sides, and
4. unity is compromised!

In light of this, Paul gives a twofold calling here, first to the warriors.

Philippians 4:2, "I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord."

This is NOT the first time Paul gave this exhortation in Philippians. Listen to these passages:

Philippians 2:2, "Make my joy complete by being of the same mind..."

Philippians 3:15, “Let us therefore, as many as are perfect, have this attitude...”

The word used in these instances (and eight other times in this epistle) is φρονέω (*phroneō*). It denotes NOT thought or reasoning *per se*, BUT a mindset or disposition. It speaks of the paradigm or lens by which you process and interact with the world.

What paradigm is Paul referencing here? According to the text, an outlook governed and determined by “the Lord.” In other words, the “mindset” exhorted here is that which was forged on Calvary and given by Paul on multiple occasions as the paradigm with which we must approach ministry and each other. Listen to Paul’s words describing the same “mind” referenced here:

Philippians 2:3-8, “Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, *and* being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.”

That is the paradigm of Christ. Based on this, we could translate the verse before us somewhat loosely as, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live with the paradigm that led Christ to the Cross” or “...with a mindset established by Christ at the cross.”

Accordingly, Paul is saying to these women, “You want to get along? You want to live in harmony together? Then take your focus off of yourself, your needs, wants, desires, or personal preference, AND view the world and your brother/sister as the prized possession of God!” It is this mindset that led Christ to the cross!

Throughout the years and in numerous counseling sessions one could hear these words: *“But you don’t know what they did to me and how they hurt me! How can I forgive them?!”*

There is no question that any one of us could have any idea what an individual may have done to another and how it may have hurt them, yet I do know what you in your sin did to Christ and how much it hurt Him, and yet HE FORGAVE YOU! In fact, He sat in the presence of eleven disciples in the upper room who were about to betray or desert Him, and yet He still went to the cross on their behalf!

Accordingly — and this is important — to allow another’s

- Real or perceived sin.
- Pet-peeve.
- Habit.
- Insensitivity.
- Personality.

To bother you reflects NOT on how “bad” the other person is, BUT on how low you view the cross of Christ AND what you were when He saved you!

Recall Matthew 18 and Christ’s parable of the unmerciful servant. A governor is brought before a king with a debt of 10,000 talents — a debt he could never repay. And yet the king forgave the debt after he begged for mercy. But then the very same individual, leaving the presence of the King, came upon a slave who owed him 100 denarii — which was 1/600,000 of the amount that the Satrap had owed the king. And rather than forgive him, the governor put the slave in prison!

Recall Christ’s response.

Matthew 18:32-33, “You wicked slave, I forgave you all that debt because you entreated me. Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow slave, even as I had mercy on you?” (Literally, “Is not love your lasting obligation”?)

Truly, when we stand in the presence of another sinner and allow agitation to arise in our hearts on account of their sin (or just something we don’t like about them), we trample underfoot the cross!

You say, *“But what I’m going through is serious; they hurt me!”* Christian, it doesn’t matter! For what is at stake is NOT your honor, vindication, or rights, BUT the unity that Christ died to create! Recall, the peace Christ prayed for three times⁴ in John 17... that peace was secured when Christ gave up His life on the cross (Ephesians 2:14-18)! Accordingly, like any governor’s responsibility with the Pax Romana, our duty is NOT to create it, BUT “preserve” the peace that Christ died to create (Ephesians 4:3). That is why Paul exhorted the Corinthians who genuinely had been sinned against this way:

1 Corinthians 6:7b, “...Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?”

See, when you understand what is at stake, there is nothing a brother or sisters could do to you that should make you trample underfoot the cross-wrought peace of our Lord!

BUT this assumes the paradigm exhorted here, where Paul said this:

Philippians 4:2b, “I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord.”

In other words, live with the mind that Christ had when He went to the cross! That is what leads to unity in the body of Christ! It is the world view/mind which understands that:

- Your purpose in the body of Christ is NOT to get BUT to give!
- You exist to bless, encourage, and build up the body of Christ!
- The object of your ministry is redeemed sinners — which means you are going to be hurt, your service is NOT going to be appreciated, and you will be walked on!
- So, to Euodia and Syntyche, Paul says: “Get your focus off of yourself and place it on Christ. When you do this, you will see 2 things: (1) No one is as worse a sinner than you, and (2) You have been saved to bless and build up each other!

Yet Paul is NOT finished. He also gives an exhortation to the body.

Philippians 4:3a, “Indeed, true comrade [the word refers to a “yokefellow” and refers to someone who shares a common burden], I ask you to help these women.”

It has baffled exegetes throughout the centuries as to who this person might be.⁵ Yet in truth, it doesn’t matter! For in fact, that is the point! When it comes to the ministry of peace in the kingdom of God — when it comes to helping brothers and sisters co-minister in the Lord — the responsibility rests upon every individual who is a “comrade of grace”! This brings us back once again to the Phalanx referenced in Philippians 4:1.

When it came to the linemen of a Phalanx the job was brutal and so incredibly difficult-holding one’s ground in the face of death! Yet, the Spartans (who perfected this type of warfare) knew that that which would enable frontline soldiers to “stand firm” was if they genuinely loved their fellow soldiers more than life!

With this in mind, think of it:

- What soldier on the eve of battle would ignore two soldier’s fighting?
- What soldier knowing that the battle could easily hinge on these two soldiers- NOT just getting along, BUT loving each other- could just walk on by?

It would never happen!

Likewise, to all “comrades in grace,” what is the logical call? It is to help the body get along with each other! For even though it may be a “personal matter,” if it could compromise the unity of the body which means it most certainly is your business!

That means that NOT ONLY is it NOT productive, BUT it is wrong to sit in the presence of

a Christian speaking against another brother or sister. Though we think we may be affirming or supporting the believer so burdened, the reality is that we are

- NOT helping them resolve the conflict.
- BUT possibly allowing ourselves to get involved in the fray.

What should we do then?

- Pray!
- Not to take sides!
- Bear the burdens of those so struggling (Galatians 6:2)

End Note(s)

¹ A key difference between Islam and Christianity at this point is that Islam includes the command for Jihad which would include physical violence. In Christianity, physical violence as a means of furthering the Kingdom of God is contradictory to Christ's call and mission (cf. John 18:36).

² Tradition holds that he was martyred in 100 AD having been tied to an anchor and then cast into the sea.

³ cf. Exodus 32:32; Psalms 69:28; Daniel 12:1; Malachi 3:16-17; Luke 10:20; Revelation 3:5; 13:8; 20:12, 15; 21:27.

⁴ Cf. vv. 11, 20-21a, 22.

⁵ The suggestions are vast and broad. Of late, most believe that the word Paul uses here is the actual name of the one exhorted. Yet, all agree that this is speculation.