

A Call for Unity, Continued

Philippians 2:1-4

Philippians 2:1-4: *“Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, **2** fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. **3** Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. **4** Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.”*

Background Notes

Throughout the book of Philippians, there is an emphasis on the importance of unity among Christians. When the apostle Paul wrote this letter to the Philippian believers, he was under house arrest in Rome, and he had heard that there was a problem with unity developing within the church at Philippi. If Paul had not been imprisoned, he would likely have gone to Philippi to help settle this problem. But Paul could not go to Philippi, and the best he could do was write a letter. The “Epistle to the Philippians” is that letter.

Although we’re sorry that there was disunity at Philippi, we’re glad that Paul had to write this letter - because it’s part of the Bible! This letter was inspired by God, and thus it is the Word of God. So Satan’s attempt to interrupt the work at Philippi was overruled by God Himself! This book of Scripture has been a help to innumerable churches down through the years, when churches experience discord and disunity.

We don’t know the cause of the problem at Philippi. It wasn’t a major doctrinal matter – if it had been, Paul would certainly have addressed it in this letter. Maybe the problem had to do with the location of the church. Acts 16 indicates that the church met in Lydia’s home, and perhaps the Philippian jailer’s home, in the early days after it was founded, but we don’t know where they met at this time. Maybe some of the believers in Philippi wanted an urban church - but maybe some of them wanted a more suburban location. The Holy Spirit didn’t reveal the exact problem, and that’s a good thing, because this book can be applied to any problem that causes disunity in churches today.

This exhortation for unity began in Philippians 1:27, and it continues through verse 4 of chapter 2. Remember, in the original letter, there were no chapter and verse divisions.

Doctrinal Point

God wants to see unity within His church.

Verse 2: *“Fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”* Notice that Paul, as the inspired writer of this book of Scripture, said that his joy would be fulfilled if the Philippians came to unity. Paul had the mind of Christ as he wrote, and this means that God is pleased when he sees unity within His Church. Psalm 133:1 says, *“How good and pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity.”*

1. *There are four realities of spiritual unity.*

Verse 1: *“Therefore if there is any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and mercy”* Do you see the four realities of spiritual unity there?

The use of the word *“if”* here is known as a “first-class condition” in the Greek language. It does not designate a “hypothetical” idea, and it doesn’t leave any question as to the reality. The *“if”* here can really be translated *“since.”* It’s as though I said, “If you’re in church this morning, listen to the sermon.” You’re here, and there’s no question whether you’re here or not, so I could substitute the word “since” – “Since you’re here, listen to the sermon.”

This is significant, because these qualities of spiritual unity are not theories (if) – they’re **realities!** They really do exist. There really **is** consolation or encouragement in Christ when disunity raises its ugly head. There really **is** the comfort of God’s love when unloving situations arise. There really **is** fellowship of the Holy Spirit when Satan would desire to tear apart God’s people. There really **is** the affection and mercy or compassion when certain members of the congregation rub us the wrong way. These four realities of spiritual unity are really there - and they’re available!

It’s also significant to realize that it’s not up to **us** to **form or make** the unity of the Spirit. Our job is to **keep** the unity of the Spirit. We are to do our best to *“keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace”* (Ephesians 4:3).

2. *There are four characteristics of spiritual unity.*

In verse 2 we have four characteristics of spiritual unity: *“fulfill my joy by being like-minded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.”* The four characteristics are (a) being of the same mind; (b) having the same love (not love for self but love for the Lord and His people); (c) being of one accord, or being united in spirit; and (d) being of one mind or intent on one purpose – and that one purpose is not our agenda, but **God’s** agenda.

Remember that unity is not the same as *uniformity*. Being *like-minded* and *of one mind* and *intent on one purpose* does not mean we have to see eye to eye on everything!

Here's an illustration. When our children were growing up, Margie and I were united when it came to the place of TV in our home. The TV was not going to rule our home, and there would be regulation of what the children watched. But Margie and I were not uniform in our tastes and preferences of program. We personally enjoyed different kinds of programs - but we were united as to the place of TV in our home. We were like-minded, of one mind, and intent on one purpose - that TV was not going to rule our home, and that our children's minds would not be contaminated by inappropriate programs. If we didn't agree about a particular program, we worked it out. When we kept our united purpose in view, it was easy to work it out!

This can be true in our churches as well. We may have different opinions when it comes to church music, or the structure and times of the services, or even the interior decor of the church! But we can be **united** when it comes to the **overall purpose** of the local church – to see people come to the Lord and then to grow together in Him in worship, fellowship, and service.

3. There are four steps to keeping spiritual unity.

Verses 3-4 list four steps to *keeping* spiritual unity. Remember, we don't have to *form* the unity of the Spirit – it's already formed. But we must *keep* the unity of the Spirit.

What do we do when disagreements arise in the fellowship? We **work them out!** How do we work them out? Although we can make our opinions known to the leaders, ultimately we must submit to the spiritual authority of the spiritual leadership in the church - whether we like their decisions or not!

And this is how we start: "*Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others*" (v3-4). Those are the four steps to spiritual unity.

- *Do nothing from selfish ambition*. Why do we really want decisions in the church to go our way? Is it really for the good of the church or do we possibly have a selfish agenda?

- *Do nothing from conceit*. When you give a large contribution to a ministry, do you give it anonymously? If you don't, why not? Don't say "for income tax purposes" - there are ways to give anonymously and still get income tax credit. Sadly, most people tend to want everyone to know that they're big givers. That prideful mentality can be a drawback to unity.

- *With humility, let each esteem others better than themselves.* We're to consider everyone in our fellowship better than ourselves! That's not easy. Suppose we lined up everyone in your church - let's call it the "importance line." Where would you place yourself in that line, according to your importance to your church? Would you place yourself at the head of the line or the end of the line? Most of us would place ourselves somewhere in the middle, because we wouldn't want to appear to be proud!

However, according to this verse, we should place ourselves at the **end** of the line. We should place **everyone else ahead of us!** Do you get the point? It's not that we actually are the least important to the church, but we should **consider** ourselves to be the least important! We should "esteem others better than ourselves." That's the kind of attitude that will definitely help to bring about unity within the church.

- *"Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others."* Did you hear of the Christian man who was driving home from work behind a speeding fire engine? Suddenly he realized that the house on fire was on his block - but he breathed a sigh of relief when he saw that it was his neighbor's house.

Is that your attitude towards others in your church – you're only looking out for your interests or your opinions or your likes and dislikes? We're all brothers and sisters in Christ, and we should care about what our brothers and sisters think and feel! *"Let each of you look out not only for your own interest, but also for the interest of others."*

Let's work at these four steps. God wants to see unity within His church.

Practical Application

Stop looking around for the perfect church.

Stop looking for the perfect church, because you'll never find it! And if you think you've found it, don't join it - why ruin a good church?

There is no such thing as the "perfect" church. If you have difficulty or disagreement with the church you're attending, there may be a proper time to change churches, after praying to ask the Lord for direction.

But when you decide to be part of a fellowship, **don't rock the boat!** Submit to the spiritual authority in that body of believers. Work towards keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (Ephesians 4:3). And stop looking around for the perfect church!