

“The Problem of Church Disunity”
Philippians 4:2-3
March 6, 2022

INTRODUCTION:

There is some comfort, though it's cold comfort, in recognizing that the church has always suffered problems of disunity. Some would like to idealize the early church era, as if it were all golden and glorious. Upon closer inspection, though, we see that they had the same problems the church has always had, and one of those problems is disunity.

When I first came to Altadena, I did some research on the history of this church, which dates back to 1854. I found an entry in the Session minutes dating back to the early twentieth century that said this: “We ask the “Antis” to stop turning the pews around for their worship service.” A little context is needed to understand that entry. In the early twentieth century, there was a union movement between two Presbyterian denominations, the northern Presbyterian Church and the Cumberland Presbyterians, the latter being Altadena's denominational affiliation. Both denominations voted in favor of the union, but many Cumberland churches were divided on the matter, especially those in the deep south. Churches, including ours, were divided internally between the anti-unionists and the pro-unionists. The division became so severe that the two groups were unable to worship together any longer, so one group would worship in the morning and the other in the afternoon. Apparently, the animosity grew to the point that one group wouldn't even worship facing the same direction as the other and decided to rotate the pews 180 degrees.

Disunity in the church is a serious problem. Jesus had emphasized the importance of unity among his followers during his earthly ministry, telling them that people would know that they were his disciples by their love for one another. Disunity in the church brings about ineffective outreach. I read this week of a church that was divided over the use of a piano in their worship services. Prior to one Sunday the pro-piano group just bought a piano and had it put in the church. When the anti-piano group arrived, they were incensed and walked out. The next Sunday, they all arrived to worship to find that there was no piano. Apparently, the anti-piano group had removed it. The pro-piano group this week was incensed and began looking everywhere for their missing piano. They finally found it six months later in the baptistry, where converts to Christ were baptized. It had not been needed because they had no converts. Church disunity leads to ineffective evangelism.

In today's passage, Paul gets very specific in addressing this topic. Let's consider three questions that arise from the key words of the text.

I. Euodia and Synteche – Why Are They Named?

Though it's not unprecedented, it is rare for Paul to single out others by name when he is urging obedience. Even in the Corinthian church, which had all kinds of problems, Paul keeps his admonitions more general. But here, he urges unity in the church by naming two women whose lives were not marked by unity. Remember that this letter would have been read to the congregation as they were gathered. It's not hard to imagine the effect it would have had upon these two women, and the entire church, if we imagine a preacher in our church doing the same thing. Can you imagine what would happen if every week when I was applying the Scripture text of the day that I would name some people who were especially needy of that application? Yet in this specific case, that is what Paul is actually doing.

Why does Paul take this unusual step? I can think of a couple of reasons. The first is the fact that disunity is a big problem for a church, but a problem that is easily minimized. There are church problems that immediately get people's attention and become matters of urgency. Sexual sin within church leadership, doctrinal heresy, or the theft of church funds by an insider all rightly become matters demanding urgent attention. They are what might be called "Level-one emergencies." If your child is about to run in front of a car, that is a level-one emergency. You don't respond to such an urgent need by giving a lecture on principles of safety. You call out your child by name and command them in as clear and as strong a tone of voice as possible to stop. Church disunity should be classified as a level one problem.

Violations of unity are even more serious when they appear among the leadership of a church. Euodia and Synteche were clearly among that group. Paul refers to them as his co-laborers in the gospel. The Philippian church started with significant leadership from a woman named Lydia (Acts 16:14), and it would seem that this pattern continued in Philippi. When church leaders are not living in unity, the disunity easily spreads through the congregation, and that was likely the case here. People naturally choose sides, and probably both Euodia and Synteche each had their group of supporters. When that happens, it is often the case that gossip and slander are not far behind.

There's a second reason Paul singles out these two ladies by name, and it's the difficulty of seeing one's own contributions to disunity. To say it more specifically, we have a hard time seeing our own sin. Consider the most disunified church you can imagine. If that church were to have a congregational meeting and church unity were on the ballot—with a vote either for or against—I dare say that one hundred percent of the congregation would vote in favor of church unity. That was undoubtedly the case in Philippi too. Had Paul contented himself with general exhortations to unity, everyone

probably would have been thinking, “I sure hope so-and-so hears this.” All the while, we are completely convinced that we are innocent of any violation of church unity.

We see this happening in the case of King David after his sin with Bathsheba and her husband, Uriah. As the prophet Nathan is telling him the parable about the rich man who stole the only lamb from the poor man in order to feed his guest, David’s anger was aroused. He was strongly in favor of justice for poor sheep owners. The point of the story didn’t hit home until Nathan specified David as the unjust one with the words, “You are that man.” I think something similar is happening here. Paul is saying, in effect, “Euodia and Synteche, the problem with disunity in this congregation lies at your feet.”

If I were following Paul’s example, I would begin to name names at this point of the sermon. But I’m not going to do that. Here’s how I will apply this. If you think that disunity, whether it’s in the church, in your marriage, or in any other association of people with whom you are involved, is the fault of someone else, then it is entirely possible, and perhaps even likely, that you are part of the problem rather than the solution. It may be that there are some who are more guilty than you in creating disunity, but there is room for improvement among all of us in this area. What does this improvement look like? That brings us to our next point.

II. Agree in the Lord – What Are They Being Asked to Do?

Paul tells these two ladies to “agree in the Lord.” What does that mean? Let me start by mentioning two things it doesn’t mean. First, it doesn’t mean that we are to pursue uniformity in every area. It doesn’t mean that we have to agree on our favorite color, our favorite football team, the best way to educate our children, or the preferred politician. Uniformity and unity are two different things, the difference being that unity requires diversity while uniformity does not. Unity happens when a husband and wife come together in the face of their great differences. Unity happens when people in a church with different gifts come together in mutual love and appreciation for one another and for the Lord.

Second, when Paul says to “agree in the Lord,” it doesn’t mean to agree to disagree. It is often the case that the wisest course of action is to do just that, but that is not what Paul is urging upon these two ladies here. We live in a world that has lifted diversity to the highest value of all, to the point that truth is lost and unity is largely dismissed as irrelevant, if not impossible. Everything is about power instead. When a Christian claims the truth that Jesus is the only way to the Father, the claim is simply dismissed as a power play.

The Bible is clear that unity is not uniformity because of the presence of diversity, but also that diversity is not to be emphasized to the point that unity is lost. How then do we go about pursuing unity? The answer lies in seeing precisely what Paul means by his command to “agree in the Lord.” There are times when considering the original language of the Bible can really help us understand something, and this is one of those times. In the original, the word translated “agree” is almost identical to a phrase back in the command of 2:5 when Paul wrote, **“Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.”** Instead of repeating that whole section again here, Paul is using this phrase as a bit of shorthand, trusting that the readers and hearers of this epistle will read into this command everything that was back there.

Chapter 2 lays the groundwork for church unity, and it is found in Jesus. Unity comes as we draw near to Jesus and become like him in his humility and his obedience. There is a sense in which unity is more about what you are than what you do. So is there something you can do to further the unity of the church? Yes, you can be more humble and draw closer to Jesus. Unity is something of a byproduct of walking in humble trust in Jesus. Disunity is not just a problem caused by other people, but something each of us can address by having more the mind of Jesus.

Let me give a specific example of what this might look like. Self-righteousness is a frequent source of church disunity. The self-righteous person lacks humility, and this shows itself in viewing others as the problem while never seeing one’s own sin. This leads, in Paul’s words in Galatians, to people “biting and devouring one another” (Gal. 5:15). The answer to self-righteousness is humbly coming to Jesus for righteousness. That was Paul’s story in the previous chapter. The righteousness of Jesus is given to us as a gift, and when we receive that gift by faith, it gives us a sense of fullness. When we live in the fullness of Christ’s righteousness given to us as a gift, we are freed up to love others instead of needing others to boost our own righteousness. For example, have you ever known a tall person who needed to say, “Have you noticed how tall I am?” A tall person doesn’t need to do that because he is confident in his tallness. A person living in joyful gratitude for the gift of Jesus’ righteousness doesn’t need other people to boost his sense of self, and he is free to love and serve others, the very qualities that lead to unity.

III. Help These Women – How Can We Help?

There’s another way we can all further the unity of the church. We don’t content ourselves with just growing more humble and Christlike ourselves, but also embrace the role of helping others. Paul says, **“Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women.”** We don’t know precisely who this “true companion is. Literally, the phrase is “true yokefellow,” using the metaphor of the yoke that ties together two oxen as they pull the wagon or the plow. This

man Paul is referring to, possibly Epaphroditus who had been sent with the letter back to Philippi, was to labor in helping them. How, then, would Paul propose that such help be given? One of the Proverbs says, **“Whoever meddles in a quarrel not his own is like one who takes a passing dog by the ears”** (26:17). I’ve never attempted to grab a dog by the ears, but I don’t think the dog would interpret it as a helpful gesture. I note three principles from the text that help us know how to go about doing this.

First, Paul seems to labor to be evenhanded and show no partiality in the way he addresses these women. Literally, verse 2 reads, “Euodia I beseech and Synteche I beseech.” He does all he can to come inside their conflict without being seen as partial by either one. He doesn’t take sides.

Second, he avoids demonizing either party. Even though there is a problem in their behavior and attitude, there is also much good in these two. Paul is careful to mention this good. They have labored with him in the work of the gospel, and their names are written in the Lamb’s Book of Life. Euodia and Synteche, like the rest of us, are a mix of good and bad. That’s one of those truths we know in theory but have a hard time accepting in reality. Our tendency, especially when in conflict with others, is to see someone as fully bad. I think that’s one of the reasons Paul calls for others to help these women. Perhaps they have lost their perspective and are demonizing the other. Paul doesn’t compromise on the truth that they are guilty of violating the peace of the church, but nor does he give way to making them all bad.

Third, Paul deals with them in a very gentle manner, seen in several ways here. First, the word he uses, translated “entreat” in our text, is on the gentle end of this word group. It has overtones of encouragement and support. There were more severe words that were available to him, but he doesn’t use those. It would be like the difference in English between says, “I encourage you” and “I demand that you.” We also see his gentleness in his mix of rebuke with the affirmation we noted previously. We have a responsibility to protect the reputation of others, especially when there is a conflict raging. Paul does so here and teaches us by his example to do the same.

CONCLUSION:

Let me bring this to a conclusion with a question. Are you taking personal responsibility for the unity of the church, or do you see disunity as a problem caused by others? If you think it’s solely someone else’s responsibility, you’re missing the point. God calls each of us to own this by the pursuit of humility and by seeking intimacy with God. When we do so, our hearts are filled with joy and personal offenses melt into the background.

Small Group Discussion Questions
Philippians 4:2-3

1. What do you think are the biggest obstacles keeping people from unity, whether it's in the church, in a marriage, or in the workplace?
2. What kind of person is easiest to get along with? What are the characteristics of such a person?
3. It was pointed out in the sermon that one of the reasons Paul called out these two ladies by name is the tendency we all have to agree with biblical principles in theory but then fail to see how we need to apply that to ourselves. Euodia and Synteche would have agreed to the importance of unity while at the same time being guilty of disunity. This demonstrates the challenge of application. What helps you apply God's word to your life?
4. When Paul commands these two women to "agree in the Lord," he is using language from 2:5 where we are told to have the mind of Christ. Review again 2:3-8. What is the greatest application of this passage to you as you pursue unity?
5. Paul commands his "true companion" to help these women. Should we always seek to help those in a conflict with one another? If not, how do we know when to insert ourselves?
6. What does this passage teach us about how we can help others?
7. How does self-righteousness harm our ability to live in unity? Can you think of some examples?
8. How might the church be more of a light in our divided nation, a light to bring people together through Christ?