

## The “Why” of Church Unity

### **Introduction**

As I get to know this church more, I learn more about the history of CBC. Over these past two weeks, I've had conversations with some longstanding members here. In both of those conversations, these beloved brothers and sisters in Christ have spoken to me about the division that this church went through around the year 1987. They have told me how devastating this period was for themselves and for the church.

For those who don't know, there arose a division between the pastors of the church at that time. This division between the pastors led to divisions in the congregation. The conflict rose to the level that the church was almost split. Based upon the council of a church consultant from my beloved seminary DTS, the church decided that the only way it could move forward was for both pastors to leave the church and for the church to bring in another pastor. That new pastor was Pastor Harvey. Harvey came here in April 1987, about two months before I was born.

As our history illustrates, division within the church is a serious threat to the church. Church unity is absolutely central to health and effectiveness of our ministry. If we want a healthy church, we must be unified. If we want an effective church, we must be unified. Our unity as a church is very important.

Disunity is a constant threat. This is not just something that is in the past for our church body. Due to sin and the work of the devil, church unity must be something that we all seek together all the time. Disunity is a struggle that every church in every place during every time has struggled with. Even the Philippians.

This morning we are transitioning to a new section in Philippians. Last week we completed Chapter 1; this week we begin Chapter 2. And for this week and the next two weeks, I will be elaborating on various aspects of church unity. This week we will deal with the “why” of church unity; next week the “what” of church unity; and the next week the “how” of church unity. This week the “why,” next week the “what,” and the next week the “how.” That's where we are headed.

Now let's go ahead and open up to Philippians 2:1. I will read through v. 5. The passage reads,

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own

interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.

Now we will not be covering this entire passage of Scripture today. For today's sermon, we will only cover v. 1 and the beginning part of v. 2. For next week's sermon, the "what" of church unity, we will cover the part of v. 2 that we do not cover today. And in two Sundays from now, the "how" of church unity, we will cover vv. 3–5. That's the plan, brothers and sisters.

Now we have talked about church unity two weeks ago. Look with me at 1:27. Paul mentions here "standing in one spirit" and "striving side by side" together. There, Paul is talking about church unity. That unity, though, was about unity against external forces of division. Specifically, there were opponents on the outside that were trying to tear the church down. Those opponents are mentioned in v. 28.

Paul pivots in Chapter 2 to discuss a different type of unity. In the previous section, it was a unity focused towards against forces outside of the church. In the beginning of Chapter 2, the unity is one against internal divisions. Paul does not elaborate for us what exactly is going on in Philippi. To be honest, though, it doesn't really matter. The causes of unity are always the same. It's sin and the devil. That never changes, never, dear friend.

That's the large context. Let's go ahead and jump into our passage for this morning. It's this:

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy.

The main question this passage answers is, "Why should the church be unified?" That's the question. This passage provides the reason for church unity. I will answer this question with two points.

### **God's Love**

The first point for you this morning is this: "God's Love." This is the large idea for this point, God lavishly showed his love to the Philippians. I get this point from v. 1.

So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy

### *A Divine Framework*

In order to understand this verse, we first must tackle a thorny interpretive question. The difficulty with this verse is Paul is not explicit with reference to "Who is doing what to whom?" Look at this statement of "any comfort of love." To complete the idea we have

to join it with what Paul says at the beginning of the verse. So it's like this: "So if there is . . . any comfort from love." Well, Paul, who is this comfort from? Who is it directed towards? Is he talking about the comfort that God gives? That he gives to the Philippians? That the Philippians give to themselves? What's he talking about? We run into this same issue with the last statement of "any affection and sympathy." Is this an affection and sympathy from God to the Philippians? From Paul to the Philippians? Or from the Philippians to themselves? It's not totally clear who is doing what in this passage.

The way I want to interpret this passage is this. I want us to see all these nouns in v. 1 as blessings from God to the Philippians. There is one main reason for this. To explore this reason, listen to what Jas 1:17 states. This passage reads,

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change.

What meaning of this passage is simple: anything good we experience ultimately has its origin in God. Every good thing we have, or experience is, whether directly or indirectly, from God.

With that in mind, look again at our passage, Phil 2:1. Are the nouns of our passage—encouragement, comfort, participation in the Spirit, affection, and sympathy—good things or bad things? They are good things, obviously. And if there are good, therefore, they are from God. Pretty simple. Even though it's not specified in the passage that these are from God, theologically we know that they are. These blessings are from God directed towards the Philippians.

*"If"*

Now look with me at the second word in 2:1. Here we have this word "if." "If" are always followed by "thens." The "then" that is implied is found in v. 2. The idea here that Paul is stating is, "If these realities are true in v. 1, then do what I say in v. 2."

However, this "if" throws us off because an "if" can be hypothetical. That is, "if" also include the idea of "if not." And when we read this passage, we ask, "What do you mean, Paul? There's not 'if' regarding God's blessings. God has tremendously blessed up."

Paul is not calling into question God's blessings towards the Philippians. No. What we see in English is not the best way to understand the Greek here. Another way to understand what Paul is saying is to understand the "if" as a "since." So, "So since there is encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, participation in the Spirit, affection and sympathy." Or, maybe even clearer for us, switch the word "if" for "because." "So

because there is encouragement in Christ, comfort from love, participation in the Spirit, affection and sympathy.” That’s the idea Paul is arguing here.

### *The Blessings*

Now we look at these blessings. Before we proceed, I want you to notice that Paul’s point is largely one based in . Paul does not present a tight logical argument here. He is not mainly appealing to the mind, but rather the heart. the We will take them one by one. Be

#### “Encouragement in Christ”

The first blessing that God gives in this passage is “encouragement.” This word refers to the lifting of one’s spirit. It means comfort or consolation. For the Philippians, they were suffering from persecution. Paul mentions that in the last verse of Chapter 1. Paul is speaking of God’s comfort, his lifting of their spirits in light of the difficulty of their circumstances. This comfort is experienced in relation to Jesus Christ. That what that small “in Christ” preposition phrase means. Based upon our union with Christ through faith, Christ mediates to us comfort when we are down and discouraged.

How often this is true of us. How often we become discouraged and disheartened with life. This life is riddled with disappointments, dear friend. Whether its our own sin, the sin of others, illness, disease, conflict in relationships, unanswered prayers, death, whatever. This life is full of difficulty. For the Christian, though, we have a faithful Shepherd. This shepherd cares for us. He loves us. He assures us that we are safe in him.

Jesus says this in John 16:33:

In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; I have overcome the world.

That’s what this comfort is. In this life we are constantly disheartened. But Christ is better. Christ is greater. He has overcome the world. And as a result, he can comfort us with the truth that he reigns.

#### “Comfort from Love”

The next phrase is “comfort from love.” Now who’s this love from? As I argued earlier, I think it’s the Father’s love for the Philippians. As the Father has been poured out to the Philippians, this love has produced comfort for them. Here we have an idea that is very similar to the idea expressed by the idea of “encouragement in Christ.” God the Father is all about comforting, supporting, and consoling his people. Paul double repetition of this idea of comfort drives this point home. He is a faithful shepherd. The second reason

naturally arises from the text. What you'll notice in this passage is that Paul mentions the Son and the Spirit, but he does not mention the Father. Hm. That's odd. Where's God the Father here? Well, I think he's here. He's lurking behind the scenes. Specifically, I think the Father stands behind the phrase "any comfort from love." Paul has this statement in 2 Cor 13:13 that is very similar to what he says in Phil 2:1. Turn with me to 2 Cor 13:13.

The passage reads,

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Notice the similarities between this passage and Phil 2:1. Here in this passage we have the Jesus-God-Spirit pattern. In our Phil passage, we are missing the reference to the Father. Using this passage, though, to help us interpret Phil 2:1 we would see that Father should be in between Jesus and the Spirit. Also, notice what attribute of the Father is mentioned? It's love. In our passage, Paul mentioned any comfort. In the NT, it is God the Father who. Specifically, because of what is there

"Any Participation in the Spirit"

With the next phrase, "any participation in the Spirit," Paul returns to his discussion of the Spirit that he mentioned in 1:27, where he wrote, "standing firm in one Spirit." The idea that Paul expresses in 2:1 is similar. God the Father has blessed the Philippians with the Holy Spirit. They together as a church and as individuals share together in the Holy Spirit. They have fellowship with him. They participate in the blessings that the Spirit imparts. And what are these blessings that the Spirit imparts? They are the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. God has blessed the Philippians with these tremendous realities.

"Any Affection and Sympathy"

Paul now concludes v. 1 with the statement "any affection or sympathy." I looked these words up in a Greek dictionary, and you know what I found out they mean? Affection and sympathy. That's right. The idea is the God relates to the Philippians in a warm, caring, and understanding way. He has great concern for them, great care. In their trials, he has great pity upon them. He is a Father to them. When one of my children is hurt or sad, my heart breaks for them. That is how God is but in an infinitely better way than I am.

*Conclusion*

What Paul is doing here in v. 1 is a very similar to what many parents do when they have a disobedient child. When a child disobeys, a parent has many different options for

discipline. Spanking, time outs, removing of privileges, extra chores, getting chewed out. All of these work. Christians can and should use all these techniques.

There is another approach, though. And this approach can also be very effective. This approach is very tender, warm, and gentle. Rather than a rebuke, this approach involves a dialogue between parent and child. Rather than inflicting pain upon the child, this approach appeals to the child's heart. It is intended to overwhelm them with the love of their parents so that they stop their disobedience.

So after your child has done something wrong, you sit them down on the couch and this is what you say to them:

Son, have you been loved in this family? Have your mother and father loved you faithfully? Have we encouraged you? When you were down and sad have we come alongside to offer you compassion and care and sympathy? When you were hungry have we provided food for you? Have we clothed you? Have we nurtured you as you grew from a little child? Have we provided all the medical care you needed to live a healthy life? Have we given you a warm environment in which to live? A bed to sleep? A room to dwell in? Son, have we shown you deep affection? Have we been gracious to you in the times when you were disobedient and rebellious, gracious to forgive you and love you and restore you? Son, have we shown you sympathy? Have we shown you mercy? Have we been patient with you while you were learning how to do things right and often did them wrong? Have you known our affectionate compassion? Have you experienced our goodness to you?

Wow. Such an approach overwhelms the child with their parent's love and tenderness. The love of the parents makes it very difficult for the child to disobey. The love of the parents is so tremendous, so outstanding, so long suffering, that the child feels strong compulsion to obey.

This is what Paul is saying here with reference to God and the Philippians. Paul is saying that God's love to them through his tender care, through his comfort, through his sympathy and affection towards them ought to overwhelm them into obedience. God's love is the motive for obedience. God's love for us is so tremendous that we must be unified. To answer the question we posed at the beginning: Why should we the Philippians be unified as a church? Because of God's love towards them. Therefore, why should we be unified as a church? Because of God's love.

### **Our Response**

Now what are the ramifications of God's heart for the Philippians? Based upon God's love for them, his blessings, his mercies, his encouragement, comfort, and sympathy,

how does he want them to live? What does he want them to do? With this question, we transition to our second point. If you're taking notes, write this: "Our Response."

It's very simple: We are unified to make God happy.

Look with me at the beginning of v. 2. Paul says this, "Make my joy complete." Although the "my" here is a reference to Paul, Paul is speaking on behalf of God. Paul's desires here align with God's desires. Paul wants the Philippians to make his joy complete because that is what pleases and honors God. The ramifications for God's love towards the Philippians is that they would respond appropriately by honoring him.

This type of motivator is very powerful. When I was a child, even though I was not a Christian, I acted in a certain way so that I would please my parents. There were certain activities that I would not engage in specifically because I had seen how much pain it brought my parents to see others around me engaging in those activities. Specifically, the main motivated for why I did not drink alcohol in high school or use drugs was because I knew how badly it would hurt my parents. I chose to abstain from those behaviors in order to please my parents.

Unity is about pleasing God. It's about bringing joy to his heart. Disunity is an affront to the love of God. It is a rejection of his blessings. It is a dismissal of his tender care. The only appropriate response to the love of God, to his blessings, is to respond by making him happy. And the way we make him happy is by being a unified church.