

Attitudes of Unity
Philippians 2
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Philippians is a letter all about unity – not worldwide religious unity, rather unity within one congregation, the case in point, the church at Philippi. Paul is not writing to a congregation on the verge of a split, as was Corinth. He was not writing to a congregation beset by false teachers, as was Colossae. He was writing to a congregation that was successful. They were doing what was right, yet Paul emphasized repeatedly in this letter, “Be of the same mind.”

Throughout history, no successful human institution has been so foolhardy so as to consider unity as a possibility, let alone a founding principle. In the past several thousand years, even as recently as the twentieth century, people have tried to establish small, utopian societies based on the good of the group: unity. All of them have failed because, eventually, in fact quite quickly, someone has decided that the needs of me were more important than the needs of you, and the whole system dissolved.

On the other hand, if a society is prepared for, if it expects, selfishness, it can survive. That is why our society has lasted so long. Capitalism is based on human greed and selfishness, so it works. The only system on earth to have worked as well is a dictatorship, based on power. In fact, the only system ever tested on a large scale that was predicated on the good of the group, which was based on serving one another, was communism. And we can all see how it quickly deteriorated into a dictatorship. Those communist governments that have not already failed are being modified to include capitalism – greed – as a motivator for the masses

But, somehow, God expects the church to run on, to endure on, self-sacrificing unity, even though it has never worked before. No wonder Jesus said that, should the church achieve such unity, it would be a miraculous sign that Jesus came from the Father.

In Philippians 2, Paul outlined four attitudes of unity. These attitudes build upon one another to unity, Paul teaches how to build the attitudes which are the foundation for a unity never before achieved by man. First, closeness:

(Philippians 2:1 – 4) Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not look out for your own personal interests, but for the interests of others.

There are many ways to try to hold people together. Paul reminded the Philippians church that selfishness will not work in the church. But we are conditioned to expect self-centeredness. Our own capitalistic system is built on it. People will remain united as long as their personal goals are being met. That’s why we have such a huge trade deficit. We buy foreign goods because they are cheaper and because we want them, so loyalty is superseded by our own desires.

The same happens in the Western church. We have loyalty with our time and money until there is something we want, and suddenly we just don’t have the time for the affairs of the Kingdom.

Paul also writes that empty conceit will not make unity, although it is a common tactic. Look at our foreign policy over the last century. We flatter and bribe backwater nations to be our friends, which lasts until a better offer comes along. We make the same mistake in the church, but in evangelism and in the operation of the church. We build our evangelistic appeals on our capitalistic and democratic ideals when we entice people with the rewards of the Kingdom, like heaven and an extended family and equality, which are good things, but those are self-centered appeals that produce self-centered church members. Our appeal instead must be one of honoring and serving the Creator, and avoiding justice on that day, the concept of serving the God who rescued us.

We do the same inside the church, empty conceit, with our culturally induced need for specially trained church leaders, instead of building the Kingdom as God did in Acts, using poor and untalented people yet conquering the world in a generation. We flatter those who confuse us because it gives us what we want: someone else to do church for us and the freedom to switch to a new confusing specially trained leader when the first one begins to encroach a little too much into our time and money.

So what is the answer? Paul gives the first building block to unity in the latter part of this paragraph: closeness, emotional ties.

To say that we are united on the Bible alone is nice, but it is not Biblical. Paul made the rather obvious observation that nothing holds people together better or longer than being close. If the church in this country is to survive, it must shift to a unity built on “the consolation of love, the fellowship of the Spirit, affection, and compassion.”

Verse 4 is a prime example of how the church has lost confidence in the Word of God, therefore shifting from God’s principles of unity to a unity based on what we disguise with the empty conceit of the “authority of the Scriptures.” That concept didn’t work for the Pharisees, either. Every modern translation except the Jerusalem Bible (which was translated from Greek to French by monks in Jerusalem) waters down verse 4. Check yours. What it really says is, “Don’t look out for your own personal interests, but for the interests of others.” Modern translators simply have not been able to come to grips with Paul’s concept of forgetting ourselves, so they decide that he must be speaking metaphorically, and supply us with what their minds believe he really meant.

Unity is not based on similar church practices, but on encouragement, consolation, affection, compassion, and love. This fellowship of the Spirit is based on what we have been given, His Spirit. It is not based on us.

And how do we develop this level of caring? Not by loafing together, as fellowship has become, but working together and learning together and suffering together.

Starting from this foundation of care, Paul moves on to the next building block of unity: the attitude of a servant.

Philippians 2:5 – 11) 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. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee will bow, of

those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Jesus could have kept His equality with God, been worshipped, without ever coming to earth. Even if it had been Jesus' responsibility to do something about the mess people have made of creation, He could have done it in a way that was less painful emotionally. He could have stayed in heaven and sent the gospel by remote control. He had the power to do it. He could have come to earth and been a bit less touchable, and avoided some real anguish. But that would have been out of character with unity. When you get close to people, you want to serve them and serve with them. Having a closeness, having emotional ties, brings out the servant's heart in each one of us and that is what unity is built upon.

We demonstrate that we have the wrong idea of how closeness is formed. We rely heavily on social occasions, group meals and such, when the Bible never speaks of such occasions as a means of developing closeness. These people became close by working together, not eating together. They became close by serving side by side.

We often use the expression, "Serving God," which is really only a figure of speech. Unfortunately, many people have gotten the wrong idea about the concept of the servant's heart from it. We cannot, literally, serve God. We have nothing that He can use. We can do nothing that HE needs done. Actually, literally, we serve one another; we are in the service of God, but that service is performed on people, not on God.

But it would be so much easier to just serve God directly, because it is easy to serve a nice person. Instead, we must serve people who, in general, are not nearly so nice. That's why Paul presents these attitudes of unity in building block fashion. First, get close to one another. Then we can learn to serve as Jesus served. Look back at verse 4 again. What is Jesus' attitude had been, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others"? We are not just on Jesus' list of priorities; we are the list. Jesus simply did not look out for His own personal interests. That's the only way He could be an acceptable sacrifice. (An interesting side note, the Scriptures never focus on the cruelty of Jesus' execution. Rather, they point out the humiliation of it.)

We can learn to serve by serving those about whom we care. Serving others unselfishly, serving others even when it means great personal hardship (like the way it happened to Jesus) is not easy to learn, especially because of the selfish world in which we grow up, that has impressed its values on us since childhood. Paul shows us the way up and out. Serve those with whom you are close and you will learn to serve as Jesus did, serving even those with whom He was not close. Closeness begets service. The next building block of unity is that service begets responsibility.

(Philippians 2:12 – 18) So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, both to will and to work for His good pleasure. Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain. But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and

share my joy with you all. You too, I urge you, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

Learning to serve by serving those to whom you are close teacher responsibility. Paul reminded the Philippian Christians that, to achieve the unity God has in mind, we need to develop a sense of responsibility toward God, toward the world, and toward the brethren.

Did you notice how Paul began this paragraph? You obeyed, served, while I was present. Not show that you have developed responsibility by continuing to serve while I am absent. Remember, you have a responsibility toward God.

I'm sure you have known those without responsibility. They work only as long as they are being watched, but quit being productive very soon after the supervisor walks away.

Paul reminds us of how easy it can be to develop the responsibility to keep on working, to have the responsibility to carry out our obligations, to have the responsibility to be organized. He says to practice on those whom you love. Once you get the hang of carrying out your responsibilities toward those whom you love, you can move on to those further responsibilities.

When you are accustomed to carrying out what you say you are going to do for your family, it becomes almost a reflex to carry out your responsibility toward others. Would you forget to feed the kids? Would you forget your child's birthday? Of course not. This is training for unity.

Once we learn that simple level of responsibility, we can move on to being "lights in the world." We can begin to discharge our responsibility toward the world and carry the gospel to it.

Once we learn responsibility, without which there is not hope of heaven, we can learn to be united, through serving the brethren. Paul demonstrated that level of responsibility by rejoicing in his service, even though his service resulted in his hardship, because serving those about whom you care is a joyful responsibility.

If we do not have the responsibility to get things done that need to be done, perhaps it is because we did not start at the beginning. First, get close to someone and serve that person. Learn how it feels and how it works. Then expand the size of the group about whom you care and responsibility will result.

Paul ends the chapter with the examples of two men who cared.

(Philippians 2:19 – 30) But I hope in the Lord Jesus to send Timothy to you shortly, so that I also may be encouraged when I learn of your condition. For I have no one else of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare. For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus. But you know of his proven worth, that he served with me in the furtherance of the gospel like a child serving his father. Therefore I hope to send him immediately, as soon as I see how things go with me; and I trust in the Lord that I myself also will be coming shortly. But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your messenger and minister to my need; because he was longing for you all and was distressed because you had heard that he was sick. For indeed he was sick to the point of death, but God had mercy on him, and not on him only but also on me, so that I would not have sorrow upon sorrow. Therefore I have sent him all the more eagerly so that when you see him again you may rejoice and I may be less concerned about you. Receive him then in the Lord with all joy, and hold men like him in high regard; because he came close to death for the work of Christ, risking his life to complete what was deficient in your service to me.

These two men, Timothy and Epaphroditus, epitomize the attitudes of unity. They became so close to Paul that serving him was more reflex than conscious effort. In serving Paul, they learned what serving was all about, so they were able to serve others. Since serving had become so natural for them, discharging their responsibilities to God, to the world, and to the brethren became their lives. They ceased to think about “me.” They stopped allotting time and energy for what “I” want to do, because it just didn’t seem all that important any more.

The world thinks that that is a pretty dreary existence: none of self and all of Thee. That’s because they missed the first step. Until you care more about someone more than you care about yourself, you will never be able to serve others consistently. You will never be very responsible with your time, energy, or ability.

If you have trouble with responsibility, with getting things done on time, every time, of fitting the Kingdom into your busy schedule, drop back to that first step. If you really care about something, nothing will get in your way of getting it done. I am not saying that irresponsibility means you do not care about anyone but yourself. I’m saying that you haven’t learned to appreciate closeness and caring.

That’s what those early Christians had: a fierce loyalty to one another that compelled them to serve, that made them responsible. So, their unity actually worked. Ours can, too, if we will take the time to be close. Unity is based on closeness rather than doctrine, service rather than being served, responsibility rather than seeking the minimum requirements. This is a scary thought for church people. IF we have this closeness, service, and responsibility, the doctrine will take care of itself, we will stop thinking about what I am or am not getting out of church and focus on putting something in.

But if this foundation for unity has failed in every attempt by human institutions, how do we expect it to work in the church? Not by our own wills or by superior self control or dissection of the Scriptures. Rather, it is by the strength which God supplies.