

The “Why”, “What”, and “How” of Church Unity - *a gleaning from Philippians 2:1-13*

Introduction

Good morning church from Veldhoven! I am Hsiang-Ling and it is wonderful that we are here, together in worship, physically apart, but yet one in Spirit. And remember that even as I speak, we join hundreds and thousands of our brothers and sisters in Christ all around the world who are also similarly gathered together whether on ZOOM or at a safe distance, for one purpose, and that is for the glory of our Lord. Before I start, would you join me in prayer.

I am going to begin by telling you a story what I thought this sermon was going to be about. A good number of weeks ago when I was given the opportunity to preach today, the first thing I did was to go to the assigned bible readings for today, read through them to get a sense of what I wanted to be preaching about. The Philippians passage which Nick read earlier this morning was one of the assigned readings this week. I was like “yes!”. I want to preach on this. I mean there is no other passage in the bible which so clearly and gloriously gives us a picture of our Lord Jesus Christ: as to who he is and what he did. And can your heart not rejoice at the the ultimate statement of honour that every knee will bow before our Lord Jesus and every tongue confess that he is Lord!

Yes, I want to preach about Jesus, my favourite person in the world wide world! I want to tell you about his surpassing character, about how beautiful and glorious he is and what he did for us. Who wouldn't want to preach about Jesus! But then the weeks

passed (the benefit of not needing to preach every week is that you get the time to ruminate), and usually in the run up to a sermon, I would get all kinds of ideas how the sermon was going to look like. This time, my brain was strangely empty. I hit the panic button: Pray. Then suddenly, within the span of a day, I started to get a recurring theme in my head. I read this Philippians passage again and the theme jumped out at me (why didn't I see it before?), I go listen to an online sermon and the same theme is preached, I open my daily devotion email, and guess what? The same theme was there on the heading. I listen to the sermons from the preceding few weeks preached to our congregation by Francis and Jan, and I go "alright so this is what God is trying to say to us". If you know how the preaching assignments work in this church, it's not like the preachers all huddle together first to discuss what we will be preaching. So for me it was significant, that there was a red thread running through all the sermons in the past weeks and also for today. It is only now that I realise why my brain was empty those weeks before: I wasn't thinking God's thoughts, I was thinking my own thoughts.

So instead of today's theme being: The Glory of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (I still want to preach that someday), our theme today is on the UNITY OF THE CHURCH. A completely different topic. However Jesus plays a crucial role in that unity.

Let's now turn to our bibles and read Philippians chapter 1 beginning from verse 27. Phil 1:27 (NIV) Whatever happens, conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then whether I come and see you or only hear about you in my absence, I will know that you stand firm in one spirit, **contending as one man** for the faith of the gospel. Skipping down to chapter 2, verse 1 (ESV) : "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.” Let’s stop here for now.

Today in this bible passage we will look at the why, the what, and the how, of church unity. Why we have to be united, what being united looks like, how are we to be united. In other words, the motive for unity, the marks of unity, and the means of church unity.

The Philippian church that Paul is writing to is the first church that Paul had established in Europe. Remember Lydia, the seller of purple cloth in Acts 16? That’s Paul’s first convert in Philippi. From what Paul writes in the letter to the Philippians, it appears that the church in Philippi was in essence a healthy church with one issue, there is conflict between two women in church (4:2), and **perhaps** a hint of the wrong doctrine of salvation by works (3:2). Why do I say the church in Philippi is relatively healthy? If you compare the letters Paul writes to the church of Corinth: there were divisions in the church, disorder during church meetings, immorality, false teaching, I mean, that church was a mess! Paul had to write at least 2 letters to the Corinthians to them to sort them out. As for the church in Galatia, Paul calls them “foolish Galatians” (Gal 3:1) because they were going back to legalism, a “works salvation”. Paul was so upset with them because the core of the gospel is that no one can earn their own salvation, it is a gift freely given from God. Free for us but paid for by the blood of Jesus Christ.

The church in Philippi, in comparison, just has a tiny problem of two church members who can't agree with each other. In 4:2 Paul pleads with Euodia and Syntyche to agree with each other. Is disagreement such a problem? I mean, I disagree with my own husband all the time! And the husbands amongst us would say: "Women! They never agree anyway." There are as many people as there are opinions in this world and there are as many opinions as there are church members in our church. What really is the problem? Disagreeing isn't the underlying issue. The disagreement was in danger of escalating into conflict and conflict is the **result** of a deeper underlying issue. There is something else at play here. Paul finds this so important that he bothers to give us in the letter to the Philippians a comprehensive roadmap for harmony and unity in the church.

1) Point one: Why do we need to be united- the motives of unity?

The one line answer which we find in v.1:27 is that unity is the manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. OK, that is a good motivation, but Paul give me some specifics to make this motivation real. Paul gives that to us in four points in ch 2:1: "(NIV) If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete."

The "ifs" used here is not an uncertain conditional. I am going to get a little technical with you here. What is an uncertain conditional? For example an uncertain conditional would be such a statement I make to my son: "If you manage not to spring on the sofa the whole day, then I will bring you to the ice-cream salon." For those who know my son, in all likelihood he's not going to make it, he may but it is unlikely. In contrast, the "if" that Paul uses here is what is called a first class conditional, which in Greek denotes certainty

of fact. To make it simple for our non-Greek minds, an easier translation to understand the meaning of this verse would be to use “because”. Paul is saying: **because** you have been encouraged by Christ, **because** you have received comfort from his love, **because** you have experienced His Spirit and have been the recipient of His tenderness and comfort, this then is how you should respond by being of the same mind, having one spirit and purpose. We strive to agree because that is our love response to what Jesus Christ has done for us.

If you have received and accepted the free gift of salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ, such that you have been cleansed of your sins and now am able to have full communion with God through the Spirit of God that has been put in you. If it is purely by grace that you have been saved through faith, as a gift from God and not through your own works, because our own works are but filthy rags before a holy God, then what should our response be to this God? If we care at all about a person, then we also care about what that person cares about. What was Jesus’ last prayer for the church before he went to the cross? He prayed that we may be united so that the world may believe.

If unity of the church was one of the last things on his mind going to the cross, shouldn’t that be one of the the first things we should strive for in our church? But we do it not because we **have** to do it - that’s legalism. We do it because we **want** to - that’s relationship. In a love response to all that we have received from Jesus and His Spirit, we strive (that’s the word Paul uses in v.27 because it’s not going to be easy), yes we strive, we content as one man for unity. And it is in this unity that we display the conduct worthy of

the gospel of Christ **so that** the world may believe. Our unity is a springboard for our evangelism.

2) Point 2: What does unity look like - the marks of unity?

Follow me to v.2. It's all there, the marks of a united church. Paul says "Make my joy complete by?"

One, being like-minded;

Two, having the same love;

Three, being one in spirit;

Four, being one in purpose.

On the whole, does our church look like that? On an individual, person to person, family to family level, do the relationships in our church look like that? Go ahead, take a look at the names and faces on your computer screen or mobile phones. Am I like-minded with him or her? Do we have the same love? Am I one in spirit and purpose with him or her? Do I even want to be one in spirit and purpose with him or her? Yet according to Paul, these are the defining marks of a united church.

I'll tell you a secret: I find it tremendously easy to be the perfect Christian... when I am on my own. It is only when I get rubbed up the wrong way, that being the perfect Christian becomes a little more difficult. But it is only in our interpersonal relationships, in how we treat others that God reveals to us the state of our hearts and ultimately, our relationship with him. You want a litmus test of your relationship with God? For a start get involved in church life that requires you to work with other members in the church. Then let's sit down again to chat about your relationship with God.

[SLIDE 1: Marks of Unity] I want us to take a moment to read those words for ourselves and let them sink into our hearts and minds. If we are to call ourselves a church under the lordship of Christ, then we need to have unity and this is shown by us being like-minded, having this love for Christ and each other, united in our spirits and with the Spirit of God, and having one purpose, God's purpose.

Before I leave this point, I must stress that being like-minded is **not** equivalent to having the same ideas, or same preferences, or sameness, or uniformity. I can like organ music for worship but you can prefer the electric guitar but we can still be united as a church. I bring up worship styles just as an example (By the way neither instrument gets my vote), but there are a thousand things about church life that you yourself can name which can cause division and conflict. So how now? This leads me to my final and in practice, the most difficult point.

3) **Point 3: How to be united - the means of unity?**

I mentioned early on that differing opinions are a fact of life. With the thousand things we can think of of church life that can cause conflict, from doctrine to the colour of our carpeting, how do we deal with them? Paul gives us four means of how to deal with these differences in verses 3-5. First, do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit; second, in humility consider others better than yourselves; third, look not only to your own interests but also the interests of others; fourth, which is in essence a summary of the above 3 points, is to have the same attitude of humility as Christ Jesus.

[SLIDE 2: Means of unity]

If you look at the list, there is nothing ambiguous about it. Is there anything too difficult to understand about it? Now let's take a situation of conflict or just difference of opinion. Most of us, whether we are being honest or not, will easily give ourselves a pass grade on the first test. Have you ever been in an argument with someone who tells you: "This is how it should be because this is what would be best for me, that would advance my personal interests, and preserve my pride?" Never right? So in any conflict situation, we easily give ourselves a pass on the first test. Although, oftentimes if we dig deep enough, we will find some self-seeking reason or empty pride somewhere in our deeply held way of thinking. Furthermore **even if** in the beginning you may have had all altruistic and good reasons, at some point in time in that process, the longer the conflict goes on, the more the original reasons for holding on to your stand becomes less important than preserving your damaged pride. In other words, we often start out good, then when our opinions get rejected, or brushed aside, or devalued, then the stance of: "I am right and these are my reasons why, so you must be wrong", that takes over, so we dig in our heels but lose sight of the relationship.

The second test is even more difficult to pass. In humility consider others better than yourselves. What? In every circumstance? Am I to give up on a promotion in favour of my less deserving colleague? What if I am clearly the better trained and educated one? Paul isn't telling us to be a doormat. Note that this is the second half of verse 3. In the first half, Paul did not say that ambition nor pride itself is bad. What then is bad? Selfish ambition and empty pride. The word Paul uses for selfish ambition has reference to a paid

mercenary who fights only for his own benefit. Vain conceit or empty pride refers to having pride without basis or justification. The counterfoil to that is Humility. In a situation of disagreement, have an attitude in yourself that consider that others act from the best of motives, whilst you yourself act from the worst of motives. (No one said it was gonna be easy!) As counterfoil to selfish ambition, to the mercenary who only fights for his own benefit, Paul tells us to not only consider our own interests but also the interests of others.

And if all that is not clear enough, Paul summarises his points by appealing to us to look at Jesus as our shining model and example. Verse 5 (NASB): “Have this mind-set, this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus.”

I know you have heard this before but it bears reminding: It all starts with our **minds**. What we think about determines also our attitude. Consider Jesus: Even though Jesus had all the right to, he did not consider equality with God as something to be grasped (v.6), He emptied himself (v.7), He humbled himself (v.8). This particular passage from verse 5 to 11 has been studied left right and centre for it's treatise on Jesus but I skim over it now because this isn't our focus this morning. Paul placed this hymn of Jesus right in the middle of his roadmap for unity as the supreme example of what this mind-set and attitude of humility looks like. Jesus is our model to follow. Increasing conformity to the image of Christ is the mark of a Christian.

Think back to when you first became a Christian. Think now to the person you are currently. Has there been for you an increasing conformity to the image of Christ? Is conformity to Christ a difficult model to follow? Absolutely! Which is why Paul tells us to strive at it. We as individuals and the church cannot afford not to follow Christ's model because humility as modelled by Jesus is the essential ingredient for church unity. We cannot have unity without humility. But oh how difficult the standard! Emptying ourselves, humbling ourselves? Fortunately Paul gives us the promise of victory in v.13 because we do not strive on our own strength. It is God himself who is working in us.

So if I have to summarise the means of church unity in one word, that would be: Humility. Humility in and among the members of the church. A self-denying, self-sacrificing, an emptying of self kind of humility as modelled by our lord Jesus Christ. What then is the underlying issue that results in unresolvable conflict? It is the lack of humility. It's the inability to consider others as possibly better than ourselves because of our empty pride. It is our stubborn refusal to lay down our rights to follow the model of our Lord, who laid down His right to call upon His Father to send angels to rescue him from the cross (Matt 26:53), because he was obedient even unto death on the cross (v.8) for your sake and for mine. What if Jesus did not lay down His right? Then we would have no hope and no future. He has done it for us, and now He asks us to do it for Him.

Conclusion

Our church will certainly be charting uncertain waters with Pastor Francis and Barbara leaving us in a few months. We will be having differing ideas what is best for our church moving forward. I think the Lord is reminding us of the importance of preserving

our unity. What is your right that the Lord is asking you to lay down for His sake? Do we have an Euodia or Syntyche among us? Are we becoming an Euodia or Syntyche?

If you have received encouragement in Christ, if you have been consoled by His love, if you have fellowship of the Spirit, if you have received any of His affection and compassion, then hear the Lord's heartfelt prayer on the way to the cross (Jh 17:21): "that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Will you strive as one man for the unity of this church so that the world may believe? Please pray with me.