

“True Spiritual Unity”

June 29, 2025

Philippians 2:1-4

I. Introduction

Paul had just written about the suffering and the struggles the church had and will continue to have until Christ returns. He wrote about standing firm and contending as one man against “those who oppose you” (Philippians 1:27-28). But Paul knew that there was an even greater threat to any church fellowship than persecution from outside; this greater threat is lack of unity within the church. Because of its importance, Paul addressed the issue of unity to some degree in every one of his letters. In Romans 15:5-6, he wrote: “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus, so that with one heart and mouth you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He wrote about unity to the Ephesians—turn to Eph.4:1-6. One of Satan’s major attacks is to cause disunity in Christ’s church. A divided, bickering church is spiritually weak. Such a church offers little threat to the devil’s work and has little power for advancing the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Although sound doctrine, moral purity, and loving commitment to the Lord and to His work are essential for a church to have an effective ministry, these things alone cannot guarantee protection from disunity. The commentator William Barclay wrote that *“the one danger which threatened the Philippian church was that of disunity. There is a sense in which that is a danger of every healthy church. It is when people are really in earnest, when their beliefs really matter to them, that they are apt to get up against each other. The greater their enthusiasm, the greater the danger that they must collide. It is against that danger Paul wished to safeguard his friends.”*

From various parts of the New Testament, the church at Philippi was identified for the most part as being theologically sound, devoted, moral, loving, courageous, prayerful, and generous. Yet it faced the danger of disunity that can be caused by just a few people. Such troublemakers can stir up contention and strife that soon infects an entire congregation. In Philippians 1:27 Paul had already written, “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.” In today’s Scripture, Paul wrote about true spiritual unity; a matter of the heart. He began with reasons for spiritual unity.

II. Four Reasons for Spiritual Unity

A. Encouragement in Christ The Greek word translated “if” in verses 1 and 2 could have been translated “since”: “Since there is encouragement in Christ, and since there is comfort from love, and since there is the fellowship of the Spirit, and since there is tenderness and compassion, make my joy complete.” In these verses, Paul gave 4 reasons for spiritual unity; the 1st is “*encouragement in Christ.*”

Encouragement means to come along beside someone to give comfort, counsel, or support. In **Matthew 18:20** Jesus said, “For where two or three come together in my name, there am I with them.” In **Matthew 28:20**, Jesus told His disciples that “surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.” In **Rev.3:20** Jesus said, “Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” Just like the comfort and support given by the Good Samaritan to the one that had been beaten and left for dead in **Luke 10:30-37**, Jesus is with each Christian to offer comfort and support. With that thought in mind, Paul asked, “*Shouldn’t the influence of having Christ in your life compel you to preserve the unity that is so precious to Him?*” This is the unity Jesus prayed for in **John 17:23**, “May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.” One reason for spiritual unity is the encouragement of Jesus Christ.

B. Comfort from love A 2nd reason for spiritual unity is comfort from love. When we were lost in our sins—when we were sinners—God loved us; He comforted us in love as He extended His mercy and grace to us when we became His children. **1 John 3:16** says, “This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us.” God put that same love in our hearts and we need to show this love to fellow believers—**Romans 5:5** says, “God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.” Spiritual unity will bloom, because of God’s comforting love which is given to us and which we share with others.

C. The Fellowship with the Holy Spirit The 3rd reason for spiritual unity is “*the fellowship with the Holy Spirit.*” Christians have an intimate relationship or fellowship with the Holy Spirit as He lives in each Christian—1 Corinthians 6:19 says, “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God?” As we read earlier in Ephesians 4:1, every believer should be motivated to “make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” The Holy Spirit is the source of spiritual power (Acts 1:8), of spiritual gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-11), and spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22-23). Ephesians 5:18 says that believers are to “be continually filled with the Spirit.” The fellowship each Christian has with the Holy Spirit is another reason for spiritual unity of fellow believers.

D. Tenderness and compassion The 4th reason for spiritual unity is “*tenderness and compassion;*” this is the tenderness and compassion each believer has received from God. Believers need to share this tenderness and compassion with others—Colossians 3:12 says, “Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience.” The tenderness and compassion we share with God and then we share with one another, the shared fellowship with the Spirit, the comfort of shared love, and the encouragement in Christ, are all reasons for the spiritual unity of fellow Christians.

III. Four Indicators of Spiritual Unity:

A. Being like-minded Paul then went on to list 4 indicators or results of spiritual unity; the 1st indicator is “being like-minded.” Paul wasn’t saying that Christians must be carbon copies of each other. He wasn’t talking about doctrine or moral standards. *Being like-minded* means to strive to achieve a common understanding and genuine agreement. Paul wrote about how one can be like-minded—turn to Rom. 8:5-9. To be like-minded we need to walk in the Spirit and not in our sinful nature; as Romans 15:5 says, “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you a spirit of unity among yourselves as you follow Christ Jesus.” Christians will be like-minded, walking in unity, when they set their minds on the things of God.

B. Having the same love A 2nd indicator of spiritual unity is “**having the same love—agape love.**” To have the same love is to love others equally—just as God loves us. Since agape love is love based on will or choice not of preference or attraction, *it can be commanded*. The Apostle John wrote about this love—**turn to 1 John 3:14-18**. Believers are to agape love one another “**with actions and in truth.**” Dissention and lack of unity in the church stems from lack of such love and sacrifice for one another.

C. Being one in spirit The 3rd indicator of spiritual unity is “**being in one spirit.**” In **Phil. 1:27** Paul wrote that Christian believers must “**stand in one spirit, contending as one man.**” Just as it did there, “*one spirit*” refers to the unity, harmony, and interdependence of fellow Christians. No two Christians—no matter what their level of spiritual maturity and knowledge of Scripture—will understand everything exactly the same. But if they are controlled by humility and love, they will be one in spirit—united in spirit. They will not allow unimportant differences to divide them or hinder their service for the Lord.

D. Being one in purpose If Christians are liked minded, have the same love, and are one in spirit, the 4th indicator of spiritual unity will follow: “**being one in purpose.**” To be one in purpose is to let the mind of Christ rule in each heart. This permits differences of expressions, differences in gifts, differences in methods of service, even differences in minor doctrines. One doesn’t go around beating others up because they disagree on things. Having the mind of Christ, believers will have one purpose—to bring praise and honor and glory to God as we spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ in a variety of ways. Writing to the Colossians Paul again emphasized indicators of spiritual unity—**turn to Colossians 3:12-17**.

IV. The Ingredients for Spiritual Unity

A. Do nothing out of selfish ambition. Paul gave the reasons or motivations for spiritual unity and the indicators of spiritual unity and then he gave the ingredients for spiritual unity. He started with two prohibitions: 1st he wrote, “**Do nothing out of selfish ambition or selfishness.**” To be selfish is to place one’s will above God’s will. Selfishness, a form of pride, is at the heart of most sin. It is a consuming and destructive sin. It begins by causing anger, resentment, and even jealousy. But from there, it can quickly divide or weaken a church. It can even poison work done on behalf of clearly biblical causes.

Discord and division are inevitable when people focus on their own agendas—their selfish ambitions—to the exclusion of others in the church. Sometimes such a narrow focus arises out of genuine passion for an important ministry. But disregard of fellow believers, no matter how unintentional, is a mark of lack of love. Sinful indifference to others produces jealousy, contention, and strife; all enemies of spiritual unity. **James 3:16** says, “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”

B. Do nothing out of vain conceit Paul’s 2nd prohibition was to “do nothing out of vain conceit.” Selfish ambition seeks personal goals; vain conceit seeks personal glory and acclaim. Such a person always considers himself to be right and expects others to agree with him. The only unity he seeks, or values, is centered on himself. Paul described such a person in **Gal. 6:3**, “If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself.” For spiritual unity, there must be no selfish ambition, no vain conceit.

C. Be humble Paul’s 3rd ingredient was to “be humble.” Humility is the direct opposite of selfish ambition and vain conceit. Someone has said that “*the humble person is not one who thinks poorly of himself; he simply does not think of himself at all.*” His conversations aren’t about himself and his wants, but about others. The truly humble person knows himself and accepts himself—**Romans 12:3** says, “Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.” The humble person yields himself to Christ as a servant, as a bondsman, to use what he is and has for the glory of God and the good of others. “*Others*” is the key idea of these verses. The humble believer’s eyes are turned away from himself and focused on the needs of others.

D. Don’t look only to your own interests but look also to the interests of others. Paul’s 4th ingredient was: “*Don’t look only to your own interests but look also to others.*” Some quarrels and divisions in churches erupt over programs or policies that may be equally biblical and important. Problems arise when people seek to promote their own ministry priorities at the expense of others. Some may consider youth ministry more important than adult ministry. Others may view personal evangelism as a higher priority than

group Bible study. The possibilities for conflict are almost endless. But division in the church is destructive. In each case, the best interests of the Lord and other believers are sacrificed.

Paul wrote that instead of being caught up in “*self*,” believers must “look to the interests of others.” It’s easy to say, but it is difficult to do. This is the outcome of considering “others better than yourselves.” “*Looking to the interests of others*” requires believers to “rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12:15), Romans 14:19 says that Christians are to continually to “make every effort to do what leads to peace and the building up of one another.” It is as Galatians 6:2 says to “Carry each other's burdens, and in this way, you will fulfill the law of Christ.”

V. Conclusion

In today’s Scripture, Paul’s concern wasn’t about doctrines, ideas, or practices that are clearly unbiblical. It was about interpretations, standards, interests, preferences, and such things that are largely matters of personal choice. Such issues should never be allowed to cause controversy within the body of Christ. To insist on one’s own way in such things is sinful, because it senselessly divides believers. It shows a prideful desire to promote a person’s own personal views, style, or agenda. Believers must never compromise doctrines or principles that are clearly biblical—but to humbly defer to another on secondary issues is a mark of spiritual strength not weakness. It is a mark of maturity and love that God highly honors because it leads to and preserves harmony in His body—the church.

Paul wasn’t advocating a church being made up of robots all walking in step with one another. Instead, he saw it as a group of individuals who, *despite their differences*, are willing to show love for one another through putting the well-being of others first. As Jesus said in John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The power of Christian love, the love that is part of the fruit of the Spirit, will keep the fellowship of Christians in unity. Paul summarized it this way in 1 Thessalonians 3:12-13: “May the Lord make your love increase and overflow for each other and for everyone else, just as ours does for you. May he strengthen your hearts so that you will be blameless and holy in the presence of our God and Father when our Lord Jesus comes with all his holy ones.”