

HAPPY HARMONY

Phil 2.1-4

INTRODUCTION

Have you ever wondered what sort of things made Paul really happy? Just try and picture him in your mind's eye for a moment.

- There he was in Rome, hundreds of miles away from his family and closest friends.
- We know that he wasn't in Rome as a tourist, to engage in a spot of sightseeing. He was there as a prisoner.
- He hadn't been booked into a comfortable hotel, or even a Bed and Breakfast hostel. He was being held in a prison cell, chained to a Roman soldier, 24 hours a day, seven days a week.
- He was awaiting his trial, unsure what fate awaited him. He might be released; he might be held in custody indefinitely; or he might even be executed – thrown to the lions, or burnt at the stake.
- And all the while, there were people outside bent on destroying Paul's reputation, dragging his name through the mud.

So what do you think would have made Paul most happy in such circumstances?

- We would have thought that top of his list would have been his release – so he could continue his work as a pioneering ambassador for Christ, preaching the Gospel to those parts of the world it hadn't yet reached.
- Second on his list might have been the silencing of his critics outside the prison gates.
- But what he actually puts top of his list is *the internal harmony of the church at Philippi*. That's a measure of how highly he prized it. Look at what he writes in verse 2. *Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose.*
- Paul has already explained (1.27) how vital unity is to our stability as Christians. We can't stand alone against the forces arrayed against us. We need the solidarity of our fellow believers.
- Paul has also explained (1.28) that our Christian solidarity is a powerful signal to those who oppose us, indicating that they're on the wrong side, and will come out the losers in their battle against Christ and his kingdom.
- And by the same token, the solidarity we cultivate within a Christian fellowship is a source of great reassurance to every believer – a sign of our ultimate salvation (1.28).
- So Christian unity, Christian solidarity, is essential for our survival and witness to the world.

But in the opening verses of chapter 2, Paul moves a step further by indicating that Christian solidarity is fundamental to the nature of the Gospel itself.

- In fact, it is fundamental to the very nature of God. God has revealed himself to us as a trinity – a tri-unity – for that is God's very nature, his essential being. He is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit comprising the one Godhead – a little like eight oarsmen making up a single crew, for a boat race. Except in the case of God, each member of the Godhead is totally one with the other two – one in nature, one in character, one in purpose, and one in activity. So much so, that we can speak of their being One God, not simply three persons within the Godhead.
- And because God himself is a trinity (a tri-unity), and because he has made us in his image to reflect his glory, he looks for us to be one within his church on earth.
- Though we are many, and gather from all sorts of different backgrounds and with all sorts of different characteristics, God looks for us to be one in our thoughts, one in our attitudes, one in our love, and one in our actions – so we faithfully replicate the trinity in our local church fellowships. That way we will not only please him and glorify him, but properly represent him to a watching world.

1. FOUR FOUNDATION STONES (v1)

So in the verses we are looking at together this morning, Paul begins by laying down four foundation stones for our unity as Christians. We could liken them to the four legs of a table, without which the tabletop would fall to the floor.

You will notice that Paul introduces them with the little word *if* (v1). This isn't intended to cast any doubt on them. Rather, it's there to suggest the implications of each of them. So we might do better to translate the word with a phrase like "since you know this to be true" or "in view of the fact that".

So let's look at each of our table legs in turn. First, Paul directs our gaze to

1.1 the stimulus that comes from being united to Christ.

If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ he writes.

- We came across that little phrase '*in Christ*' right at the start of this letter, in Paul's description of a true Christian (1.1). He is writing this letter to '*all the dedicated ones in Christ Jesus at Philippi*'. So, if the words 'at Philippi' describe his readers' physical location, the words 'in Christ' describe their spiritual position.

Illustration. I have often used the picture of getting on a bus to explain what this means in practise. Suppose you wanted to go to Newcastle by bus. You might go down to the bus station to find the right bus to take you there. You would ask at the enquiry desk, go to the appropriate bus stop, and wait for the vehicle to arrive. It will have a notice on the front indicating its destination: Newcastle. You could ask the driver if that's where he was going to take the bus. And you could even double-check with the passengers, who would confirm the route the bus would take. But until you place yourself on board that bus, it's not going to take *you* anywhere. It might take some other people to Newcastle; but for it to take *you* to Newcastle, you must put yourself inside it, on board it.

And it's just like that with you and Jesus. He is the vehicle God has provided to carry you back to himself. He is the only vehicle who can bring you to God. It's what Jesus taught his disciples in John 14.6. *I am the way, the truth and the life; no one comes to the Father except by me.* So to be brought into a relationship with God, and to be taken into God's presence beyond death, we have to put ourselves 'on board' Jesus. We must take our life and put it *into his hands*, for safekeeping. And we must leave it there *in his hands*, for him to take up and use in whatever way he chooses, for the rest of our days on earth. That's his prerogative as our Saviour and Lord.

Now, when we do that, something truly wonderful happens. Jesus likened it to a branch being grafted into a vine – or a vine growing a new branch altogether. His life starts to flow through my life, so I can bear fruit for him. So changing the analogy from a bus with its passive passengers being taken for a ride, to a fruit-bearing vine, we can say that being 'in Christ' is something dynamic, not static. It's a living relationship, not a static state of being.

The word translated *encouragement* here carries the sense of someone being *called alongside us* – not merely to encourage us, but to challenge us, exhort us, urge us, and stimulate us. So being in a living relationship with Jesus Christ is a very dynamic thing. It's very stimulating.

- ⇒ And this is one of the 'givens' of the Christian life. This is something we all share in common within a church fellowship. It's one of the foundation stones (or table legs) of our God-given unity.

The second foundation stone (or table leg) that Paul points us to next is

1.2 The comfort of God's love

The word 'comfort' reminds me of the opening words of Isaiah 40.1-2. *Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and proclaim to her that ... her sin has been paid for.*

This is the greatest consolation we can ever receive from God, in his great love for us.

- What we deserve for our sin and rebellion, our shortcomings and failings, is his just condemnation. But in place of despair, God brings us great comfort by telling us that *our sins have been paid for*. Our debt of guilt has been paid off by Jesus – once for all time - through his death on the cross for us.
- *Man of sorrows! What a name for the son of God, who came ruined sinners to reclaim! Hallelujah! What a Saviour! Bearing shame and scoffing rude, in my place condemned He stood; sealed my pardon with His blood: Hallelujah! What a Saviour! Guilty, vile, and helpless, we; spotless Lamb of God was He: full atonement—can it be? Hallelujah! What a Saviour!*

- The Greeks of Paul's day used to console themselves with the writings of the ancient philosophers when life was hard. But we console ourselves with the forgiving love of God. God has reached down to us in his great love and mercy, to whisper in our ear, "Your sins have been paid for – by my own Son at the cross. There's nothing for you to do, except accept my gift of forgiveness."

The word Paul uses for God's *love* here is the special one the New Testament writers adopted to describe the unique kind of love they had first seen in Jesus – a love that was both unreserved and shown to the undeserving. It was a love that stopped at nothing – not even death, to save those in need of it. And it was a love gifted to the undeserving, those with no prior claim to it.

- ⇒ This is also a 'given' for every Christian, something we all share in common, which provides a basis for our unity.

Next up, Paul speaks about our common

1.3 Participation in the life of God's Spirit

The word *fellowship* is one that is often bandied about in a fairly loose kind of way in church circles. Sometimes it means little more than a chat and cup of tea after a church service!

- But the root idea in the word is that of partnership – sharing in something, along with other people.
- So Paul reminds us here that we all share in the life of God's Spirit, those of us who are true Christians, because it's what being a Christian is all about.

Illustration. You will remember Jesus telling Nicodemus that unless he was *born again* – unless he received a new life from above from God, by his Holy Spirit coming to live within him, - he wouldn't even be able to see what God's kingdom was all about, let alone enter it and experience it for himself (John 3.3-5).

- By the same token, in Romans 8.9, Paul says, *if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.*

- ⇒ It's another 'given' of the Christian life – one of the foundation stones – one of the table legs upon which our unity rests.

And the fourth one Paul highlights for us here is

1.4 Our affinity for our fellow believers.

That's the thought behind the two words *tenderness and compassion*, at the end of verse 1.

- The first word, *tenderness*, refers to our inner feelings toward each other within the church. Literally, it's our 'gut reaction', because that's where the Greeks reckoned the source of our emotions was to be found – with good reason! We talk about having a feeling in 'the pit of our stomach' – either good or bad. Paul has already used the word back in 1.8, where he speaks about the 'gut-wrenching' feeling he had towards these Christians.
- And so if the word *tenderness* describes the feeling we have towards each other, the other word Paul uses here – *compassion* – speaks of the practical outworking of our feelings. It means literally to 'suffer alongside someone' – to enter into their experiences with them.

- ⇒ Now this is also a 'given' for us as Christians, because when we trust our life to Jesus, God adopts us as his children. So all our fellow believers become our brothers and sisters in the Lord. That's why we feel such an affinity for other Christians within a local church fellowship. They're family with us! And this too is part of the bedrock upon which our unity is based.

So here, we have the four table legs (or foundation stones) upon which our unity as Christians is built.

- *the stimulus we all enjoy, from being joined to Christ;*
- *the comfort we have all received, from a loving and forgiving Father;*
- *the shared life of the Spirit, we've been granted;*
- *and the supernatural affinity we have for each other, as brothers and sisters within God's family.*

These are four givens. These are things we have in common.

And that being so, they should find practical expression in the way we relate to one another, Paul goes on to explain in verse 2. Just as he has given us four foundations of Christian, he now gives us

2. FOUR PRACTICAL EXPRESSIONS (v2) of Christian unity.

First, he speaks of us cultivating

2.1 A common mind

He wants us all to start thinking the same way. And this comes about as we allow God to reshape the way we think.

- In Isaiah 55.8-9, God reminds us that, *"my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD. "As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."* This is why our whole way of thinking needs to be reprogrammed to bring it into line with God's.
- *Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind,* Paul urges us in Romans 12.2. *Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is--his good, pleasing and perfect will.* It matters how we think, what we think, and that we think! The way we think, as well as what we think, determines our behaviour patterns.
- *Illustration.* In the church at Philippi, there were different members from different backgrounds; and as a result of their different upbringings, I am sure they had adopted all sorts of different thought patterns. You had Lydia, a high-powered business executive, in sales, well used to adopting a very gentle, persuasive way with her customers. But then there was the local town jailer, a rough tough character, much more used to being very direct and blunt with people. It was the way they had been brought up. It was the way each of them had been trained to think and relate to other people. But now, *both* of them had to undergo a reprogramming of their thought processes. Both of them now had to learn to think the way God did. That was different for both of them, from the way they had been brought up to think.
- You see, it's no use for any of us to excuse ourselves by saying, "It was the way I was brought up to think. It's what comes naturally to me." Part of the challenge of being a Christian is allowing God to reshape the way to think, so that our thought processes are brought into line with his. We don't blindly accept everything our upbringing has instilled into us, any more than we accept every our society would try to impose on us, when it comes to the way we think about things, and what we think about things – or whether we think about things at all!
- All of us need to learn to think the way God thinks, and then we are brought to a common mind over issues.

Next, Paul says another practical expression of the unity we have as Christians will be the cultivation of

2.2 A common love – and again, the love he is speaking of here is *God's love* – God's love being worked into us and then out through us to others. Paul wants us to practise the same kind of *αγαπη* love that was first seen in Jesus – a love that is both unreserved in its giving; and undeserved by its recipients. It's a love that gives according to what people need, rather than what they merit.

- Now this is a very radical kind of love, especially for our society today. It's not simply sacrificial, to the point of death, hard though that is for any of us. It's an *unconditional* kind of love. You see, we live today in what is often called a 'meritocracy' – a society in which people get what they are considered to deserve, by and large. It's what the school exam system is all about. It's deeply ingrained now in our national psyche. Some people are very proud of it. They consider a meritocracy far better than the old class-based system for deciding who got what, and they are probably right.
- But neither a class-based system, in which people received things according to who their parents were (high, middle, or lower class), nor a merit-based system, in which people get what they are deemed to deserve, is an *αγαπη* way of operating.
- *Αγαπη* love gives people what they need, regardless of whether or not they deserve it. And that's the kind of love Paul wants us to cultivate within a local church fellowship. It's the kind of love God has shown us. We deserved nothing from him, apart from his condemnation, because of our sins, our failing and shortcomings. Yet he lavished upon us blessing upon blessing. And that's the kind of love Paul wants us to show to one another.

He speaks next about

2.3 A common spirit. He uses the word *ψυχη* here, to describe our common soul or character as a church. A church can take on a character all of its own, can't it! And Paul wants that character to be the character of Jesus. It's not just the way we think and feel towards one another that matters. It's the way we act and relate to one another too. Paul has already spoken about the importance of us *standing firm in one spirit*, when faced with opposition from outside the church; and here he drives home the importance of cultivating a common spirit within a local church fellowship for its internal harmony.

And this is always helped when we develop

2.4 A common purpose.

It's all about being of *one mind* again. It's about having the same objectives and goals as God. It's about adopting the kind of attitudes and values that we know will please him. Paul has expressed some of his goals earlier in this letter, in chapter one.

- His great desire and *hope* (1.20) was for **Jesus to be magnified** in his whole being – *always* – whether by fruitful living or courageous dying.
- His overriding priority (1.18) was to see **Christ proclaimed**, regardless of who was doing it.
- His heartfelt prayer (1.11) was for **Christlike fruit** in the lives of his readers.

These things define our purpose as a Church. They are what we can all give ourselves to wholeheartedly: the magnification of Jesus, in whatever we do; the proclamation of Jesus, to those who need to hear about him; and the reproduction of Jesus in our own lives. These are the great purposes of the church around which we can unite, and around which we must unite.

And so in verses 3 and 4 to an important postscript – some practical

3. HELPS AND HINDRANCES TO HARMONY (vs 3-4) in a local church.

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

- Our unity is God-given; but it needs to be outworked, by *each* church member. We all have a responsibility in this regard, because it only takes one bad apple to spoil the whole barrel.

3.1 Hindrances

What hinders harmony in a local church fellowship is first,

(a) **selfish ambition** – people pursuing their own goals and agendas. It's the "What's in this for me?" attitude; or the "What am I going to get out of this?" mentality. It's the voice of a child insistent on having its own way, a mark of spiritual immaturity. It was what was blighting the church's witness in Rome, as Paul was so acutely aware (1.17). Some were *preaching Christ out of selfish ambition*. They were the petty empire builders.

Another great hindrance is

(b) **pride** or *vain conceit*, as the NIV puts it. If selfish ambition has to do with a person's aims in life, pride has to do with their attitude to other people. They think they are a cut above the rest, and so look down their noses, rather disparagingly, at all the other lesser mortals in their world. It's empty boasting – boasting when there's nothing to boast about. We saw last Sunday evening, from the story of Hagar and Sarah, how pride can be so ruinous of harmony within a home. And the same applies within a church.

3.2 Helps

What helps harmony is

(a) **Humility**. This was a quality despised by the Greeks of Paul's day, but dignified by Jesus. He didn't stand on ceremony at the last supper, even though John tells us that he was fully aware he had come from God and was about to go back to God (John 13.1-17). But as one of his last actions on earth, he took a towel, wrapped it around himself, and began to wash his disciples' feet. Harmony within a church is fostered by people taking the initiative to do the rather menial tasks that we would naturally consider

beneath us. Jesus didn't consider washing the disciples' feet beneath him, because he had made it clear earlier that *the Son of Man had come not to be served, but to serve and give his life a ransom for many* (Mark 10.45). Harmony is helped when we cloth ourselves with humility, just as Jesus did with that towel. Harmony is hindered when we are puffed up with a false sense of our own importance, but is helped enormously when we reckon other people to be more important than we are.

Harmony is also helped when we consciously cultivate an

(b) awareness of other people's needs. It's so easy to get so wrapped up in ourselves that we're not even aware of the needs of other people around us, isn't it? We don't stop to ask ourselves, "What's best for them?" because we haven't even noticed them! We have been so caught up with our own agenda and goals. And so Paul says to us in verse 4, cultivate a greater awareness of other people and their needs. *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.* Never get so busy with your own life, that you've stopped being aware of other people's needs.

- Down in verses 20-21 of this chapter he gives us a practical example of someone who had learned this grace, Timothy, his son in the faith. *I have no one else like him, who takes a genuine interest in your welfare. For everyone looks out for his own interests, not those of Jesus Christ.* When we are looking out for the interests of other people, we are looking after Christ's interests. For whatever we do for one of the least of his brothers or sisters, we are doing, ultimately, for him.
- And he set us the supreme example of unselfish servanthood, as we will see in verses 5-11 next time.

May the fragrance of Jesus fill this place, the lovely fragrance of Jesus, rising from the sacrifice of lives laid down in adoration.

May the glory of Jesus fill His church, the radiant glory of Jesus, shining from our faces, as we gaze on him in adoration.

May the beauty of Jesus fill my life, the perfect beauty of Jesus, fill my thoughts, my words, my deeds, my all I give in adoration.