

SETTLING OUR DIFFERENCES

Phil 4.1-5

Introduction

The passage of Paul's letter to the Philippians that we are looking at this morning opens with one of the most heart-warming descriptions of a group of Christians found anywhere in the New Testament.

- Paul refers to the believers in Philippi not simply as *dear friends*, which they were to him. He also calls them *my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown!*
- But this most heart-warming of verses is immediately followed by a very disturbing verse, in which Paul has to plead with two of his former colleagues to be reconciled to each other in the Lord.
- And this juxtaposition of verses - revealing everything that was so good about the church at Philippi, alongside what could potentially destroy all that goodness – reminds us that we must always be vigilant in maintaining the unity of the Spirit, which is such a wonderful gift to us from God. *Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace*, Paul writes in ***Ephesians 4.3***.

Psalm 133 reminds us *how good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity!*

- It's *good*, because it reflects the very nature of God – a tri-unity of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
- And it's *pleasant*, because it is a welcome relief from a world in which there is so much conflict.
- But most importantly of all, it's essential for spiritual growth. *For there the LORD bestows his blessing, even life forevermore*, the psalm concludes (***Ps 133.3***).
- And for us as Christians, *life forevermore* means 'eternal life' – the greatest blessing the Lord can ever bestow on an individual and on a church.
- If churches are to see conversions - the bestowing of eternal life on people by God - they must be fully united.
- And if individuals are to go on and grow spiritually, the church they are in must be united. Any kind of division or disunity will be like a cold draught inhibiting growth.
- You will remember from ***1.9***, that Paul likens our love to a luxuriant tropical plant, capable of lush all-the-year-round growth. But if you put a healthy tropical plant in a cold draught, it will suffer. It's growth will be inhibited. So it is with Christians who find themselves in the unfortunate position of being in a divided church. Their growth will be inhibited. This is why unity is so important for every local church.

So before Paul confronts the difficult situation of two women who had fallen out with each other, he shows us what our relationships *should* be like with one another in a local church; and he does so, as always by pointing to his own attitude. Paul was a man who like to model good practise, not just talk about it.

So in verse 1, we see

1. PAUL'S GREAT AFFECTION (v1) for the Philippians.

Notice how

1.1 He loved them

In ***1.7***, he has spoken about the way in which he *held them in his heart*. His affection for them was real, not put on. His heart beat for them with the rhythm of Christ's heart (***1.8***). *I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus*.

- And it's clear to me that Paul loved the Philippians not just because of ***all they had done for him***. You will remember that they were the first group of Christians to help Paul out financially (***4.15***) - *as you Philippians know, in the early days of your acquaintance with the gospel, when I set out from Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you only*. Moreover, their giving had been on-going (***4.16***) - *even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me aid again and again when I was in need*. But it wasn't simply because the Philippians had given Paul financial aid that he loved them. It's easy for any of us to love those who give us money!

- No, Paul loved the Philippians believers for *who they were*. Twice in this letter, in **2.12** and here in **4.1**, he refers to them as *my dear friends*. And on no fewer than six occasions he speaks of them as *my brothers* (**1.12**; **3.1,13,17**; **4.1,8**). The Philippians were more than friends or colleagues to Paul. They were family – *his* family!
- And that, because we all *share in God's grace*, as Paul puts it in **1.7**.
 - We're not in the church on merit; we're not in the church because we're useful, let alone indispensable.
 - We are in the church solely on account of God's grace to us. That goes for all of us.

And so this should define the way we relate to each other in the church. We are a part of God's family because we are recipients of his grace – and that makes us all equals, brothers and sisters within the one family.

We see too, that Paul not only loved the Philippians.

1.2 He longed for their company.

God can testify how I long for all of you with the affection of Christ Jesus, he has written in **1.8**. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder," we sometimes say. And that was true of Paul. His longing for the Philippians was all the greater because he had been wrenched away from them, and now he felt *homesick* over them.

- So here's a reminder that if we truly love our brother and sister believers we will long to be in their company. We won't want to miss any opportunity of being with them. That means we will want to be at our midweek meeting and Sunday evening service if possible, as well as at our morning services.
- It means we will want to meet up with our fellow believers informally, during the week.
- A very large piece of research a few years ago sought to identify key characteristics of growing churches. One of the features identified were *loving relationships*. "The research tried to measure the extent of genuine love in a church. It asked questions like, *How much time do Church members spend with one another outside church meetings? How often do they invite one another to their homes for meals or a cup of tea? How generous are they with their compliments and words of encouragement? How guarded are they in their criticisms and grumbles? How much laughter and joy is evident? Genuine love is the most compelling attraction any church can possess (John 13.35)*, the research concluded - far more effective at drawing people in than any evangelistic 'methods'. Love in action confers on a church much greater charisma than all the marketing endeavours in the world. 'Marketing' for the church can at best be compared to a plastic flower. It may look real, but it has no scent. Genuine love exudes a fragrance that draws people closer."
- Alex Motyer comments (p201), *Most churches have a long way to go before we are feeling the emotions of Christ towards each other, as Paul was here. We so easily dismiss from our reckoning those whom God has accepted and reconciled; we so lightly offend those for whom Christ died. A passage like this rebukes our lukewarm affection for our brother and sister believers.*

The Philippians were

1.3 Paul's joy

- They were his joy because of their **partnership with him in the Gospel**, he explains in **1.4-5**. *In all my prayers for all of you, I always pray with joy because of your partnership in the gospel from the first day until now.*
 - It had begun with Lydia and the Philippian jailer offering Paul and his companions *hospitality* on their first visit to Philippi (**Acts 16.15,34**);
 - and it had continued through their *financial and prayer support* (**4.15-16**; **1.19**).
 - They had also seconded *personnel* for Paul's missionary team, in the person of Epaphroditus (**2.25-30**).
- But the Philippians were Paul's joy primarily because **they were going on with the Lord**. Nothing gives a Pastor greater joy than knowing that those he has had the privilege of leading to Christ are going on with the Lord. *It has given me great joy to find some of your children walking in the truth, just as*

the Father commanded us, writes John in his second letter. And in his third letter, he goes a step further when he writes (3 John 3-4), It gave me great joy to have some brothers come and tell about your faithfulness to the truth and how you continue to walk in the truth. I have no greater joy than to hear that my children are walking in the truth.

For this reason, the Philippians were also

1.4 Paul's crown – the eternal reward he would receive on the day of Christ's return, when he would see these believers fully glorified. No pastor could ask for a greater reward than that – seeing those he has been privileged to lead to faith in Christ, made perfect in his presence. *What is our hope, our joy, or the crown in which we will glory in the presence of our Lord Jesus when he comes? Is it not you?* he exclaims when writing to the Thessalonians (**1 Thess 2.19-20**). *Indeed, you are our glory and joy.*

1.5 The secret of stability and advances

As always, Paul provides us with a model of how we should relate to one another in the Christian church. And this way of relating is *how we stand firm in the Lord*, he tells us. Unity is the secret of stability. "United we stand, divided we fall," is the old saying. Paul has already spoken about us 'standing firm' in **1.27**, where he speaks about us *standing firm in one spirit, contending as one man for the faith of the gospel*. He will speak again about us *contending side by side in the cause of the gospel*, in **verse 3**. So the secret of stability in the Christian life, and the secret of effective service, is unity within the church. We can't hope to stand firm, let alone advance, if we are fighting one another instead of the forces of evil arrayed against us! "*Only a united church can present a united front to the forces arrayed against it, and so not give ground,*" writes Alex Motyer (p202). "*Only a united church can hope to face its foes and stand firm. Where there is disharmony on the inside, there is bound to be defeat on the outside. Where Christians cannot stand the sight of each other, they won't be able to look the world in the face either. they cannot win on the main front, against the world, if they are secretly carrying on a conflict on the home front. This is why Paul sees disunity as such a solemn and disastrous thing.*"

And so having spoken about his great affection for the Philippians, he moves on to highlight

2. HIS GREAT ANXIETY (vs 2-5) concerning them.

- In **verse 2**, he publicly names two women who had fallen out with each other, *Euodia and Syntyche* – two of Paul's former colleagues, *who had contended at Paul's side in the cause of the gospel*.
- And having named these two women publicly, Paul proceeded to plead with each of them individually to be reconciled to the other. *I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord*. Literally, he pleads with them to come to 'one mind' – to have a common feeling for each other, other than mutual animosity! All the good that was being built up in the fellowship at Philippi was in danger of being undermined by these two warring women.

Let's unpack these verses carefully, because it is so important for us to know how to handle disputes within a church properly. Disagreements and disputes are bound to occur from time to time; and if they are not resolved satisfactorily, they can prove immensely damaging to a fellowship. Churches are damaged much more often by internal disputes and disagreements than by external pressures - or even doctrinal heresies. So let's break down what these verses are teaching us.

First, we need to recognise that

2.1 Differences of opinion are inevitable between Christians because we come from such a wide diversity of backgrounds. We have had very different experiences of life. We are blessed with a variety of temperaments and personalities, gifts and opportunities. So we are bound to look at things from different viewpoints. Now it is important to realise that our diversity is a good thing. It's God-given, and enriches our fellowship. Life would be very dull if we were all exactly the same!

2.2 But divisions on the grounds of our differences, or on any other grounds, are always unacceptable

We may have our discussions or debates, but they must always be brought to a satisfactory resolution – one that ensures on-going harmony. That's why Paul has already written in **2.2**, *make my joy complete by*

being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Ralph Martin comments (p166): *being like-minded means having a mind that sets the good of the church above personal interest. It's having an outlook that derives its inspiration and example from Jesus himself* as Paul goes on to explain from **2.5-8**.

So if disputes arise, they must be resolved swiftly and harmoniously, for the sake of the whole fellowship. Before we take a look at how that can best be achieved, let's stay in chapter 2 for a moment to discover **2.3 why disputes arise in the first place, 2.1-4.**

We can tease out no fewer than five inter-related reasons in *verses 1,3 and 4*. First up, at the top of the list is

(a) a lack of sensitivity (v1) or *tenderness* as Paul puts it in verse 1. Disputes arise when people are abrasive or brusque instead of tender towards each other. You see, in our relationships with other people, we can either be like a goods engine shunting freight wagons, or like a passenger engine coupling coaches. A goods engine bangs the freight wagons into each other, whereas a passenger engine couples the coaches together gently, for the sake of the passengers on board.

- Unfortunately, some Christians – either because of their temperament or their upbringing or both – behave more like goods engines than passenger ones. They may even think it's manly to be quite rough with other people, verbally if not physically.
- But it's certainly not Christian, or Christlike. Jesus is described as being meek towards other people – and someone has defined meekness not as weakness but 'power used gently'. That's what it means to be sensitive to other people. We must use whatever powers we have – the power of our tongue, or the power of our position in the church – gently.

Secondly, disputes can arise because of

(b) a lack of sympathy (v2) or *compassion* as Paul puts it in verse 1.

- The thing that upset my Andrew so much in his early days in Laos was not the fact that he was so ill, which was bad enough in itself; but that the director of the place where he was working was so unsympathetic to his condition. Whenever we say to someone, "Pull yourself together. Stand up like a man," we are probably being unsympathetic.
- *As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has compassion on those who fear him, Psalm 103.13-14* tells us, *for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust.* Sadly, we sometimes forget what the Lord always remembers in his dealings with us. Human beings are very fragile, and need to be handled with tender loving care.

A third cause of disputes is

(c) selfish ambition, v3 people wanting their own way or pursuing their own agenda for their own ends, and very often at other people's expense.

Fourth up, we can identify an insidious sense of our own

(d) self-importance, v3. *Vain conceit*, is how Paul describes it – the tendency we have to get puffed up with a sense of our own self-importance, thinking we're a cut above everyone else, that we're indispensable and that the church wouldn't survive long without us. That kind of mindset very quickly leads to disputes.

Fifthly, Paul speaks about

(e) self-interest, v4 – the "What's in this for me?" attitude; or "What's in my best interests?" *Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others*, Paul writes.

These are the kind of problems that launched Paul into his magnificent description of Christ's mindset and servant heart (*vs 5-8*). Though by nature fully God, Jesus didn't consider all the trappings of his deity, which had rightly been his since eternity past, things to be clung on to, at all costs. He emptied himself of *everything* that would have hindered him from being a true servant towards other people. And that's the kind of mindset we must cultivate too if we are to avoid disputes in the church, Paul says.

Let's turn back to 4.3 again. For here we see that

2.4 the resolution of a dispute often calls for a mediator, (4.3)- a go-between.

You see, positions can very quickly become entrenched in any form of dispute. And it's very hard for someone who feels passionate about something, or who has been hurt by someone, to look at things from the other person's point of view.

- Apparently, harsh words may not have been intended in the way they were taken by the person who ended up being hurt by them; and the person who spoke them may not be aware of the damage they have done.
- The visionary may not be able to understand why other people are so slow to take on his ideas – ideas that he has been living and breathing for weeks, but which have come like a bolt out of the blue to everyone else.
- Someone who has been in a church for years can feel threatened by any talk of change – whatever the proposed change might be.

So the role of the mediator is to bring the two or more warring factions together, so that everyone is given an opportunity to think things through from other people's perspective. He needs to be someone who can encourage good listening skills. He needs to be firm but fair with all concerned. He needs to be a neutral in the dispute, not from one particular camp. Above all, he needs to enjoy the trust and confidence of everyone in dispute.

It's a tall order to take on the role of a mediator. But in Syzygus, Paul knew just the man for the job. His name means *yokefellow* – or 'coupler', as we would say today. It may have been his nickname, or his real name. It doesn't really matter. The important thing was that he had the required skills to seize the initiative and sort out the dispute.

And you will notice that Paul calls on *Clement and the rest of his fellow workers* to *help these women* sort out the mess they had got themselves into. We can see how highly Paul regarded conflict resolution within the life of a local church. It was a top priority for him. So much was at stake.

But here's something else I notice from these verses. In seeking to settle a dispute, we should encourage everyone to

2.4 recover, and then keep, a proper perspective, v3-4

Most disputes in local churches are over relatively trivial matters – things to do with this life, rather than with eternity.

- People sometimes fall out over music within a local church – what instruments, which hymnbooks, what songs, and so on. These things are largely a matter of personal preference and taste. There are no fundamental principles involved.
- Paul can, and have, fallen out over all manner of things to do with church buildings – the furnishings, the décor, the seating arrangements.
- Paul have all sorts of views on the church services – what time they should be, how long they should last, what their content should be.

But it's interesting that Paul doesn't mention any specifics here. He doesn't give us so much of a hint as to what this dispute had been about, primarily because the particulars were not that important. [Motyer, p203]. "*Paul doesn't sum up the rival claims of these two warring women. He doesn't try to apportion blame. He doesn't say to one, "You're in the wrong and must apologise." Nor does he sit on the fence by saying, "There are two sides to every story." For it's not a matter of who is right and who is wrong, or even of what rightness or wrongness existed on each side. The plea is made to both women, and to each one individually, because for Paul, what mattered most was the restoration of their relationship – reconciliation leading to true harmony.*"

And so he encourages them to regain a proper sense of perspective.

(a) *Your names are written in the Book of Life (v3)*, he reminds them. That's what matters most – that

God, in his great mercy and grace, has saved you for himself, for all of eternity. In view of that, what is there to squabble about during our days on earth? Our time on earth is meant to model the age to come, the age of peace and harmony.

He also encourages them, twice over, to

(b) find their greatest joy in Jesus (v4)

Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Paul has already told us to find our greatest joy in Jesus back in **3.1**, adding *it is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.* It's hard to be at loggerheads with another Christian when our greatest joy is Jesus! *The joy of the LORD is your strength*, Nehemiah reminded the people of his day (**Neh 8.10**). When Jesus is our greatest joy, *the things of earth will grow strangely dim, in the light of his glory and grace.* We're strong when Jesus is our greatest joy, and weak when we take our eyes off him.

2.5 Be gentle with each other, v5

Finally, as a help to resolving disputes – and avoiding them in the first place – Paul says, “*Let your gentleness be evident to all.*” (v5). We all know that it's possible to win an argument, but lose a friend; to be right, but to end up being rejected.

- ***It's not simply what we say, but how we say it that matters.*** The word Paul uses here carries the idea of being ready to forgive people (Martin, p168; Motyer, p210). “*It's the attitude of a person who is charitable towards other people's failings because he takes their whole situation into his reckoning. It's an uncomplaining readiness to accept other people as they are, and to submit to their demands. It's a willingness to yield under pressure, instead of striking back in retaliation. In short, it's the outshining of our joy over Jesus.*”
- There are **two key verses** to remember if we are to avoid disputes in a local church. First **Col 4.6**. *Let your conversation be always full of grace.* We should always say to ourselves, before we open our mouths, “*What's the most generous thing I can say to this person in this situation?*”
- And then there's **Eph 4.29**. *Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen.* Nothing unwholesome – nothing we would feel awkward Jesus hearing. Only what's beneficial to the hearer. What do they need to hear from me, we need to ask ourselves before opening our mouths – not my views, but whatever will meet their needs. How can I build this person up to make him or her stronger? *Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you. Be imitators of God, as his dearly loved children [Eph 4.30-5.1].*