

Building Unity the story of Euodia and Syntyche

Philippians 4:1-3 HCSB So then, in this way, my dearly loved brothers, my joy and crown, stand firm in the Lord, dear friends. (2) I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord. (3) Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the book of life.

Introduction:

Let me tell you about two people who worked side-by-side in the church. But something happened. They fell into a trap--a disagreement arose between them. Perhaps it began as a small argument, but it mushroomed into a rift that not only affected them but began to hurt the entire congregation.

You may know of similar circumstances. The people I'm referring to, however, lived more than 1,900 years ago. Their story is told by the apostle Paul in Philippians. He doesn't provide much detail, but we get the picture if we read carefully.

- **Philippians 4:2 HCSB** I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to agree in the Lord.

Here in the midst of his letter to the church in Philippi, Paul exhorts Euodia and Syntyche, to end their disagreement. This short exhortation packs a powerful lesson for us today--a lesson about addressing division and producing unity in the church.

Euodia and Syntyche

Contention had arisen between these two women, and it concerned Paul enough to address it in this public letter. Why? Paul knew that contention between members spreads. If unchecked, it leads to a lack of unity in the congregation. Paul was concerned. He wrote the book of Philippians, in part, to address the subject of church unity.

Paul describes Euodia and Syntyche as:

- **Philippians 4:3 HCSB** Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the book of life.

From this we infer that they were leading members, perhaps deaconesses, making the contention between them all the more harmful.

Notice also that Paul addresses both women. This shows that **both** needed to change, as is the case in most disagreements. Paul tells them that the solution to the problem is to "agree" but not just any kind of agreement, rather "in the Lord" (4:2).

They are to solve their disagreement, not their own way, but in and through Christ. Paul not only urges the women to seek reconciliation between themselves, he also enlists the help of others:

- **Philippians 4:3 HCSB** Yes, I also ask you, true partner, to help these women who have contended for the gospel at my side, along with Clement and the rest of my co-workers whose names are in the book of life.

We don't know who the "true partner" was--it may have been Luke, or perhaps Epaphroditus. In any case, Paul calls on others to reach out to Euodia and Syntyche and help them reconcile.

If you had the opportunity to help two believers settle a dispute, how would you go about it? Paul gives us some valuable advice:

- **Philippians 2:1-2 HCSB** If then there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, (2) fulfill my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, sharing the same feelings, focusing on one goal.

In this passage, Paul shows the way to build unity in the body of Christ. He begins with a statement that is really a question: "If there is any encouragement..." to which he answers that encouragement toward unity is available in four ways--four tools for building unity.

1. The encouragement of Christ's example.

Paul begins by pointing to the "encouragement in Christ". As we will see later, he is apparently focusing on the example of Christ himself. Jesus models for us what produces reconciliation.

2. The incentive of God's love.

Paul describes the second tool as "any consolation of love." "Consolation" can be translated "incentive" with the added element of tenderness. God tenderly gives us the incentive to display the love He showers on us. As believers love each other with the love of God, divisions begin to cease and unity unfolds.

Paul echoes the same thought in Colossians:

- [Colossians 3:14 HCSB](#) Above all, *put on* love--the perfect bond of unity. Love is the glue that binds us together.

3. The unifying indwelling of the Holy Spirit.

Next Paul mentions "fellowship with the Spirit." This refers to the work and presence of the Holy Spirit in us. God dwelling in us through the Holy Spirit enables us to live in unity with each other. Paul exhorted the Ephesians:

- [Ephesians 4:3 HCSB](#) diligently keeping the unity of the Spirit with the peace that binds *us*.

God's people are a diverse group. We come from varied backgrounds, races and economic and educational levels. We have different tastes, preferences and needs. How can such a diverse group have unity? By God's Spirit that binds us together.

4. The unifying qualities of affection and mercy.

Affection and mercy involve the way we treat one another. We have received affection and mercy from God--and that should inspire us to treat others the same way. When brethren are tenderhearted with each other, progress can often be made toward unity.

Paul goes on:

- [Philippians 2:2-4 HCSB](#) fulfill my joy by thinking the same way, having the same love, sharing the same feelings, focusing on one goal. (3) Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. (4) Everyone should look out not *only* for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Paul says to get rid of the rivalries and the selfishness that separate us. We are brothers and sisters, of one body--therefore let every member feel and labor for the welfare of all.

Christ's example

Having made this plea for unity, Paul returns to the first tool, the encouragement of Christ's example. In Philippians 2:5-8 he exhorts us to be Christ-like in the way we treat one another:

- [Philippians 2:5-8 HCSB](#) Make your own attitude that of Christ Jesus, (6) who, existing in the form of God, did not consider equality with God as something to be used for His own advantage. (7) Instead He emptied Himself by assuming the form of a slave, taking on the likeness of men. And when He had come as a man in His external form, (8) He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death--even to death on a cross.

"*Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus.*" What was Christ's attitude? One of willingness to give up personal privilege in order to serve others. Christ is God, and He set aside many of the privileges of being God to become human. As God in the flesh, He humbled Himself

to the point of the excruciating pain of crucifixion (2:8). Christ set aside His own interests for the sake of others. So should we.

Unity required

Unity in the church is vital to the success of the mission God has called us to. That is why Paul says:

- **Philippians 1:27 HCSB** Just one thing: live your life in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ. Then, whether I come and see you or am absent, I will hear about you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind, working side by side for the faith of the gospel,

We must stand firm in unity to advance the work of the gospel. As individual members, we advance this work by creating unity, and we set it back when we cause division.

Paul commends Euodia and Syntyche for their past labors, but warns them of the danger of hindering the work of God by destroying the unity of the congregation. It takes work to reverse this dangerous trend. It takes "standing firm in one spirit" and "one mind." It takes effort and positive action.

The rest of the story?

Reading the few words in Philippians about Euodia and Syntyche leaves us hungry for more detail. Did they resolve their disagreement? To do so they would have needed to see unity as more important than what separated them. They would have had to swallow human pride and take positive steps to reconcile.

How? By following Christ's example of humility and selflessness. By allowing Christ to live that same selfless life in them through the indwelling Spirit.

We have some indirect historical evidence that, perhaps, they did reconcile. Early in the second century, the church in Philippi wrote to the church leader Polycarp. They asked about another minister who was arrested and taken to Rome. We don't have their letter, but Polycarp's reply was preserved.

Polycarp commends the congregation in Philippi, writing that they "have followed the example of true love and have helped on their way, as opportunity offered, those who were bound in chains." Then he adds, "I rejoice also that your firmly rooted faith, renowned since early days, endures to the present and produces fruit for our Lord Jesus Christ."

These words could only be spoken about a congregation that had, somehow, developed and maintained godly unity. Can we conclude, therefore, that Euodia and Syntyche resolved their differences? The answer is lost in history, but perhaps Polycarp's letter gives us some indirect reassurance that they did.



Conclusion:

I wonder what will be written about our congregation years down the line? Will they bear the fruit of unity? They will if we follow Paul's admonition and put to use these four tools that build unity. If we work together, the fruit of unity will grow and remain for many years to come.