

Essays in Philippians- Unity

Phil. 2:1-5

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Have you ever wondered what it must have been like as a church to receive a letter from the apostle Paul? The church at Philippi had fond memories of Paul, Timothy, Silas, and Luke. They had brought them the good news of Jesus Christ. They had lovingly laid a foundation of faith upon which they could begin to grow in the image of Christ.

Paul and his traveling companions left Philippi. Sometime after leaving, the saints received terrible news: Paul was in prison. Imagine the anxiety this news must have caused them. The church sprang into action. They sent one of their members, Epaphroditus, with money to help care for Paul. Inexplicably; however, Epaphroditus disappeared. No one knew what happened to him. News of his whereabouts slowly got back to Philippi: he had fallen gravely ill.

Finally, Epaphroditus returned to Philippi. No doubt some at Philippi would have been suspicious of Epaphroditus's "sickness." He left Philippi with money from the church and then no one heard from him for a lengthy time. However, he returned to Philippi with a letter written by the apostle Paul. The reading of this letter would have given validity to Epaphroditus's story and assured the saints of Paul's well-being.

As the second chapter commences, Paul makes two points regarding the responsibilities of churches. First, churches need to be united (Phil. 2:1-11). Second, churches need to be holy (Phil. 2:12-16). Unity and holiness are companions. Unfortunately, churches sometimes try to separate these ideas. The delusional thinking of some is that unity in a church can be achieved by ignoring the holiness of saints. This foolish perspective will only encourage division and worldliness.

Unity

Paul instructs the saints who comprised the church at Philippi to be like-minded. Today, like-mindedness is considered a hindrance to unity. Society views unity as being achieved through the acceptance of divergent beliefs and behaviors. Yet, among saints, there is often confusion about the meaning of like-mindedness. Some think being like-minded means "everyone must think like me." So, there are misperceptions of like-mindedness on every side.

Paul explains the concept of like-mindedness by listing blessings we have in Christ. These blessings are to be used by saints to become united. Paul wrote, "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" (Phil. 2:1-2).

Paul identifies the following blessings to be used to produce unity: encouragement in Christ, the comfort of love, participation in the Spirit, affection, and sympathy. Paul prefaced this

list by stating, “If there is any...” This is a rhetoric statement. Of course, these blessings are available. Therefore, we are sufficiently equipped with what we need to become united in the local church.

Well, when we commit to using these blessings to achieve like-mindedness, what are the concepts to which we agree? What thoughts do we share in common? Paul writes we are to be of the same love, accord, and mind. In other words, we are to share the same motive, purpose, and resolve.

Love is the only acceptable motive for our interactions as saints in the church. Our purpose as saints individually and collectively as a church is to reflect the glory of God through Christ. Our resolve is to remain steadfast and committed to our purpose.

Now, we must acknowledge that churches are comprised of a diversity of saints. The saints at Philippi certainly had a diverse membership. The founding members were a household of God-fearing worshippers and a household of pagan Romans. While they came from different walks of life and had different understandings of God, they could be united with one another by sharing a common motive, purpose, and resolve. We can too!

Of course, Paul does not merely instruct like-mindedness from an academic perspective. He gives an example of the kind of attitude needed by each saint to become united in the local church. Paul cites Christ: “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:3-5).

Unity demands humility. Too often, the unity of a local church is disrupted by a saint(s) who is overbearing and self-serving. Rather, as saints, we must acknowledge our equality. We are all sinners saved by grace through faith. We can be saved because Christ humbled Himself before God to serve us.

Being a saint is about being identified as a servant of Christ. Through our obedience to the Gospel, we become dedicated to serving God in the world by serving others. This relates to our shared motive, purpose, and resolve. Service is the result of hearts shaped by self-giving love. There is no room in a local church for the self-serving. Such is not the spirit of Christ.

Thankfully, there is never a shortage of opportunities to serve. There is always someone somewhere who could use our attention and find relief from our kindness. However, we must be looking for opportunities to serve. We must set our minds on the needs of others. When each saint of a local church sets his or her mind on the needs of others, no one gets overlooked.

Conclusion

When studying the churches documented in the New Testament, we get a sense of isolation. Paul was imprisoned. The small church at Philippi was trying to serve God in a godless

Roman colony. How were they able to survive? More than survive, though, how were they able to advance the Gospel?

The saints at Philippi were able to thrive in a godless society and advance the Gospel with the support of one another. In a word, unity. The church at Philippi demonstrates the critical importance of churches being united.

We need to be united. We need each other. There are not many Christians in Houston. No one is expendable. Each saint has been given a gift by God whereby he or she can serve His purpose and reflect His glory.