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Paul's Plea For Unity

By the late: C. D. Cole

"If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies,

Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind.

Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

Look not every man on his own things, but every man also on the things of others.

Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus:

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God:

But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men:

And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:1-8).

We have in these verses Paul's plea for unity in the church at Philippi. It was not a plea for one church in one world, but a plea for unity in one church or congregation—the congregation at Philippi. There appears to have been no serious rift in the church at Philippi, but only the possibility of division. No church is so strongly united as to make discord and division impossible. Unity is something that has to be kept and this requires effort. In his letter to the Ephes-

ians, Paul exhorts them to live worthy of their heavenly calling, "endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bonds of peace." A church united in faith and practice is a blessed thing. The Psalmist exclaims, "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments."

Before making his appeal for unity, Paul probes the hearts of the Philippians. He questions their motives. He appeals to their Christian experience. He uses the hypothetical if to enforce positive affirmation. If there is any consolation or encouragement in Christ, let it be known. If there is any comfort of love, let it be shown. And, of course, there is consolation and encouragement in Christ. And there is comfort in love. Love is not hard and heartless. Love does not turn a deaf ear to the cry of the needy. Love does not turn the cold shoulder to the weeping. Love is compassionate and tender. If there is any fellowship of the Spirit, let it be manifested. All believers have been born of the Spirit and have been made to drink into one spirit. This makes Christians yokefellows and comrades. The Holy Spirit does not divide a church of Christ. When the early church at Jerusalem was filled with the Spirit, they had all things common and were of one mind and soul. If there are any bowels and mercies, that

is, if a Christian experience carries with it any pity and compassion, these are the things needed by suffering saints, so bestow these blessings upon them. To sum up, Paul is saying something like this: Can you be a true Christian and turn down my appeal? Can you have these Christian virtues and refuse to do what I ask? Paul wants these Christian graces to be in full exercise towards one another.

He then makes his appeal. "Fulfil ye my joy by being of the same mind, showing mutual love, being of one accord, and of one soul." Paul wants the Philippians to be knit together, like Jonathan and David, as one soul. We talk about the ties of flesh and blood, but the tie of the blood of Christ ought to be stronger than any fleshly and earthly tie. And so Paul says to the Philippians, "My joy will be full, my cup will run over, if you Philippians will be joined together in mutual love and defense of the truth."

Now, in verses 3 and 4, the apostle mentions some hindrances to unity and follows with some helps to unity. He says, "Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory." This means to avoid party spirit and pride, ugly twins of selfishness. Too often it is pure selfishness that causes brethren to contend with one another. It is strife that causes one to try to put another down. It is pride that wants to put self on top. It is pride that wants to make self prominent and pre-eminent. Strife and pride will wreck any church where they get a foothold. There can be no teamwork where these two evils exist. Vainglory is what the self-seeker gets when he succeeds. He gets glory, but it is empty and hollow and worthless.

After warning against hindrances to unity, Paul next gives some helps to unity. He says, "...in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves," or as the Greek has it—above himself, or superior to himself. The normal Christian thinks of himself as Paul did, as being the very least of all the saints. A superiority complex and holier-than-thou spirit will cause strife and wrangling in a church. The opposite of this, lowliness of mind or humility of spirit will be a great help to unity. Another help Paul mentions is to consider not only one's own interests, but also the interests or well-being of others.

We are told that the pagans or heathen had no word for humility. Christianity had to coin this word as an ethical concept. The pagan idea of manhood was self-assertiveness—imposing one's own will on another. Humility is a plant that can only grow in spiritual soil, and the ethical idea of humility could not be grasped by the pagan world of old nor can it be grasped by the modern world of today. The Christian idea is for each one to consider the good of others first, rather than keeping the eye on the main chance for

number one. In a church where everybody looks up to everybody, nobody would be looked down on by anybody. In a church where everybody puts the interests of everybody first, nobody would be neglected.

The opposite of what Paul is talking about is illustrated in the case of two students. They sat on opposite sides of the dining table with only two pieces of chicken on the platter: a neck and a thigh. When one of them reached for the thigh, the other said, "You selfish thing, I was going to take that piece myself!" Now Paul is urging a reversal of that sort of thing. He wants us to urge the other to take the thigh.

Now in verses 5 to 11, the apostle holds up Christ as the supreme example of humility. It is said that one example is worth a dozen rules. Christ is the supreme example of what Paul is exhorting unto. He came not to be ministered unto but to minister and to give His life a ransom for many. His humility was voluntary self-descent and self-abasement. He voluntarily descended from the highest heights of glory to the lowest depths of shame and woe out of consideration for us in our deepest need of salvation. From where He was to where He went was the distance from heaven to hell. He gave up sovereignty with all its attendant glory to become a servant with all its hardships and shame. Before becoming man, Christ was in the form of God, which means that He possessed all the essential qualities of Deity and so appeared to those in heaven who saw Him. Now this being equal with God in manifest glory was not something He held on to, but something He voluntarily gave up. Paul says that He emptied Himself. The question is, "Of what did He empty Himself?" "Not of His divine nature," says Dr. A. T. Robertson. In essence of being Christ remained what He had been in eternity past—He did not empty Himself of Himself—He continued to be the Son of God. Nor did He strip Himself of any of the attributes or properties of Deity. The Lord Jesus Christ was as truly God while on earth as He was in heaven. The Scriptures tell us that He was God manifest or made visible in flesh. He was of the same essence or nature as the Father, for He said on one occasion, "He that hath seen me hath seen the Father." The Scriptures tell us that in Christ dwelt the fulness of the Godhead bodily. In becoming man, Christ did not cease to be God. He was one person with two natures, the Divine and the human. He was the God-man. He possessed all the attributes of God and all the attributes of man. Christ was not another God, but another person in the Godhead. Great as the mystery is, the Scriptures make it plain that God—the one and only God—exists as a plurality of persons. God is a triune being—three in one and one in three. We have the triunity of God in the plural names of God in Scripture. The first name of God we

meet with in the Bible is plural. "In the beginning God (Elohim, plural) created (singular verb) the heavens and the earth. The plural noun with the singular verb shows one God acting as three persons. We have plural pronouns for God in Genesis 1:26 where we read, "Let us make man," and in Genesis 11:7, "Let us go down." And so the God of the Bible is one in essence or substance, but three in personal relationships. But back to the question, "What did Christ give up in becoming man?" He gave up the glory He had with the Father. He gave up His position of equality with the Father for the place of a Servant and was obedient unto the death of the cross. And He did this for our sakes that we might not perish in our sins. Here is voluntary humility out of consideration for others.

It is argued by some that if Christ was God, that when He died, God died. But wait, Christ suffered and died as a person, not as a nature. He suffered as a person with two natures—He died as the God-man. He died neither as God nor as man, but as the God-man. He needed the nature of God, as well as the nature of man to make atonement for sinful men. I agree with Luther when he said, "If I permit myself to be persuaded that only the human nature has suffered for me, then Christ is to me a poor Saviour." Those who have only the human Christ on the cross do away with the efficacy of the cross. No human being can save another human being. Christ suffered as a person and His person must not be divided at Calvary. Christ voluntarily humbled Himself in giving up His position as Sovereign to perform the work of a Servant, and God the Father justly rewarded Him for His obedience unto death by exalting Him to His former position in glory. And so Paul exhorts us to take Christ as the pattern of humility in serving others. His sufferings on earth are over and He is now enthroned in glory



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