October 7, 2015

The Right Formula For Spiritual Unity (Part 1)

Philippians 2:1-4 (NASB), **"Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others."**

John MacArthur writes in his commentary on Philippians, "Disunity among His people deeply grieves the Lord. It should be every pastor's, church leader's, and church member's prayer that men will not tear asunder what God has divinely joined together in the body of Christ. Because fracturing Christ's church is one of Satan's major objectives, the challenge to preserve the unity of the spirit is constant. A divided, factious, and bickering church is spiritually weak. It therefore offers little threat to the devil's work and has little power for advancing the gospel of Christ. Endeavoring to maintain, or to restore, the spiritual unity of a congregation is easily the most pressing, difficult, and constant challenge for its leaders."

One of the most heartbreaking and heart wrenching things that pastors have to deal with is disunity and discord within the Body of Christ. While it is true that there are many things that pose grave danger to the Church: the attack on the source and authority of God's Word, spiritual apathy and a general coldness and an indifference to Biblical truth and God's standards of righteousness. However, equally to be feared is that which attacks the unity of the church. All of the above items can disrupt, weaken, and destroy a church by causing discord, disharmony, conflict, and division.

Apparently the issue of disunity and discord was front and center in the church at Philippi. The division and discord was between two women who we know nothing else about; Euodia and Synthche. The danger of disunity has potential in every single church, and this was a danger that Paul addressed in one way or another in every one of his letters to the various churches. In Romans 15:5-7 he wrote, **"Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, accept one another, just as Christ also accepted us to the glory of God."** In 1 Corinthians 1:10 he wrote, **"Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment."** In 2 Corinthians 13:11 it says, **"Brethren, rejoice, be made complete, be comforted, be like minded, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you."** He challenged the Galatians in Galatians 5:26, **"Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another."**

The foundation for believer's unity and oneness is the unity of God that is granted to us in answer to Jesus' prayer in John 17:21 that His people **"may all be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me."** That prayer was then answered at Pentacost and afterwards when the Holy Spirit came and indwelled all believers, bringing to them eternal life which all believers are partakers of. This essential unity of all believers in the body of Christ should be lived out in practice not just in theory.

Paul's concern here is not about doctrines, ideas, or practices that are clearly unbiblical. This is about interpretations, standards, interests, preferences, and the like that are for the most part matters of personal choice. You see when we insist on our own way in things like this that is sinful. Why is it sinful? Because it needlessly divides believers. It reflects a prideful desire to have one's own way. We must of course never compromise doctrines or principles that are clearly Biblical. But we are to humbly defer to one another on secondary issues and when we do that this is a mark of spiritual strength. This is a mark then of spiritual maturity and love that God highly honors, because it promotes and preserves harmony in His church.

This unity that the Word of God so highly exalts and values is inward, it is not outwardly compelled; it is internally desired. It is not grounded in sentimental emotionalism but in careful, thoughtful, and determined obedience to God's will. It is the Spirit-motivated and Spirit-empowered bonding of the hearts, minds, and souls of God's children to each other. Preserving unity in the church is not an option. Ephesians 4:3 tells us that we are to be **"diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."**

Over the next several days we will be taking a look at Philippians 2:1-4 where Paul gives us one of the most concise and practical teachings on unity in the New Testament. My prayer is that once again we will be grounded in the truth of God's Word and that through His Spirit will be convicted of the need to diligently **"preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."**

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