
Topic : Christian Unity
Passage : Philippians 2 : 1 – 8
Date : 20 June 2004

How many of you have never quarrelled with anyone before ? How many of you think that Christians should not quarrel ? I ask about quarrels because the Bible says that its opposite, unity, is a good thing. Psalms 133 : 1 says :

How good and pleasant it is
when brothers live together in unity !

Acts 2 records that the early believers were united in faith, love and good deeds, and therefore fully experienced the blessings of God :

- 42 They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.
- 43 Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles.
- 44 All the believers were together and had everything in common.
- 45 Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need.
- 46 Everyday they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts,
- 47 praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

Just as unity brings blessing, the Bible warns that disunity brings a curse. Hebrews 12 : 15 says :

See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.

As we will be starting the care group ministry soon, today's message on unity is especially relevant. From July onwards, we will be meeting in smaller groups regularly to fellowship. This means that while in the past you might only say a "hi" and "bye" to other church members, now in a care group you will rub shoulders with them. No running away. While this will be a great opportunity to make friends, there is also a chance that someone might rub you up the wrong way. Or maybe you might offend someone. But as we see from the Bible, the blessings that we experience as a fellowship, stands or falls depending on whether we are united in love.

Reality of Disagreement

Disagreement is a very real part of our lives. Based on the survey just now, everyone here has at least argued with someone else before. We are born fighters. We like to have our own way. When a car cuts in front of us, when we see someone jumping our queue, when someone else

unfairly gets ahead of us at work, we want to pick a fight with that person. Even if we don't actually pick a fight, we swear at that person under our breath.

Disagreement is also a very real part of Christian life, both outside and within the church. Some of us might have left previous churches because of disagreement between its members or leaders. Maybe some of you right now can't get along or disagree with the present church leaders or members. Maybe it is something as petty as you don't like my face.

I've got news. Would it surprise you to know that there was disunity even in the early church ? The church I described in Acts 2 was united for just a short time. At first, the church was made mostly of Jews from Israel. But when people from all over the world started to become believers, they brought with them different languages, cultures, practices, experiences, prejudices. Disunity broke out. The Bible doesn't hide the ugly reality that it can be really difficult for Christians to get along. It doesn't paint us a false picture of heaven on earth, but tells us the truth as it is :

- Foodfights : Christians argue over whether meat sold in the market (which was offered to idols) should be eaten : Romans 14
- Factionalism : Christians argue over whether to follow Paul, Apollos or Peter : 1 Corinthians 3
- Court fights : Christians sue each other in Court : 1 Corinthians 6
- Disunity amongst Philippians : Philippians 2

It is not just the church members that argued. Even the great Christian leaders did :

- Paul and Barnabas spilt up because they disagree whether to give John Mark a second chance : Acts 15 : 36 - 39
- Paul confronts Peter : Gal 2 : 11 - 14

Now if even the great Christian leaders couldn't get along, is there hope for us ? Is unity something nice to have, just like having big church building – something nice to have – but a reality that we can live without ?

Unity is not an Option

In Philippians 2 Paul had to deal with this very difficult issue of unity. Philippi was a Greek city that became a Roman colony. It was also a major trading city. This means that the people who lived there were not just native Greeks. There were immigrants from Italy (where the Romans came from), and merchants from other parts of the world. Like Singapore, it would have people of different ethnic groups, holding different types of jobs, upper, middle and lower- income, and educated and uneducated.

The composition of the church in Philippi was similar. It had local Greeks, the Roman colonial masters, and immigrant Jews, Africans and Europeans. It would have rich and poor people, educated scholars and simple labourers. It would be a church like ours – made up of different people from different backgrounds.

Given the differences, it is not surprising that the Philippians had problems getting along. But this is what Paul says :

- 1 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,
- 2 make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Here, Paul asks a question with an obvious answer. If – that means “do you” – have “any encouragement in Christ, consolation in love, fellowship in the Spirit, and affection and compassion”, he asks. The answer must certainly be yes. Who else other than believers in Jesus can have “any encouragement in Christ, consolation in love, fellowship in the Spirit, and affection and compassion” ?

Then, Paul commands the Philippian Christians, be united.

In the same way, do we have any encouragement in Christ, consolation in love, fellowship in the Spirit, and affection and compassion ? Definitely, otherwise we wouldn't be called Christians. Then, the Bible commands, we should be united.

Unity is not an option. It is not just an ideal – something good to have, but which cannot always be attained. But as we have seen, unity is not something that occurs naturally amongst men. So in the remaining part of Philippians 2, Paul tells the Philippians to work towards unity by effort, submission and cultivating brotherly love.

Unity takes Effort

- 3 Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves;
- 4 do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others

“Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit”. Paul first tells the Philippians what they should not do. “Selfishness” and “vain conceit” refers to Christians looking out for themselves only, or having a false sense of importance or righteousness. It is not difficult to see how these bad attitudes can lead to disunity.

A selfish person looks out for his interests only. He might be a talented musician, but refuse to join the music team. Or he might guard his turf. I know of pastors who fight over who should preach on Sunday.

Out of pride and a false sense of importance, some Christians can't accept criticism or won't listen to suggestions. This applies to both mature and young Christians. A mature Christian might not be willing to listen to a younger one because he thinks the young punk has nothing to offer; the young Christian might think that the counsel of a mature Christian is not worth listening to because of the "generation gap".

Some Christians, in a spirit of self-righteousness, put other Christians down instead of encouraging them towards faithfulness.

After telling the Christians what they should not do, ie. "do nothing out of selfishness and vain conceit", Paul tells them what they should do. This is significant. Many of us may think that so long as there is no disagreement, there is unity. This is only partly right.

Not doing the things that cause disunity alone is not enough to bring about unity. Paul says that Christians must go beyond looking out for their personal interests, and "with humility of mind regard one another as more important ... look out for the interests of others".

What does it mean to look out for the interests of others ? It is summed up in the command of Jesus to "love one another". For there to be unity, Christians must love one another, and do so by their actions.

Loving means humbling ourselves to put the interests of others before your own. You might clearly be the better musician, or more experienced in organising events, or the person in the right in an argument. But how about letting someone else take in your place in playing in the worship team, or organising an event ? How about training another person to take your place ? How about letting an argument rest, instead of insisting on having the last word ?

Jesus and the Father : Perfect Example of Unity

There is no greater example of the type of love that brings about unity than the relationship of Jesus Christ and the Father. And in verses 5 to 7 Paul tells the Philippians to learn from the perfect example of Jesus Christ :

- 5 Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,
- 6 who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,
- 7 but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.
- 8 Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

There is no question that Jesus is equal to God. Jesus had every right to consider Himself equal to God. He had every right to think only about Himself, to assert His divine authority and to remain comfortably where He was in heaven.

However, Jesus chose not to do this. Instead, there was unity between the Father's purpose and His own. He submitted Himself to God's divine will, gave up the comforts of His heavenly

dwelling, and became a human. While on earth, He suffered in the cold (He was born in a manger), He lived in poverty (His family was poor), He experienced hunger (Jesus often fasted), He endured rejection (people rejected Jesus' teaching), and finally he was wrongfully killed on the cross.

But in the perfect example of love that leads to unity, Jesus placed the interests of the Father above His own, and aligned His life with the will of Father.

Appreciating the Differences that Unite

Now, having seen what we should and should not do to preserve the unity of our fellowship, how do we deal with the reality that there will always be differences in our personalities, our opinions and approaches to doing things, and our talents ? How do we deal with the reality that there will always be friction as long as we are human ?

Paul says, in Philippians 4, that we should dwell on the positive differences instead of the negative :

8 Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is of good repute, if there is any excellence and if anything worthy of praise, dwell on these things.

And in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul says that these God-given differences in our personalities, our opinions and approaches to doing things, and our talents are to be honoured and appreciated for their ability to contribute positively to the work of God, rather than be seen as divisive :

12 The body is a unit, though it is made up of many parts; and though all its parts are many, they form one body. So it is with Christ.

...

21 The eye cannot say to the hand, "I don't need you"; And the head to the feet, "I don't need you."

22 On the contrary, those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable;

23 and the parts that we think are less honourable we treat with special honour ...

24 ... God has combined the members of the body and has given greater honour to the parts that lacked it

25 so that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other.

26 If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honoured, every part rejoices with it.

27 Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you a part of it.

Here, Paul is comparing the Church to the human body. Just as different body parts perform specialised functions to help the body work effectively, individual Christians have differences that allow them to exercise special roles to make the Church an effective instrument to give glory to God. Just as body parts are not there by coincidence but by divine construction, God made our differences for a purpose.

We can experience the blessing of unity if we honour God's gifts by accepting and allowing our different abilities and resources, and experiences and perspectives to work together to give glory to God.

Unity sometimes requires Confrontation

Now, before I end, I would like to deal briefly with two other issues which can be sermon topics on their own – confrontation and hurt.

First, confrontation. Unity – accepting and appreciating differences – is not always about avoiding confrontation at all costs. Unfortunately, there are times when it is necessary to confront wrongdoing for the greater good of the entire church. There will be times when it will be necessary for our leaders to rebuke us; or even for members to tell a leader that he is in the wrong. Proverbs 27 :6 says :

Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses.

True friends will try and lead us back onto the path of righteousness, instead of allowing us to continue down the wrong way.

In Galatians 6 : 1, the Bible says :

Brothers, if someone is caught in a sin, you who are spiritual should restore him gently.

Keyword : gently. The NASB uses the word “spirit of gentleness”. Where there is unity, confrontation is not done in spirit of pride or self-righteousness, but in love out of genuine concern for the person.

So in Galatians 2, when Paul noticed that Peter was avoiding the non-Jewish Christians, thereby giving the impression that Christians had to observe Jewish religious customs, he confronted Peter :

When Peter came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he was clearly in the wrong ... he began to draw back and separate himself from the Gentiles ... the other Jews joined him in his hypocrisy, so that by their hypocrisy even Barnabas was led astray. When I saw that they were not acting in line with the truth of the gospel, I said to Peter in front of them all, “You are a Jew, yet you live like a Gentile and not like a Jew. How is it then that you force Gentiles to follow Jewish customs ?”

Hope when it Hurts

As for hurt, there may be times when Christians get so carried away with insisting on their way that all later efforts to bridge the differences just fail. Maybe all trust is lost. Maybe there is so much anger that we cannot see what we have in common. Maybe such hurtful words have been exchanged that time is needed for healing. Maybe we have committed ourselves to a point from which it is impossible to return.

In my short 20 years of Christian life, I have witnessed four church splits in my previous three churches – in 1988, 1996, 1997 and 1999. I have personally witnessed a Christian friend who was forced to leave his church, because his church friends just could not get along with his girlfriend. Was such a painful separation really necessary ? I don't know. But I take this as a warning that unity is very fragile and Christians can always be more careful when dealing with their differences.

What happens when separation becomes necessary ? I believe that God gives hope and will bring about healing in His time.

Paul was himself confronted with such a situation in Acts 15. One of Paul's disciples, John Mark, had deserted them in the middle of a mission trip. Maybe John Mark couldn't take the tough missionary life – shortage of food, lack of shelter, abuse from persecutors – so he quit. Now when Paul and Barnabas wanted to start off on a new mission trip, Barnabas wanted to give John Mark a second chance. Paul absolutely refused to bring John Mark along. The disagreement between Paul and Barnabas was so sharp that the two great leaders of the Christian church spilt up – Paul took Silas and went his own way, while Barnabas took John Mark.

However, God did not allow this to be the end of the matter. Towards the end of his life, in Paul's letter to Timothy in 2 Timothy, Paul writes to ask Timothy to bring Mark to see him. Obviously, God had brought about a reconciliation. So as much as there is hurt, I want to encourage you to remain hopeful of a reconciliation brought about by God.

Conclusion

I want to end today's message by addressing three groups of people.

The first is all of us who are going to be part of a care group. I believe that just the early church in Acts 2 was blessed, we will also be. But to claim that blessing, we must put aside our pride and prejudices, our selfishness and self-interests, and put on love. Do you want to experience this blessing badly enough, to surrender the prideful, selfish and quarrelsome part of you ? Are you ready to commit yourself to the effort of loving others more than yourselves, so that there will be unity ? Are you prepared to guard the fragile unity of your fellowship, even if it sometimes means giving up your rights in certain situations ?

The second is the care group leaders. It will not always be easy to manage the differences between your members, to love those who are unlovable, and to confront those who are straying. I would the Pastor to pray for spiritual anointing, so that you will have wisdom and patience, and the respect of those who you lead.

The last are those of us who have been hurt by our previous conflicts with Christians. We need to look back and see if we have in some way been a cause of the separation – by our pride or lack of love. Then we need to move forward, and ask God to bring about reconciliation in His time.