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# Others First - Church

## Philippians 2:1-4

**Introduction** We will be studying from Philippians 2:1-4 this evening. Let's begin by reading that passage together [Read]. Let's pray before we get started.

*Here is the Church, here is the steeple*

*Open the doors, and see all the people!*

I remember learning this children's rhyme as a child and being somewhat amused and pleased by the last set of motions, "and see all the people!" The witty mind that came up with this children's rhyme knew something of church.

Yes, indeed there are usually meeting spaces enclosed by walls, and tall upward structures pointing to heaven exhibiting to all the nature of the events taking place inside, but then, there are, *the people*. Not cogs and gears comprising well-oiled smoothly running machines...Not leafy green things doing photosynthesis – organic and alive enough but spending a virtual lifetime in apparent peace and harmony...Not even docile herds of benevolent and amiable sheep with wool as white and pure as the driven snow, wandering harmoniously with their shepherd over the hillsides – no, our churches are not full of any of these. Our churches are full of people.

Tonight's message is the first in the evening component of the family enrichment series that we traditionally hold in the month of January. Sunday evenings this month will be used to expand on Sunday morning teaching, particularly in the area of practical application. As you already know, our text for this family enrichment series is Philippians 2. Tonight I will discuss the application of the 'Others First' principle to the Church. In the following two weeks Pastor Greg Cook will address the 'Others First' as it pertains to our spouses and then our children.

### Why Others First?

Before we delve further into understanding and applying this passage this evening, it is important that we revisit and remind ourselves of the immediate context of verses 1-4. Although we are focusing on the "others first" aspects of Philippians 2 during the Sunday evenings of our family enrichment series, this emphasis comes to us enveloped by a greater purpose. That purpose is the unity of the church. Note Philippians 1:27 [Read]. What does a "manner of life worthy of the gospel" look like? In part, it looks like "standing firm in *one* Spirit, with *one* mind, striving *side by side* for the faith of the gospel..." And see again Philippians 2:1-2, what is the outgrowth of gospel union with Christ (v.1)? It is "being of the *same* mind, having the *same* love, being in *full accord* and of *one* mind." Our emphasis upon "Others First" in these various relationships in life during the Sunday evening service, is *made* important by one of the greater purpose it serves – that is, the unity of the church, and *that is* the glory of God as the body grows up into it's head, Christ (Ephesians 3:20 – 4:16). For those of you who dabble at growing

house plants, you will understand that there are many things that go into it: watering, offering the right amount of sun, trimming, preventing the root balls from becoming root bound, adding fertilizer at the right time, etc. You do none of these activities, however, just for the sake of the activity. You do them because you want a beautiful plant. In the same way, we do not consider “Others First” as a bible topic simply because we are enamored with the idea of putting others good before our own (kind of like Oprah) – no, we are teaching on “Others First” because is it necessary to the unity of the body which is necessary to God’s glory in Christ.

So it may be easy to see why the idea of putting others first *in the church* is important to unity *in the church*, but why are we talking about relationships with spouses and relationships with children in the context of a passage discussing unity in the church? In addition to what Russ spoke of this morning, I think the simplest answer to that is that your home is the smallest representative unit of the church. This goes back to the confusion that we are often pushing back against – the church is not a place, it is not a building, it is not a series of sermons or a palette of programs, the church is God’s people together. Therefore, at home, in a very real sense, you are “in church.” Many of us fail to realize this and it explains, in part, why we will treat our spouses one way on Sunday morning between 9-12, and another way the rest of the week.

So this is how the idea of “Others First” in Philippians 2:1-4 concerns the unity of our homes and our churches. Christian unity in the church begins at home. It is true that this statement needs refined to address the various home situations that we find ourselves in, but I will leave that work to Greg in the coming weeks as he speaks to “Others First” in our relationship with spouses and children.

But let’s do a reality check – is this a topic that really needs addressing? Does our failure to live out the commands of Philippians 2:1-4 somehow inhibit or destroy our unity? Is disunity a problem that characterizes the church *today*? I imagine most of us would readily say “yes.” However, we may say that simply as recognition of a theoretical possibility. That is, “Of course disunity exists in the church because it is possible it exists in the church, so it must be happening somewhere...after all, don’t we hear about church splits all the time...” Are any of us actively thinking about our *own* church, the believers *we* meet with regularly and consider to be part of *our* local expression of the body? Does this really apply to us here at Clearcreek? Is Christian unity really, only, just not, having a church split or open arguing and dissent in the aisles? Or, is Paul’s idea of unity calling us to something much higher?

I believe that once we adjust our idea of church unity to reflect the biblical concept, two things will happen: First, the importance of “Others First” will become more central in our thinking about unity. And second, we will not so quickly view ourselves here at Clearcreek as uniquely free of the potential for disunity or disunity itself. Before we discuss that further, however, let’s start by simply answering the question, is disunity a problem for the church?

## New Testament Churches

We can go all the way back to the beginning of church, so to say, to consider the church’s longstanding relationship with disunity. So what do we find in the New Testament?

1. In the Jerusalem church, shortly after the church's inception, there is a dispute between Hellenists and Hebrews because a certain group was being preferred above another (Acts 6:1ff).
2. In the Roman church there was quarreling over opinions and passing of judgment and despising of one another over issues related to "allowed" foods and days and "unallowed" foods and days (Romans 14)
3. In the Corinthian church there were those who followed "Paul" and those who followed "Apollos" and those who followed "Cephas" leading to "quarreling among" them (1 Corinthians 1:10-17).
4. In the Philippian church, there is Euodia and Syntyche who will not "agree in the Lord" and Paul asks others to aid them (Philippians 4:2-3).
5. There are many other references – Paul's difficulties with Barnabus, Peter, and Demas; the strife and division that was caused by the teaching of false doctrine in the church, and these among many other direct and indirect references to disunity.

There is little question that the early NT church, even with the blessings of having been contemporaries to Christ and the apostles, struggled with unity among themselves. Is it so great a leap to put our own names into these instances? Certain groups preferred or given precedent over others, passing judgment on one another in areas of freedom, being more willing to follow one leader over another, or women who cannot agree...

### Today's Churches

But that was then, this is now. Has the contemporary church grown out of these problems? If a split or failure of a church is the end game of a disunified church, then getting a sense of church splits in the US might shed some light on our current day condition. To gain insight into answering that question, one must go no further than that great digital representation of the American consciousness, Google. Type "church split" into Google and you will immediately discover thousands of records and reports of church splits. For example, "100 years of joy and love go down the toilet, as a **church** bickers about an old piano bench;" "Church Split Evident as Clergy Admit Doubts over Existence of God." There are major denominations on the brink of splitting over issues such as female clergy, homosexuality, and apparently, piano benches. And then there is this quote from a Presbyterian columnist, "I know we had our New Side/Old Side split, and our New School/Old School split. I know we had our Fundamentalist/Modernist controversy that caused some people to split off and form Westminster Seminary, the Orthodox Presbyterians and then the Bible Presbyterians. I know the Presbyterian Church of America split off from the Presbyterian Church in the United States (the old southern church), and the Evangelical Presbyterian Church split off from our reunited church, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Our Presbyterian history in these United States is one of splits and mergers and divisions and reunions."<sup>1</sup> A search on "church disunity" or "church closure" produces similar results. So

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.pcusa.org/oga/perspectives/oct05/schism.htm>

even a cursory look demonstrates that both yesterday's and today's church is plagued by disunity.

Let's briefly reconsider then how Paul describes unity in Philippians 2, by asking several questions over this text: What is a Philippians picture of unity? How is it destroyed? How is it maintained and what is the role of "*othering first*" in maintaining unity?

## Questions & Answers

Before answering these questions, note these several observations about the context of this passage as Paul arrives at the admonishments and encouragements of 2:1-4.

### Observations on Context

First, we should note the economy of joy in Paul's life. If we make a quick survey of Philippians 1 and ask the question – what is bringing Paul joy, especially as Paul is asking the Philippian church to complete his joy, we will gain insight into biblical unity as well as Paul's heart.

1. (1:4-5) Paul prays with joy because of his *partnership in the gospel* with the Philippians
2. (1:7) Paul prays with joy as he holds the Philippians in his heart because they are all *partakers with him of grace*
3. (1:18) Paul, in the midst of hardship, rejoices in his future deliverance, "because [he] knows that *through [the Philippians'] prayers* and the Spirit [he] will be delivered and Christ will be honored."
4. (1:21-26) Paul recognizes that his being *among the Philippians* will result in their progress and joy in the faith (although he'd rather join Christ!)
5. (2:1-2) And then finally, Paul makes clear that his joy is completed by *unity and love* among the believers

It would be a simple enough exercise to sit down and ask ourselves if what brings Paul joy brings us joy?

A second observation, already mentioned by Russ this morning, is the current state the Philippians find themselves in at the time of this letter. They themselves, like Paul, are experiencing opposition without (1:27-30) and conflict within (4:1-3). Paul does not come to the Philippians with all this silly "joy" and "unity" talk in a Disney-like atmosphere...but that is what Sunday mornings sometimes seem like...*my wife and I are madly in love, we're happy to be here today, we highly value the preaching and teaching of the word, the music is perfect, we love the people of the church because we understand it to be Christ's body here on earth, in fact, we love them so much we'll even smile at them!* That is a foreign world to Paul, and if we are honest, it is a foreign world to us. God's Word meets us in the mess, just like it met the Philippians in the mess.

Third, the centrality of Christ and the gospel is prominent. The words Christ or Jesus are used no less than 20 times between 1:1 and 2:5. While a mere count does not tell

us much, it does at least say that Paul's mind returns to his Redeemer frequently – and with good reason – for Christ is our all in all.

So here you have the opening of Philippians. There is an intensely horizontal and vertical nature to this letter, Philippians is about both *people* and *truth*. Paul can find much reason for joy because he rightly sees and interprets his role in the madness of a world loved by a great and sovereign redeemer. If we look carefully, we will see that what makes Paul's heart beat is the people of God partaking in the purposes of God resulting in the praise of God.

### What is a Philippians Picture of Unity? (v.1)

Here is where we need to think carefully about our understanding of biblical unity. Perhaps we view 10+ years of successfully avoiding a split as unity. Perhaps we think of unity as relative peace among ourselves when we gather. Or maybe it is that only a few families have left over the past couple of years...If this is how we think of unity, we have missed the mark. Paul sets the bar much higher. Let's look again at 1:27 and 2:2. [Read]. It is not simply living together peaceably, like we do in the American democracy, it is:

**a oneness of mind:** In agreement on issues of doctrine and ecclesiology

**having the same love:** a unity in our expressions of love and care to the rich and the poor, to the strong and the weak, to the mature and the immature, to those with more visible spiritual gifts and to those with less visible spiritual gifts (James 2).

**being in full accord and of one mind:** united in spirit, affections, sentiments, bonded by something deeper than volunteerism or a sense of civil duty; and united in thinking and judgment – wedded in heart and head.

When Beth and I were living in Seattle...(crew rowing example)

Continued growth as a church in this manner is a clear demonstration to ourselves and the world, that we *experientially know* our God and His work of redemption for us in Christ (1:27, 2:1, John 13:35). And as Russ explained to us this morning, at the heart of this type of unity is joy – true joy that can only be experienced in obedience to God.

### How is Unity Destroyed? (v.2-4)

Keep in mind that as Paul discusses these things with the Philippians he is not having a hypothetical discussion. There is evidence throughout this letter that there is grumbling and questioning (2:14), divisive and false teaching (3:2), and dissension and unreasonableness (4:2ff) in the Philippian church.

In verses 3 and 4, we see those character qualities and actions that destroy unity, and this is where a fine point is placed on the importance of "othering first." In verse 3 there is a continuum of thought regarding the way a person views themselves. On one end of the continuum is pride, evidenced by rivalry and conceit. On the other end is humility, evidenced by counting others more significant/important than yourself. Pride elevates one's own importance and needs. Humility de-elevates one's own im-

portance and needs but it does not annihilate them. Rather, it puts them in their God-pleasing place. A proud person cannot in their heart put others first. The façade may be in place, but that is no substitute for true humility. Pride will always, eventually, give itself away.

Pride-driven interaction in the church represents a real danger. Hence the writer points us to humility. Rivalry and conceit are only two symptoms of pride, there are many more. In each one, however, the same core sickness is responsible: It is an elevation of self not just above others, but above God. It caused Satan to fall to a treacherous end, it was the sin that caused the fall of man in Genesis 3, and it has certainly caused the fall of many a church.

I think it is appropriate to briefly issue a special warning to elders and those that teach or lead in the church. We know that position, power, and knowledge puffs up, but love builds up (Matthew 20:25ff; 1 Corinthians 8:1; 2 Corinthians 1:24) – any greater knowledge or authority that we possess should only bind us further to the humble service of our brothers and sisters. When we sense distance in our hearts between ourselves and those we shepherd, we should be very careful to stop and consider if pride has wormed its way into our hearts and has begun saying, “I am different from them.”

## How is Unity Maintained?

As we have already noted, unity begins with true understanding and experience of God and his grace. It is motivated by joy-producing obedience to God. It is destroyed by those who in their hearts put themselves first. The method or way in which biblical unity is increased and preserved, is the humility-shaped activity of “othering first.” Now I have used that term once or twice already and it is a bit of doing harm to the English language, as “othering” is not a word, however, I believe it captures well the spirit of what Paul puts forth. Othering, meaning a self-conscious, active, and purposeful consideration of others in the body, their needs, their desires. And First, lovingly and intentionally placing those needs and desires before our own in a way that moves all of us godward and brings God glory. This requires, “looking,” as Paul puts it in v.4. Watching out over, considering, having conversation, asking questions...we must *look* to the interests of others.

The Scriptures make it abundantly clear that our *looking* is NOT to be the work of a busy body or a gossip. No, we come to know and care for with the purpose of *doing* actual good unto our brothers and sisters, not simply becoming a conduit for inside information. Outside of the context of relationship, it is very difficult to know how to serve, how to encourage, how to admonish, how to confront, how to challenge, how to weep with, and how to rejoice with. [Consider example of single parent with limited access...].

To put it bluntly, our *othering first* should be characterized by a little less talk and a lot more action. Intelligent, wise, hard-working, and persevering love should be one of the most visible qualities our body.

1 Corinthians 10:24 reads "Let no one seek his own good, but that of his neighbor" and Romans 12:10, "Be devoted to one another in brotherly love; give preference to

one another in honor." Does this mean we recklessly abandon care for our self and our families? No. Verse 4 assumes that you care for your self as well, look "*not only*" to your own interests. It is a rare believer who becomes so committed to caring for the body (with godly motivations) that they neglect to care for themselves. The struggle is usually quite the reverse. We are so committed to our own progress and well-being that we neglect to care for the body. *My heart* is a classic example of this. As an elder I have been exercised in this area...[example of meeting others needs].

The key here is this: You care for your self and your family in a manner that leaves resources to care for others in the body. If your life is consumed by self-care, you are no longer humble. Humility displays itself in the arranging of life in such a way that allows for the care of others. Often this type of thinking takes careful and wise planning, decision making, and discernment. One way that has worked itself out for Beth and I is in the case of my school debts...[example of school debt]

A high school bible teacher taught me well when he impressed this biblical principle upon me: *the way up, is down*. We must not pride ourselves in our abilities, skills, wealth, or gifts but rather we must become expert of making much of others abilities, skills, and gifts as we use our God-given resources to serve them. What do we have, after all, that has not been given?

Lastly, are you in need of an example? Would it help to have some inspiration by being able to witness someone actually doing this? Do you need help to carry out this high calling? Then hear Luke 23:46: Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And having said this he breathed his last. In verse 5 and following of Philippians 2, Paul is not primarily setting forth propositional truth about the incarnation – No! he is setting forth the *person* of Christ who in his humility counted others more significant than himself, even though he is certainly much more significant than us (cf. John 13:34-35). Christ is our perfect example of the humble consideration of others' interests before our own.

## Observations & Applications

So what about the church on 2738 Pennyroyal Road in Springboro, Ohio? Are we known for this kind of unity? Are we humble to the degree that we are *characterized* by consistently, intelligently and wisely considering the interests of others before our own? Or, are we a conceited people? So self-interested that our field of view is no broader than our belly buttons? Are we compelled by our union with Christ to complete the joy of God, and others, by living in sacrificial service to each other as we glorify our Redeemer?

What observations and applications can we make as we draw to a close tonight?

1. *What does biblical unity mean to us?* Is it simply not fighting or splitting? Or is it more on the order of, "By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another?" (John 13:35)
2. *Othering First Inventory:* How do we care for Widows? Orphans or fatherless? Elderly? Poor or needy? among us? When is the last time you or I privately and personally met the financial or material need of a brother or sister in the church? When did you or I last discover such a need because we had intentionally engaged

others in the church with the intent of loving them? When did you last make big changes in plans or commitments to serve the church? When did you last meet an immaterial but interpersonal need?

3. *Othering first happens most effectively in the context of relationship.* This presupposes that you and I are both asking questions of others AND answering others' questions.
4. *The under girding for body life is Sunday services and flock.* So where are we? As a Sunday night crowd, *you're* most likely the ones at flocks as well. But in your othering first, when was the last time you challenged someone to attend Sunday nights or flock? And I want to wade in a bit further here. There may be those tempted to, from a platform of "family values" argue for "family time" and its precedent over body life. Beware of the false dichotomy (strain, conflict) set up between valuing family time and church attendance. For to attend to church and the members of the body is to attend to your family members (Galatians 6:10). The tension lies not between the life of the body and family life, but between body life and other priorities – between which the family is pulled – we believe something more valuable can be found elsewhere (family night, childrens' sports, professional sporting events? weekends at the lake, work commitments, tiredness). Not that anyone of these is wrong in and of themselves, but when they become regular inhibitors to your ability to put the interests of others first, we must reevaluate. Further, and darker, is when "family" related activities or priorities are simply a cover up for an heart neither values or cares for the church body. Remember, the idea in Philippians here is not that you ignore your own interests, but rather that you arrange life in a manner that leaves resources to put the interests of others ahead of your own.
5. *Is your joy completed by what Paul's joy was completed by?* (Are your concerns more for yourself and opinions? Or the body and its good?)
6. *True union leads to true unity.* Do not disconnect the motivation statements and the commands of vv. 1-4 from the person of verse 5. It is because of union with Christ that unity in the body is possible. It is through Christ that unity will be produced. And what is the mind we are to have? It is the spirit that humbles itself to serve. This mind *is ours* in Christ.

In balance, YES, you are required by and before God to care for your spouse and your children and you must not do poorly. [Ephesians 5, 1 Timothy 5:1-8, wisdom is required].

God has blessed us much as we are a people who know something of othering first. May we continue to grow in this Christian duty and delight. [Pray]