

**“Paths to Unity”**  
**Philippians 4:2-3**  
**June 21, 2026**  
**Faith Presbyterian Church – Morning Service**  
*Pastor Nicoletti*

**The Reading of the Word**

We continue this morning in our series in the Book of Philippians.

Paul has covered a number of topics in this letter so far. And now, in our text this morning Paul addresses a very concrete and specific issue in the church in Philippi.

With that said, let’s turn to our text: Philippians 4:2-3.

Please do listen carefully. This is God’s Word for us this morning.

Paul writes:

<sup>2</sup>I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. <sup>3</sup>Yes, I ask you also, true companion, help these women, who have labored side by side with me in the gospel together with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

This is the word of the Lord. (Thanks be to God.)

“All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.” [1 Peter 1:24-25]

Let’s pray ...

**Prayer of Illumination**

Lord, as we come to your Word,  
teach us the way of your statutes,  
that we might keep it to the end.  
Give us understanding, that we may follow your word  
and observe it with our whole hearts.  
Incline our hearts to your testimonies,  
and not to our own selfish ends.  
Turn our eyes and attention now from frivolous things,  
and give us life through your word.  
Grant this for Jesus’ sake. Amen.  
[Based on Psalm 119:33-34, 36-37]

**Introduction**

Paul in this letter to the Philippians has covered a lot of ground, and a lot of big topics. He's talked about the amazing mystery of the humble incarnation of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. He's described the incredible grace of the gospel. He's outlined the call of the Christian life.

And then, in these two verses this morning, Paul turns his attention to an ordinary conflict a local church.

And we can far too easily dismiss this. We can far too easily brush this aside, and move on to the next verse.

But we shouldn't. Because this issue was important to Paul. It mattered. It mattered so much that, not only did the Apostle Paul himself get involved with the situation, but the Holy Spirit wanted Paul's concern for this issue to be included in Holy Scripture, for all future Christians and all future churches to think about it as well.

As Romans 15:4 reminds us, God put these verses here for us, and for our instruction.

And so this morning we will consider these verses. And we'll see that there is actually a lot to reflect on in them.

What we find in this passage is that: While the church can be tempted to unnecessary division and discord, the church is called to unity, which is achieved through what we share in Jesus Christ.

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And it's that last part that we'll spend most of our time on, because in these verses Paul tells us how to actually seek the unity of the church – concrete paths to actually do that. In fact, Paul here points us to five distinct paths to unity among the things we share as fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

So that will be our focus this morning.

But first – before we get to those concrete paths to unity, we do need to consider the temptation to division.

### **The Church Is Tempted to Division & Discord**

The church ... in every age and in every circumstance is tempted towards division and discord.

And when Christians gives in to this temptation ... it can be ugly. And it betrays the Church's mission and message.

There are so many examples of this. One that Pastor Rayburn made me aware of occurred several decades ago in the Reformed world. Klaas Schilder was a pastor, professor, and theologian in the Netherlands. He was a neo-Calvinist, in the same tradition as Abraham Kuyper and Herman Bavinck, but he came to prominence after their deaths. And while he appreciated much of Kuyper, he also had some critiques and differences. One of those differences was regarding Kuyper's understanding of the theological basis of infant baptism. While Kuyper taught that the basis of

infant baptism was presumed regeneration, rooted in election, Schilder argued that the basis of infant baptism was in the nature of the covenant. Now ... that's not a huge difference. One would think that these perspectives could co-exist among ministers who agree on infant baptism, and share a Reformed view on the nature of the sacrament. But no. Instead, Schilder's denomination adopted a statement that, among other things, all ministers must affirm Kuyper's perspective on the basis for infant baptism. And when Schilder didn't agree to their statement, the synod suspended and then removed him as an officer of the church and as a professor of their seminary.

And if that were all there was to the story, it would be sad enough. But it gets worse. Because this nit picking over these theological issues occurred in 1942. And the trial and deposition of Schilder occurred in 1944. In other words, this unnecessarily divisive antagonism in the church all took place in the Reformed church of the Netherlands while they were being occupied by the Nazis. And, in fact, Schilder was in hiding from the Nazis at the time his opponents put him on trial on the church, over these theological disagreements – and so Schilder could not attend the trial or defend himself. The Nazis had already arrested Schilder once for his outspoken opposition to them, releasing him after several months in prison. And then the Nazis issued a new arrest warrant. And so Schilder had to flee.

At the time his opponents decided to put him on trial in the church, Schilder was hidden away at the house of a friend, that was only accessible by rowboat.

When the Nazis first invaded, Schilder said that the unity of the church was more important than ever. Instead, many Christians sowed discord. The result was eventually a denominational split. [De Young, 173-179; Thomas, Part 3; Van Rest, 111 n.10, 295-314, 325]

That's one sad example. But there are so many more throughout church history.

And they're not all over theology. They can often be over personal disputes, or disagreements over very practical things.

Richard Osmer tells the story of a church he pastored which almost split and lost major families, over a disagreement about how close the church's new playground should be put to the church's picnic canopy on the property. [Osmer, 2-3]

And we can laugh at such examples. But we do it too. We get swept up and tensions rise, and division and discord are sown, and people may leave churches. I have been amazed more than once at the kind of things that can spark harsh hostilities within the church. And that's not a statement about other people. It's about all of us.

All of which is to say: the Church is frequently tempted towards division and discord.

With some distance, these sorts of divisions and disputes can sound crazy. But when we are in the moment, and when it's close to home, we too can fall into this temptation just as easily as anyone else.

And we're often especially bad at dealing with minor disagreements. In fact, Sinclair Ferguson writes that "Christian fellowships are often at their worst when dealing with differences of opinion." He continues: "In some ways biblically-based churches find it easier to deal with false teaching. But personal differences can be almost as deadly, dividing the fellowship, sowing seeds of bitterness, diverting attention from central issues to sometimes petty, peripheral concerns,

sucking energy that should be employed in building up believers and in reaching out to the community. How effectively we handle these differences may say more about the biblical character of our church life than how we handle heresy.” [Ferguson, 100]

And often, it would seem, our character is lacking. Because we give in to the temptation to discord and animosity.

Underlying our text this morning is the reality that the church is regularly tempted towards discord and division.

Anyone who has spent any real time in the church should know this. It’s something all Christians experience, and it’s the first thing we see here.

### **The Church Is Called to Unity**

But the next thing we see here is that the church is called to unity.

The Church is called to be one. Paul says so in his letter to the Ephesians [4:4]. The early church included that conviction in the Nicene Creed, which we sang just a moment ago. Elsewhere, the Apostle Paul says that as Christians we should be “eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit” in the church. [Ephesians 4:3]

And the Bible gives multiple reasons for this call to unity. Jesus explained that the Church’s unity is supposed to point the unbelieving world to the nature of the gospel, and God himself. [John 17:21]

Paul said that the Church is the body of Christ: one body with many different members. If you separate the organs and members of a body, both the body and the organs die. And so the Church must be one just as a body must be one. [1 Corinthians 12]

Elsewhere the Bible says that the Church is the household of God. [1 Timothy 3:15] And God doesn’t want a family marked by division and discord.

The Apostle John adds that if we love God, we should also love our brothers and sisters in the church [1 John 4:20]. And such love, should lead to unity.

In the gospel, in response to God’s grace, the Church should be united as one.

But how do we do that? How do we heal divisions when they occur, and how do we strengthen the church against future divisions?

That’s the big question.

### **Unity Is Achieved Through What We Share in Jesus Christ**

And the Bible tells us that the answer is rooted in Jesus. Without Jesus, there can be no real unity.

Jesus gives us himself, and it's only in him and in his strength that we have the power to maintain the unity of the church, and to heal its divisions and discord.

But Jesus also gives us specific and concrete paths to the unity he has provided for us. And Paul in our text this morning points us to five of those paths: five concrete paths to foster and nurture our unity in the church, and to heal disunity and discord when it arises.

Paul points us to the fact that in Christ we have a shared mindset, shared labor, shared status, shared responsibility, and a shared future. And all of these should unite us as one.

Let's take those one at a time.

### 1) Shared Mindset

First, Paul calls us to a shared mindset.

That's really the first things he says to Euodia and Syntyche here.

In our translation it says "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord." But Gordon Fee argues it might be better to translate it as "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to have the same mindset in the Lord."

The Greek phrase here is actually the same one Paul uses in chapter two verse two of this letter, when he says to the Philippian church: "complete my joy by being of the same mind." And a few verses later, Paul uses the same word again, when he urges the Philippian Christians to have the mindset of Jesus Christ, as he reminds them of Jesus's humility, his service, his pouring himself out for others. It's for this reason that Paul calls on the Philippian Christians to "Do nothing from rivalry or selfish ambition, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves."

Paul seems to be alluding to all of that in verse 2 of our text. [Ferguson, 98]

And so, taking all that into account, we see that Paul is not primarily calling Euodia and Syntyche to agree on every point they've disagreed on. He's mainly calling them to have the same mindset. And the mindset they need to have is that of Christ: a mindset of sacrificial love for others, rooted in the sacrificial love that Jesus has already shown us. They are to have the same mindset "in the Lord." [Fee, 392; Ferguson, 98]

And so are we. Think of it like this: In our conflict with God, we were 100% in the wrong, and God was 100% in the right. And yet in Jesus, God himself cared so much about being reconciled and reunited with us that he was willing to pay the full price for that reconciliation himself. In our conflict with God, in which we were completely at fault, God still took the initiative to sacrificially seek reconciliation with us.

And if that's so, then how can we refuse to do the same for our brothers and sisters whom we have conflict with in the church? How can we put the burden of reconciliation on them – even if it is all their fault? Jesus did not have that mindset towards us – if he had, we would be doomed. But Jesus's mindset was to seek us, and to sacrifice himself, in order to reconcile us to him. And Paul calls us to have the same mindset – all of us.

As Christians, instead of insisting that the other person take the initiative, or the other person pay the price in order to end a conflict, we should all be falling over one another, seeking to take the first difficult steps towards reconciliation. That is what it would look like for us to have the mindset of Christ – to have the same mindset in the Lord. [Ferguson, 99]

And so the first path Paul points us to here is that because we have received such grace and love from Jesus, we are to have the same mindset as Jesus, who sought us when we were divided from him, even when it was all our fault, and even when it would cost him the most.

That's the first path Paul points us to: To have a shared mindset in the Lord – the mindset of Christ.

## 2) Shared Labor

Second, Paul calls us to shared labor.

And specifically, he calls us to shared gospel labor, as a path to unity.

For Euodia and Syntyche, this is something they already have, and Paul indicates that this reality should be a means by which unity can be restored.

God seems to have built human beings in such a way that they bond over shared labor towards a shared goal. That's true in the ordinary struggles of life, and so it must be even more true when it comes to the gospel.

In the 1950s researcher Muzafer Sherif performed a psychological experiment on 22 twelve-year-old boys. He had them all come out to a summer camp. But before they got there, he split them into two separate groups of 11. And the two groups were gathered at separate locations. And for the first week, each group bonded on its own, and built up group connection, camaraderie, and loyalty.

For the second week, the researchers introduced the two groups to each other, but pit them against each other, making them compete against each other in situations where the winning group got prizes and the losing group got nothing. Hostility increased fast. Taunting and name-calling escalated to one team burning the other team's flag, which escalated to the other team ransacking the first team's cabin, overturning their beds, stealing their belongings. Soon the animosity was so intense that the researchers had to physically separate the groups. They did not like each other.

The researchers then tried to get the two teams to socialize – just to spend time together. It did not lower the hostility.

But next, the researchers introduced a series of situations where the two groups had to work together towards a shared goal that was more important than the things that had divided them earlier.

The researchers turned off water to the camp and staged an act of outside vandalism as the cause. The two teams then needed to work together in order to get the water running again. And they did. And afterwards, they two teams celebrated as one – they even let boys from the other team get drinks of water before they themselves did.

Next, the truck bringing food to the camp was made to look as if it was stuck, and the two teams had to again work together to pull it out of a ditch. Again, as they worked together towards a shared goal, hostilities decreased, and unity grew.

By the end of a series of such activities, the two groups wanted to spend time together, turning down opportunities to divide again.

Where fighting and even theft and vandalism had characterized the relationship before, now there was a new unity and a real camaraderie. [<https://www.simplypsychology.org/robbers-cave.html>]

And if earthly labor towards earthly goals can heal such division and foster such unity, how much more must gospel labor towards eternal goals heal division in the church, and nurture and strengthen its unity.

That seems to be what Paul is pointing to in verse three. Ideas alone don't usually lead to true unity or healing. We need to act. We need to labor side-by-side in the gospel.

In the case of Euodia and Syntyche, Paul believes that that their shared labor in the past should be a major help in overcoming their current divisions – that's why he mentions it. And his words seem to imply that future shared labor for the gospel should heal those divisions.

And the same is true for us. What can we do to prevent future division? Well, laboring side-by-side with one another for gospel goals, in gospel ministry, working as a team to care for those in need among us, reaching out together to the lost – these shared labors towards shared goals, which should supersede so many of our petty squabbles in this life – these shared labors should serve as a preventative measure that strengthens our unity and guards us against division.

Of course, as we see with Euodia and Syntyche, division can still occur. But when it does, such shared labor towards a greater goal can also seem to heal our divisions with one another, when it's done with the mindset of Christ.

Where do you need to come alongside other Christians who you might struggle to get along with, and labor with them in gospel work, side-by-side, in ways that serve Jesus's kingdom and form deeper Christian unity?

Have you avoided such gospel labor? Have you avoided serving alongside certain Christian brothers or sisters? If so, how might God be calling you to repent? Where might he be calling you to serve? Who might he be calling you to serve alongside?

The second path to unity that Paul points us to here is shared gospel labor.

### 3) Shared Status

Third, Paul points to a shared status in the gospel.

And Paul points us to this in his own conduct.

There were a lot of ways that Paul could have pulled rank here. And so it's striking that he doesn't. Instead he emphasizes his shared status with Euodia and Syntyche.

And to fully see this, we need to understand the situation as best we can.

For one thing, Paul addresses this situation as something affecting the life of the church. It seems clear that Paul is not identifying a private conflict here, but one among leaders in the church at Philippi [Fee, 392, 397]. Paul seems to regard Euodia and Syntyche as influential leaders in the church. And he doesn't seem to have any problem with their influence or their leadership. His problem is with their discord and the division it's leading to.

While ordained offices were limited to men, ordained offices were not the only kinds of leadership roles in the early church. There were other formal leadership roles. And there were also various informal leadership roles. And Euodia and Syntyche seem to clearly have occupied some kind of non-ordained leadership positions.

And they are in conflict. Now, we often want to dismiss this conflict in one way or another.

Some want to act as if Euodia and Syntyche must have been especially problematic church members. But far from saying that, Paul describes their earlier ministry labors as exemplary. [Fee, 389]

Others want to ascribe their unresolved conflict to the fact that they are women. But the text doesn't say anything like that. And so, if we read that into the passage, it really says more about us than the situation being described. [Fee, 397]

What we have here, is a substantial conflict between two influential leaders in the church, both of whom the Apostle Paul respects ... but even so, Paul outranks them both.

And yet ... Paul doesn't appeal to that here.

In a church where he had the highest office as an Apostle, Paul doesn't evoke his office. And in a culture where men often had greater authority than women, Paul doesn't appeal to gender either.

Contrary to some church leaders today, Paul doesn't say "Ladies, cut it out, and back off, and let the men lead through this situation." Instead he calls on the women themselves to re-unite in order to faithfully carry out their leadership roles in the church. Paul also doesn't say "Hey, Bob and Frank, would you please get your wives Euodia and Syntyche under control?" There is no such male chauvinism here, but Paul appeals to Euodia and Syntyche directly, as fellow believers who deserve his direct engagement.

But even more noteworthy, Paul also doesn't appeal to his own church office – he doesn't say "Hey. I'm an apostle. God put me in charge. So shut up and do what I tell you." No, Paul entreats them to reconcile. And he asks the "true companion" to help.

Rather than order anyone else around, instead, in verse 3, Paul emphasizes their shared status as coworkers in the gospel.

Now, Paul's approach here is not a denial of authority structures in the church. But at the very least, it may be a display of the fact that trying to authoritatively clamp down from above doesn't really solve division or cause unity. I personally can't think of an example where a church's

leadership bringing the hammer down on a community led to a renewal of healthy congregational unity.

Instead, Paul here appeals to our shared status in the gospel. Men and women, ordained and unordained, we have a shared status in Christ, as those who are to labor side-by-side. And so, whether we are part of the conflict or coming from the outside of it and trying to help resolve it, we need to come to others not from above them, but from beside them – as brothers and sisters, as co-laborers, who share a status that we’ve received by grace. That’s what Paul does here. And surely none of us have more of a right to pull rank than the Apostle Paul does.

Real efforts at unity are rooted in our shared status in Christ.

#### 4) Shared Responsibility

Fourth, Paul points them to a shared responsibility.

In Jesus Christ, unity is not the responsibility of just some people. It’s a shared responsibility for all of God’s people.

We often want to make unity someone else’s responsibility – whether it’s those who are raising concerns, or those who are in authority, or those who we believe started the conflict. But Paul here makes the church’s unity everyone’s responsibility.

It’s Euodia’s responsibility. And it’s Syntyche’s responsibility. But Paul doesn’t stop there. In verse 3 he puts responsibility also on an unnamed companion who has no role in the conflict, but whom Paul says still has a responsibility to try to help heal it. [Fee, 393-395] Then, as verse 3 continues, Paul is suddenly mentioning Clement and others in the church there in Philippi.

It seems to imply that everyone has some level of responsibility to work for the peace and the unity of the church. Which would include every one of us.

And we don’t get to shrug that off, or push it onto others because they caused the problem, or because they are officers, or because they are paid staff. We are not just our brother’s keeper – we are also, in a sense, our church’s keeper.

Where are you called to this ... right now? Where is there division that you have caused in the life of the church ... or division that you’ve at least been complicit in ... or division that you’ve seen and chosen to ignore? What would it look like for you, like Paul’s “true companion” to see that, and to regard it as at least in part, your responsibility?

So, as paths to unity, Paul points us to our shared mindset of Christ, our shared labor in Christ’s gospel, our shared status in Christ’s grace, and our shared responsibility for Christ’s people.

#### 5) Shared Future

Fifth and finally, Paul points us to our shared future in Christ’s kingdom.

Paul reminds those in the church in Philippi – including those caught in division and discord – that they have a shared future. Because, as he notes at the end of verse 3, their names are all in the book of life. [Fee, 396-397]

If we are fellow believers, then we are going to spend eternity together. Reconciliation is therefore not optional. It will have to happen sooner or later. And clearly sooner is better than later.

At the resurrection, there will be no division or discord between us and other believers.

But God doesn't want us to wait until then. He calls us to live according to the resurrection even now. And so even now, we must seek unity and reconciliation. And we can do that with confidence, because we know that in the end, in the gospel, unity and peace really will win out. True reconciliation among all God's people will one day be achieved. Because our names are written in the book of life.

## **Conclusion**

Brothers and sister, Jesus Christ died in order to reconcile us to himself, and to one another.

And so, division and discord among us, as his people, grieves him. God wants his people to be one as he is one. Jesus wants his body to be united – his bride to be whole. God the Father wants his family to be truly connected and truly at peace.

Where do you need to seek that peace? Where do you need to work towards that unity?

Jesus entreats us, to share the mindset he had when he saved us, to labor side-by-side in the gospel, to embrace our shared status in his kingdom, to take responsibility for one another in his family, and to seek peace now with those we will spend eternity with by his grace.

The Lord has entreated us.

Let us obey his call ... for his glory, for the church's good.

Amen.

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### **This sermon draws on material from:**

- De Young, Johannes Marinus. *The Church is the Means, the World is the End: The Development of Klaas Schilder's Thought on the Relationship between the Church and the World*. 2019. <https://www.tukampen.nl/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/proefschrift-Marinus-de-Jong-final-3.pdf>
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<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/1999/learning-from-the-life-of-dr-klaas-schilder-part-ii/>  
<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/1999/learning-from-the-life-of-dr-klaas-schilder-part-iii/>  
<https://banneroftruth.org/us/resources/articles/1999/learning-from-the-life-of-dr-klaas-schilder-part-iv/>
- Van Reest, Rudolf. *Schilder's Struggle for the Unity of the Church*. Translated by Theodore Plantigna. Neerlandia, Alberta, Canada: Inheritance Publications, 1990.

Wright, N.T. *Paul for Everyone: The Prison letters: Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, and Philemon*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2024.

Note: In my preaching I often cite and draw from a range of sources, which includes material from Christians within my theological tradition, Christians outside my theological tradition (in keeping with our church's core value of "Reformed Catholicity"), and also (following the Apostle Paul's example in Acts 17) non-Christians who are well outside of Christian orthodoxy and orthopraxy. And so, when I cite an author or a source, that citation should not be understood or construed as me necessarily agreeing with, endorsing, or recommending to others anything else from that author or source, except for what I explicitly say I agree with, endorse, or recommend. When engaging with different materials and thinkers, all Christians must exercise wisdom and discernment to determine what is helpful, appropriate, and edifying for each person, taking into account their current needs, wisdom, and spiritual maturity.