

Reading

These are the words of God:

Therefore, my brothers, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, stand firm thus in the Lord, my beloved.

I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. 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. (Philippians 4:1-3)

Please sit.

Pray

Intro

You didn't have to dig very long to unearth multiple examples of churches splitting. I'm not talking here about churches or denominations, which split over significant doctrinal matters - sometimes that is inevitable, and even the right thing to do. I'm talking about churches which split over relatively trivial things.

This is an extreme example but I came across this story about a church in Maryland:

100 years of Christian fellowship, unity, and community outreach ended last Tuesday in an act of congregational discord. Holy Creek Baptist Church was split into multiple factions. The congregation will be having four services each Sunday. There has been an agreement mediated by an outside pastor so that each faction will have it's own separate service with it's own separate pastor - since the head pastor is not speaking to the associate pastors. The services are far enough apart that no group will come into contact with the other. [Why are they splitting?] The source of dissension is [the position of] a piano bench which sits behind the 1923 Steinway piano to the left of the pulpit. Members at Holy Creek Baptist say that

the old bench was always a source of hostility. An outside party will be moving the piano bench to different locations and appropriate positions, between services to please all sides, and avoid any further conflict that could result in violence.

Well, that's pretty extreme. And it makes me grateful we don't have piano benches.

But the Apostle Paul is very concerned that factions might develop in the church in Philippi, because of a disagreement between two women, named Euodia and Syntyche.

Now in God's providence, history has not recorded the details of this disagreement.

And I think that's a good thing. Because it keeps us from saying, well *we'd* never fall out about something as foolish as THAT. And the fact is, EVERY church is vulnerable to this.

What do YOU do when you have a strong difference of opinion with someone at church?

What do you do when you see OTHERS falling out with each other here at CCC?

It's not that the parties have sinned against each other, maybe it's just a sharp difference of opinion about the way we ought to do things.

Let's say you're on a committee together, and you feel strongly that money should be used in one way, but someone else on the committee thinks it should be used a different way. And you're both convinced you're right, you've both got the bit between your teeth, and neither of you is backing down, and a rift develops between you. Or maybe you are convinced of a particular political view, but this person isn't, and you've had a sharp disagreement about it. Again, no sin is involved.

But over time, it's become something of a feud between you. And other members of the church have started to notice. And people are taking sides.

What do we do? Well Paul does three things I'd like us to emulate:

He entreats them both

He calls for mediation between them

He asks them both to "agree in the Lord"

1. He entreats them

Notice the posture Paul takes towards these two women.

When you look at Paul's letters as a whole, Paul tends NOT to name his enemies, but he OFTEN names his friends. I think that's true here, of Euodia and Syntyche. He pleads with them on the basis of his love and fondness for them.

Notice how in verse 1 he addresses his comments to those "whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown.... My beloved." Doesn't it remind you of the start of the letter where he said that he "yearns for them ALL with the affection of Christ Jesus".

Although it must have been awkward for Euodia and Syntyche to hear themselves called out like this in front of the rest of the church as they read this letter aloud, Paul is clearly not trying to shame them.

He reminds everyone in verse 3 that these are women who have labored side by side with [him] in the gospel together with a man called Clement and the rest of [Paul's] fellow workers. So he's been in the trenches with them. He deeply values them.

That's such an important thing for us to remember if we are having to confront a situation like this. He doesn't talk down to them.

The word he uses is "entreat", not "command": he doesn't pull rank on them. He doesn't act as if he's suspicious of their spiritual health: quite the reverse - he affirms their status as true believers, and valued co-workers.

That's how to talk to people, isn't it? Even though he believes they ought not to behave like this, he believes the best of them, not the worst. He entreats them, and he leaves them with the unmistakable sense that he is absolutely on their side.

In fact, and I think this IS a challenge to us, it is precisely BECAUSE of his love for them that he calls them out.

Proverbs 27 says:

Faithful are the wounds of a friend; profuse are the kisses of an enemy. (Proverbs 27:6)

Sometimes, loving confrontation is what we must do. Because we need our brothers and sisters to help us see more clearly.

I can remember a time in my Christian life when I was relating to someone in a way that was selfish and not loving. And I had a real blindspot about it: it was invisible to me.

And I later learned that there were friends at my church who didn't want to challenge me on it, because they were afraid they might lose my friendship. So they said nothing. And as a result, I continued to behave in this way for a number of YEARS.

Ironically, it was a brother from another church, who didn't know me that well at all - who finally had the courage to say to me, in private: "Brother, I don't think you've loved this person well."

Now, to be completely honest with you: I wasn't wild about being called out like that. I think instinctively I was a little indignant. But I knew he was right. He gave me the gift of being able to see myself more clearly, and what I was doing.

Could you love someone enough to do that here at CCC? Or, do we think that avoiding confrontation is always the more loving thing to do? Is it possible that what we call love is sometimes cowardice in disguise?

It is risky to confront in this way, of course, and if you're the sort of person who gets a kick out of confrontation, please don't. I imagine the Apostle Paul would much rather NOT have to do this. But he DOES do it, because he loves them.

But the reason he entreats them to agree with each other isn't JUST for their own sake; it's for the sake of the whole church.

The word translated "entreat" there in verse 2 is surprisingly strong. It could be translated: "exhort", "urge", "beseech", "plead", and even "I BEG Euodia and Syntyche to agree in the Lord". Clearly, for Paul, the stakes are high. Why?

Because this kind of situation - discord between two believers - is never entirely private. It always destabilises, in some way, the whole body of Christ. Especially if the people concerned have prominent status in the church, which seems to be the case with Euodia and Syntyche.

It happened in a church I used to attend when I was a kid. The minister of this church fell out with someone, it wasn't dealt with quickly, and soon the whole church was taking sides. And the church was never the same after that. Relationships were strained rather than joyful.

My memory of it is that there were a lot of fixed smiles. The unity of the church was deeply fractured.

You know, a few years ago, I was feeling nostalgic when I was back in the UK, so I went to visit that church, the one I'd grown up in. And I discovered, not entirely to my surprise, that it had been knocked down and replaced with an apartment block.

Would the church have survived had people handled disagreements differently? Quite possibly.

And this is why Paul entreats them as he does.

That takes us to our second point.

2. Paul calls for mediation

Sometimes, we need a third party to help us.

Look at verse 3. Paul says:

3 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... (Philippians 4:3)

Now, much ink has been spilt over the identity of this mediator, this “true companion” Paul mentions. Some have suggested it might be Luke, others have suggested Epaphroditus, which has some merit I think, given that Epaphroditus is the one who’ll be delivering the letter to Philippi.

But the identity of this “true companion” isn’t the important thing here.

The important thing is that sometimes, a disagreement or conflict between two people becomes so painful and so prolonged that they need a mediator.

A third party who without favoritism hears both sides and works to reconcile both parties. A mediator instead comes in and appeals to BOTH parties at the same time to see things from a different perspective.

To be a mediator is to act in a profoundly Christ-like way, because of course Christ is the ultimate mediator.

In First Timothy 2, Paul says:

5 For there is one God, and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, (1 Timothy 2:5)

As one who is fully God and fully human, Christ is uniquely placed to mediate between God and ourselves.

By nature, by birth, there is enmity between us and God the Father. But Christ, by his life, death, resurrection and ascension, makes peace between us and God. That is the gospel: that is the good news. He mediates for us so that we are reconciled with God.

In Second Corinthians, Paul says that the gospel is

from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave US the ministry of reconciliation (2 Corinthians 5:18)

So in one sense, because of Christ's mediation, ALL of us become mediators. Our job description as Christians is that we seek to bring reconciliation between people by pointing them to the ultimate mediator, Jesus Christ.

So if you were the mediator between Euodia and Syntyche in this situation, what might you say? How would you bring the gospel to bear?

Or maybe we can ask, what would Jesus say?

Perhaps something like this. Euodia, Syntyche: God has shown each of you incredible grace, so that you can now show grace to each other.

Imagine that a man called Jack asks his wealthy best friend, David to loan him some money. He says, "David, would you loan me the money so I can invest in this stock I've heard about? It's guaranteed to make a LOT of money, so you'll get a great return on your loan. In fact, if it doesn't succeed, I'll pay you back everything, I'm that sure about it."

But Jack doesn't tell David the whole story. There's a lot of risk attached to this investment. But he doesn't tell David that.

So David agrees, he loans Jack \$5m to invest in this stock he's recommended.

And then the next day, the stock just craters. It's worthless. So David loses his entire investment overnight - all because of Jack.

Well, Jack gets a call from David and he says: "I trusted you. You hid the truth from me. I demand you pay me back, and I'll take you to court to make sure you do."

Now Jack is really scared at this point. He doesn't sleep a wink that night, because not only has the friendship been wrecked, but he knows he has no way of paying David back the 5 million.

So the next morning, he goes to David's office to see him. And he's in tears. He says, "I am so sorry. Please, I know I said I'd pay you back, but I don't have anything LIKE that kind of money. Paying you back will ruin me and my marriage, and my family will literally be out on the streets."

And David looks at him and says: “Listen, I know you promised to pay me, but I’ve been thinking about this. Your friendship is worth more to me than \$5m. And I know it would ruin you if you had to pay it back. So I’ll absorb the debt myself. There’s no need for you to pay a dime.”

Jack is totally amazed. Stunned. Relieved! He hugs David. He can’t believe it. David has forgiven the debt, and the two friends are reconciled to each other.

Well, as Jack is driving home, he sees another friend of his walking along the sidewalk, and he remembers that this friend owes him \$5000.

Jack also knows that this friend is on the breadline - that he and his family can barely make ends meet. So what does he do?

Here’s what he does. He pulls over beside him, gets out of the car, and says to him, “Hey! Where’s the \$5000 you owe me? I want it by the end of the week.”

And the friend pleads with Jack and says, “I can’t do it, I can’t even pay the rent - please, as a friend, would you forgive the debt? I’m begging you.”

And Jack says, “We’re not friends any more. I want my \$5000 by the end of the week or I’m calling in the debt collectors.”

Now, Jack’s wealthy friend David hears about this from some mutual friends. What do you think he says to Jack?

He says, “Jack, is this true? You demanded repayment of a \$5000 debt from your friend after I FORGAVE you a \$5 MILLION dollar debt that very same day? You showed your friend no mercy at all after the mercy I showed you? In that case, I withdraw my offer. Because you refused to cancel your friend’s debt, I refuse to cancel yours. I’ll see you in court.”

Now if that story sounds familiar, it’s because it’s based on a parable Jesus tells in Matthew 18, the parable of the unforgiving servant.

Jesus tells it as a response to Peter’s question: how many times should I forgive my brother? And Jesus says, Well, how many times has God forgiven YOU? Go and do likewise.

And though Euodia and Syntyche may not have sinned against each other, nevertheless, they are withholding grace from each other, when God has already shown them incredible grace.

What might Jesus say to that? “Euodia, Syntyche, God has reconciled himself to you at vast expense, can you not extend that reconciliation to each other?”

I was willing to die on a cross so you could be reconciled to God - are YOU now unwilling to die to your own personal preferences?

Sometimes it takes a mediator to help us see that.

Now as I speak about reconciliation, I do want to be clear about something. Jesus is NOT calling two people to be together where there is an ongoing physical danger to one of them. Jesus calls us to forgiveness; He doesn't call us to foolishness.

It is not always possible, it is not always desirable, for that relationship to carry on as if the sin never took place. So I want to be clear about that.

But that is not the situation here. There's no sin between Euodia and Syntyche. And that's why Paul entreats them,

that's why he calls for a mediator, and thirdly, that's why he calls them to agree with each other "in the Lord".

3. He asks them to “agree in the Lord”

Look at the end of verse 2:

2 I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord. (Philippians 4:2)

Or “be of the same mind”. We’ve heard that earlier in Philippians haven’t we? Chapter 2 verse 2 says it twice:

2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. (Philippians 2:2)

And then in chapter 1 verse 27, we hear the same plea:

27 Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you are standing firm in ONE spirit, with ONE mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel...
(Philippians 1:27)

That word “striving” in Greek is “synathleo”: exactly the same word Paul uses when describing the way he and Euodia and Syntyche had worked together in the past:

3 ...these women, who have labored (“synathleo”) side by side with me in the gospel together...
(Philippians 4:3)

It’s as if Paul is saying, “Remember how we’ve labored together, strived together, shared the same goals - don’t forget that.”

Sharing the same goals. I think that’s crucial to understanding what Paul means when he says “agree in the Lord”. Literally, in Greek, he says: “I appeal to Euodia and I appeal to Syntyche to think the same thing in the Lord.”

Think the same thing? Is that reasonable?

Is Paul saying they (and we) need to think the same things about everything? Politically, socially, theologically? And if so, how would you achieve that?

Let’s say you’re in a disagreement with somebody. Does “agree in the Lord” mean that one of you has to change your mind to the other person’s view, just to keep the peace?

Or are you BOTH supposed to change your views and find some sort of middle ground?

Or is Paul saying: you must stop squabbling publicly, and make sure you keep those kinds of disagreements behind closed doors, and THAT's what it means to "agree in the Lord"?

Or is he saying, listen stop squabbling about theology. Doctrine divides. Love unites. Just love one another and stop talking about doctrine, because that always ends in tears?

I don't think it's any of the above.

The key to understanding what he means is the repeated phrase "in the Lord". It's there in verse 1 - "stand firm thus in the Lord" - and in verse 2, where he says "agree in the Lord."

He's not entreating them simply to agree. He is entreating them to agree in the Lord. Huge difference.

What is he reminding them of with that phrase? He's saying: "You're both 'in the Lord', and that means you are both on the same team! BOTH of you labored side by side with me."

Apologies for a soccer analogy, but sometimes players from two different countries have a really strong rivalry. For example, Brazilian footballers and Argentinian footballers. When they play against each other, the tackles are brutal, there are arguments, people get in each other's faces. But then those players come home and play for the same team domestically and suddenly they're smiling, hugging each other, celebrating each others' goals - why? Because now they're on the same team. They're not competing any more. The differences become irrelevant.

Paul is reminding these two women of that fact. You both want the same ultimate things. You both are "in Christ".

And there's something else that helps us "agree in the Lord". Verse 3, Paul reminds them: both your names are in "the book of life".

Apart from this one, there are seven references to the book of life in the New Testament. Six of them are in Revelation, where we're told that the book of life existed before the foundation of the world, that in it are written the names of all those who will endure to the end, whose names will be confessed by Christ before His Father and before his angels.

In other words, the book of life contains the names of all those whose citizenship is in heaven.

It's no coincidence that this passage about Euodia and Syntyche comes immediately after Paul has reminded them:

20 ...our citizenship is in heaven, and from it we await a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ
(Philippians 3:20)

My agreeing with someone else in the Lord depends on my remembering the fact that MY citizenship is in heaven, and HIS citizenship is in heaven too. That MY name is written in the book of life, and HIS name is written in the book of life too.

Why? How does that help us in our conflicts?

I said there were seven other references to the book of life in the New Testament, six of which are in Revelation. There's one more. Luke chapter 10 verse 20.

The seventy-two disciples have just been sent out by Jesus and they are overjoyed with the power they are

experiencing as they proclaim the gospel, and cast out demons. And what does Jesus say to them?

20 ...do not rejoice in this, that the spirits are subject to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

(Luke 10:20)

So when Paul references the book of life here, he's reminding them: “Euodia, Syntyche, don't rejoice in getting other people to agree with you. REJOICE that your names are written in heaven!”

Or, to put it another way. “Euodia, Syntyche, you're unhappy with each other. You think you would be happy if you could make the other person agree with you. But if you can't be happy that your names are written in the book of life, then getting your way in an argument is certainly not going to do it for you.”

“You already have something that is infinitely better than the other person's agreement! You have THE LORD, and everything HE has is yours. If you have EVERYTHING in the Lord, do you really need to WIN this debate? You don't need to be right. And you don't need her to be wrong.”

That's how you agree "in the Lord."

Those of you who are parents of smaller children will know that there are few things sweeter than seeing your children getting along well with each other, working things out, loving each other well.

That is how our heavenly Father looks at us. Our agreeing with one another in the Lord is just delightful to Him.

In the same way, as a parent, it GRIEVES us when our children fight and squabble. And usually, from OUR perspective, high above them, the fights and squabbles, they seem very trivial, don't they?

What if we could lift our eyes to heaven, and see our squabbles and disagreements in the same way our Father does: from the perspective of eternal glory.

Let's pray.