

Pastor Don Nelson

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Beverly E.C.C., Chicago, IL

“ONE IN SPIRIT”
Philippians 2:1-11

☑ I know a man who always has to be “right”. To him, it is of utmost importance that others acknowledge his “rightness.”

If you remember a shared experience differently, he will insist that his version of events is the accurate one.

If you are mistaken about a minor detail of geography or history he will correct you, and go online or pull out a reference book to prove it.

If you disagree with his political convictions or religious views he will discuss and debate and dispute in a close-minded effort to convince you of his rightness.

He claims to act out of strong conviction, but it is all very personal. If you disagree with him, or simply question his rightness, he will feel irritated, defensive, and angry.

His need to be seen as being right takes its toll on relationships. If you do not concede that he is correct, especially on the big issues, the best you can expect is tolerance. More likely he will nag and bully you.

Bottom line: “rightness” is of greater value to him than truth and principle and people. When push comes to shove he will sacrifice relationships and take pride in the “knowledge” that he is right.

{Ro 6:6; 7:19} I am talking about my old man. Not my dad; my *old man* in the biblical sense. My “**old self**” who is

“ruled by sin,” the part of me that does “**not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do.**”

{2 Co 5:17} Praise God, “**in Christ**” I am being transformed, “**the new creation has come**”! The new me loves God and people more than he loves being right. He is the *real* me, and he is getting stronger.

Nevertheless, my old man isn’t going down without a fight. He’s been getting more aggressive again, stimulated by the pervasive discord all around.

So I catch myself listening, not to understand but to find the holes in their logic, not to learn but to plan my next brilliant statement. That is my old man.

And I catch myself smugly judging others for (what I perceive to be) their glaring ignorance, obvious blindness, and willful perversity. That is my old man.

And I catch myself bristling. I imagine cutting them down to size with my words. They might be wounded, the relationship might be over, but at least I would be proven right. That is my old man.

If only I was the exception! I don’t think I am.

I see communities, friendships, families, marriages – affiliations of every kind and degree – strained, fractured, and sometimes destroyed by the compulsion to be “right,” or to be *seen* as being right.

Alas, the Church is not immune! Congregations and entire denominations are coming apart at the seams.

To be sure, significant differences will develop around the specific doctrines, practices, and policies of the Church. However, we tend to assume that the solution is for the idiots on the other side to come to

their senses, recognize *our* rightness, and change to be like us.

? Is this so bad? Sometimes one side is right and the other is wrong. Shouldn't those who are right demand recognition – even at the cost of division?

□ Please turn with me to Philippians 2:1-11.

★ Inspired by the Holy Spirit, the apostle Paul emphasizes the priority of unity in verses 1-2.

■ **“¹ Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion,” – “if ... if ... if ... if”:** all of these conditional statements could be condensed down to one: ‘if you are alive in Christ,’ for all four “ifs” are true of every Christ Follower – ‘if you are alive in Christ,’ **“² then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”**

{Jn 17:20-23} On the night of his arrest, God the Son prayed for all believers in every time and place:

“My prayer is ... that all of them may be one, Father I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

? Our unity is a top priority for the Lord of the Church. Is it a priority for us?

Christians in the U.S. have formed hundreds of denominations and tens of thousands of unaffiliated churches. Congregations split over everything from musical preference to bedrock theology. And now there are the “Dones,” professing believers who reject organized Christianity altogether.

As for me, my old man is slow to listen and quick to speak, quick to take offense and slow to forgive. He is proud and self-seeking. He inflates non-essential matters as though they were essential. He presumes that his point of view is normative. My old man does not prioritize unity.

? With him whispering in my ear it is not easy to be **“like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.”** How can we fulfill the call to unity?

★ Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul describes the practice of unity in verses 3-4.

■ **“³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.”**

Notice that the apostle does not present a detailed creed for us to espouse or be excommunicated. Many denominations have done that in order to enforce unity.

In their defense, some doctrines are non-negotiable. For example, if you do not believe in the Trinity, or the Incarnation, Death, and Resurrection of

Jesus, or the necessity of New Birth in Christ, and so on, you are not a Christian.

Having said that, although our unity involves certain beliefs, it is not centered there. After all, Satan believes these things – and he is dead-set on tearing us apart.

✈ Instead, Paul focuses on our conduct within the Church. We unite with each other by: a) rooting out our own arrogance and self-centeredness; and b) honoring our brothers and sisters for their edification and serving them so their needs are met.

📖 This gets at the nature of Christian unity. It is a relationship created by the Holy Spirit among Christ Followers. It consists of a shared experience of salvation in Jesus, common love for God and neighbor, mutual participation in Church life, collective efforts to make disciples, and cohesive confession of core beliefs. This presupposes agreement in essentials, and liberty in non-essentials, and love in all things.

{Mk 10:37, 42} As for me, my old man is like James and John, who told Messiah, “**Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in... glory.**” He is like a tyrant who “**lords**” his power “**over**” his subjects, or a “**high official**” who uses his authority to exploit the lowly. My old man refuses to practice unity.

? How can our new selves overcome the old? How can we actually “**value others above**” ourselves and look “**to the interests of the others**”?

★ Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul describes the power for unity in verses 5-8.

■ ⁵ **In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude ... Christ Jesus had:**

⁶ **Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage;**

⁷ **rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of servant, being made in human likeness.**

⁸ **And being found in appearance as a human being, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death – even death on a cross!**

☑ Our unity is not grounded in race, ethnic heritage, socio-economic status, or political ideology. To quote Bonhoeffer, “**Christianity means community through Jesus Christ and in Jesus Christ We belong to one another only through and in Jesus Christ.**”

? What does this look like in practice? It looks like cross-carrying.

{Mk 8:34} “**Whoever wants to be [Messiah’s] disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.**” You and I have our own crosses to pick up, but we walk together with Jesus and each other.

{Gal 5:16, 20-21, 24} “**Those who belong to Christ... have crucified the**” “**old self**” “**with its**

passions and desires.” Hence, we **“do not gratify the desires of the sinful nature”** by indulging in **“hatred, discord, jealousy, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions and envy.”**

✍ {Mic 6:8; Jn 13:1-5; Mt 5:44} Discipleship is a cruciform life (a cross-shaped life). We **“act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God,”** like Jesus in his incarnation. We serve selflessly, like Jesus when he washed the disciples’ feet. We **“love and pray for”** our enemies, like Jesus on the cross.

{Mk 8:35-36; Mt 23:6} As for me, my old man **“wants to save [his] life,”** even if it costs me my soul! He loves **“the place of honor at banquets and the most important [seat] in [church].”** He exalts himself, does not care about his neighbor, and hates his enemies. My old man rejects our power for unity.

{II Co 3:18; Rom 8:29; Eph 4:24} But my **“new self,”** the real me? I am **“being transformed into” “the Lord’s” “image,”** increasingly **“conformed to the image of [God’s] Son,” “created to be like [him] in true righteousness and holiness.”**

✍ {Php 2:13} Please hear me: we do not carry the cross in imitation of the Lord Jesus, in our own strength; we carry the cross with him, in his strength. **“For it is God who works in [us] to will and to act in order to fulfill his good purpose.”** And **“his good purpose”** includes our unity of spirit and of mind.

? But why does this matter? What is the big deal about **“being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one-mind”**?

★ Inspired by the Holy Spirit, Paul describes the purpose for unity in verses 9-11.

- ⁹ **Therefore God exalted him to the highest place,
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰ that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹ and every tongue acknowledge that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of the Father.**

Our unity in the Church exalts the Lord. When we honor and serve others, the name of Jesus is magnified. By humbly denying ourselves and carrying our cross, we prove Christ’s lordship.

? Could there be a greater purpose? Is not this reason enough to strive for unity?

Brothers and sisters, it is far more important to be right before God, and to be in right relationship with each other, than it is to be “right”!

Philippians 2:1-11 is the word of the Lord.