

**What to Do to have Unity**  
**Philippians 4**  
Rhys Thomas

Unity doesn't happen by itself. What happens by itself is what we have, cities with a church for about every 300 population, all different, all supposedly teaching from the same book.

Through three chapters of Philippians, we have seen three of the ingredients of unity: encouragements, attitudes, and knowledge. But so far, it has not gotten very practical, very physical. If we were to stop reading Philippians after chapter three, we would have only a collection of great platitudes with little in the way of concrete things to do. But God does not send messages like that. God is always very practical, if we will just keep reading.

Chapter four is what to do to have unity. Of course, it is predicated on the previous three chapters. All these Do's of unity are based on the knowledge, attitudes, and encouragements of what went before.

So let's begin with the things to do in order to have unity: not worldwide religious unity but unity between individual believers. First, helping:

(Philippians 4:1 – 3) Therefore, my beloved brethren whom I long to see, my joy and crown, in this way stand firm in the Lord, my beloved. I urge Euodia and I urge Syntyche to live in harmony in the Lord. Indeed, true companion, I ask you also to help these women who have shared my struggle in the cause of the gospel, together with Clement also and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

Paul's Do here is to help, not to sit back and watch people build walls between themselves, but to step in and actively maintain unity.

That may seem like hazardous duty, stepping between two feuding people. We are likely to get hit from both sides.

See how Paul subtly induces the Philippian Christians to get up the nerve to interfere in someone else's business? "My fellow workers, whose names are written in the Book of Life." He's saying, "We can't let the old gang fall apart like this. Think about what we have been through together." It is reminiscent of chapter 1 verse 27, "With one mind, striving together for the faith of the gospel."

And notice how this helping fits with chapters 2 and 3. Without the emotional ties, the attitudes of chapter two, there is no motivation to help. Without the knowledge of what is valuable, there is no urgency to interfere.

The first thing we have to do to have unity is to help bring estranged people back together. The second thing is to forbear.

(Philippians 4:4 – 5) Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, rejoice! Let your forbearing spirit be known to all men. The Lord is near.

That's an interesting word, forbearing. The King James Version has moderation. The New International Version has gentleness. The Phillips translation has reputation for reasonableness.

Whenever there is a word in the Scriptures that is translated in different ways in different versions, usually it is because there is no adequate English equivalent for the Greek or Hebrew

word in that place. The translators had to make a choice because they did not want to include a whole paragraph of explanation in the middle of Paul's thought. As you can see, which English word best describes what Paul meant here is open to considerable debate among translators.

When that happens, what are we to do? The best approach for us is to take all the translations and blend them together. In that way, we get a bigger picture of just what Paul intended.

The type of spirit Paul wants to be known to all men is one of moderation and meekness and gentleness and a reputation for reasonableness. It is the meekness and gentleness that reasonable people display. It is the moderation that comes from being confident in the Word of God and not just in my understanding of it.

How does that work? Take King David as an example. He was called meek and gentle, a man after God's own heart, yet he was also a superb military commander and an able administrator. David could be gentle and reasonable with his people because he was not worried about losing his position or his power if he showed gentleness and reasonableness. Paul says that this is the spirit that must be apparent if unity is going to work.

If we were to read chapter four just starting with verse 4, we might not pick up on the unity theme that pervades the first three chapters. But, that is the context of the letter: unity between believers. Developing forbearance is one thing we must do in order to obtain the unity Jesus prayed for.

We do not need to put on a façade. We don't need to be concerned about losing position or power. Instead, we have confidence in the Word, so our forbearing spirit can show.

How do we do that? Paul says that this forbearing spirit is manifested in rejoicing in the Lord. If you are happy in the service of God, gentleness and reasonableness can be displayed. If we will just remember that the Lord is near, we won't be concerned that we might lose anything. We can afford to be gentle and reasonable like David, while still being good leaders in God's kingdom.

Since the church began, some misguided individuals have appointed themselves as defenders of the faith, as though, without them, the Word would not survive. They have no room for honest differences because they live in fear, having no confidence in the Word, but only in themselves.

To make unity work, people must see a reputation for reasonableness. Then they will not be afraid to let down their defenses. Defenses are what separate us.

After helping and forbearance, the third thing we must do to have unity is pray.

(Philippians 4:6 – 7) Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Those are lovely verses and we want to believe them, but "Be anxious for nothing" sounds a bit simplistic. We do not come equipped with little switches to turn off anxiety. Everyone gets anxious, nervous, worried. How do we handle this? How do we dispose of the anxiety that makes us do unreasonable things that cause division? Paul says, "Pray."

Anxiety can come from many directions: health, job, school, what will become of the kids, fear of failure, fear of success. In this context, unity is Paul's primary example. Anxiety affects everyone and acts like an infection.

When your body gets an infection, your body goes on the attack. It produces antibodies to fight the invading infection. War breaks out in your body. The whole body is involved, not just the site of the infection. Did you know that, during a serious illness, your fingernails and toenails stop growing as your body marshals all its resources to fighting the invasion? During an infection, have you noticed that your whole body slows down? You feel bad all over, even though the infection is in one place.

Our minds are the same way with anxiety. Anxiety is like an infection of the thinking process. Our minds attack the anxiety and our whole thought processes grind to a halt. We forget all about all those perfectly rational things we should do and act like a sick person. So Paul gives the antibiotic of anxiety: prayer. And again, the specific context is unity. Discord makes us anxious. How should we combat discord? Paul says to do it with prayer in order to cure our anxiety and to have peace which allows for unity.

Paul says, "Make your requests known to God." Talk to God about what is making you anxious. First, God will not laugh at you for having unreasonable anxiety. Second, the process forces you to talk out why you are anxious. You have to put your thoughts together in order to explain it to God. In the process, maybe we will understand our own anxiety a little better.

Paul writes, "With thanksgiving." Count your blessings. That may sound a little trite in the face of mounting anxiety, but it works. If you start thanking God for what has gone right, fears of the future will not seem so big and our confidence that God can handle even this will be greater.

Anxiety can be turned into "the peace of God," but not by empty-headedly ignoring problems that make us anxious, but by knowing that God will provide. Of course, my experience has been that He will provide in ways I had not imagined and with results I would have thought were undesirable. Never the less, prayer allows us to express our confidence in God before we see the outcome, which is the essence of faith, rather than waiting until we see the outcome, which is walking by sight.

Anxiety destroys reasonableness, and unity becomes impossible. Prayer overcomes anxiety and unity works.

After helping, forbearing, and praying, the fourth thing we must do to have unity is to think.

(Philippians 4:8) Finally, brethren, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, 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.

This kind of thinking is not an attitude, but an action. It is conscious thought control. If you think about good things, you will have a better outlook on life. If you think about good things, you will do the good things, because you can only do the things that you think about.

Does discord loom on the horizon? Then shift to Paul's list of topics, that which is true and honorable and right and pure and lovely and of good repute and excellent and worthy of praise. God promised back in chapter 3 verse 15, if we will stay together and keep trying, that He will see to it that we come to the correct understanding. What do we do if disunity threatens? We want to narrow down on that one sore point. That's not what Paul says to do to have unity. Instead, shift to these topics.

If you only read the newspaper and watch television news, no matter which network, the world can begin to look like a very dismal place. If you only deal with rotten people, you will

see all people as rotten. That's what happens to many policemen and psychiatrists. They deal with normal people so rarely that they lose sight of what normal is. Somehow we have gotten the idea that we need to keep up with all the rottenness of the world or we will be out of the loop. That is not what Paul wrote.

Learning is another form of thinking with which we have the same problems. You can learn only that which you think about. As a negative example, it used to amaze me that I could give a homework assignment on Monday for Friday, remind the students on Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday, and on Friday some of them would still get surprised when I asked for it to be turned in. Why did they forget? Because not one thought of school entered their heads between when the last bell rang in the afternoon and that fateful moment on the next morning when someone told them it was time to go to school. Some of them got surprised every morning all year long that there was school that day.

But if we make an effort to think about the things Paul lists, we will know what is good and we will do what is good. The ways of God will become automatic because we will think about them all the time.

Further, we do not need to think about only one thing at a time. If you are anything like I am, your mind resembles a kitchen stove. Some ideas are on the back burner, some are simmering, some are baking, and some you are working on directly. Some need more attention than others.

What would happen if you cooked only one thing at a time? Supper would be very dull, very long, or very cold. The same goes for the mind. We can dwell on lots of good things and have a veritable smorgasbord of good things to do.

And what happens if something on the stove goes bad; you burn it or add too much of some spice? You do not put it on the table and spoil the taste of everything else. You dispose of it. The same goes for thinking. The bad thoughts need to be disposed of and replaced with something nutritious.

Do you wake up happy in the morning? For many years, I just accepted the fact that I did not. Each morning, it took a while to put on a civil demeanor and face the day. And that's just wrong. Each morning, practice conscious thought control. Pray (item three on this list). Pray about the wonder of the gospel, the power of the kingdom, the gift of grace, about what is true and honorable and just and kind. Then get up and face the day from a much better perspective.

Practice conscious thought control and unity will happen.

After helping and forbearing and praying and thinking, the fifth thing that we must do to have unity is to imitate.

(Philippians 4:9) The things you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, practice these things; and the God of peace shall be with you.

The goal is to have the mind of Christ, yet Paul says to imitate him! That seems a little odd to me.

We start by thinking about good things. We pray in order to dispose of that disease of the thought process, anxiety. We strive toward gentleness and reasonableness. The goal is that our actions be a nature result of our attitudes, rather than forcing ourselves to do what is right, hating every minute of it.

Unfortunately, there are these things called bad habits. Habits are ways we have acted so long and so often that we don't think about them any more, we just do them. Some habits are

helpful, like walking. If you stand behind a one-year-old and speak his name as he walks away from you, he will fall down because you interrupted his concentration on walking. Fortunately, our habits have taken over and we can both walk and chew gum at the same time.

Reading is another habit we have developed. At first, we concentrate on sounding out each word and, when we reach the end of the sentence, we have no idea what it said. But, as the habit grows, we even stop seeing the individual words and think about the meaning.

Habits make us feel comfortable and secure. If it is your habit to watch the news before leaving for work in the morning, the day just doesn't start out right if you don't. Going against a habit makes us grouchy and anxious.

So, adopting the mind of Christ isn't so easy. Many have taught that it is because we must grow into it, that it is a maturing process. That is just plain wrong. If we were truly washed at baptism, we could completely change direction and never look back. But, we have these bad habits. Even when we are doing right, we feel grouchy and anxious because something doesn't feel right. That bad habit nags at us.

Paul tells us here to be prepared for those good attitudes by having good habits, by practicing those good things. It is going to take practice to make those good habits happen. But, we often have trouble converting theory into practice. So Paul says, "Imitate me." He said the same thing back in chapter 3 verse 17, even though back in chapter 3 verse 12 he wrote, "Not that I have already become perfect."

We need physical models. We should all be seeking such models around us in the kingdom to imitate in order to achieve unity. Not that we should imitate one person exclusively; there aren't too many apostles like Paul running around today. But we can imitate the good things we see in a whole collection of people and create our own concrete collage.

If we walk according to the pattern, developing that walk as a habit, we will end up walking together.

And the sixth thing to do to have unity: share.

(Philippians 4:10 – 19) But I rejoiced in the Lord greatly, that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned before, but you lacked opportunity. Not that I speak from want, for I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me. Nevertheless, you have done well to share with me in my affliction. You yourselves also know, Philippians, that at the first preaching of the gospel, after I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving but you alone; for even in Thessalonica you sent a gift more than once for my needs. Not that I seek the gift itself, but I seek for the profit which increases to your account. But I have received everything in full and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. And my God will supply all your needs according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

This is Paul's brand of sharing. Help was not expected, but it was accepted and appreciated. Paul accepted responsibility for his own upkeep. When times were good, he lived reasonably well. When times were bad, he was poor, but not blithely poor (pretending that everything was fine even when he was missing meals), but neither was he frantically poor

(turning all of his thoughts and energies to getting back to middle class). He was reasonable. He did what he could in whatever situation he found himself.

Our sharing of money, time and effort, needs to be on the same basis. If we find ourselves expecting others to share with us, it is no longer sharing but receiving payment on a debt. If we hold back from sharing because, "He's got enough," we are not sharing but paying a wage. If we do not accept and use what others want to share with us, we deny them the opportunity to be like Jesus.

For unity, we need to share simply because we care.

Unity requires helping, forbearing, praying, thinking, imitating, and sharing. If we will practice these things until they become habits, "the peace of God shall guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

These are not the methods people use in order to establish unity. No, we want to have essential doctrines and well defined lines between right and wrong understandings. That is not Biblical; it is human. Helping, forbearing, praying, thinking, imitating, and sharing, these are the actions that bring about unity.