

## Joy and Unity

Cinderella teams are usually the talk of March Madness. Analysts, prognosticators, and fans alike enjoy the excitement of a Cinderella team's lengthy run through a tournament as they leave the usual heavyweights in their wake. Unheralded teams and little known players are thrust into the limelight and incessantly discussed on every sports show. The pressure mounts, as the stakes become higher and higher. In turn, the questions that are asked of coaches and players sound something like this: "What makes your team so successful? How do they tune out all of the outside noise?" True to form, the answer usually involves words like connectedness, chemistry, culture, and of course, unity.

The stakes for unity are even greater when it comes to the church. As the Apostle Paul concludes the first chapter of his letter to the church in Philippi, it is evident that both he and his readers are experiencing hardship and persecution for their faithfulness to Jesus and their partnership in the gospel (Phil 1:27-30). As he transitions into the second chapter, he links his appeals for unity to his teaching on suffering with the word "therefore" (NKJV; NIV; NASB) or "so" (ESV; RSV). Clearly, unity is critical in withstanding the external pressures that seek to weaken and divide. On the flip side, it could be said that unity galvanizes and strengthens a church as it functions as an outpost in enemy territory.

But there is more. Paul wants the Philippian believers to remember that splintering forces can also come from within (Phil 4:2-3). In Philippians 2:1-2, he bids them to fill him with joy by embodying God's gospel work through their harmony. The *New American Standard Bible* translates Paul's appeal to his dear friends and fellow sufferers in the following manner:

Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, **make my joy complete** by being of the **same mind**, maintaining the **same love, united in spirit**, intent on **one purpose**.

It is important to note that the text employs a trinitarian structure. God Himself is the epitome of perfect unity. The Triune God is three distinct persons - the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit - and these three persons are nevertheless one God. He is triune, i.e. three in one. The co-equal Father, Son, and Holy Spirit co-exist and function in perfect unity. It is also helpful to note that the word "if" used throughout verse one is best understood as "since". There are divine realities that are a product of God's gospel work, and each person of the Trinity contributes to its

effectiveness in the lives of believers. First, there is “encouragement in Christ.” Second, we find comfort from [the Father’s] love.” Lastly, we have “participation in the Spirit.” We are bound together through the common saving and sanctifying work of God in our lives.

Embracing these divine gospel realities should function as a source of joy for every believer. In turn, a church filled with members that rejoice in these truths brings joy to its leadership, and to its God. This kind of church is persuaded to have a united perspective that is “set ... on things that are above” (Col 3:2). This kind of church is persuaded to love self-sacrificially, “considering someone else’s needs ... more important” than their own (Phil 2:3). This kind of church fully participates as one body, each part using its Spirit-given gift for the good of all (1 Pet 4:10; 1 Cor 12). This kind of church is one that we all long for, because it reflects the unity of the Triune God. It is based on the transformative work that He has done and continues to do in us. It is a unity that is not separated from or devoid of truth and sound doctrine. It is not a “unity at all costs.” Rather it is one that aligns itself to God’s Word and Jesus’ high priestly prayer (John 17).

In his book *The Pursuit of God: The Human Thirst for the Divine*, A.W. Tozer illustrates the harmony of unity beautifully:

Has it ever occurred to you that one hundred pianos all tuned to the same fork are automatically tuned to each other? They are of one accord by being tuned, not to each other, but to another standard to which each one must individually bow. So one hundred worshipers [meeting] together, each one looking away to Christ, are in heart nearer to each other than they could possibly be, were they to become ‘unity’ conscious and turn their eyes away from God to strive for closer fellowship. **Social religion is perfected when private religion is purified.**

So, rejoice and celebrate what we share in Christ. Learn to love one another selflessly in the Father. And get involved fully by the power of the Spirit. Pray for the unity of your church!

***Romans 12:1-5 (ESV)*** - “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. For by the grace given to me I say to everyone among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think

*with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith that God has assigned. For **as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.***"