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Philippians 4:2-3: 'To agree or not to agree? Unity is the question'

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Abstract

The dispute between Euodia and Syntyche in Phil 4:2-3 may be seen as an important window onto Paul's theology of unity. The nature of the apostolic exhortation should be clearly defined: it is to be 'of common mind', rather than to 'agree'.

Keywords

Philippians, Unity, Euodia, Syntyche, Problem Resolution

Paul's interest in, and passion for, unity is a well-known feature of his writings (Rom 12:4-5; 1 Cor 12:4-12; Eph 4:4-6), with the letter to the Philippians particularly notable in this regard (cf. 1:7, 1:27, 2:20).¹ Such desire for unity is manifest in the final chapter of the letter, evidenced by the double exhortation to Euodia and Syntyche (4:2-3), two apparently feuding women² whom Paul urges to be reconciled and to restore their relationship.³ Attention is often drawn to

the passage because of the prominent role occupied by female protagonists;⁴ Paul appears to be addressing two women who are exercising some form of noteworthy role within the church.⁵ They are co-workers with him in the gospel (4:3), seemingly well regarded by the apostle, and the very fact that Paul needs to attend to their dispute suggests that they are significant figures in their own right, 'mainstays of the believing

¹ It is recognized that some interpreters have viewed Paul's desire for unity with more suspicion, conceiving it as inappropriate exercise of power. Our concern in this article is not to assess the motivation behind Paul's exhortation, but rather to focus upon what is actually said (and what is not said) in the pericope.

² The suggestion that the women are actually being affirmed rather than critiqued is an interesting one, but ultimately fails to persuade. It is difficult to see why affirmation would require the double paraclesis that Paul utters. (Cf. http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?lect_date=10/12/2008&tab=3, accessed 15/07/09).

³ Cf. Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* (WBC 43; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 178: 'Unity among believers is an essential element in a truly Christian way of living'.

⁴ See further Wendy Cotter, 'Women's Authority Roles in Paul's Churches: Countercultural or Conventional?', *Novum Testamentum* 36 (1994): 350-72.

⁵ Cf. Richard Hays, 'Paul on the Relation between Men and Women', in *A Feminist Companion to Paul* (ed. Amy-Jill Levine; London: T&T Clark, 2004), 144: 'They are not explicitly described as leaders of the Philippian church, but the prominence Paul accords them in this letter addressed to the whole church suggests that they are persons with an important role within the community.'

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Philippian community'.⁶ Given their particular mention, and the high regard in which Paul holds them, it is likely that they are figures of significance within the church. Similarly, much of the interest in the pericope derives from its relationship to other parts of the letter, for example, whether the dispute between Euodia and Syntyche is the occasion for the epistle, and thus whether their debate is part of a broader factionalism operative within the church.⁷ The extent to which they represented competitive parties within the congregation, or were rather merely feuding individuals, remains unclear,⁸ but the fact that Paul intervenes so personally in their dispute does invite further comment and discussion. As a minimum, therefore, Phil 4:2-3 reflects a tension between two figures – presumably female – whose dispute Paul is seeking to resolve; the verses may be said to, in some way, reflect both a pattern of factionalism or disunity within a local church congregation or community, along with a measured apostolic response to it.⁹

The church in Philippi is, of course, generally regarded as one with which Paul has good relationships and with whom expressions of mutual affection are exchanged (1:3-11, 4:8-20). Although there seems to be a foreign element lurking in the background (1:28, 3:2-4, 3:19), Paul's dealings with the Philippians themselves remain highly cordial; at this

stage in the letter, he even describes them as his 'joy and crown' (4:1). Hence Paul's admonitions to the two women are issued within a friendly context, and such a positive backdrop should impact upon the interpretation of 4:2-3.

The way in which Paul handles the situation is therefore of some interest, with several aspects of his response worthy of comment. First, his use of *παρακαλέω* (4:2) reflects a strong desire that the two women be reconciled; the emotion conveyed by the particular verbal expression (and the fact that he makes his appeal without using an imperative form)¹⁰ suggests a heartfelt desire that rapprochement be reached. But he *exhorts* them to achieve this, rather than commanding them to do so. Second, the fact that *παρακαλέω* is rendered twice, and directed respectively to both women, reflects an attempted neutrality on Paul's part; he addresses both on equal terms without taking sides, or showing partiality to either party. Third, he mentions both women by name, a rare occurrence in the Pauline corpus,¹¹ and a stark contrast, for example, to the anonymity granted to the sexually immoral brother in Corinth (1 Cor 5:1-5). This explicit naming would therefore seem to be significant, with the situation becoming highly personalized (and would accord with the specific mention of names in the book of life – 4:3). It *matters* for Paul that the two women are *τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν ἐν κυρίῳ*, and the specific naming of them underscores the significance of the unity he desires.

It is further notable that Paul gives no background detail as to what has occasioned the dispute. The absence of such information is undoubtedly tantalizing for many interpreters and has evidently 'provided plenty of speculative grist to scholarly mills',¹² but Paul's silence on the matter is surely important. It directs the hearers' attention away from the dispute and focuses instead on the desired resolution; once more, it is the unity that matters. Similarly absent is any advice or instruction from Paul to the women

⁶ Moises Silva, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 221.

⁷ Nils A. Dahl, 'Euodia and Syntyche and Paul's Letter to the Philippians', in *The Social World of the First Christians: Essays in Honor of Wayne A. Meeks* (ed. L. Michael White and O. Larry Yarbrough; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995), 3-15 argues that their dispute is actually that which has occasioned the letter, and therefore the christological affirmations of 2:1-11 derive from the practicalities of 4:1-3. It 'makes sense to read the letter with the assumption that the disagreement between Euodia and Syntyche is the chief problem Paul faces and the main reason why his joy over the Philippians is less than complete' (14). Cf. also Davorin Peterlin, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians in the Light of Disunity in the Church* (NovTSup 79; Leiden: Brill, 1995), 105: 'The conflict between the two women was the focus of disunity referred to throughout Phil.'

⁸ The scale of the dispute cannot be gauged; it may be a fairly minor dispute (so Cotter, 'Women's Authority', 353) or a more major one (Silva, *Philippians*, 221). Peterlin, *Philippians*, passim proposes that it is representative of widespread dissension within the Philippian congregation.

⁹ Dahl, 'Euodia', 5-6.

¹⁰ A. H. Snyman, 'Philippians 4:1-9 from a Rhetorical Perspective', 28 (2007): 230: 'Philippians 4:2-3 differs from 4:1 in two respects: it is a request and not a command, and it is directed towards individuals and not towards all believers in Philippi.' The exhortation to the fellow loyal companion is contrastingly rendered as an imperative *συλλαμβάνου*.

¹¹ Frank Thielman, *Philippians* (NIVAC; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995), 216.

¹² Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: A&C Black, 1997), 238.

regarding the problem, no suggestion of the means by which to resolve the dispute. This silence may be read in several ways. It may be that the dispute was sufficiently minor or petty not to warrant an apostolic injunction as to its detailed resolution.¹³ Alternatively, the opposite may be the case; it may be that this is something different – maybe Paul really *is* giving apostolic ‘advice’, and the ‘advice’ is to be of the same mind in the Lord. The dispute itself is not addressed because it is secondary to the unity that he is seeking. The detail is not important, but the solution – unity – is.

But at the same time, something must have caused the division between the women (and perhaps the factions they represented), and it must surely have been of sufficient significance and depth to warrant the attention Paul gives it. This seems to be the position advocated by Thomas, who, in his review of women’s roles in the Philippians’ congregation, opines of their dispute: ‘It was evidently threatening the unity and well-being of the church and probably related to questions of belief, worship or interpretation of the Christian ethic.’¹⁴ Thomas is probably right on both accounts, but it is his second observation that is the more germane. The dispute is more than a quarrel at a personal level, it is about something ‘real’; however, because that issue is not addressed by Paul, his call to unity does not – and indeed cannot – mean that they have to agree over their point of prior difference.

The summary of the pericope thus far is not particularly contentious, and most commentaries would give broadly the same synopsis. That Paul is requiring some form of rapprochement between the two individuals is evident, and he is seeking the involvement of an unnamed third party in the reconciliation process (the *γνήσιε σύζυγε* - 4:3),¹⁵ along with Clement and other co-workers. However, beyond this broad consensus, deeper engagement with the verses begs an important question, one that commentators rarely address or clarify: what exactly is the nature of the desired reconciliation? Although the qualifying *ἐν κυρίῳ* (‘in the Lord’) gives a context or shape to the anticipated unity, the essence of it can cause confusion: is Paul urging Euodia and Syntyche

to *agree*, or is he urging them to be *of common mind*? Is there any difference between these options, and if so, what difference does it make?

The core of the matter derives from the translation of the phrase *τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν*. The NIV renders it ‘to agree with each other in the Lord’, whilst the NRSV offers an alternative rendering: ‘to be of the same mind’. The TNIV, interestingly, abandons its ancestor and reverts to the NRSV format, perhaps suggesting that this is the preferable translation (so also KJV). Whilst some may write this off as mere translational variance, the phrasing of the clause is important; such nuances do matter, for, in the mind of this writer at least, the two clauses imply different perspectives or responses to the tension between the two women. Being ‘of common mind’ does not necessitate agreement;¹⁶ to ‘agree with one another’, however, would normally require that the two protagonists adopt the same precise viewpoint or position, that they assume a distinct pattern of belief. One can easily think of contexts in which a common purpose or mindset is sought, but in which the protagonists do not formally ‘agree’ or share matching creedal formulae; the devolved executive of Northern Ireland or the power-sharing government of Zimbabwe (however unstable) spring to mind.

Furthermore, to construe Phil 4:2 as ‘agree’ is unpersuasive, not just because of the Greek expression (see further below), but because of the absence of any reference to what is to be agreed on. If a particular position were to be adopted, if there was something on which both women were to ‘agree’, then one would surely have expected apostolic determination of that position. Similarly, the logic of the position must be that agreement on the matter is not possible, for one would win and the other lose; Paul does not take sides – the common mindset transcends any agreement that may have been reached, indeed it almost requires that they do *not* agree on whatever has separated them hitherto. Instead it is unity in the Lord that is paramount. Sampley summarizes the anticipated relationship well: ‘To be “of one mind,” Euodia and Syntyche need not agree on every detail in the community, nor must they, we suppose, even have great fondness for each other. On the contrary,

¹³ Cotter, ‘Women’s Authority’, 353.

¹⁴ W. Derek Thomas, ‘The Place of Women in the Church at Philippi’, *Expository Times* 83, no. 4 (1972): 118.

¹⁵ The identity of the ambiguous *γνήσιε σύζυγε* has also generated a plethora of speculation as to his/her identity.

¹⁶ Cf. J. Paul Sampley, ‘Roman Law and Paul’s Conception of the Christian Community’ in *God’s Christ and His People: Studies in Honour of Nils Alstrup Dahl* (ed. Jacob Jervell and Wayne A. Meeks; Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1977), 169.

the succinct phrase “the same mind” calls them together to their larger commitment – the commitment that itself provides the context of their sharing, namely their partnership.¹⁷

It is notable, however, how many commentators blur the distinction between the two options (‘agree’/‘common mind’), and eventually end up treating the phrases as synonymous. A cursory review of recent commentaries reveals the lack of precision. O’Brien, for example, initially renders the phrase as ‘to have the same attitude of mind [because of the common bond] in the Lord’,¹⁸ a sense broadly akin to the NRSV, and one which captures the more perspectival or relational aspect of *φρονέω*. However, he continues to aver that Paul wishes the women to ‘think the same thing’ – they are to ‘agree as those who have a common bond in the Lord’.¹⁹ This is either an interpretative move or a treatment of the two phrases as synonymous. Likewise, Snyman advocates how Paul’s rhetorical strategy involves ‘calling on certain individuals to be united in their work for the gospel’,²⁰ a helpful and pithy summary of the apostle’s exhortation. But he then proceeds to translate the clause in 4:2 as ‘agree with one another’,²¹ thereby again aligning two ideas/renderings that are not completely alike. Hawthorne seems to go even one stage further: ‘(t)he richness of meaning in the phrase *τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν* exceeds any single translation such as “to agree.” For it embraces not only the idea of possessing ‘a common mind’ but also of having identical feelings and attitudes toward each other, a total harmony of life’.²² One wonders whether Hawthorne’s proposal imposes upon 4:2 a monochrome identity that it does not, and cannot, bear.

The crux, therefore, remains the translation of *τὸ αὐτὸ φρονεῖν*, and especially the nature of the cognitive act that the two women are supposed to embrace. The construction of the phrase points towards the concept of a commonality of approach, rather than a fixed point on which they are to agree. It is the act – or deed – of coming to a common perspective that is

upheld by Paul, rather than any specification of that on which they are to ‘agree’. The ambiguity of *τὸ αὐτὸ* – the fact that it is left unqualified – speaks loudly as to the perspective Paul desires. If the opaqueness of the phrase is taken seriously, *τὸ αὐτὸ* would seem to function in a more adverbial sense – Euodia and Syntyche are to think ‘commonly’, so to speak. Furthermore, the verb itself would also counter the notion that a particular dogmatic perspective is in view here; it is not *πιστεύω*, it is not an expression of faith akin to that commonly perceived to be articulated by Paul in Romans or Galatians. Instead, *φρονέω* bespeaks more of a perspective or attitude, or of an opinion one holds; it conveys more of a positional posture, rather than a dogmatic framework (though is no less theological for doing so). It occurs 10 times in Philippians, more than in any other NT text (cf. 9 instances in Romans), and its ‘attitudinal’ dimension, especially in relation to unity, may be one of the letter’s key features.

Evidence elsewhere in the letter bears this thesis out. Paul uses *φρονέω* in terms of the close relationship he has with the Philippians (1:7); it is also used of the Christ-like mindset that the church are supposed to imitate (2:5), one that is premised upon a commitment of self-outpouring. Bearing in mind the correlation with Jesus, it is surely a behavioural demeanour that is being alluded to, rather than a confessional or catechetical disposition. Later on in the letter, Paul uses the verb to denote where people’s mind/heart might be focused (cf. 3:19 NRSV: ‘their minds are set on earthly things’), again a disposition or perspective, rather than a creedal belief. Although not specifically using *φρονέω*, 1:27 is also worthy of comparable mention. It shares with 4:2–3 the emphasis on unity (*ἐν ἐνὶ πνεύματι, μιᾷ ψυχῇ*) and the athletic verbal imagery of working together in the gospel (*συναθλοῦντες*). Paul urges the audience to have a common purpose and strategy, as they seek to make the gospel known.²³ He exhorts the believers to stand

¹⁷ Sampley, ‘Roman Law’, 168.

¹⁸ P. T. O’Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (NIGTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 478.

¹⁹ O’Brien, *Philippians*, 478.

²⁰ Snyman, ‘Philippians 4:1–9’, 230.

²¹ Snyman, ‘Philippians 4:1–9’, 230.

²² Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 178.

²³ Hawthorne, *Philippians*, 57 opines that that *τῇ πίστει τοῦ εὐαγγελίου* (1:27) bespeaks some kind of creedal formula, that the content of the gospel message is being brought into question. On his reading, the ‘Christian faith is being threatened’. But one wonders whether one can be so precise about the way in which *τοῦ εὐαγγελίου* is functioning here, or indeed whether the phrase can be reduced to creedal formulations. It could be rendered a number of ways, perhaps as the faithfulness that the gospel demands, namely the attitude of humility and outpouring articulated in 2:1–11. No doubt creedal affirmations are

firm in one spirit, with ‘standing firm’ (cf. 4:1 - *στήκετε ἐν κυρίῳ*) becoming almost a *terminus technicus* or catchword for the unified position they should adopt (cf. 1 Thess 3:8). He does not tell them here what unity involves believing – perhaps because, at this stage in the letter (1:27), no division is mentioned – but the call to unity remains nonetheless prominent.

But perhaps the clearest verbal and conceptual parallel to 4:2 is Phil 2:2, where an almost equivalent expression (*τὸ ἐν φρονούντες*) is to be found (whether 4:2 feeds 2:2 or vice-versa, the phrases are highly proximate). What makes 2:2 particularly helpful is the way in which it effectively amounts to the idea: ‘consider the oneness’; i.e. ‘sameness’ is not about thinking the same thing, or taking the same belief, but rather adopting a position of ‘oneness’. The only thing that Paul actually demands of Euodia and Syntyche in 4:2-3 is that they agree on ‘oneness’, and others in the church are to support/help them in achieving that.

Perhaps the best articulation of 4:2-3 comes from Stephen Fowl, who summarizes the clause as follows: to ‘adopt a common pattern of thinking, feeling and acting in the Lord’. This phraseology seems to expand the meaning of the verb to its fullest extent and likewise captures the essence of Paul’s *paracesis*. The exhortation is not simply about restoring friendship – it is ‘to display a set of habits and dispositions ... basic to living faithfully before God,’ a call to ‘unified patterns of thinking, feeling and acting’.²⁴ Fowl’s analysis is attractive on two counts. On the one hand, it embraces the aspect of faithful discipleship, the attitude to which 1:27 accords. Unity is marked out by faithful living – faithfulness to the Lord, to the gospel and to one another, and Euodia and Syntyche are reminded of that pressing exhortation. On the other, Fowl’s rendering emphasizes the practical – one might say visible – outworking of common thinking, which does not demand that the protagonists agree. This likewise accords with Paul’s use of *φρονέω* elsewhere in the NT, notably Rom 15:5, which shares the *paracesis* content of Phil 4:2. The NRSV renders 15:5 as ‘living harmoniously together’; bearing in mind the context of Rom 14-15 and the stronger/weaker comparison it elucidates, this supports the notion we are proposing, namely that ‘*phronesis*’ is a disposition towards the other, an attitude that

important to Paul, but in Philippians, it is common purpose or unity that becomes as prominent.

²⁴ Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 178.

aspires to unified, harmonious living for the sake of the gospel. The NASB translation of Phil 4:2 – ‘live in harmony in the Lord’ – therefore seems somewhat apposite, as does Moises Silva’s suggestion: ‘adopt the same frame of mind’.²⁵

What, then, are the implications of this analysis? In one sense, it is a purely translational matter, the NRSV version being preferable to that offered by the NIV. But this is only half the story; the consequences of the two renderings are, to this writer at least, semantically significant, and when applied to ministerial and theological practice, highly variant. When a dispute arises within a local congregation, the only aspect that Paul exhorts members to agree on is to be united in the Lord. This conclusion may be uncomfortable for those who seek doctrinal orthodoxy or clarity, but, if our reading of 4:2-3 is consistent, then Paul the apostle seems to value unity above being right, above having the ‘correct’ perspective on a particular matter. Rather than establish an apostolic line, particularly when working with a familiar community, Paul seems to find unity – demonstrated in relationship and action – more important than catechetical or confessional agreement. A common purpose ‘in the Lord’, a common way (to quote Fowl) is preferable to debates over matters – however seemingly important.

It may be objected that the dispute between Euodia & Syntyche is not necessarily doctrinal – but rather primarily relational – and thus the debate cannot be used to address discord along creedal lines. It would be akin to comparing the proverbial apples and pears. Such an objection cannot be dismissed out of hand, but equally it only works up to a point; there is still some ‘theological’ dimension to the call to renew relationship – it is ‘in the Lord’ – and the roots of the Philippians’ unity must be upheld. There is something doctrinally significant to the prominence Paul gives to congregational unity. Likewise, it may also be objected that, because Paul does not tell us what the disagreement is, the interpreter cannot be appropriately confident as to when unity matters more than agreement. That is true, and his strong rebuttal of, for example, the circumcision faction in Antioch (Gal 2:11-14) would seem to be one way in

²⁵ Silva, *Philippians*, 220. I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Epworth Press, 1992), 109, although beginning with the idea that the women should ‘agree together’ in the Lord, develops the argument in terms of ‘harmony’, a more appropriate motif for the pericope. Peterlin, *Philippians*, 131 defines it as: ‘a call for practicing humility in mutual relationship’.

which the boundaries of unity are challenged by doctrinal principles. Yet Phil 4:2-3 nonetheless testifies to an integral aspect to Pauline thinking, one that underscores the importance for congregational unity; where members of a church find themselves in dispute, they do not have to *agree* with each other to *stay* with each other.

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SERMONS FROM OXFORD

Oliver O'Donovan, *The Word in Small Boats* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010. £11.99. pp. xiii + 172. ISBN 978-0-8028-6453-6).

This is a fine collection of sermons all but one preached while the author was Regius Professor of Moral and Pastoral Theology at Oxford University and Canon of Christ Church Cathedral. While they occasionally set themselves in that context, and while little glimpses of the life of the preacher may be gleaned from them, these sermons are firmly rooted in the liturgical year and in the exegesis of the lectionary rather than in personal or congregational story. This makes them stimulating reading on a theological and homiletical level, and gives them a universal significance and appeal.

Arranged into four sections, each has mission at the centre of it: the Mission of God's Word; the Community of God's Word; Tradition, Truth, and the Public; and Launched upon Life by God's Word. As the Editor, Andy Draycott, comments in his Foreword, themes of faith and sight and journeying feature strongly. Issues tackled include money, sex, terrorism, the liberation of Kuwait, marriage and materialism. Hard questions are faced and unequivocal answers are given, although never without compassion.

While some readers might prefer a more personal approach, and will seek in vain for a deeper understanding of O'Donovan's own motivation and history (although the newly written, opening sermon does offer something about the nature of his calling), all will find these sermons elucidating, accessible and inspiring. They are not primarily a resource to be plundered for illustrations in one's own preaching, but they show all of us who do preach what might be achieved when theological insight, biblical knowledge and a profound awareness of the need for mission are applied to the task.

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