

A Pauline Approach to Christian Conflict Resolution: (Philippians 4:1-9)



“All Things εν Χριστω Ιησου”

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Paul wrote Philippians to teach the church at Philippi how to pattern themselves after Jesus the Christ so that they may be found *εν Χριστω Ιησου*. “εν” is the operative word for it is in “εν” that we find “glory” (3:3), “peace of God” (4:7), “glorious riches” (4:19), and especially “joy” (1:26).

After showing our citizenship is in heaven, Paul argues that transformation will occur. He begins the fourth chapter by saying (note the use of paragraph separations based on traditional publishing/translation devices, in this case NIV) ...

¹Therefore, my brothers, you whom I love and long for, my joy and crown, that is how you should stand firm in the Lord, dear friends!

²I plead with Euodia and I plead with Syntyche to agree with each other in the Lord. ³Yes, and I ask you, loyal yokefellow, [*or loyal Syzygus*] help these women who have contended at my side in the cause of the gospel, along with Clement and the rest of my fellow workers, whose names are in the book of life.

⁴Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! ⁵Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. ⁶Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. ⁷And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

⁸Finally, brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things. ⁹Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me—put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you.

Normally, the entreaty in verses 2-3 by Paul for Euodia and Syntyche to make peace is treated as a separate issue from the advice to “stand firm in the Lord” in verse 1 and the clarion call to “rejoice in the Lord” in verses 4-9. In this analysis, however, I contend verses 1-9 are a unified whole, and have extraordinary theological and pastoral beneficence.

Conflict¹ within human groups is troublesome; conflict within the church is tragic. Conflict is a natural part of human activity; in fact, when there is no conflict, there is no existence. Congregations of the church who have no conflict are not active in the Lord. Intriguingly, conflict per se is neither good nor bad. **How** conflict is resolved is whether conflict results in good or evil. Thus, the church can benefit from conflict management—Paul teaches God’s way in Philippians 4:1-9.

What Paul Teaches About Conflict Management

The Problem at Philippi. As “dear friends,” Paul urges that the conflict between Euodia and Syntyche be resolved “in the Lord.” Paul would so urge for he shows little patience with Christians airing their dirty laundry outside the church (cf. 1 Corinthians 6:1-8).² He calls upon Syzygus, a loyal friend, and others to facilitate the peace between these two women. They are valuable assets to the church, the spread of the gospel—for they are εν Χριστω Ιησου—their names are listed in “the book of life” (cf. Revelation 21:27; 20:12).

Illustrating Porter’s first law of theology (“God is smart”), Paul does not end his discussion with a “solve the problem” command, but continues with “how” to solve the conflict. I contend Paul’s narrative in verses 4-7 is a continuation of verses 1-3, regardless of traditional paragraph separation, and not a separate thought thread. If so then, Paul is teaching an elementary and, simultaneously, a graduate course in conflict management. While its applicability may be best suited for those attempting to “stand firm in the Lord” (the church), Paul’s advice bears careful theological scrutiny, and pastoral application beyond the typical individuated application.

¹Conflict is an open disagreement between at least two people who support with equivalent passion clearly understood mutually exclusive alternatives with limited resources. Accordingly, conflict is “resolved” when the disagreement is undisclosed (vs. “open”), or when one of the opposing parties is eliminated, or when the passion of one party is modified, or when the alternatives are not viewed as mutually exclusive, or the alternatives being posed are modified to become non-exclusive, and/or when the resources become unlimited, or there are no resources at hand to meet the needs in question.

²1 Corinthians 6 “¹If any of you has a dispute with another, dare he take it before the ungodly for judgment instead of before the saints? ²Do you not know that the saints will judge the world? And if you are to judge the world, are you not competent to judge trivial cases? ³Do you not know that we will judge angels? How much more the things of this life! ⁴Therefore, if you have disputes about such matters, appoint as judges even men of little account in the church! ⁵I say this to shame you. Is it possible that there is nobody among you wise enough to judge a dispute between believers? ⁶But instead, one brother goes to law against another—and this in front of unbelievers! ⁷The very fact that you have lawsuits among you means you have been completely defeated already. Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be cheated? ⁸Instead, you yourselves cheat and do wrong, and you do this to your brothers.”

Principal Principle of Christian Conflict Resolution:
“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!”

All conflict management within the church must begin by being in the Lord and rejoicing at that eternal fact. Unless the conflicting parties rejoice “in the Lord,” and rejoice seriously, then the teaching of Paul described below will not work. Those who are in conflict, must first, and continually remind themselves to “rejoice in the Lord.” When we rejoice in the Lord together, it is difficult to allow unresolved conflict to fester and become infected with self-interest.

How to Resolve Conflict within the Church

1. “Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near.” When Christians disagree, and wish to settle their disagreement,³ they first need to manifest gentleness. Paul provides very useful advice here, for he says that the gentleness between people must not be just felt, but “evident to all.” Gentleness felt but unexpressed is not *efficacious* gentleness.

Furthermore, if you do not feel like making your gentleness real, remember: “the Lord is near.”⁴ We all behave differently depending upon the nature of our companions in the corridors of human interaction; since the Lord is our companion, this manifestation of gentleness is not only appropriate and functional, it is commanded.

2. “Do not be anxious about anything ...” We humans love to worry. It allows us to believe internal feelings somehow solve external problems. After all, were I not worrying, then no one, including me, would recognize I am indeed alive. As a malady, anxiety confounds conflict resolution by creating dysfunctional listening and associated defensiveness.

For believers, anxiety is more than mental illness. It can become a form of idolatry—anxiety says that God is not in control. But, within disagreements between believers, anxiety serves to cause mis-interpretation which in turn causes mis-interpretation—a vicious cycle leading only to pathologically unresolved and increasingly complex conflict.

³Some human beings thrive on unresolved conflict; therefore, never make the assumption people necessarily want to resolve the conflict. Unresolved conflict has underwritten many mentally ill people and spiritually devoid barren churches.

⁴Many commentators interpret this phrase, “The Lord is near,” eschatologically, perhaps as a reminder that we all should be gentle; the time of the Lord’s coming to us, or we to Him, is soon, like a thief in the night.

3. “ ... but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God.” The power of the human spirit grows with Holy Spirit’s involvement. We are taught Holy Spirit will communicate our concerns to the Father (Romans 8:26) and that the Christ will intercede similarly for us (Romans 8:34). **When Christians fail to avail, they fail.**
4. “And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” As noted earlier (see footnote 1), conflict can be resolved without a good result; e.g., conflict can be ended by simply changing the opacity of the conflict. But how does the Christian know when the conflict has been resolved successfully?

Again, Paul does not leave the reader wondering. It is the transcendent “peace of God” that testifies to successful conflict resolution. If this peace is not there, there is no true resolution—only its false mask. Furthermore, this “peace of God” has functional value; it guards your emotions and your intellect by being εν Χριστω Ιησου. When we are εν Χριστω Ιησου, our hearts and minds are protected by the “peace of God.”

Paul uses the Greek ειρηνη to depict peace here—not the Hebrew concept shalom (שָׁלוֹם) indicating prosperity, nor the Latin idea of *pax* indicating an absence of conflict, nor the peace that comes from submission (e.g., the Arabic concept of *islam*) but ειρηνη implying the Greek notion of balance, a return to equilibrium. Thus, the peace Paul calls for here is a turning to what is fair, balanced, and quiet—not peace based on submission, nor a mere absence of conflict, nor even peace which comes with perfected prosperity.

5. “Think about whatever is – ”

Note: “Think” in this context [λογιζεσθε] means to count, compute, calculate, count over; i.e., to take into account. It refers to facts, not suppositions; these are not esoteric, airy human perception-based phenomena—they are facts about which to λογιζεσθε.

- Think about whatever is ... **True**. The truth will set you free—free from guilt, free from culpability, and accordingly free from stress. When the truth is the mindset, and the result, then the truth is culpable, not you.
- Think about whatever is ... **Noble**. Rise above your natural instincts which inspire “get what’s yours;” seek rather to “get what’s best” for the

church. Consider the nobility of Jesus—He chose a cross over a crown, a shepherd’s staff over a scepter. Moreover, He called us to be meek rather than magisterial, and merciful rather than malevolent. Blessed indeed are the peacemakers for they will be called the sons of God.

- Think about whatever is ... **Right**. Seek to find what is right, not what is functional, nor what is acceptable, nor what is useful. The pagan seeks to be appropriately functional and useful. The believer seeks to be right, in God’s eyes. It is only through His eyes that we see what is right.
- Think about whatever is ... **Pure**. Seek to find the Ockam’s razor of Godliness: God is holy, you be holy. When we seek to be pure, there is little time to seek our own self-interest. Stick to the basics of holiness; be as pure as Jesus was pure. Earlier in Philippians, associating completed joy within a context of seeking unity, Paul said this about seeking self-interest:

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only⁵ to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. (Philippians 2:3-4)
- Think about whatever is ... **Lovely**. Seek to find that which is beautiful—regardless of circumstances (Philippians 4:11). Consider the beauty of feces—its stench makes us want it covered up, cleaned up, and taken away from our living environment (Deuteronomy 23:12-14). There is loveliness everywhere: *if* we look for it.

Conflict is rarely viewed as “lovely,” but Paul tells us to think about what is lovely, even in the midst of conflict. Consider the value of conflict—if nothing else, it shows that people care. And, if resolved according to Paul’s prescriptions, its resolution brings people together to a higher plane of purity, nobility, and truth.

- Think about whatever is ... **Admirable**, in fact, anything that is excellent or praiseworthy. Seek to acknowledge, yes to rejoice, in the positive characteristics of the conflicted parties. After all, they believe strongly, and while you may believe them to be wrong, they are passionate about their beliefs. Find those qualities which can be admired and think on those qualities—it is certainly better than dwelling on their (or your) shortcomings.

⁵The word “only” is not in the Greek text, but is implied by the *αλλα και* (*alla kai*) in the second clause (“but...as well”).

One of the larger challenges for the Christian is loving people we do not like, especially in conflict. Here Paul again strikes a Godly, and therefore functional, chord—think about whatever is admirable. For those you do not like, be affirmatively civil—heap “burning coals of fire on his head”⁶ thereby communicating love (not affection), and teaching you to love, even when you do not “like.”

6. “Practice whatever you have learned or received from me, or seen in me.” Paul had taught the Philippians before (cf. Philippians 3:1). Now he is calling upon them, and us, to manifest those teachings. Education without transformation is mere puffery. And, when it comes to conflict resolution, manifesting gentleness, prayer, calmness, and peace by calculating the reality of truth, mercy, nobility, righteousness, purity, and loveliness, and excellence in our deliberations—such practice is the essence of perfection.
7. “And the God of peace [εἰρηνηζ] will be with you. “ The Christian *raison d'être* for conflict resolution? God’s peace, εἰρηνηζ. It is easy to obscure success in Christian conflict by simply deploying one of the world’s solutions to conflict resolution (see the footnote on “conflict”). Christians, however, will seek God’s peace as the measure of success—not whether the conflict is resolved by human standards.

It is easier, in other words and for example, to eliminate one of the people who are conflicted. Or, to make the issues cloudy, or to pretend the conflict simply is not. *Christian* conflict resolution seeks God’s peace—a fair, balanced, and quiet peace—not a peace based on submission, nor mere absence of conflict, nor even a peace which comes when “everyone is happy.”

Parting Thoughts

Paul wrote Philippians to teach the people of the church at Philippi how to pattern themselves after Jesus the Christ so that they may be found ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ. Illustrating Porter’s first law of theology (“God is smart”), Paul did not end his discussion with a plea to “solve the problem” between Euodia and Syntyche, but provided additional advice on “how” to solve the conflict. I contended Paul’s narrative in verses 4-7 is a continuation of verses 1-3, and should therefore be treated as a single unit of thought. In short, Paul taught a graduate course in conflict management. We do well to learn its value and practical application.

⁶Proverbs 25:21-22 say, “If your enemy is hungry, give him food to eat; if he is thirsty, give him water to drink. In doing this, you will heap burning coals on his head, and the LORD will reward you.”

Caveat. The theology of conflict needs further study, of course, but the pastoral significance of Holy Spirit's guidance here in Philippians 4 can not be overstated. Conflict within human groups is troublesome; conflict within the church is tragic. For those of us εν Χριστω Ιησου, we must seek ειρηνη-type peace. Yes, it is this peace that transcends human understanding; it is this peace that we seek as God's people in God's church. To seek other forms of peace not only defies Paul's teaching, it obscures what Christian conflict resolution truly seeks. Gods' peace.

