In Troas, a coastal city of Asia Minor, there appeared to Paul in a vision a man of Macedonia who said, “Come over to Macedonia to help us” (Acts 16:19). Believing this to be the call of God, Paul, Silas and Luke set sail across the Aegean Sea to Neapolis the port of Philippi. From there they travelled some ten or twelve miles up the Gangites river to Philippi itself.

The decision to cross over into Macedonia was one of the most far reaching decisions Paul ever made. With the preaching of the gospel in Philippi the evangelization of Europe was begun. From this early beginning flowed the tremendous effects of the gospel upon western civilization.

Philippi was a chief city and a Roman colony. It had been founded by the father of Alexander the Great, Philip, after whom it was named. Established as a centre for mining the deposits of gold and silver which had been discovered in the area, Philippi was situated on the Egnatian Way. This was one of the great Roman roads which carried the trade from the east that flowed through Neapolis to the port of Dyrrachium the road’s terminus on the Adriatic Sea.

What we know of the beginnings of the church at Philippi is found in Acts 16. Paul’s custom in the towns he visited was to begin his preaching in the synagogues, but Philippi did not contain a sufficiently large Jewish community to boast a synagogue. It was a general rule that a synagogue was only established where there were ten men who could devote their time to its administration, so the Jewish community in Philippi must have been very small indeed. In fact it seems to have consisted mostly of a few women who gathered for worship at a place on the river bank. To this group belonged Lydia, Paul’s first convert in Philippi. Lydia was a proselyte from Thyatira who made her living by trading in fabrics dyed with the crimson dye for which her native city was famous.

The church in Philippi had been intensely loyal to the apostle Paul during his subsequent ministry. It is understandable how a special bond of affection should have existed between them. Paul’s particular commission had been to take the gospel to the Gentile world. He reaped the first-fruits of his labours among the Gentiles at Philippi.

Almost a decade had elapsed since Paul, Silas and Luke had first set foot in Philippi. The years had been momentous ones both for Paul and the churches. Paul now found himself in custody in Rome, on trial for his faith. For at least two years after his arrival in Rome Paul was allowed to live in his own hired house (Acts 28:30). He was also free to receive visitors, and welcomed friends not only from Rome but from places much farther afield. Some of the churches took advantage of his position to send on of their number to him. These brethren brought gifts and tidings from the churches they represented. One can well imagine the encouragement this must have been to Paul facing perhaps death for his loyalty to Christ.

The messenger from Philippi was Epaphroditus. On his arrival in Rome Epaphroditus was taken seriously ill, so ill in fact that at one time Paul almost despaired of his life (Phil. 2:25-27). Even in those far off days news travelled fairly fast. Somehow or other the Philippians heard of Epaphroditus’ illness, and they were worried. When news of this filtered back to Rome, Paul and Epaphroditus were themselves concerned at the Philippians sorrow. Paul determined that Epaphroditus should return to Philippi as soon as possible to allay their fears.
With Epaphroditus on his return, Paul sent his letter. It is probable that Philippians was written late on in the first two years of his imprisonment. It must have taken some time for the news of his arrival in Rome to reach Philippi and for Epaphroditus to reach him. The circumstances mentioned in chapter one also require a considerable lapse of time. Paul’s reputation among the Praetorian Guard (Phil. 1:13), the development of a faction among preachers of the gospel who sought to discredit him, these things did not arise over night.

The visitors who came to Paul in Rome brought news of the problems as well as the progress of the churches they represented. The churches of apostolic times were no less liable to difficulties than we are today. In the New Testament we find the same basic problems that the churches have encountered right up to our own times. It is this that makes the epistles so applicable to our present circumstances.

A careful reading of Philippians leaves us in no doubt that the church was facing some perplexing questions. Paul’s letter seeks to deal constructively with the peculiar situation with which they were confronted.

The Philippians’ problem is not immediately apparent since Paul does not spell it out in clear and obvious terms. There is a reason for this as we shall see. Part of it was, no doubt, that Paul held all the participants in the dispute in equal regard. He was not quick to take sides.

Speaking generally, the Philippians church seemed to be in a healthy state of spiritual development. The Christians were zealous in their witness. They had a desire to know more of the Lord. They had a sense of responsibility toward those who laboured in their midst. Spiritual keenness, however, brings its own unique trials. There is no spiritual strength but brings temptation with it. Nevertheless, the faults in Philippi were incipient rather than developed, but Paul was well aware of the dire consequences that might accrue from relatively insignificant beginnings.

There is bound to be an element of conjecture in seeking to determine the nature of the Philippian difficulty, but a close study of Paul’s letter will yield a fairly accurate idea of its basic nature. In chapter 4, verse 2, Paul entreats Euodias and Syntyche to maintain their unity. There must have been some serious reason for him to mention them in this way. Whatever the nature of their dispute, it was having significant repercussions on others than themselves. What Paul says earlier in his letter suggests (1:27) that the spirit of dissension was beginning to make itself felt in the church as a whole.

Euodias and Syntyche were not spiritual novices. Paul speaks of them with respect as two sisters who had made a valuable contribution with himself and others in the ministry of the gospel. It is hardly to be supposed that the difference was in the nature of some petty quarrel. Paul’s exhortation to them to ‘agree in the Lord’ is significant. It indicates that the disagreement was of fundamental importance to their spiritual lives, a disagreement maybe on some doctrinal issue.

Are there any signs of such disagreement in the letter? In chapter 3, Paul gives voice to a rather startling denigration of himself. He is at pains to point out his own limitations, and does so in the strongest terms. At the same time, what he says has the nature of a defence. In verses.12-14, he repeatedly stresses the fact that he has not reached a stage of final spiritual maturity. He is straining forward to the fullness of Christ.

Why is Paul so concerned that the Philippians should recognize this? Defence only has meaning in the context of attack. There would be little point in Paul so strongly refuting the idea that he had reached a stage of final spiritual maturity if no one had suggested
that he had attained it.

There is no conclusive proof that Euodias and Syntyche had made this claim for Paul, but someone had, and from a reading of this epistle one or another of these is the most likely person to have done so. Their close association with Paul would have been fertile soil for the growth of a misplaced loyalty amounting almost to hero worship. The church down through the centuries has been no stranger to this danger. While either Euodias or Syntyche held to an exaggerated idea of Paul’s spiritual stature, the probably much more balanced attitude of the other may well have been misconstrued as disloyalty. Hence the friction.

Is spiritual perfection an attainable ideal in this life? This was the question that beleaguered the minds of the Philippians. Someone suggested that the life of the apostle Paul was proof that Christian perfection is a present possibility. Others disagreed. There was no outward division in Philippi as there had been in Corinth, but there was division of heart. Paul well knew how important it was that the Philippians should have a clear understanding of the basis of their unity, otherwise the church would ultimately find itself divided.

The issue in Philippi was both theological and emotional. If the question of Christian perfection was a theological question, it was yet centred around the personality of the apostle Paul. Every problem of spiritual understanding that faces the local church contains both these elements. It is doubtful whether anyone has the capacity to view a theological difficulty with complete objectivity. Many more of our decisions than we realize are determined by emotional factors. Loyalty is a virtue to be prized, but it is a virtue that can very easily becloud our perception of truth. For this reason the scholar who spends most of his time cloistered in his study may be able to give a much sounder judgment on a spiritual issue than the person who is concerned to see spiritual principles worked out in the down to earth circumstances of a church fellowship. The scholar is less likely to be involved with the emotional issues that affect one’s spiritual discernment.

What is the answer to this dilemma? We can never hope to separate the problems that face us from their emotional content. Are we then to be satisfied with a permanently impaired sense of judgment? The answer surely is that man’s legitimate loyalties cannot be destroyed, nor his legitimate emotional attachments subjugated, but they can and must be rightly directed. The Christian must have due sense of spiritual priorities. And the first priority always Christ. Christ is his first loyalty. Christ is his first attachment. This is the basis of all spiritual discernment.

Paul’s letter to the Philippians demonstrates how fragile is the unity of the church. It is something that can never be taken for granted. A personality problem (and where is the church that has never experienced one?) seemingly trivial in itself, can expand to threaten the fellowship of the entire church. Paul was well aware of the danger. His letter brings the Philippians back again to a solid foundation. It shows us how unity can be maintained.

The manner in which Paul deals with the problem is most instructive. Anyone who has had to deal with such problems will at once realize that Paul does not go about his task in the normally accepted way. He does not try to act as a mediator. Our tendency in a dispute is to determine the rights and wrongs of the various parties and thus come to a decision in favour one or the other, or to strike a compromise. This is a method that seldom produces lasting results. It leaves untouched the emotional factors involved, factors with which man cannot adequately deal, but factors which must be dealt with somehow if spiritual deterioration is to be checked.

Paul in his dealings exemplifies a principle that is basic to the Christian ministry. It is
this. The purpose of the Christian ministry is not to provide an answer to the church or to individuals in their problems, but to drive them to Christ where alone they will find a lasting solution. Here is where we so often fail. If our ministry does not urge people to think more of Christ than of ourselves, it is a failure.

This does not deny a place for the forthright condemnation of evil. Where obvious sin exists, as it did in Corinth, it must be condemned and judged, but the nature of many of the difficulties that plague the life of the church is of a different order. They are problems of the inner man with which only Christ can adequately deal.

Each one of the four chapters of Philippians marks out a section of the letter. In each chapter there is an exhortation to unity and a principle of Christian oneness is developed. Thus we come to our outline of the epistle.

### Philippians

**Four Cardinal Principles of Christian Unity**

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1. A Sense of Constant Spiritual Quest
(Philippians 1)

Paul’s dissertation in chapter one reaches its climax in the exhortation in verse 27, “Only let your manner of life be worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in one spirit with one mind, striving side by side for the faith of the gospel.”

The apostle’s future was in the balance, yet he had a certain confidence that he would be able to visit the Philippians again. He hoped that when this visit took place, he would find them united in striving together to move on into a greater experience and understanding of the gospel.

The word translated ‘striving side by side’, (sunath lountes), indicates not only working closely together, but working towards a specific aim. From it we derive our English word athlete. The picture is of athletes striving to reach a peak of fitness and encouraging one another from each other’s progress. The object of this striving is ‘the faith of the gospel’. Whereas it seems that some of the Philippians were occupied striving about the faith of the gospel, engaged in a dispute as to the meaning of the gospel from their own particular fixed point of understanding, Paul urges them to progress in their understanding.

The principle that Paul here enunciates is simple but extremely important. It is that the unity of the local church consists not in a measure of understanding of the gospel common to all of its members, but in a common sense of purpose to enter into more and more of Christ. When a church loses its sense of spiritual quest, it is near the point either of death or division.

There are basic essentials of Christian doctrine affecting the fundamentals of the faith to which every true child of God will subscribe, but it is a mistake to think that Christian unity can be achieved through a common acceptance of the minutiae of Christian belief. We owe a great debt to those who formulated the great creeds in centuries past and to those who have attempted to systematize the great doctrines of the Bible. At the same time we must recognize that none of these fully comprehend Christ. Christ is greater than all of them. He is greater by far than our measure of understanding of Him. The tendency of every new sect is to formulate a detailed statement of faith which clearly marks out its differences from every other Christian group. The church, however, was never meant to centre around a creed, written or unwritten, however correct or helpful it may be. The centre of the church is Christ, and its aim is to understand Him fully.

A popular conception of the church is of a company of Christians holding to certain truths which they believe (sum up) the truth as it is in Christ, and propagating them. In the New Testament, however, the church is essentially a company of learners. As the disciples learned from Christ, so the church continues to learn through the ministry of those gifted by the Spirit to teach. Together they move on to Christ their goal. The familiar words of John Robinson, the Puritan leader, are as apt to us today as they were when they were spoken. "On my part, I cannot sufficiently bewail the condition of those reformed churches which are come to a period in religion, and will go, at present, no further than the instruments of their reformation. The Lutherans can not be drawn to go beyond what Luther saw; whatever part of His will our God has revealed to Calvin, they will rather die than embrace it; and the Calvinists, you see, stick fast where they were left by that great man of God who yet saw not all things. This is a misery much to be lamented."

Paul is swift to remind the Philippians of the need to maintain the spirit of quest. In
chapter 1, verse 6, he says, “And am sure that He who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”. However much of the truth of Christ the Philippians had already grasped, it was but a beginning,. By the grace of God the process of learning would go on and perfect understanding would come when they all met together in the presence of Christ.

The spirit of quest which Paul urges was very much part of his own experience. He unconsciously demonstrates this in the first chapter as he recounts what happened to him in Rome. Learning of Christ is not a mental process confined to the study. Every-day life with its experiences of joy and sorrow offer abundant opportunity to prove the reality of the principles we learn from the Word.

In vs. 15-16 Paul speaks of certain brethren who, by their preaching, sought to discredit him. What a bitter experience this must have been to the apostle, and what a sad commentary it is on the pettiness of human nature. The Scriptures do not present Paul to Us as a perfect man. He made his mistakes, and was no doubt unpopular with some. But surely this was a time when everyone who loved the Lord should have been standing with him in prayer and encouragement. Paul had been imprisoned for his faith and was ready to pay the supreme price of his life. That there could be Christians who would take advantage of such circumstances in order to discredit a man who had faithfully and zealously served the Lord could well destroy the peace and spiritual poise of the most spiritual person. Had Paul lashed out at his critics with bitter resentment, few would have condemned him for it. But he does not react in bitterness. He rejoices in an opportunity to experience more of the grace of God. Paul accepted the distresses of his life as a means whereby he could the more assiduously press on towards the goal.

The unity of the church lies first in unity of aim, that we recognize the partial nature of our understanding of Christ and move on together. Every circumstance can contribute to this quest.
2. Spirit of Self-giving  
*(Philippians 2)*

This chapter contains Paul’s great passage on the self-emptying of Christ (vs. 5-11). He cites the experience of our Lord as a demonstration of the effect of the gospel in those who have experienced its power.

The operative verse in the present section is verse 5, “Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus.” In these words the apostle sums up what he considers to be one of the obvious results of an experience of the grace of God. If there has been an encounter with Christ which brings the strength and encouragement of His presence; if there is that close communion with God from which is derived the knowledge of His will and the incentive to do it; if there is a participation in the Spirit which unites all together in the indissoluble bonds of a divine fellowship; if there is the affection and sympathy for one another that betokens a deep experience of the grace of God, then it is unthinkable that a person should continue in a life of self-centred conceit. The obvious result of the gospel is to do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourselves’ (v. 3). In fact this is the mind that we see in Christ, the mind that should be in each one of us.

The Bible is never reticent in pointing out the practical implications of the gospel. Reconciliation with God and the fellowship of the Spirit are lofty concepts, but we are in constant danger of forgetting that both must result in an attitude conducive to spiritual service. There can be a false sense of reconciliation which produces smug self-satisfaction. This was the sin of many of the Pharisees. There can be an equally false sense of fellowship which is just as self-centred. It glories in the fact that whatever outward differences appear to separate the people of God, all are mystically one. So why worry? We are one with all who love the Lord. Fellowship need have no practical expression. It remains a lofty concept to be enjoyed individually by those who apprehend it.

The point Paul makes is that an encounter with Christ frees man from the bonds of his introverted spirit to look beyond himself into a world where Christ and His will become his supreme objective. It produces a completely new attitude that is Christ-centred and dynamic. This is the divine miracle apart from which man’s most eager efforts to foster fellowship are bound to fail.

The far reaching implications of this work of grace are set out before us in the example of Christ who so completely gave Himself. He voluntarily divested Himself of everything that could be considered glory or gain. Paul takes us from the highest height to the deepest depth. From Christ who was in the form of God, to Christ on a cross. The One who is everything gave all for men who are nothing. The highest measure in which any man can share His experience can be no more than a shadow of this. Yet, the principle is clear, the principle of death to self. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone.” John 12:24.

Our Lord’s self-giving went beyond the surrender of His worldly rights. What is perhaps more significant, He cast aside the security of His identification with His own people as a Jew and a man. In going to the cross, embracing the stumbling block of the Jews, He was cut off from His own.

The need to belong is universal. All society has its built-in safeguards. When society begins to crumble and the security of the family or the community is no longer effective, or when someone rebels against the security he has always known, it is not long before he sets out on a quest to rediscover what he has lost. The security of belonging is a
universal need.

Yet this same security which man cannot do without devitalizes him. It depersonalizes him. It destroys his initiative. It restricts him within a safely limited sphere of responsibility. It leaves him but a shadow of what God meant him to be. This is the tragedy of prosperous, materialistic society. The appeal of the known and secure over the unknown is relentless, though it offers only a bleak emptiness. One escapes only to be drawn irresistibly back again - to die. This, with no object beyond himself, is the plight of modern man.

Security is in Christ, but we will realize this only as we release our hold on the other things to which we cling. Self-giving means not merely the offering of our goods and chattels, nor the readiness to do a little perfunctory service. It means the readiness to deny the right to belong which Christ Himself denied, and to go the way of the cross.

The cross for Christ meant not only death but resurrection and exaltation. This is the offer that is open to every Christian and to the church. Man’s need to belong remains the same, but in Christ he realizes his need in a realm richer and fuller, and finds a security that is eternal.

Paul himself had experienced this self-giving as we see in the following chapter (Ch. 3:8). He had given up the security of his position of the Jewish community, the security of his Roman citizenship, the security that his learning could have earned him among the Greeks. But in place of all, he gained Christ. The pages of church history are lightened up by the stories of men who have discovered this same great principle. Francis of Assisi for example. Or some of the more modern missionary pioneers, Hudson Taylor and others.

The full implications of the gospel dawn but slowly on all of us. In the first joy of reconciliation with God and newfound fellowship with His people, we may eagerly embrace the truth of self-giving. But all that this means becomes clear only as we walk the spiritual pathway. “Work out your own salvation,” urges Paul (vs. 12). The demands of the life of self-giving as of every other aspect of spiritual living increase as God is at work in us to make clearer and clearer all that is implied in the gospel we have received. The spirit of quest, which was the subject of the first section of the letter, is relevant also to the present consideration. We never exhaust the application of any spiritual truth. Truth retains its vitality only in our increasing awareness of how it applies to our day to day lives.

The naturalness with which Paul goes on to express his concern for the Philippians (vs. 14 ff), is the most conclusive demonstration of what he has been urging upon them. There is nothing forced about his words. There is the ring of spontaneity and deep heart interest. “Even if I am to I be poured out as a libation upon the sacrificial offering of your faith, I am glad to rejoice with you all,” he says. Here was a man who knew something of the self-giving spirit, though he would be the last to claim this for himself. He commends also Timothy and Epaphroditus as two men who lived to serve and who did serve with a self-effacing humility which be speaks a work of the Spirit of God.

The Philippian church was not left with a set of cold principles by which to order their living. They saw these same principles lived out by the men who proclaimed them to them. Would that it were always so.
3. A Supreme Loyalty to Christ  
(Philippians 3:1-4:1)

We have already made some mention of the apostle Paul’s rather startling insistence in this chapter that he had not arrived spiritually. He begins with an exhortation to rejoice in the Lord (v. 1). He climaxes his argument by telling the Philippians that those who are mature should, as he himself did, have their sights set on the ‘upward call of God in Christ Jesus.’ He concludes with a reminder that one day He ‘will change our lowly body to be like His glorious body’ (v. 21), and will reign supreme. Throughout, Paul points beyond circumstances, beyond our imperfect measure of understanding, beyond himself to Christ.

The principle of progression which we saw in the first chapter is still very much to the fore. The word ‘maturity’ generally has the idea of accomplishment. It denotes the stage of growth and development when something has reached the stage of greatest usefulness. In a fruit, for example, the stage beyond maturity is rottenness; in a person perhaps senility. But spiritual maturity is not a state of final perfection. It is a state in which we recognize more than ever the need to move on and that perfection lies ahead with Christ.

On the other hand, the Christian is not a restless seeker who knows not in what direction truth lies. He does not easily abandon one conviction to flit off to another in the hope that truth has at last come within his grasp. “I am ... the truth,” said Christ. He who has found Christ has found truth. The gospel leaves us in no doubt. Confident assurance is the right of every Christian. Established on the foundation that is Christ we move on to perfection. “Let us hold true to what we have attained” (v. 16).

There is an exquisite balance here. Let us not think that the endless quest in which we are engaged means that we are without a sure foundation. On the other hand let not the fact that we have a sure foundation in Christ, make us imagine that our quest is at an end.

Our assurance and hope of final perfection only make sense when the focus of attention is Christ. Otherwise they remain cold theories with little practical relevance. Paul, in emphasizing the centrality of Christ in his own thinking, urges the Philippians to the same spirit of loyalty to the Lord.

The Philippians were faced with a basic conflict between loyalty to their theology and loyalty to their emotions. This is a difficulty which has beset Christians and the church again and again down through history. The trouble is that is is so seldom recognized for what it is. To ask the question, “Does Christ come first or Paul?” would be to invoke an indignant assurance that Christ must be supreme. But is He? (We all like to think that we are guided by principle and that emotion is under strict control. In fact, this is not so. Paul Tournier has well put it in his book, “The Meaning of Persons”. He says, “We are controlled by feeling, not by logic, though we firmly imagine that we are being guided by our reason. What happens, in fact, is that reason supplies the arguments with which to justify our behaviour. We appear to be logical but are thoroughly illogical.”

The balance between loyalty to Christ and loyalty to man is always a delicate one, because it is also true that our loyalty to the Lord is demonstrated by our loyalty to one another. As John reminds us, “He who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen” (1 John 4:20). The bond of love among us as brethren is rightly there. The error is not that we can ever love another person too much, but that we can love Christ too little. Our emotional tie with a person de-ends on the strength of our personal relationship with him. Ultimately it is the strength of our
relationship with the Lord that matters. Where our apprehension of the gospel has meant a deep personal experience with Christ, the priority of our loyalties will be right. Where this is not so, the inevitable tendency will be toward a man-centred rather than a Christ-centred faith.

This chapter points out the importance of a thoroughly Christ-centred ministry. We have already seen how Paul drives the Philippians to Christ as the only answer to their problems. Beyond everyone and everything that God uses as a means to our blessing, we must see Christ. All are but channels through which we must learn to apprehend Him. This is what John the Baptist expressed when he said, "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30).

Paul has poured forth to the Philippians the consuming passion of his life to know Christ. Then he says, "Brethren, join in imitating me" (v. 17). "Join me, brethren, in my quest. So many live only for themselves. Let us live together for Christ till He makes us like Himself and reigns supreme." With such a Christ-centred vision, the very thought of disunity is ludicrous.
4. A Recognition of Our Indissoluble Relationship to Christ (Philippians 4:2-23)

“I entreat Euodias and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord” (v. 2). These words are almost deceptively simple. Had there been no disagreement between Euodias and Syntyche the exhortation itself would have been pointless. On what basis does Paul urge them to recognize their unity? That they are ‘in the Lord’. Beyond every disagreement and the different measures in which they may have apprehended Christ, this fact remains indisputable, that they are related to the Lord. Here is something which no one can alter. It is an eternal reality.

This relationship with Christ forms the solid basis of our oneness. A man does not cease to belong to the family in which he was born because he decides to go and live at the other end of the country, or because he decides to cut off all relationship with them. The family connection is something that he cannot eradicate. No more can we eradicate our relationship with others who are in Christ.

The ecumenical movement today claims to unite all who own ‘Jesus Christ as Lord’, but it leaves this phrase without any adequate definition. It may be as well to point out that when Paul urged Euodias and Syntyche to agree in the Lord, he was not using a catchphrase, or words to which they were free to put their own meaning. Through faith in Christ men are reconciled to God and to one another. In Romans 10 for example, Paul shows how the unbridgeable gap between Jew and Gentile has been bridged. But this reconciliation is the product of faith and ‘faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ’ (Romans 10:17). Faith is dependent upon an acceptance of the content of the gospel. It is no blind leap in the dark.

In his greetings at the beginning of the letter Paul expresses thanksgiving for the Philippians ‘partnership in the gospel’ (Phil. 1:5) and expresses his assurance that God began a good work in you’ (v. 6). It is quite obvious that he accepts the Philippians as sharers in the same faith of the gospel that he himself has experienced. They are all one ‘in the Lord’. The content of the gospel is clearly expressed in succeeding chapters. In chapter two we have the deity of Christ, His incarnation and the work of the cross (vs. 6-11). In chapter three we have the necessary effects of accepting the gospel, ‘the righteousness from God that depends on faith’ (v. 9). When a person is ‘in the Lord’ the grace of God is manifested in human experience.

The unity of our relationship in Christ does not imply a complete identity of outlook, nor does it imply complete uniformity of character. In no two people does their relationship with the Lord express itself in exactly the same manner. The differences which exist may lead to problems as happened in Philippi, but where the foundation is sure, God’s people need to learn to stand firmly on the primary fact that God has put them together.

The fact of a common relationship with Christ forms the basis of Paul's final exhortations. Genuinely to believe that God has done a work of grace in others, is to do away with the deep distrust that is a normal characteristic of relationships in the world. This means neither that others are perfect nor that we should automatically acquiesce in their thought and conduct because we are one in the Lord, but it does mean that there is a big place for tolerance. Our first reaction to every child of God should be one of rejoicing. We may see much that calls for intercession, but let our prayers be offered with thanksgiving. Confusion will then give way to God’s peace (vs. 4-7).

Where the grace of God has been at work, there will be evidences of that grace. “Think about these things,” says Paul in verse 8. This must be our starting point. In the life of the greatest saint we will not have far to look to find something that requires correction
or improvement. But the spirit which delights to ferret out and gloat over the disreputable is not the spirit of Christ. Loyalty to one another does require that we exhort one another and hold one another to the highest, but we can do this only by rejoicing over what Christ has already done.

This truth is nowhere more strikingly confirmed than in 1 Corinthians 13. Love and trust must have a solid base on which to operate. That base is provided in the relationship which we have in Christ. Then it is our spiritual duty to be patient and kind; to resolutely banish jealousy and boastfulness, arrogance and rudeness; to refrain from insisting on our own way; to cast aside irritation and resentment; to refuse to rejoice in what is wrong, but to rejoice in what is right; to bear all things, believe all things, hope all things, endure all things. 1 Corinthians 13:4-7.

We do no service to anyone by attempting to minimize the problems which arise because of different personalities. There is probably not a church since the church began that has not experienced them. They are real. We must not close our eyes to them. But there is another and greater reality, the reality of Christ indwelling each one who is a partaker of His grace. We must concentrate upon Him.

If Christ indwells a person, there is something in his example that can be an incentive to our spiritual progress. “What you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, do,” says Paul in verse 9. Let this be your guide; what you have learned from me and found to be practically true; what you have heard me preach and seen me practice. Look for a demonstration of the grace of God in other believers and you will find it.

The trust which Paul is urging the Philippians to show one another is illustrated in the final paragraphs of the letter. The Philippians had seen Christ in Paul. The result was a spiritual and practical concern which moved the apostle to a deep expression of gratitude (verse 18). If they could so clearly appreciate the bonds that united them with him, could they not also recognize the bonds that united them with one another.

Unity is the most vital condition for a church’s effective witness. There is little wonder that it is so strongly contested. The forces of disruption are insidious and ever-present. Every church, sooner or later, has to deal with them. In this connection the letter to the Philippians is still as relevant today as it was nearly two thousand years ago. May we learn its lessons well.