

Strife

Fulfil ye my joy, that ye be likeminded, having the same love, being of one accord, of one mind. Let nothing be done through strife or vainglory; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.

Philippians 2:2-3

This couplet of exhortations from the apostle Paul to the Philippian church strikes a common refrain within our New Testament epistles. His initial statement emphasizes the positive, that they pursue unity of mind and mutual love. He follows with the inverse exhortation to do nothing through strife or vainglory, bolstered by the remedy to pursue a spirit of humility towards others. He will later call out by name two instigators of strife in the church to be like-minded. He issued similar commands to the Corinthians (I Cor. 3:3; II Cor. 12:20), Ephesians (Eph. 4:30-32), and Colossians (Col. 3:12-15). In addition, James' epistle contrasts "earthly, sensual, devilish wisdom" characterized by envying and strife with the wisdom from above, which is, among other things, pure, peaceable, and easy to be intreated (Jas. 3:13-18). He continues in chapter four decrying "wars and fighting" among believers, as well as evil speaking. He later issues a strong warning against one result of strife: "Grudge not one against another, brethren, lest ye be condemned: behold, the judge standeth before the door" (Jas. 5:9).

Why so much warning against such attitudes and behaviors to Christian people? Because the apostolic writers were well aware of the "natural man," or the "old man," as called by Paul, that still struggles to hang on in the life of a disciple, even though we are commanded to put off that old nature with the power of the Holy Spirit, who is the only one that can equip us unto both the positive and negative of these exhortations. It is the devil's desire to divide Christians, and it often occurs over meaningless issues.

Although the word strife may refer to a range of conditions, even to the point of war, its beginning is typically some contention over exertion of self-perceived superiority. In personal matters, it can begin by a difference of opinion over how a matter should be handled. Most of us have a personal view of the correct way to do just about everything. Yet, we assume that everyone's methods should conform to ours. Then, when that doesn't happen in a particular matter, the perceived nonconformance is further assumed to be a personal offense. Yielding to the natural, instead of the Spirit, by the offended, and/or the perceived offender, only escalates a matter of preference or personality difference to the point of selfish indignation. In some cases, one party, or both, is willing to "throw away" the non-conformer to preserve such selfish perception. Such sinful attitudes and behavior result in grudges: self-justified hatred without repentance. And how does this fulfill our text? It does not. It is not Christian in attitude or behavior, no matter how many church activities or perceived good deeds are amassed.

May God help us to often review and heed the exhortations cited here, and continually repent and submit to Christ, who left us that new commandment, to love one another "as I have loved you," in demonstration of whose disciples we are. (John 13:34-35)