

## The Good Result of a Bad Word: The Value of Fellowship Between Women

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My first experience of Christian fellowship with women occurred shortly after my conversion. As a new mother just beginning to look at life from a biblical perspective, I was intimidated by the other young mothers at church. They were all well ahead of me spiritually, integrating God's wisdom into every nook and cranny of their lives. I tried hard to fly under the radar while hanging around the edges of our Bible study. I was simultaneously drawn toward these godly women and a little afraid of them. They were just so *good*—I felt they were nothing like me.

Then one day, while I was working on a project with one of the other young mothers, she said a word not to be repeated in polite society. It was a *bad* one.

I was never more grateful in my life.

Please understand that I am not excusing or condoning this sin. But the *good* result of that *bad* word was that her slip-up opened to me the possibility that I might be more like the other women in the church than I thought. I gradually started being a little more open with them. The resulting fellowship has been and is an important part of my spiritual growth and a consistent source of joy.



The Apostle Paul knew that fellowship between women is important.

In the book of Philippians, Paul deals with different issues that might cause problems in the church—false teaching, personal pride, selfishness, persecution, and the church's discouragement over hearing of Paul's arrest. He writes to the church from prison, about 11 years after Acts 16, when he first met Lydia and the other women by the river.

News came to him that two women in the church were quarreling. Paul wrote, "I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche to agree in the Lord." And then he described them, "these women who have labored side by side with me in the Gospel."

How would you like to be described by *your* elders? I'd be honored to be like Euodia and Syntyche—identified as a woman who labored side by side with them in the Gospel. These fallible, fussy women were considered by Paul to be co-laborers in the gospel. By extension, we can say that you and I (and my friend who said the bad word) can also be co-laborers in the gospel.

Ladies, we are not God's "B Team." We have a distinct role, different from that of the men. But we can be co-laborers in the gospel.

I think that the argument between Euodia and Syntyche was an issue of opinion and not of doctrine. I'm convinced that Paul would have given correction if this was a doctrinal issue, as he often does in the epistles. Instead he appoints a mediator. And

it's important to note that the personal rift between these two women was painful enough to the church that they told Paul about it, and Paul, in turn, took it seriously. Fellowship between women is important. If it's broken, it needs to be fixed.

You and I may not be arguing with anyone in the church just now, but the kind of fellowship that Paul wants us to have as a church, and by extension, as sisters in Christ, is much deeper than just not arguing. Listen to Paul's instruction:

*Make my joy complete by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Phil. 2:2-4*

Think about the women in your church or small group and ask yourself:

- Could we be described as being of one mind?
- Do I love these women?
- Do I feel somehow in competition with them?
- Do I think of these women as more significant than I am?
- What have I done to look out for the interests of these women?

In order to share one mind and to love in the manner Paul describes, we have to know each other. In order to demonstrate that we count others more significant than ourselves, we must learn to bend our opinion of how things should be done when there is conflict. In order to demonstrate that we are looking out for other's interests, we have to sacrificially serve each other.

Here's the picture Paul gives of a healthy church—and a healthy women's ministry. It is my prayer for the women of your church and mine. In Philippians 1:27 he urges the church to continue "standing firm in one spirit with one mind striving side by side for the sake of the Gospel." Do you see the picture Paul is painting? He sees us all as working for the same goal, side-by-side. As we work together, we come to know and love each other. Our differences fall aside when we labor together in the work of the Gospel, with one mind focused on Christ.

I think it's important to note here that working *for* the Gospel is not the Gospel. The Gospel is the good news that Christ paid the price for our sins on the cross. Believing the Gospel—completely trusting that this sacrifice for sin was enough and that it applied to my own (and your own) sin—is the means by which God saves us for a life of service. In Philippians 3, Paul calls it "the righteousness from God that depends on faith." Please don't get the cart before the horse. Our life of service and fellowship comes *after* the new birth.

If you have experienced this new birth, will you join the women at your church who are focused on Christ, fellowshiping as they do the works commanded by the gospel?

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