

Unity matters

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[0:00] Let me add my welcome to you, to Jerome's. My name's Daniel. We haven't met before. It's good to see you here this morning. And ourselves have been in prayer as we prepare to come to the Word of God. So, thinking about unity, but before we get there, we have so much choice, don't we?

If you go and do your weekly shop, you have an array of choice of shops to go to in Brighton. So many supermarkets. You go to Tesco, Aldi, Asda, Sainsbury's, others, Tesco, Waitrose, M&S,; if you're in a higher class than me.

So much choice of where to go and shop. If you were to go out and eat after church this morning, go down London Road, you'll find a whole array of different foods that you could eat.

You could now get some Yemenese food. If you want to try that, you can just head down around the corner. Or some Greek food, or Chinese, or Italian, or Japanese, or Nando's, or McDonald's, or my favorite, Greg's. So much choice.

And if you want to come to church in Brighton, you have so much choice. You could go to high Anglican, low Anglican, charismatic churches, Baptists, Reformed churches, and so many other churches you could go to in Brighton. So much choice.

[2:06] Apparently in the UK, there are over 300 church denominations. And in the world, as of 2023, there are 47,000 church denominations to choose from.

And some predict by the end of 2050, there could be as many as 67,000 church denominations. Staggering.

But is all that choice good? Is it good we have so much choice? Well, when you come to do your weekly shop, it probably is quite good that we have a whole array of shops to choose from.

Because they'll be competitive, they'll keep their prices a bit lower. And just so much variety to choose from. It's great with food to have so much variety to choose from in our city.

It's not boring, is it? But it's a variety of different denominations, different sorts of churches to go to.

[3:13] Is that a good thing? Well, that's what we're thinking about this morning. Unity. Church unity. It seems important to me as I read the Bible that it's important that Christians are united together.

Let's just turn back to John 20. We will get into Acts 15 in a moment. But just want to hear the words of the Lord Jesus.

Sorry, John 17, verse 20. That's what I meant to say. John 17, verse 20. This chapter is a prayer of the Lord Jesus.

It's an amazing prayer. Here's just a snippet of what he prays for to his Father. And here he is praying, not just for his disciples, but now for all who will come to believe in the Lord Jesus, including us this morning.

So John 17, verse 20. My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one.

[4:22] Father, just as you are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. I have given them the glory that you gave to me, that they may be one as we are one.

I in them and you in me, so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them, even as you have loved me.

Jesus prays that his people will be brought to complete unity. The unity of the church, the unity of God's people, it matters to the Lord Jesus.

And so if we love Jesus this morning, then we should care and love church unity. Some of the disunity and infractions in churches that mean there are these thousands of church denominations worldwide, some of them are necessary and sadly important because they are because of differences of how we read the word of God, or don't read the word of God in some cases, over matters of an important doctrine.

That's the teaching of the church. Churches coming together to affirm that our faith in the Trinity, praying God.

[6:12] But not everybody could sign up to that. But sadly, churches have also split over less important matters, over human preferences, over tradition.

All churches have their tradition, whether a church has just been going for a few weeks and doing the same things on those Sundays, or whether the churches have been doing things Christians have done for thousands of years.

Churches are split over music. Churches are split over whether you sing old hymns in an organ or new songs with a band. Churches are split over music. Churches are split over music. Churches are split over music. Churches are split over music.

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Churches are split over music. churches made up of FAC, Grace Baptist, New Frontiers, Anglicans and others recognizing we can stand together for the gospel in Sussex.

[7:32] Literally here in Brighton we meet up with a few churches two or three times a year to have services together as an expression of our unity. Next month I'll be swapping pulpits with somebody who's pastoring up in Hurstford Point to express again our unity together in the gospel as churches. We recognize our unity nationally. We're part of FIEC, a group of over 600 churches who believe in the word of God, believe the gospel, proclaim it in our nation. And then even more wider is the Evangelical Alliance which is great for some families in our churches to get them into good schools but also we stand with them again on the gospel. We sign up to a statement of faith.

All those churches will look very different but they believe the gospel and so we can stand together on that. But there are still threats to the unity of the church and the threats to the unity of the church is nothing new as we find in Acts 15. The threat to the unity of the church is real.

And we began looking at this chapter last week and if you haven't heard Mark's sermon on it do go away and listen to it later so you can get a fuller picture of this chapter. But the problem started in verse 1 of the chapter where it says certain people came down from Judea to Antioch and were teaching the believers. They were saying unless you are circumcised according to the custom taught by Moses you cannot be saved. Some Jewish believers were saying to Paul and Barnabas that those people you've taught those gentle people that you've taught and you believe have found salvation in the Lord Jesus Christ they cannot be saved unless they follow this law of God that they're to be circumcised.

And so Paul and Barnabas got together with the church in Jerusalem and a council was formed and they stood up to say actually we must reject this teaching because this is threatening to drive us apart. No we're united together in the Lord Jesus Gentiles and Jewish people.

Hear what Peter says there in verse 10 and 11 key verses that we looked at last week. Now then why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of Gentiles a yoke that neither we nor our ancestors have been able to bear? No we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we are saved just as they are. Peter declaring there is nothing we can do to save ourselves.

[10:42] If we're trying to obey the letter of the law so that we'd be right with God then it's foolishness he's saying. The law is good it's God's good words to his people but it shows us just how sinful we are.

It shows us how we cannot stand before our holy gods. And so don't say that that Jesus plus doing something will save you. No it's Jesus plus nothing that will save you. Believing in him alone.

And this controversy this was the threat to the unity of the church. It could have driven Jewish and Gentile believers far apart from one another. And so the council in Jerusalem had to meet. They had to discuss this problem.

And this week we continue to see how this problem was sort of resolved amongst the church. And I want us to focus firstly on the leadership of the situation. We'll spend most time there and then we'll just see as well how God's been leading them and then we'll learn what the church, all the people's responsibility is in terms of the unity of the church. So leaders who strive for unity. The leaders wanted to explain their decision from this council meeting. They wanted to explain it clearly. They wanted to tell their Gentile brothers and sisters very clearly what they are saying. So they wrote a letter and it's worth us just reading that again. Verse 23 to 29. Let's read this letter. With them they sent the following letter. The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Greetings. We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barnabas and Paul. Men who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything beyond the following requirements. You are to abstain from food, sacrifice to idols and from blood and from the meat of strangled animals and from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell.

[13:47] They write a clear letter. A clear letter to explain clearly to the Gentile brothers and sisters who've been hearing that unless they're circumcised they can't be saved. They're explaining clearly to them what their discussions about this important issue has been. And just a thought on this letter that we have recorded here. It's interesting Luke put it there. I think if we read this chapter without that letter in it, it would make perfect sense what the council in Jerusalem had decided.

It's sort of repeating what we saw James say last week. But Luke wants to be absolutely clear with us on the details. And so guided by the Holy Spirit, he makes sure it's here for us because this is an important issue. This was a threat to the unity of the church. So let's be really, really clear with you how this situation was resolved.

Continuing to think about the leadership of this situation, that the leaders, they emphasize the family. They emphasize the family. Look there in verse 23.

The apostles and elders, your brothers, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia. Those Gentiles, those believers, they've had their faith questioned in God, their place in God's family questioned. But the leaders are saying here from the beginning, you are, we are brothers with you in Christ.

[15:51] Christ. It's not nice to be questioned on the genuineness of who you are, is it? I've been watching these last few weeks, the traitors. I don't know if anybody else is into the traitors. If you don't know how the traitors works, it's a game that is being played by a group of about 22 people. And they're competing to win a lot of money at the end. And the people are split into team faithful and to team traitor. The traitors, as you've got three or four of them, the rest are faithfuls. And the traitors every night have the power to try and murder someone, not literally, don't worry, but to get someone struck off the game. And by day, through the day, they're trying to convince people, they're faithful. And the faithful have to work out who are the traitors amidst us. We need to get rid of them so that we can win money, not them. But it's not nice at times to watch because the faithful are questioned on their character. Someone says, you're too quiet, so you must be a traitor. Or someone says, you are too loud, so you must be a traitor. It's not nice to be questioned. And so there's tears and there's emotions that run high. And likewise here in this chapter, we see the Gentiles and Antioch,

Syria and Cilicia, their genuine faith in Jesus is being questioned. It's not nice. But this letter that is written by the leaders of the church shows from the very beginning, we're not questioning you. We

are your brothers in Christ. And verse 23, the second bit, to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, that should really read, literally it should read, the Gentile brothers and sisters. So brothers and sisters in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia, they say clearly from the get-go, you're part of us, you're part of the family of God.

You're trusting in Jesus. You don't need to follow that outward sign of physical circumcision that some are demanding of you. And what matters is your hearts are right before the Lord because you're trusting in Jesus alone to save you. Brothers and sisters in Christ, they can confidently say. The leaders continue to show the importance of unity here by sending themselves.

They send themselves. They don't just send the letter with a messenger boy or by pigeon or whatever they could do them days. No, they send the A team of the church with the letter. Have a look, verse 22. Then all the apostles and elders with the whole church decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas, called Barnabas, and Silas, who were leaders among the people. So Paul and Barnabas, they go with the letter and then some from the Jerusalem church themselves. They go with the letter and some of their own men. They are told in verse 32 that Judas and Silas who were sent, they were prophets and they stayed and they continued to encourage and strengthen the believers there. They sent the leaders. And this was a united decision to send the 18th. And verse 25, so we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends, Barnabas and Paul. We all agreed or with one accord, we agreed to send them to you. Because we didn't want to hide anything from you. We wanted to be absolutely clear with you.

We wanted to tell you this letter. We wanted to read it to you in person. And we wanted to be there to continue to care for you and look after you and encourage you. We want to be there to answer your questions. Why are we sending these guys to you? Because this matters. Unity matters. It matters that we're clear with you when the unity has been under threat. Verse 24, look at what was going on in the Gentiles' minds. Verse 24, we have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and they disturbed you and they troubled your minds.

[21:15] This caused, this issue caused their minds to be disturbed and troubled. It could have caused them to really doubt their newfound belief and faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

It could have caused them to drift away from the true saving faith and into man-made pressures to work for salvation.

And so sending themselves meant they could be absolutely clear with them. And that's important for leaders amongst us today.

And I say that as a leader myself. We need to be clear in the decisions that we make in church life. And where we are not being clear with people, members need to ask us for clarity.

Now, confidentiality may be needed in cases, particularly cases involving individuals. But where say we make decisions as we have in the last year about how we do communion together, the Lord's Supper, we need to be absolutely clear.

[22:33] And I pray that we have been. We need to be clear in the detail that we give to members. And so we, I wrote a position paper for members, just a side or two of A4 to explain clearly where my head is at with the Lord's Supper and what my thinking on it is.

And then we discussed and we made sure we listened to people so that we could be together on whatever decisions we made.

And rightly, people wanted clarity on if communion was going to be in the main service like it is once a month. People wanted clarity on making sure we tell people clearly what this meal is about and who it is for.

And so we came up with that form of words to help us and to reassure people. We want to be clear on this. Because the Lord's Supper itself is an expression of our unity together in Christ.

It's the family meal. And so do ask for your prayers for us as leaders of the church that God would help us to be clear in our leadership, to be clear with decisions we make.

[24:01] The leaders here, they send themselves in order to provide clarity and extend the unity between brothers and sisters in the church.

And finally, the leaders, they are passionate about the name of Jesus. Verse 25, They sent Barnabas and Paul back to them.

And they state in this letter, These men have literally been risking their lives for the sake of making Jesus known to people. We saw a bit of that a week or so ago as people wanted to stone them. They literally risked their lives because they're passionate about the name of the Lord Jesus. They're passionate about the name of Jesus. They're passionate about declaring salvation in his name to everyone who calls on his name.

Salvation full and free only in the name of Christ. And if we're passionate as they are about Jesus, We'll be passionate about his church, his people being united together.

[25:34] That's the reason most of us are here this morning. Most of us are here spending time with this diverse group of people around us because Jesus is our Savior.

The Holy Spirit has worked in our hearts and led us to faith in him. We're united by him. And because of him, we'll be passionate about the unity of the church because we're passionate about the name of Jesus being lifted high.

And if you're not convinced, go back and read those words in John 17 that we read. But that doesn't mean, and I don't want to be mistaken to thinking this means, we can have unity with all churches. Sadly, we can't. So we can't at Calvary Church, in good conscience, have unity with a Roman Catholic church.

They claim to be Christian. They claim to worship Jesus. But they say Jesus is not enough. It's Jesus plus something. So they may worship Mary.

[26:48] They may look to the words of an infallible human being who they look to as the head of the church. But we believe clearly from Scripture that the Lord Jesus Christ is the head of the church.

Nor can we have unity with churches in the sun and brighton who say, well, God is love, and so come all of you and live as you please.

I agree, God is love. But because he's a God of love, he's also a God of right justice and right anger at sin. And so he calls people in the name of Jesus to repent of sin.

To turn around from living their own way to living God's way. And so we can't have unity with people who say that's different. So here in Acts 15, the leaders make clear to them that the Gentiles, they are brothers and sisters in Christ.

And trusting in Jesus alone is enough for them. So they don't need to have disturbed and troubled minds. They are in.

[28:10] Jesus is more than enough. So if unity matters to the Lord Jesus, and it does, and if unity matters for churches and their leaders, and it does, don't we need to pray for it?

Where it's not the case. Don't we need to pray for it within our own local church? For that's where it starts. Here amongst us, seated in this room, pray that God would grow our unity together in him. Pray for the Lord to protect our unity. Because by his grace, I think we are united together in Christ. And we express that well.

So pray for the Lord to grow and protect it. Pray for your leaders here to keep striving for it.

Because if we're passionate about making the name of Jesus known to this city, then we should be passionate about the unity of the church here.

Next we see the Spirit who protects unity. The Spirit who protects unity. All these events, as we know, are under the sovereign will of the Lord.

[29:44] The Lord who is himself the head of the church. And I want to draw your attention in this letter to verse 28. Where the leaders write this, It seemed good to the Holy Spirit.

It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us. A recognition here from the church leaders that the Holy Spirit has been guiding them in this important matter.

Guiding the church and keeping the believers united together in this. And this should be a great comfort to us as the people of God.

We live in days where there are false teachers around. Where there are, as we've already said, churches that we cannot be united with. And where we, in this room, are sinful human beings and we could just say a word or do one thing.

And the bonds of love and peace and unity could be damaged or broken. But take heart because God is at work here.

[31:00] Verse 28, Seemed good to the Holy Spirit. And commenting on that thought, Al Mohler, a Christian leader in America, says, Take heart and know that God will not forsake his church.

His eternally and powerful spirit will forever protect the body of Christ from false teaching, impure doctrine, and the schemes of Satan.

So take heart, brothers and sisters. The Lord is at work here. And the Lord to the Lord, unity matters. And so we must, when threats to church unity come, we must think and discern God's will together as leaders and as the church, like the council in Jerusalem do as they thought and debated together.

That's good. But ultimately, we've got to be looking and depending on the Lord of the church. Depending on him when theological issues arise.

Depending on him when threats to the love, peace, and unity of the church come about. So in all our discussions, whether they be at our regular meetings on Sundays and Wednesdays, whether they be at church members meetings, or elders and deacons meetings, we have and we must continue to make an emphasis on starting with listening to God in his word and by praying to him.

[32:41] We must depend on him to lead and guide us. Jesus himself tells his disciples that apart from him, we can do nothing.

We must depend on him. And I pray that this last week of prayer together will have been a help and a reminder to us of how much we need to do that.

We've spent this week praying together in different ways and different forms to help us express our dependence upon him. And we need these weeks of prayer to remind us that we are human creatures and we must be dependent on him for our own walk with the Lord and for our church's walk with the Lord together.

And we need to continue that spirit of dependence upon him through this year. We need to keep meeting and regularly praying with one another on Wednesday evenings, Sundays.

Get those prayer times in your diary. We need to depend on the Lord. Who by his spirit protects unity.

[34:04] And thirdly and finally, we see a church that is glad to be united. Glad to be united. Here's the response from the Gentile Christians to this letter.

Verse 31. The people read it and were glad for its encouraging message. They were glad and encouraged.

They were glad to hear from the leaders in Jerusalem. They were glad to hear good theology. Theology is the study of God.

There's good theology going on in this situation. As the leaders have met and discussed. As the threat to the Lord Jesus and the salvation he offers was undermined.

These believers hear how the church leaders have been dealing with this. And how they come to them and teach them. And encourage them with good theology.

[35:09] And so do you rejoice in good theology? Do you rejoice in hearing the Bible taught? Or do you rejoice when the sermon is over and you can go home?

They're glad to hear good theology. And they're glad to hear how they can play their own part in church unity.

It's there in verse 29. You are to abstain from food sacrifice to idols. From blood and from the meat of strangled animals.

And from sexual immorality. You will do well to avoid these things. That's what they are to do. And they're told not to do these things. Because just as the Jewish people might have found.

[36:08] You not being circumcised a stumbling block. So we don't want you guys to be causing a stumbling block to the Jewish people. So where you might cause offense to them.

And going off to temples built for false gods. And eating food there. Don't do that for the sake of church unity. You might be doing that simply just to get some food.

And we are free in Christ. But don't do that. Because your Jewish brothers and sisters will feel offended from that.

And Mark was really helpful in helping us. How this works out for us. Day to day. In our own lives.

In our own church life. And one example which reminds you of. If Betty comes to your house for Sunday lunch.

[37:09] And Betty believes it's wrong for Christians to watch TV on a Sunday. We don't put the TV on for the sake of Betty.

It's just a little thing to honor a brother or sister in Christ. For whom this would be a genuine stumbling block. The church responds to hearing these things.

And they are glad and encouraged. Glad to hear how they can play their own part. In church unity. And just to give you an example from our own church's life in the last year.

Last year. Elders. Took the decision. To pause. Singing music from a few different sources. So from Hillsong and Bethnal Elevation music.

Not particularly because the songs we sang were bad. But knowing that a little bit of money will go to a church ministry. Which actually for some of us that feels uncomfortable.

[38:16] And so knowing and hearing from where different people are at within the church family. That seemed to be the best thing. To help guard our unity together in Christ.

We're not saying that will always be the case. Things may change in the future. But that's where we're at now. In order to keep the family of God together.

Which is so important. And so we can be glad. And we can be encouraged to do that. Because we love Jesus.

And because we love Jesus. We love the unity of the church. And we love Jesus. Now all in this passage seems sorted, doesn't it?

The letter has been given. The leaders have encouraged and strengthened the believers. So surely next week we should expect peace and harmony, shouldn't we?

[39:22] Well like a good end to a TV series. Come back next week and find out what happens. But for now shall we pray.

Amen.