

# United in Christ

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[ 0 : 00 ] Our theme this morning is United in Christ. And it forms part of a series that over these weeks we're looking at what it means to be in Christ.

That's where we find our identity as followers of Jesus. There are all sorts of different things you can say about a human person. But as a Christian the one thing that defines us first and last is Jesus.

It's him in whom we are held. He is the one who has saved us. He is the one who promises to hold us for all eternity. It is God who has created us.

It is God who saves us. It is God who through a lifelong process makes us the people that he wants us to be. And so we are in Christ and that is where our identity lies.

But there's a danger that when we talk about these things that it can become very introspective and rather individualistic.

[ 1 : 07 ] So we just get caught up in ourselves and our own personal individual identity. And so this morning is a really important part of this series as we think of what it is to be in Christ.

As Paul says that, you know, there's no sort of lone range spirituality here. It's not about just me, myself and I. Rather we are part of something bigger.

That as Paul puts it, all the members belong to one another. United in Christ. You know, all of this is particularly important because of the cultural map on which we find ourselves in the West right now. Now, the question of personal identity is not a new one. Of course it's not. But what is very contemporary in our Western world is the nature of the struggle and the confusion in which our culture more widely is caught up in that question of what is personal identity and how do we identify one another?

Add to that the Western focus on individualism in the extreme sense, and you've got the perfect storm.

[ 2 : 27 ] Let me give you an illustration, albeit a rather extreme one. Several years ago I was reading about a woman in this country who had just got married.

She had baked her own cake. She'd made her own dress. She'd done all the invites. Nothing unusual about that.

Perhaps a little bit more unusual, although not unheard of. She'd played quite a big part in actually writing the words of the ceremony. Whilst in a marriage ceremony we might perhaps, sometimes it may be that the people getting married want to sort of input into the words that might be used.

This was rather more unusual in that she'd written the whole lot. But the thing that really stood out about this particular marriage was that the lady who was getting married was marrying herself. Now you may think I'm joking, but it wasn't intended as a joke, even though the way the media reported it perhaps made a bit of fun of it, but actually she was really serious.

[ 3 : 42 ] And she said that the reason she wanted to be married was that she didn't see herself finding somebody to get married to in the near future, and she didn't want to wait to have her big day.

She wanted her wedding ceremony. She wanted the party. She wanted to bring her friends in. But actually, at a deeper level, she wanted to celebrate who she was. She wanted her family and her friends around her to celebrate that sense of who she was and is.

Now this was several years ago, and it has become a bit of a growing trend. Of course, you can't marry yourself and have that legal status. But actually, going through or having a wedding day where you marry yourself and you celebrate your identity is a growing thing.

It's actually called sologamy. Put that into Google, and you'll see that it's not a few people that are now marrying themselves.

I even, and it sounds like I'm joking, I actually read, and I was looking this up, preparing for today, somebody just recently married themselves, and the next day announced that they were going to divorce themselves because they just couldn't cope with being with themselves for any longer. [ 5 : 01 ] Better get used to it because you've got the rest of your life. Now, one I've just described is a pretty extreme example. Perhaps it's something that maybe might not immediately resonate with our own experience.

But what I'm talking about here is our wider cultural obsession with individualism and the way in which the question of identity gets caught up within that. And that theme of individualism is something that I think actually probably all of us of any age in the West would have been caught up in.

Ask yourself this question. When you receive something from somebody else, whether that's a gift, whether it's an act of kindness, maybe it's just the offer of an act of help or kindness, what are your instinctive internal reactions?

I'm going to dare to answer the question for you because I think, generally speaking, we shirk away from it. We back off. Why?

Because we feel uncomfortable about receiving. because we have this culture that we've been brought up in. I'm talking about a Western reality now that actually you've got to stand on your own two feet.

[ 6 : 29 ] Now, there's nothing wrong inherently with that, of course. But there's something quite dangerous when we become so individualised that actually we feel uncomfortable about receiving help or support from somebody else.

And we feel that actually somehow the only way we can receive that is if we're going to reciprocate it and pretty quickly too. And it's against that that Paul says that our identity, who we are as human beings, is in Christ.

Okay? It's a deeply, deeply personal thing, but it's not an individualistic thing. He says this, in Christ, each member, and he's not talking about the church as a club.

Often that's how we turn it into, but that's not what he means. Paul uses the language of the body and talks about body parts as members. So it's an organic living thing, the church.

In Christ, we are a body and each one of us as members of that body belong to one another. It's not an individualistic thing. John Wesley put it, none holiness but social.

[ 7 : 51 ] We are in this together. Our mission is together. We are called to serve not just individuals, but collectively the society around us.

And that we are called to be followers of Jesus, not just as individual persons, but as part of a body. And if we're serious about growing in Christ, about learning more about who we are and what our identity is and why we matter to God and how we can truly flourish as human beings, we need to understand that that is not something that we can do and work out in isolation from others.

If you've ever watched geese fly, you'll notice they do it in formation, in the shape of a V.

It's one of those fascinating lessons from nature that we can all learn from. Because there is a reason why they do this in that it enables them to fly so much better and more efficiently.

The formation acts aerodynamically like the geese, collectively, are a single wing. The air drag becomes evenly distributed across all of the birds, such that if one of the geese accidentally falls away from the group, then they need to rejoin it pretty fast.

[ 9 : 21 ] Apparently, research says that when geese fly, if 25 geese fly together in the shape of a V, they can fly for more than 70% further than one goose flying on its own.

Over 70% further. We are called, says Paul, to understand and to learn and to grow in the truth that our identity, as personal and as unique as it is to each of us, is shaped and formed, not in isolation from one another, but together.

That is how we fly. That is how we flourish. If we really want to grow, then we need to not only understand that we are part of something bigger, but actually get actively engaged in that bigger thing.

And the danger can then be that if we get involved in a church, that if we become just passive consumers of that church and we're not actually actively involved with it, the danger can be that we feel isolated, we can feel lonely within it, and this can apply to churches of any size, whether they're big churches or smaller churches, but I would suggest that perhaps bigger churches are more vulnerable to this danger.

That if we're not engaged with it at all, we can feel quite lonely and isolated within it. Because we look around us and we see other people and we can assume that they're really engaged and we can feel quite alone and cut off.

[ 11 : 10 ] And that's why I would really encourage to anybody, whenever you're joining a church, wherever it is, however big or small it is, that the earliest opportunity, actually try and get involved. And there's loads of ways in which you can get involved in any church and there's loads of ways you can get involved in this one.

And if you're not sure where to start, then just have a chat with any of us. And look out for the people, the yellow lanyards afterwards are on the host team this morning. The host team itself is a great place to start if you're not sure, if you want to just join in and get involved.

But there are loads of other ways, and not just here on the Sunday, but throughout the week. But the thing is, you see, is when we don't get engaged and active together, the danger can be that we become isolated from others.

And then the next step can be we become critical of others, and then we become cynical of others. Jesus said that we're to let our light shine.

He said that nobody puts a light underneath a bowl and covers it up, but rather they put it on a prominent place so that it can shine. And that's true for every single one of us, that we need to shine.

[ 12 : 25 ] And when we don't, well, let me share with you another analogy. Years ago, when I was a sixth former, in fact, that wasn't just a few years ago, that was an embarrassingly long time ago.

But I can remember, I'm trying to, I think it was a, I was trying to write a, it was British history. I was trying to write an essay on the corn laws, I think it was, something like that. And I was in my bedroom and had one of those angle poised lamps.

And I'll be honest with you, I was bored senseless with the corn laws. And I was just fiddling with this angle poised lamp. The room light itself wasn't on. So the angle poised lamp was, was all the light that I had to work with.

And in my boredom, I was fiddling with this thing and I found out that I could dim it by bringing the lamp closer to the surface of the desk. And I found it great fun to see how much I could dim this lamp without it completely losing all of its light by just bringing the lamp against the surface of the desk.

And then I could actually make the light go out completely and then just bring it back up again. So it's just like about half a millimetre off the surface of the desk. And I managed to actually set this thing so there's just enough light to see.

[ 13 : 42 ] So it was just, the lamp, if you can just imagine, was just a millimetre or so above the surface of the desk. And there I was. So I went back to my essay. And a couple of minutes later, there was an almighty bang and I was plunged into complete darkness.

See, what had happened was because I'd messed around with this lamp in this way, the heat had just built up within the lamp and the bulb had just exploded. Never forgotten that.

You see, there was plenty of heat, but not very much light. And that's the danger when we turn in on ourselves.

Heat builds up when we're actually, as Christian believers, we're called to be people whose light shines. And we're called to do that as individuals. We're called to do that as a church. And it's when people, and when churches stop doing stuff together and stop engaging, we turn in on ourselves. The heat builds up. There's not so much light. And people start to fall out into arguing. And that's not good. I saw a documentary a few years ago, BBC Wildlife documentary.

[ 14 : 59 ] And it was, it was out on the African plains. And there was this, I think it's called a springbok. It's like a type of gazelle type antelope. And there was two of these things.

And they're normally really super alert to predators. They have to be in order to survive. But in this particular documentary, it was showing these two springboks, springboks, fighting each other.

They were so absorbed with their fight. I don't know what it was about, but they were so absorbed with their fight, they didn't notice the lion that was prowling around them and encircling them.

When we turn inward and just see the conflict and the differences between one another, when we argue, when we become embroiled within all of that stuff that's inward looking, we don't notice the dangers around us.

it says in 1 Peter that the devil is like a prowling lion ready to pounce at any time. And we need to be alert.

[16:17] Churches, generally speaking, when churches are persecuted by sources, whether that's the state or whether that's others from outside of them, when churches are persecuted, generally speaking, they grow.

because they haven't got the time, they can't afford to focus on their divisions. The big danger facing churches is when we turn in on ourselves and we isolate ourselves from what's going on outside and we just focus on the things that are dividing us.

And Paul says that if we are really to not just be in Christ, but to grow in Christ and to flourish in Christ as individuals, as groups and as churches and as the church in the widest sense, we need to understand this basic truth that we belong to one another, that we are part of something so much bigger than just our own personal spirituality.

To be and to grow as a disciple of Jesus is to be and grow as part of something bigger and to know that we are united in Christ. And of course, this is not just to do with the stuff that we do.

Most fundamentally, it is to do, it has to do with the fact that we are, as Christian believers, united around one thing and that is that we are all receivers of God's grace.

[17:49] We don't earn our way into being in Christ through the stuff that we do. We are in Christ and we are held in Christ because we have one fundamental thing in common, that we all need him.

And that it is he who opens up the way to eternal life for us and him alone. And that all of us are broken beings, all of us need his help, all of us need his salvation.

And it is that recognition, first and last, in our brokenness, that we share that brokenness and we share that common grace in God that unites us, that holds us together.

I'm going to share with you one last story and it's a story that comes from 1941. Interestingly, the words Amen and Alleluia are words that unite Christians around the world and are almost identical in just about every language.

But the following story is told about a Romanian soldier in the Second World War named Anna George. And it was 1941 and Russian troops had overrun the Romanian region of Bessarabia and entered Moldavia.

[19:15] And Anna and his comrades were badly frightened. Bullets whizzed around them and water shells shook the earth. By day, Anna sought relief reading his Bible.

But at night, he could only crouch close to the earth and recall verses memorised in childhood. And one day, during a spray of enemy fire, Anna was separated from his company.

In a panic, he bolted deeper and deeper into the woods until, huddling at the base of a large tree, he fell asleep from exhaustion. The next day, he tried to find his comrades and he moved cautiously towards the front, staying in the shadow of the trees, nibbling a crust of bread and drinking from the streams.

Hearing that the battle was closing in, he unslung his rifle and pulled the bolt and watched for the enemy. His nerves near the breaking point, 20 yards away, a Russian soldier suddenly appeared. Anna wrote this. All my mental rehearsals of bravery served me nothing. I dropped my gun and fell to my knees, then buried my face in my sweating palms and began to pray.

[20:46] And while praying, I waited for the cold touch of the Russian's rifle barrel against my head. I felt a slight pressure on my shoulder close to my neck.

I opened my eyes slowly. There was my enemy kneeling in front of me, his gun lying next to mine among the wild flowers.

His eyes were closed in prayer. We did not understand a single word of the other's language. but we could pray.

We ended our prayer with two words that need no translation. Hallelujah and Amen. Then after a tearful embrace, we walked quickly to opposite sides of the clearing and disappeared beneath the trees.

let's pray together. Lord God, we thank you that we are in Christ and we thank you that you call each of us as individuals to know that we are loved by you and that you want us to know that you are loved by you.

[22:16] Thank you that that is where we find our identity and that each of us is individual and unique. But Lord, we thank you that that individuality and that uniqueness does not mean that we

are to be in isolation from one another.

Lord, we are all dependent on each other. We are all dependent on you. Lord, forgive us for those times when we have sought to go it alone, for when we resist the help from others, for when we feel that we are on our own and we should be alone, for when we become stagnant, critical, and perhaps even cynical.

Lord, we are sorry. But we thank you that we may know that we are forgiven because we are all dependent on your grace.

So Lord, help us to bring what we have and to bring who we are in all our uniqueness into your service, that we can serve you together, that we can grow together, and that we can join together in saying that alleluia and amen.

In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.