

World Mission: Part 3

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2023

Preacher: Rev. Dr. Steven Griffin

[0 : 0 0] let's pray thank you lord for your word for your written word that we have before us and we ask that by your spirit that it would be come come alive in us set us on fire help us to trust in you and to walk with you more faithfully because of it because of your promise as we ask in jesus's name amen well very often a new a new year's day sermon is devoted to looking back uh where we've been so we can give thanks to god for where we've been and so we can try to discern where he's leading us as we go forward keeping our eyes on jesus as the writer to the hebrews uh challenges us to do and this morning i'd like to keep that keep up that tradition somewhat by putting this challenge to us let's consider that as christians we're called to be world christians christians who delight in and welcome uh the fact that throughout history god has been in the business of calling together uh sinners from all nations into the fellowship of the triune god and that in doing that his purpose is to make us one people bound together by the same spirit to the lord jesus i think the call to be world christians is is a particularly urgent one today consider that a startling fact of our of our times is global migration on a massive scale now my wife stella works in that area of migration and so these sort of uh statistics are kind of always there before us according to the unhcr that's the uh united nations refugee agency that the number of forcibly displaced individuals last year 2022 reached reach the mark of 103 million and apart from forced migration there's all the ordinary ordinary movement brought about uh by labor migration uh commerce and just tourism and the the effect of all this together is that global crossings and exchange uh is the stuff of ordinary life for us so that we're not only we're not only encountering people of other faiths and belief systems but we're encountering christians of other traditions and temperaments and dialects and so forth and i think that uh if we're guided by acts chapter 15 i think uh we can we can reflect uh on how mission and unity are related uh to one another if you were with with with us here in november you may recall that we looked at the task of mission where we find ourselves when i spoke about mission uh i think it was november 6th if i'm not mistaken drawing from first peter 2 and then we looked at the task of of how that task of mission where we find ourselves is actually related to the task of going to all the nations uh and we looked at acts chapter 17 so today we back up into 15 and we come back to jerusalem if you like uh and to the question of christian unity but without actually changing the question the basic question what is mission so what does mission have to do with unity but before actually looking at the passage with you there's something of a roadblock i think we have to have to clear out of the way since the question of christian unity can be a really complicated one the main reason is that it's not actually quite clear just what sort of unity

we're called to as christians at times we've been tempted to focus just on a kind of heart unity that has little or nothing to do with external things like institutions or networks or or even beliefs i recall a song some years ago and i'm dating myself that went like this and i think i probably even sang it uh in our hearts were undivided worshiping one savior one lord in our hearts were undivided bound by his spirit forevermore but then then the next stanza began like this it doesn't matter if we agree i'm not sure if i stumbled at that point or not maybe i did maybe i did later on is that what we're uh is that what we're to be content with a kind of hidden inward unity not worrying about doctrine and order and other external things well it might seem that way since when christians get around to uh the matter of visible unity as we do on occasion we often throw up our hands uh and say forget it we've been there we've tried that see how all those ecumenical projects inevitably get derailed uh we might say or how we get bogged down in meetings that are just there for their own sake and so on and i've studied a little bit of the history of ecumenism and i know i know how it can be this mixed bag right and how institutional ecumenism often is an animal of its own that seems to get us distracted from the real work and originally ecumenism grew out of mission and so i think it's good to remember that even though it did get sort of hijacked along the way but it's clear in scripture or

what's clear in scripture is a celebration and even a call to unity that isn't just a hidden thing even though this hidden dimension is of course there remember what paul writes in first corinthians 1 10 i appeal to you brothers by the name of our lord jesus christ that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you but that you be united in the same mind in other words the same truth and the same judgment unity in the bible is not something that's that's just taken for granted something that's just there while it is a gift of the holy spirit it's also a task for god's people you might ask well isn't the church's job just to get on with the work of of going to the nations and making disciples in any case do we really expect to see all the churches be reunited as one under one visible institution before jesus comes again well to the first question we can say most certainly the church's main job under knowing the living god himself is to make the living god known whenever the church forgets the great commission it it really gives up on its right to be called a church whenever it thinks that its main business is just to look after the needs of its members then uh it just becomes another club another another one more volunteer organization and the whole thrust of acts is one is one of a message uh of salvation that's going global it's a from here to there message from jerusalem to the uttermost parts of the earth story that's being told to answer the second question no the bringing together of all the churches into full confessional sacramental structural unity before jesus comes again is extremely unlikely humanly speaking our divisions require so many levels of mediation and believe me i've joined in on a few of those levels of mediation uh through the privilege of of of working in in different places in different churches and that the task would be nothing short of overwhelming i won't go into examples because i think you can probably come up with your own and yet god's plan for the bridegroom is not multiple brides well of course there are cultural reasons for our divisions to actually to try to make peace with our fragmentation and to encourage it through various forms of individualism and maybe empire building is to damage our witness in the world and maybe to say to the world yes we may preach a message of reconciliation but it doesn't actually apply to our horizontal relationships i think that as we become more and more aware that the church is a global reality one of the great one of the key issues in the world christian movement today i think is a is the matter of unity so what sort of unity are we to hope for and work towards then does the bible speak to this and i think it does i think the message comes uh to us when we ask the question okay i understand the from here to there vision the one about going from my out from my home church to all nations but is there a from there to here movement that corresponds to it is there some indication that mission also involves a from the uttermost parts of the earth to jerusalem back to jerusalem thrust and if we had been given as i'm sorry as if we had been given the commission go ye therefore back to jerusalem and well if we were looking for something like that we'd have to turn to a passage like acts 15 because there in that episode in the life of the early church it becomes clear that the great commission didn't mean go to all nations to make disciples and when you get there when you get to the one to which you you're called consider that your final destination i think i tried to make that point in one of the one of the earlier talks what am i what am i trying to say by that i'm trying to say that uh that the church never comes to rest in one place it never stops being a sent people rather the church is a people uh god has seen fit to use to bring a word to yet other people groups even the original community the mother church back in in jerusalem you might say well but that's that's not mission a word that god gives you for a sister church or even the mother church well it's a word maybe it's a word of encouragement maybe it's a rebuke uh but it's not a word that we would call a missionary word and at this point we might have to have another look at what mission actually is ephesians 2 6 speaks of it as reconciliation between jew and gentile through the cross colossians 1 puts it in terms of reconciling all things to god whether things on earth or things in heaven by making peace through his blood shed on the cross god's mission in fact involves believers in in each other's lives just as much as it involves us in the world and these these go hand in hand we are we are constantly in the is if we take a word that the catholics prefer evangelization we're constantly in the business of evangelization under god and even of ourselves it's a reciprocal thing so let's work our way through the passage to learn just how this from there back to here vision works itself out and i think to get a glimpse of that we need to put on a different set of reading glasses this morning instead of reading the passage as gentile believers let's try to to think of ourselves as jewish mother church believers with james and peter as our as our elders and ask ourselves what are we learning as the gospel goes out through people like paul to the nations what are we learning about the way to handle our differences and what and as we learn about that what is the holy spirit also teaching us about unity what is it based on and what's it

for so i want to consider the things that that we learn as followers of jesus in jerusalem under three headings a dispute that emerges a divine work that is named and a decision that is taken a dispute that emerges a divine work that is named and a decision that is taken so first the dispute that emerges so under the under this heading we first of all have the sheer fact of disagreements the fact that christianity is to be a world movement taking root in very diverse cultures means that disagreements are going to be inevitable in this case beliefs that we hold dear as jewish christians uh are in are being tested verse verses one to two the first part of two uh tell us that certain people and we can modify the text slightly to say certain leaders of ours have gone out or have gone up to antioch and have been teaching the believers this unless you're circumcised according to the custom taught by moses you can't be saved this brought paul and barnabas into sharp dispute and debate with them what this debate amounts to is that we're being forced to ask ourselves this is the ceremonial law by which we know ourselves to be part of god's covenant family and children of the promise essential for salvation or in the gospel reading if if even jesus who knew no sin was circumcised can we let go of that ancient custom and still identify with him we're struggling with this in the second place we're learning as jewish believers that the disagreements that emerge are not meant to to just be ignored on the assumption well we belong to different cultures so we won't try to resolve our differences instead we'll just celebrate them as as a modern pluralist might do rather our differences are meant to be dealt with and in this case the initiative is coming from the great center of gentile christianity antioch remember the early centers of christianity antioch being prominent and through their initiative there we're getting a sense of here in the mother church that christian communities in different places are actually interdependent so we read in to be that in verse to be that paul and barnabas are sent with some others to go up to jerusalem to consult with the apostles and elders about the matter so the dispute has emerged two part two the divine work is named so the second thing we learn as jesus followers in jerusalem as paul and barnabas pack their bags and say their goodbyes we learn that a divine work is given a name it's recognized for what it is from the sheer fact of disagreement the text brings us to the basic reason for the dispute and the reason boils down to a series of events and reports that are troubling us here in jerusalem news is spreading about the conversion of the gentiles verses three and four and this worries us jewish christian because it's happening if you like without any any obvious link to the to the original community that's us so it has come about that some of our leaders the ones that belong to the party of pharisees speak up and what they say is this in verse five the gentiles must be circumcised and required to keep the law of moses so a formal meeting is called verse six the church throughout the ages has referred to this as the jerusalem council the first council the first ecumenical council and as an aside just i should point out that some traditions uh some christian traditions the ones that tend to downplay the authority of the councils in the life of the church make of this meeting something less than a council but i think they overlook the importance of the occasion and just how crucial is the precedent that is established here the precedent is this churches from two very different worlds jewish and greek are going to learn that they are one people of god not two they are going to learn that they need each other so as to better see their own blind spots and as they meet through their representatives they are going to learn something about the basis and reasons for unity now to to be back in the story as jewish believers what we learn specifically is is that this new work of god among gentiles helps us to see ourselves from where well from the outside from we jump outside as whenever we read scripture we are we are trying to jump outside and let it read us so that it challenges us and the same is going on here we're learning as jewish believers that the gentile experience god working in them and among them is helping us read ourselves from the outside to focus on the main question uh that god has been trying to teach us all along and what what is that what is that lesson well we're reminded of it when peter gets up to speak verse 7 we recall that he had avoided the company of gentile christians check out galatians 2 he'd been rebuked for that but that he had also learned through a gentile cornelius that it's by faith that men and women are saved whether jew or gentile that's back in acts chapter 10 and now he reiterates that when he says we believe it is through the grace of our lord jesus that we're saved just as they are the gentiles so at this point james our other key leader here in jerusalem gets up and explains that this apparently new thing that the gentiles can come to god apart from ceremonies of the law isn't at all contrary to what god had taught us in the past in fact it flows directly from what he told us through the prophets about his concern for gentiles as james says in verses 14 to 18 and i'll read them again simon simon peter has described to us how god first intervened to choose a people for his name from the gentiles the words of the prophets are in agreement with this the words of the

prophets are in agreement with this as it is written after this i will return and rebuild david's fallen tent its ruins i will rebuild and i will restore it that the rest of mankind may seek the lord even all the gentiles who hear my name says the lord

[20 : 18] and who does these who does these things things known from long ago a dispute a divine work is named and a decision is taken with the divine work named for what it is and the main lesson learned that faith trust in jesus is what's essential for salvation we still need to address the practical implications so we come to the third topic in this passage we learn as jesus followers here in jerusalem that there's a decision that a formal decision that needs to take place we've been made aware of the fact that that god's work in one place has implications for the whole church and there's also the matter of our common witness in the world if we claim to follow one master for this we turn to james who adds another word verses 19 to 21 it is my judgment therefore he says that we should not make it difficult for the gentiles who are turning to god instead we should write to them telling them to do what to abstain from the food polluted by our idols from sexual immorality from the meat of strangled animals and from blood for the law of moses has been preached in every city from the earliest times and is read in the synagogues on every sabbath i'll say a word about that what james is calling for here essentially is a minimal standard of behavior for fellowship a minimal standard a standard which both parties will agree to adopt now why propose such a standard well partly for mutual recognition but also so that their collective witness together in the world won't be threatened but here's here's the problem does this standard leave us with a necessary ceremonial law after all that we're saved to the extent that we observe these external things does it mean that we're part of god's family only as long as we avoid food offered to idols the meat of animals whose blood has not been properly drained strangled and immoral sexual acts now i don't think the point is that we end up back in law apart from grace so what is going on and here here's my reading i i'm hoping for further light on it but here's here's my understanding for our if we're thinking of ourselves as jewish christians for our part as jewish christians we're asking our gentile brothers and sisters to adopt a minimal standard for behavior essentially as a to honor us as a courtesy to us in the mother church why should we make such a request well our membership in the jewish community and our witness among fellow jews are not going to allow us to leave behind these dietary laws easily and most certainly most certainly not god's guidelines for sexual relationships more than that gentile adherence to this minimal standard will will serve as a means to avoid publicly contradicting our witness here in jerusalem i think that's that's me trying to take a stab at what's going on there in this standard business now from their side the gentile believers have our blessing as the mother church to work out their calling within a very different culture with its own challenges but free from the requirements of all the purity laws and in the end the followers of the way

will not be split in two one jewish one gentile but will be one people one bicultural bilingual people if you like but one people all the same for the sake of a common witness in the world so this brings me to the last point i want to note regarding the decision that's taken it's that the two communities jewish and gentile are blessed for their decision for their obedience even as the jewish believers are blessed by the news of god's word spreading among the gentiles confirming what the prophets had foretold the gentile believers are encouraged by the ministry of judas and silas sent by the mother church receiving that the representatives to minister among them so along with the letter that james had proposed the two men being prophets themselves according to verse 32 said much to encourage and strengthen the believers there look at this marvelous picture of this of this mutual encouragement going on with two very different communities i know we shouldn't miss the reciprocity here the reciprocal nature of the blessing god blessing two communities through each other and we shouldn't miss the overall message which i would summarize as this god's blessing is for jew and gentile alike the dispute that emerged was settled in council and the decision was reached through that means and through the holy spirit's guidance as james said it seemed good to the holy spirit and to us verse 28 i'm coming to a conclusion just a few words about what this important moment in the history of the church means for us it's clear that our passage helps us to acknowledge the gospel movement as a world movement it's a world movement that will inevitably come apart here and there but it's a movement that god is in the business of uniting by his spirit and of using for his glory as we think of our identity as world christians today here and now what are the main things that we need to bear in mind as we carry the message of acts 15 with us i think we can summarize them by comparing the from here to to there work of paul in athens in acts 17 with the from there to here vision we've seen here in acts 15 where paul is also of course involved let's recall

what the from here to there vision looks like well for starters there's an awareness of the world's great need there's a passion to go and tell and there's a readiness to announce the gospel on top of that there's a boldness to proclaim the message of jesus and to call sinners to turn to him as paul does there among the polytheists in athens god now commands all people everywhere to repent he says the primary mode of the church here is we see as a scattered people as god has seen fit to send his people far and wide so they can bring light to others in darkness so let's look at it in the inverse if you like what's the from from there back to here vision uh what does that look like well it begins as jewish believers become aware of god's great love for the non-jew as well or they're reminded of this deeply biblical truth that's already theirs the passion that they begin to cultivate is that of hospitality as they willingly uh hurt hear and receive paul's testimony and and and are ready to receive this as a word from from the lord himself and where does the boldness come in well it's there too it comes in as the mother's church becomes bold to announce through peter and james what this means for the whole church for all of us and finally the primary mode of the church here is as a gathered people as god brings his people together to bless them and to encourage them as they encourage one another mutually so may this two-way vision be be ours today as we seek to live out our calling as world christians as we go to the nations with uh with the gospel may may we also make every effort to be of one mind with others who call jesus lord may we be quick to listen to their concerns and slow to assume that our that our own concerns are always synonymous with uh with central gospel concerns may we be quick to be peacemakers and to show hospitality and slow to find fault and to build religious empires and finally may we uh find much joy as we look forward to the day when all the redeemed all god's people of all nations will be gathered as one amen you you you you you you