

# United In The Word

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Preacher: Colin Dow

[ 0 : 00 ] Turn with me this evening to Colossians chapter 3 and verse 16.

Colossians chapter 3 verse 16. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

The church isn't a golf club, not a social club, it's not a military unit, it's not a political party.

The church is a species all of its own. The bride of Christ, the temple of the Holy Spirit, the children of the Father.

It's not formed by the efforts of men, but by the sovereign and loving word and work of God himself. The church is a species all of its own.

[ 1 : 18 ] No matter how tough the opposition, it cannot be destroyed from without. Persecute it, hate it, hound it.

All you'll achieve is to ground it more deeply and spread it more widely into the culture. The only danger to the church is from within, from the very Christians who make up its membership.

They can fall from the truths of the gospel and preach a lie. They can descend into immorality. Or perhaps most dangerously of all, they can speak and act in such ways as to promote division, disunity.

In the name of truth, they can tear down the temple of God. They can drive Christ's bride into schizophrenia and cause Christ's children to splinter and fall.

How dangerous when all this mischievous evil is done in the name of the truth of the word of God and zeal for the gospel of Jesus Christ. Well, according to both Jesus and Paul, it is the word of Christ which unites us and makes us one as Christians.

[ 2 : 45 ] That word which proclaims God's reconciling love in the cross and resurrection of his son. In Colossians 3 verse 16, as you see, it is the word of Christ which is the instrument of our unity and oneness as the church.

A word which is to dwell in us richly and to bring order out of anarchy and beauty out of chaos. If, as the church of God, the family of Christ, we are to live out the uniqueness of our calling, to be a species all our own in our society, our unity must be founded and formed upon the word of Christ. Not a shared cultural background. Not a shared socioeconomic class. Not a common color. Not even a common language. But the word of Christ, which rather like a spinning wheel, makes one twine out of many disparate messes of wooden fibers.

But before we enter into the meat of this text, both in terms of dwelling in the gospel and using the gospel, let me make two introductory comments about this text as I see it.

[ 4 : 06 ] First of all, this text is not to be used as a weapon by those who want to insist upon a particular style of public worship. It is not to be used as a weapon by those who want to insist upon their particular preferences in public worship.

It is difficult to believe that we have allowed Paul's teaching in this verse on unity to divide us on issues such as exclusive and inclusive psalmity when all the time his intention is to proclaim unity in the word of Christ.

I challenge anyone, anyone at all, to point out any clear markers in this text to show that Paul is referring to the conduct or the content of what we sing in public worship.

To use the text in this way as a weapon of division rather than as a balm of unity is deeply injurious to the gospel and just plain wrong.

Secondly, the phrase the word of Christ may be interpreted in different ways. Literally, the phrase is the word of Christ not the word of God.

[ 5 : 33 ] We might more consistently think of the word of God as referring to the written Bible. However, we may more dynamically translate this phrase the word of Christ, the logos of Christ as the message of Christ.

It seems to me that Paul is referring to what we call the gospel, the good news of Jesus Christ. That in the life and the death and the resurrection of Christ, God has reconciled the world to himself and paid the ransom price of our pardon.

So the word of Christ isn't to be thought of in terms of pharisaic legalism to a system, but grace-filled, holiness liberated.

So for that reason, when it comes to unity, we want to talk about oneness in the gospel. Oneness in the gospel, the gospel as the instrument of our unity in the church.

So, from this verse, we want to think of two things, dwelling in the gospel and using the gospel.

Dwelling in the gospel and using the gospel.

[ 6 : 43 ] Remember, the church cannot be destroyed from without, only from within. When Christians forget or forget to apply the gospel to all their relationships.

First of all then, dwelling in the gospel. Dwelling in the gospel. The apostle Paul begins with the command, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly in all wisdom. Now, dwell is a rather formal word. Perhaps we might, if we bring it down to earth, we're dynamically say, let the word of Christ be at home in you.

Let the word of Christ be at home in you. For all that, for all that the gospel is at home among us, we shall be united in his spirit.

And so, at the very beginning of this study, we're asking the question, is the gospel at home among us? Are we a community formed, motivated, and shaped by the gospel of Jesus Christ?

[ 8 : 04 ] I've never been into a betting shop. I really don't think I'd feel very much at home in a betting shop. I'd feel rather out of place, rather restless, and I don't really know what an akka is.

I just wouldn't be comfortable. What kind of community are we to be if the word of Christ, the gospel, is to feel at home among us?

What kind of community are we to be if the word of Christ, the gospel, is to feel at home among us? Is it not one which is characterized by love, repentance, and forgiveness? By righteousness, hope, and faith?

During his ministry, there were some places that made Jesus feel very uncomfortable indeed. A good example of this was the temple, when it was filled with money changers, stall holders.

Oh, Jesus didn't find that very comfortable at all. Didn't feel at home in the temple when it was like that. Is he at home in a church where Christians sit in judgment over each other, proudly trying to draw the speck out of the eyes of others, whilst ignoring the planks in their own?

[ 9 : 20 ] Is Christ at home in a church where fellow Christians, rather than bearing with each other and forgiving each other in the spirit of the gospel, hold decades-old grudges against each other and speak bitterly to and about one another?

Is he at home in a church where everyone zealously protects their own time and reputation and resources rather than lovingly sacrificing them for one another? See then how we can say the church is a species all of its own?

Just like the Ark of the Covenant dwelt in the tent of meeting during those 40 years of the wilderness, so the gospel dwells among us as the children of God.

But as you can see from the way in which Paul issues this command in verse 16, that the gospel should dwell among any group of believers is not a foregone conclusion.

Let that word dwell among you. It is entirely possible to call ourselves a church, but for the gospel not to dwell among us because we haven't taken the commands of this verse seriously enough.

[ 10 : 35 ] We've gone through the motions of religion and the institution of church, but because we are neither formed, motivated, or shaped by the cross of Jesus Christ, the gospel's not at home here.

The point is that the form of the command Paul issues is in its imperative, active form. It is not a passive command.

It requires effort on our part for the gospel to be at home among us. Effort, sweat, tears, energy. It is really hard to forgive the unforgivable. It is really hard to love the unlovable. It is impossible to bear with the unbearable. But that is just what Christ did for us on the cross.

So we, if we are to obey the command of God here, are to do just the same. This is what a cross-shaped community is to look like.

[ 11 : 42 ] Love, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, hope, righteousness, faith.

Now, no church has ever been perfect in this world, and if you're looking for the perfect church, don't look for it here. It is the very fact that we have to put up with each other's sinful tendencies which demands that we're formed and shaped and motivated by the gospel.

But you'll notice also that the word dwell in verse 16 is in its present form. Let the word of Christ keep dwelling in you.

Let it dwell day by day in you. Let it be at home among you yesterday, today, and forever. Never let your guard down on your judgmental attitudes, on your grudge bearing, or the bitterness of your spirit.

Never ever say, I've had enough. I can't forgive anymore. I can't bear anymore. I can't love anymore. I can't give anymore.

[ 12 : 59 ] The apostle Paul says, you keep that gospel dwelling in you. From the youngest of us to the oldest. Strain every spiritual muscle you've got to be shaped by the gospel.

So let's be clear. When we're talking about unity among us, consisting and letting the word of Christ dwell in us, we are not talking about a community of people who can spout Bible texts at each other. We're talking about a community of people shaped, formed, and motivated by the gospel who know the word of Christ well enough to live the word of Christ.

Orthodoxy in the church is not enough. It's not the key to unity. Orthodoxy and orthopraxy together. Believing the right things, living the right way. Who is the person who is letting the word of Christ dwell in them? Is it the judgmental proud legalist smartly dressed but looking down their nose at everyone else?

[ 14 : 18 ] Or is it the person who despite being hurt and hurt and hurt again in the church keeps persevering joyfully with us?

But Paul adds two qualifiers to this command as you can see. Let the word of Christ dwell first of all in you richly. And I want to argue that that corresponds to being graced by the gospel.

And then he says in all wisdom. And again I want to argue that corresponds to being guided by the gospel. So first of all, graced by the gospel.

Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly. This word richly points back to Colossians 1, 27 where the apostle speaks of God making known among the Gentiles the riches of the glory of this mystery which is Christ in you the hope of glory.

It takes strength and durability to forgive someone when they've really hurt you. It takes real strength and durability to bear with someone who just is just awkward.

[ 15 : 42 ] And it takes strength and durability to give yourself for someone who's so ungrateful. It takes strength and tears and love to love others the way that Christ has loved us.

Where shall we find such strength and such ability? The strength we need to pursue gospel shaped behavior is to be found in the gospel itself.

It is grace toward us in the indwelling Christ. Christ in you the hope of glory. It is not that by our own strength we live gospel shaped lives.

Rather it is by the power of the gospel itself that we live gospel shaped lives. It is the power of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ that work in us.

When the word of Christ dwells in us the gospel provides all the power we will ever need to love one another as hard as that might be.

[ 16 : 48 ] To forgive one another as tough as that might be. And to bear with one another as impossible as that might be. So the richness with which the word of God dwells in us here in Colossians 3.16 is a reference to the infinite treasures of the grace of God which are available to us in the gospel.

But then also this command to let the word of Christ dwell in you is also qualified in all wisdom and this is guided by the gospel graced by the gospel guided by the gospel in all wisdom points toward wisdom not merely as the acquisition or possession of knowledge but in how we apply the knowledge of the gospel in any and every situation we face.

So we might translate it also as prudence. How to prudently with discernment apply the gospel into the whole of our lives. So supposing over coffee after the service through there someone becomes angry at you.

How do you apply the gospel of love forgiveness and righteousness in that situation? Is it to return anger for anger?

Is it to nurse a grudge and become bitter against them? Or is it to follow the path of peace? forgiveness and reconciliation?

[ 18 : 26 ] We all face many unique situations in the church. Situations which are not fully covered by the exact words of the Bible. Well, wisdom takes the gospel and applies it into these situations.

Wisdom casts the shadow of the cross over all the situations we face. Wisdom casts the shadow of the cross over all the situations we face.

So there's conflict. How does the wisdom of the gospel meet the challenge of disagreement between two mature Christians?

Christians? Can two mature Christians find commonality at the foot of the cross where no one is better or worse than the other?

Rather, both have been saved by grace and not works. And so, again I say, as we look carefully at this first clause of Colossians 3.16, the unity we so desperately crave as the church, in which the living Christ feels at home, is formed and shaped and motivated by the gospel.

[ 19 : 43 ] This is grace at work among us, when the church becomes what it was always meant to be, a species all of its own. This is when the church becomes unbreakable, not just from the outside, but also from the inside, when the word of Christ dwells in us richly in all wisdom.

Well, secondly, and more briefly this evening, using the gospel. We've already somewhat covered this point earlier in the broader section on being graced and guided by the gospel.

And yet, in the way the verse is set out, the manner in which we are graced and guided by the gospel is first through being instructed by the gospel, and secondly, being transformed by the gospel.

To use technical terms, teaching and admonishing are participles supporting the active verb in this verse, dwell. This is how we are to make the word of Christ dwell among us.

When we instruct each other with the word of Christ, teaching and admonishing, and ourselves are transformed by the word of Christ in our hearts. So, first of all, instructed by the gospel, instructed by the gospel.

[ 21 : 14 ] Teaching and admonishing are two sides of the same coin. The one refers to positive instruction, this is how to live. The other to negative instruction, this is how not to live.

Now, of course, you know and I know we live in a society where no one likes to be told anything. Here we're being told, as a Christian, we are to be teachable and unchangeable.

We need to be ready both to be instructed and to instruct, both to be admonished and to admonish. Notice also here in this verse, if you're new to my preaching, you'll need your Bible very close to you when I'm preaching because usually I'll just point out a word.

Notice in this verse that the role of admonishing and instructing in the Colossian church was not left to the pastor or to the elders, but every member was responsible to and for one another.

Teaching and admonishing one another. Christians in any church, even Glasgow City and Partick, are waiting for the pastor or elders to make decisions and do things.

[ 22 : 32 ] Perhaps they see a pastoral need which isn't being met and they feel disappointed with the leadership of the church. Why can't they meet that need? But Colossians 3.16, as you see, doesn't allow anyone in the church the luxury of sitting on the sidelines and letting others do the teaching and admonishing.

Rather, we are to be each other's teachers and admonishers. I'm asking you the question, do any of you here tonight see a pastoral need that isn't being met by the leadership of this church?

Go and meet it yourself. Don't wait for someone else to do it. You do it. But what are we to use for our teaching and admonishment of one another?

Well, look, our source material for instructing one another in gospel living, how to live for the glory of Christ through the gospel, is to be psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs.

Psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. Now, it's been argued over the years that this trio of psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs refers to the body of song we call the book of psalms, with hymns and spiritual songs merely being different kinds of psalms.

[ 24 : 00 ] That may be true, that may not be true, but I don't think that's the point Paul is making. He is telling us where to find the source material for instructing one another in gospel living.

It is here in the body of Christian praise, which is to include psalms, hymns, and spiritual odes, more literally, spiritual odes.

Whether we're singing together in public worship, or we're just singing privately, as we engage with one another in song, or with the words of these songs, the words themselves act as instructors to us in the grace of the gospel.

So, for example, we sing Psalm 103, verse 1, Bless the Lord, O my soul, and our hearts begin instinctively to enumerate the ways in which God has been so gracious to us.

Or we sing the words of the hymn as we did at the beginning of the service, And can it be that I should gain an interest in the Saviour's blood? And we are moved to praise God for his work of sovereign grace in our hearts.

[ 25 : 19 ] Or we sing the words of the spiritual song, I have a shelter in the storm, and our troubled hearts are directed for refuge to the finished work and grace of Christ.

there is nothing we sing here in this church which we cannot use to teach and admonish one another to walk in closer fellowship to Christ and to each other.

There is nothing we sing which we cannot use to instruct each other how and where to find strength and grace to cope in difficult times.

Forgiveness, liberty to manage, to hope, and to adapt in the gospel of Christ. And so if we are to pursue unity in the gospel of Jesus Christ, it must be a living gospel we actively use to teach and admonish one another.

so you have a responsibility to me as my fellow Christians. Sing psalms to me.

[ 26 : 38 ] Repeat spiritual songs to me. Recite hymns to me because in so doing you're warning me away from self-reliance and drawing me to deeper dependence upon the grace of Jesus.

us. And I as your fellow believer have a responsibility to you which is exactly the same as yours to me. This is every member ministry where all of us have a responsibility to one another.

Everyone wants to know what their role in this church is. It is to instruct one another in the grace of Christ in how you speak and how you sing.

As all of us engage in this role, the word of Christ shall dwell in us richly and in all wisdom. Now some Christians think they don't need to help others in their discipleship.

They don't need church at all. They don't need others to help them in their discipleship. Can't you see the selfishness of that position? By abstaining from worship, you are denying me the instruction I need from you in the grace of Christ.

[ 27 : 57 ] And by abstaining from worship, you are denying yourself the instruction God's people have for you in the grace of Christ.

So you see, it's the word of Christ, it's the message of the gospel, which is the unifying glue of this church. The more we yield its power through the mutual encouragement of psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, the tighter our fellowship's going to be, and the more we will tend to oneness in Christ.

So reflect this evening on this question. In what ways am I teaching and admonishing others in Glasgow City and Partick?

And in what ways am I allowing others in Glasgow City and Partick to teach and admonish me? And then lastly, very briefly, transformed by the gospel.

Transformed by the gospel. The original, the translation of Colossians 3.16 from the original language is actually anything but straightforward. In the English standard version, this glass clause reads, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

[ 29 : 15 ] The New King James is closer to the mark, in this instance anyway, when it reads, singing with grace in your hearts to God. I guess the English standard version has dynamically translated the word charis, the word grace, with thankfulness.

After all, gratitude, which comes from the word grace, means thankfulness. Singing with gratitude in your hearts. to God.

So I guess ultimately, the two translations mean the same thing. We're singing with our hearts, transformed by the amazing grace of Christ in the gospel.

Christ working on our hearts, in the center of all we are, rearranging priorities, changing values and outlooks. What we once thought of as being very important, we now see as being indifferent.

what didn't matter to us before is now the most important thing in the world. What as once we didn't need other people, now we most desperately do.

[ 30 : 22 ] What as once we had a natural suspicion toward other people, kept them out, we're now filled with the love of Christ toward them and we want to open ourselves out to each other.

the point of this, grace has gone from being a word we speak to the beat of our hearts. Grace has gone from being a word we speak to the beating of our hearts.

It has penetrated deep into us, it has changed us, it's changing us and continue to change us. This is true transformation, not a new set of clothes, it's a new heart and only the grace of the gospel can do this.

is it all, tell me, so same old, same old with you. Same old suspicion of others, same old distance from others, same old detachment from others.

What can you do as a Christian to grow in your unity with other Christians? Invest in the grace of the gospel. Invest in repentance and faith.

[ 31 : 32 ] in renewed trust and commitment. Invest in Jesus and then please invest in us. Then and only then will I need no longer say that the church is a species all of its own, that people will see it for themselves.

People will see the way in which we love each other. They'll be attracted to the gospel which alone can change and transform hearts. then and only then shall the church be truly indestructible.

Let us pray. Father, give us repentance for all the ways in which we make the gospel of Jesus Christ feel not at home among us for the nursing of grudges, for the underhanded manipulations, for the exaggerated words, for the bitter thoughts.

Lord, give us repentance to turn away from all that we know to be wrong and to turn to the grace of Christ, that grace which is filled with love and self-sacrifice, which is filled with blood, sweat and tears for the lost.

Father, we pray for any here this evening who have lost their affection for the church, perhaps over decades of spiritual abuse, have just lost their desire to be part of any church, disillusioned, detached, not wanting to open themselves out to anyone else, in case they're hurt.

[ 33 : 25 ] Father, we pray that tonight's message would be as a soothing ointment on their wound, bringing them to a new place of commitment and opportunity in him.

So we ask all these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.