

Keeping Church Unity

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Preacher: Phil Meulman

[0 : 0 0] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on May 2nd 1999 The preacher is Phil Muleman His service is entitled Keeping Church Unity and is from Acts chapter 15 verses 22 to 35 Well you may like to have your Bibles open at Acts chapter 15 as we continue on with verses 22 to 35 today It's on page 899 Now people are always looking for ways in which they can be united The recent massacre in the States was brought about by two people who were united in a common cause, wasn't it?

And the unity of purpose though was not shared by many people around them People in that town at the time were united in their grief But there are always going to be barriers to it There could be racial barriers, cultural, social differences and so on The current NATO countries have been united in their desire to protect the Albanians of Kosovo Yet divided about how to go about this process So what is it then that unites Christian people?

Is it church faiths? Is it the fact that if we all follow one football club then we'll be united? The gospel of Christ knows no discrimination There are Christians from all different social standings racial backgrounds with various personalities and so on How can we as a church then come together when as individuals we all differ so much?

Last week in Acts chapter 15 we read and looked at the first council of the Christians in the city of Jerusalem And in it we saw that division was building up in the church over the question of what was necessary for salvation Was it circumcision and obedience to the law of Moses?

Was that necessary or wasn't it? Testimonies in verses 1 to 22 were given by Peter, Barnabas and the Apostle Paul to say that circumcision wasn't necessary And they relayed their experiences of God's work in the lives of the Gentiles to preach that Remember we looked at the story of Peter reminded the audience of obviously what had happened with him some years prior with Cornelius who was a non-Jew He was a Gentile Gentile And he had converted to Christianity without having to go through the rite of circumcision Peter relayed that And Paul and Barnabas gave their experiences as well But the final proof to show that circumcision was not necessary for people to be followers of God came from God's word And that was that came from the scriptures Through the scriptures and experience this Jerusalem council was able to decide with unity that salvation was available for all people for Jews or Gentiles

[3 : 2 6] And they were also united in their decision about salvation not being earned That is it's not displayed not displayed by any external ritual such as circumcision or obedience to the law of Moses but it is given to us freely by God through Jesus' death and resurrection And our response to God's offer of salvation is demonstrated by faith to him, in him Now it seems clear from this passage that the deciding factor in the council's decision was made after scripture was brought into the situation The leader of the church at the time, James showed that what Peter, Paul and Barnabas had experienced was in keeping with the scriptures And so this unanimous decision made by God's church should therefore become normative So what is it that brings unity for this gathered group of believers?

It's the scriptures, isn't it? Sure, God's Holy Spirit has been working in the lives of the believers but God's word confirmed the work that his spirit had been doing and provided them with a foundation upon which to move forward as a group of believers as a body of united believers Now shouldn't that be the case for us as God's people too?

The scriptures must be the confirming word for us in individual matters as well as in matters to do with any work that we are doing in the church because the scriptures confirm for us whether or not we are doing God's work So councils in the church have no authority unless it can be shown that their conclusions are in accord with what the scriptures say Church unity isn't brought about because of a person's experience one person's experience of God's grace and favour in their lives is bound to be different to another person's experience and if those experiences conclude that their way is the only way then there is bound to be division Now put a whole group of people imagine you put all of us together with all of our experiences and with our own agendas then there is bound to be disunity

But give those people a reference point that they can use as authoritative and despite the different experiences that we may have if it is in accord with the reference point that we use then there is going to be unity And scripture is our basis for unity as it was the basis for the unity that was seen within the Jerusalem council And this reference point is not some arbitrary man-made document It's the spirit inspired living word of God This is the basis and the reference point for us as we make decisions individually and as God's people united The council's findings then on the matter of circumcision leads them to write a letter to their Christian believers back up in Antioch, Syria and Cilicia And the letter is sent with two members from this council chosen unanimously from this Jerusalem church as well

And they also send Paul and Barnabas to go back there as well Now the reason the Jerusalem church sends two of its council members is to confirm that what is written in the letter is the church's decision It's this unanimous decision that they've all come to And it's not just someone's own agenda based on experience It's not just Paul and Barnabas' agenda for example So we see all those sorts of things that they talk about in the verses 22 to 27 And then in 28 we see the main contents of this letter Verses 28 and 29 And they say Well James writes For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden In other words they're referring to the fact that circumcision is not necessary for salvation It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us to impose on you no further burden than these essentials And in verse 29 he lists four things

[8 : 00] That you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols and from blood and from what is strangled and from fornication If you keep yourself from these then you will do well Farewell Isn't that a good short letter To the point and it makes the point Well what's going on here On the surface it looks like there is something extra that we need to do in order to bring about our salvation But what is going on here is an important issue which impacts fellowship between the Jewish Gentiles or the Jewish Christians and the Gentile Christians of the time And the four abstinences are all to do with Jewish and Gentiles being united Now of the four things that they have been told to abstain from three of them the things that have been sacrificed to idols food that has been sacrificed to idols blood and what is strangled three of them are to do with

Jewish food laws those three to do with Jewish food laws and the fourth one fornication is to do with sexual morality Now I want to deal with those things this morning and I want to begin by looking at the Jewish food laws first Now Jewish food laws in Leviticus 17 in the Old Testament forbade Jews to eat meat that was sacrificed to idols It forbade them to eat meat that had been killed with the blood left in it and it forbade them to eat the flesh of animals where the animal had been strangled where the blood had stayed inside Now Gentiles who had converted to Christianity would not have seen eating meat with all these sorts of requirements that had been placed upon the Jews They would not have seen that as a problem for them because they didn't have any reference point to work from if you can put it that way there were no ceremonial food laws for them to follow

So in order to preserve unity with the Jewish converts the Gentiles in this letter are asked to observe these Jewish ceremonial food practices to help ease the consciences of the Jewish Christians who were probably struggling with the new freedom that they have in Jesus Christ After all these Jewish traditions that these Jewish converts have had had been with them for a very long time for thousands of years these food laws had been handed down to them and friends we all know that old habits are hard to break It's on this same topic of food offered to idols that Paul writes to the Christians later on in Corinthians as we read from 1 Corinthians chapter 8 this morning and perhaps later in the book of Romans when Paul writes a letter to the Roman Christians some years later he asks in those letters that they be sensitive to the weaker Christians consciences and abstain from meat offered to idols lest it becomes a stumbling block to those who may be weaker in their

Christian understanding of freedom Now these prohibitions of food laws prohibitions of the food laws that are addressed here in Acts chapter 15 are made out of sensitivity for the scruples of the Jews rather than for theological reasons So in understanding what this means for us today we don't necessarily need to slavishly follow certain prohibitions regarding food but we do learn here about the need to be sensitive to the consciences and scruples of our fellow believers believers and it is this principle that we need to take away with us to be sensitive to the consciences and scruples of our fellow believers Let me illustrate this for you I enjoy a glass of wine and as a Christian I know that I am free to drink wine whenever I want There is no legalistic demand in scripture to tell me that I cannot drink wine

However in the recent past there has seen a prohibition among Christians about the consumption of alcohol and the reasons for this have been very honourable because you don't want to pull your brothers and sisters down and all those sorts of things and they are very honourable reasons So the question could be asked then whether I should or shouldn't have a glass of wine with Christians I know that don't drink I know that I am free to drink it there is nothing to tell me I can't but if it were going to cause a stumbling block for my Christian brothers and sisters then I would do well to stay away from it in their presence for the sake of Christian unity Now I foolishly chose to drink a glass of wine a few weeks ago at a gathering where there were other Christians that I knew were against drinking alcohol I knew that I was free to do it but I don't think that I exercised sensitivity to the consciences and scruples of those

[13 : 24] Christians there who chose not to drink alcohol As Christians it is important that we make wise decisions for the sake of Christian unity Now whilst we may think that those who are against alcohol are too legalistic there is also the danger for those who have been liberated to think oh yes it's okay to drink alcohol to abuse the intake of alcohol In other words they think that they are free to over imbibe No worries keep on sort of thing Well the Bible warns about getting drunk Proverbs chapter 20 verse 1 says this Wine is a mocker strong drink a brawler and whoever is led astray by it is not wise Ephesians 5 Do not get drunk with wine for that is debauchery but be filled with the spirit It's obviously talking about the Holy Spirit there

As Christians we need to make concessions on both sides for the sake of Christian unity Now the fourth matter that the Christians in Antioch are told to abstain from is fornication Now the Greek word used here covers every kind of unlawful sexual intercourse It may also be used in a more specialised sense of marriage between degrees of blood relationship or affinity expressly forbidden in Levitical law in Leviticus chapter 18 And the reason this issue is perhaps brought up is because the society in which the Gentiles Christians lived back in Antioch it was so pervaded with sexual immorality that the church had also been influenced by it Now I think this issue of sexual immorality immorality is much easier for us to apply today

As in Antioch many today consider sexual immorality no longer evil What Christians might call immoral society around us calls love The power of the media is such that it is difficult to avoid the impact of this onslaught of sexual immorality within our society Last week a Victorian school teacher resigned because the school computers had pornographic photos of himself and a partner displayed on them Now I don't know how they got there, how those photos got there in a sense it really doesn't matter but the fact that they were displayed for everybody to see is a sign of our sexually immoral society I once innocently did a search on the internet for a particular word, you know you can type in a word and do a word search I was actually looking for a church website and in doing so I found all these websites which had very explicit material on it

Now I did that innocently and accidentally but the point is this stuff is readily accessible it's at our fingertips the fabric of our society is in moral decline has been for a long time and this sort of immorality and so on that's going on must have a huge impact on many many people Now sexual immorality is a problem which has even influenced the church One person says this the extent of the problem in the United States is expressed by the results of a recent study claiming that 56% of single fundamentalists engage in sex outside marriage The pastor of a large evangelical church in North America says that about half the members of his church that get married there have already had sexual relations with each other

Polls suggest that whereas earlier if Christians indulged in sex outside marriage there was a sense of shame and remorse over sin which is sadly missing in today's church But Christians seem to have accepted that immorality is not as serious as was once thought If we can take scripture seriously then are we as a church taking a strong enough stand against immorality Do we recoil with the horror that the apostle Paul expressed when he wrote to the Corinthians about immorality within the church there For me the danger that I struggle with as a Christian leader is to ignore these sorts of issues for the sake of seeing the church grow numerically But listen to what the apostle Paul says in 1

[18 : 43] Corinthians chapter 5 verses 9 through to 11 I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral persons not at all meaning the immoral of this world or the greedy and robbers or idolaters since you would then need to go out of the world But now I am writing to you not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother or sister who is sexually immoral or greedy or is an idolater reviler drunkard or robber do not even eat with such a one They are strong words immoral But we should be warning people about the dangers of sexual immorality Paul says again in chapter 6 of 1 Corinthians that the sexually immoral and a list of other names he puts there will not inherit the kingdom of God We must therefore as a church take a firm stand against immorality when it is manifested in the church

To love Christianly involves telling the truth in love It involves the confrontation of sin followed by the faithful care and nurture during the time of healing as well Now of course the sexually immoral person can be forgiven can't they It is brought about by repentance from that type of behaviour turning away from it placing it upon Jesus and knowing that he has forgiven you And the sign of forgiveness forgiveness It is not seen in returning to old habits It is seen that you turned away from those habits and that in Christ you are a new creation God calls his followers to be united and he has given us guidelines in his words to help us understand Christian unity and the

Christians in Antioch rejoiced If you read on a little bit further in verses 28 and so on they rejoiced when they received a letter from the council of Jerusalem because they were free from the previous demands of Jewish circumcision and the rigorous obedience to the law I have no doubt that Judas and Silas who went down and gave prophetic teaching and encouragement dealt with these food laws and fornication and told these people to abstain from them and the people would have been given much ethical instruction on Christian holy living by Judas and Silas and Paul and Barnabas back in Antioch and it would have been a steep learning curve for them as they were taught from the scriptures about how to live as God's people and we too need to keep on hearing from God's word and understanding how we are to live in

Christian unity as God's people we ought not to be complacent about issues such as sexual immorality or alcohol usage by Christians and nor should we be legalistic about it either but for the sake of Christian unity we ought to be able to say what God's opinion on such matters is from scripture we are called to live lives that are obedient and holy and that starts the moment we enter into a relationship with God through the Lord Jesus Christ we continue on living lives that are obedient and holy by following his commands and working for his purposes now in our world of relativism where rules and authority are thrown away for the sake of doing what we want we are fast seeing a world which is in chaos and in deep crisis for the

Christians though there is a lot to give thanks to God for especially for his written word which helps us to make sense of this 20th century world and when acted upon brings about a unity of purpose for all his people no matter what background they may come from let's pray our gracious God we thank you for your word we thank you that it teaches and instructs and Lord there are times when the word challenges us beyond our understanding and we pray that we would learn to understand what you are saying to us by your holy spirit we pray that through the reading of scriptures that we as a church would be united that we would make a stand where a stand needs to be made and that in doing so people would be drawn into your kingdom and we look forward to the day oh Lord when every knee will bow and tongue confess that you

[24 : 07] Jesus Christ are Lord Amen