

The Church: Unity and Diversity

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[0 : 00] Please turn back with me to the chapter we read in Romans chapter 16. I'd like, as I said, to consider with you the first 16 verses in a sort of general sense.

As you'll see in the sermon title, the title of the Church, Unity and Diversity. As I pray we'll see as we go through this particular section, because we often ask, and I suppose we must ask, what does a church look like?

Maybe even what should a church look like? And I know there are many ways that that question's been answered, but, you know, if we're to express the way that God's Word speaks of a church, of the church, then surely we can say this, that the church, as seen in God's Word, surely is a body of people, well, whose heart it is to glorify God.

A body of people who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit, and it's your motive to worship God and fellowship one with another.

That a church is a place for those whose desire is to seek the Lord Jesus, to exalt the Lord Jesus, to do so by faith in Him.

[1 : 24] A church is where that faith is expressed in love, in love for God and love for one another. And that love, of course, that expression of love, that self-giving love, that's seen, of course, fully, completely and wholly in the Lord Jesus Christ, in Him who is at love.

And, you know, when we think of the church, where those who are in the church practice that love, look to the Lord Jesus, shine for Him, reflect that love, and do so, yes, in fellowship, in unity one with another, where there is a diversity of people who are gathered together, united in love.

United in Christ. But, yes, diverse people from different backgrounds. Yes, but united in the love of the Lord Jesus.

And that expression of the church, seen in these two words, unity and diversity, well, we see it here in Romans chapter 16, this first century church that Paul describes here.

And I pray that it's not just the first century church, but the 21st century church, and, yes, and beyond until the Lord Jesus returns, that we see these emphases in relation to the church.

[2 : 45] This unity and diversity that Paul reveals here in this great chapter. Because, yes, on the one hand, we might think, well, it is just a list of names.

But there's much, much more going on than simply a list of names here. There are great truths contained in this list of names, truths about the church for each one of us to examine and to apply.

If, you know, we're going to be God-honouring, if we're going to be Spirit-empowered, if we're going to be Christ-centred as a church of God's people.

So, what about the church? Well, let's just get first things first. When we go through this chapter, this passage, we actually notice four times Paul uses the word church, certainly in our English versions.

Verse 1, let me look at verse 1. Paul refers to our sister Phoebe as a servant of the church at Kincere.

- [3 : 52] Go to verse 4, where Paul speaks of the churches of the Gentiles. Then verse 5, the church that meets in a particular house, the house of Priscilla and Aquila.
- Go down to verse 16, where we read there of the churches of Christ. Paul's using a particular word that certainly in our English language, the word ecclesiastical comes from the word in the original language that literally means being called out.
- Called out from a particular situation. Called out from a particular way of life. Called out to form a gathering or an assembly. Called out to worship and to serve the Lord.
- But then my curiosity got the better of me. And one thinking, well, why use the word church? Why don't we say, you know, I came into your sister Phoebe, a servant of the ecclesia, ecclesiastical in Kincere.
- Well, actually the word church, when we're going to use the word church, and if you bear with me, it comes from an old German word that means a sort of gathering. So, kirkhe, you know the word German word, the church gathering.
- [5 : 09] Okay. But that word itself comes from a Greek word that means belonging to the Lord. Belonging to the Lord. And I think that helps us to see something that I think certainly after many years failed to recognize.
- That the church, the church is about people. The church is about people. It's about the called out people. It's about the people who are called out, who belong to the Lord.
- Those who are called out, who are the Lord's people. So, you know, when we think about what a Christian is, and what a fellowship of Christians is, then think of that sense of the Lord's people who are the called out people of God.
- Christians called out from the world. Yes, you're in the world, but you're no longer of the world. You're no longer adhering to the world's values.
- Your loyalty is not to the world. Your loyalty is to the Lord Jesus. Now, that of course doesn't mean to say that, you know, Christians are to somehow cut yourself off from the world in places such as work or education or your hobbies, your interests.
- [6 : 23] But they're certainly God-honoring. I mean, when we see in the passage before us, these individuals were very much part of society in Rome, very much part of the infrastructure of society.
- They didn't live as first century hermits hundreds of miles away in the desert. They were part of society. But they were in the world, but they weren't of the world.
- And you who are a Christian, you are called out from the world, separate from its standards, separate from the standards of self-centeredness, self-interest.
- You're to be separate from the standards of all these secular values that have no place within the church of Christ. But what about unity?
- What about the unity of the church? That being called out from the world and called into that gathering, that gathering where Jesus is at the center.
- [7 : 27] What about the church in the sense of the unity of God's people? Well, look at the passage that really tells us about the unity of the church in Christ.
- Because that unity, first and foremost, is a spiritual unity. It's a unity in Christ. Again, when you go through this passage, just look at the number of times that Paul refers to individuals in the church there as either being in Christ or in the Lord.
- And I think I'm right. Well, I counted ten times from verse 2 to verse 13 where you see the expression either in the Lord or in Christ. These expressions that tell of the fellowship that you as a believer have or believers have in the Lord, the fellowship that you have with the Lord Jesus, that fellowship that's so intimate that the believer in Christ has that union with Christ that can't be separated.

Now that's the case. And since it is the case, then all who are in Christ at the same time have to be, must be, united one with another through faith in Christ.

So it's in the Lord Jesus that you're united one with another, you who are in Christ. And it's nothing to do with age.

[8 : 55] It's nothing to do with social class. It's nothing to do with any kind of geographical background. It's nothing to do with any kind of intellectual ability. It's nothing to do with anything else other than you being in Christ, united in Him and united one with another.

Because it's the Lord Jesus who binds His church together so that believers can say, Christian believers can say that yes, truly we are one in Christ, one in Him, one with one another.

So, the church, the church, the called out people, called out from the world, called out as the gathering of God's people, called out to be in Christ.

And so the Lord Jesus is the reason for the church. He's the reason why believers are called out. He's the reason because of His death, because of His death.

Then, Christians, you've been empowered, given that power to come out of the world, to be distanced from all those secular values that you once knew and once held you so deeply.

[10 : 08] And you've now come to know the Lord Jesus as your Saviour. And you've come to know Him who's the head of the church. You've come to know Jesus, the head Jesus, the builder of His church, Jesus, who's at the centre of the church.

Jesus, the cornerstone of the church, without whom the church would collapse, wouldn't be. There'd be no church without the Lord Jesus. And so, when you think of the church, don't think of, you know, simply the church as one particular place and certainly not as some kind of sacred building.

No. Think of God's people even worldwide. And think of, I remember someone once saying that, you know, the church in a particular location is like a link in a chain.

You're joined one with another with all of God's people. Yes, even, even worldwide. The church then, again, another expression has been used even as a community, a family in Christ.

Christ. It's a wonderful expression to think of the church as that great family of God, whether it's in Livingston here or elsewhere, where God's people are gathered, where God's people are called out in Christ.

[11 : 34] And so, when you come, go through the door of whichever particular building you come into to worship, then remember that you're going through that door because the Lord Jesus has made it possible for you to gather with the Lord's people in that being called out from the world and called out to serve Him.

And, you know, remember, even now as we're gathered together, it's what a privilege it is to gather in the Lord's day, to be with the Lord's people and to give praise and glory to our Lord and Saviour who's made it possible so that you might know that fellowship one with another, whether it's with believers here in Livingston or wherever that you worship God, wherever God's people are, where the Lord Jesus is honoured and glorified, the builder of His church.

And remember too that if you're in Christ, in Christ, remember that great expression, if that being in Christ is what defines a people who are called out, called out from the world, then, I can't express this more fully, there has to be that brotherly love one with another in not just the immediate fellowship, but, you know, across the church, across the worldwide church.

And again, that brotherly unity, brotherly love expressed in unity and you see that here in Paul's letter, that brotherly love expressed in the unity of God's people, we might say in particular ways, particular situations.

Four things that are identified when we think of the unity of God's church and yes, the diversity within that unity. Look at, first of all, unity and diversity of men and women.

[13 : 34] Again, if you count the names of those who are mentioned, of the 26, I think it is, individuals mentioned by Paul there in his greetings, one third are women.

One third, Phoebe, Priscilla, Mary, Julia, Trifina, unnamed mother of Rufus and so on. I mean, that's important, that's significant.

I mean, Paul isn't going to somehow relegate women in the church to some kind of, you know, second class status. I mean, remember this is very much, in Paul's day, very much a male-dominated society, but, you know, look at what Paul's doing here.

He's valuing the work of these women. I mean, you know, he's mentioned them by name. I mean, he even uses the shortened version of the name Priscilla there in verse 3.

Priscilla, I mean, there's such familiarity. You know, he's no problem mentioning the shortened version of her name. I mean, here we're seeing in the church in Christ there that there's no discrimination.

[14 : 43] You know, the church of Christ gives, obviously, God-given and God-directed roles for men and women and these roles are to be valued and put into practice.

You all have a part, you who are in Christ, have that part to play in the extension of God's kingdom. And of course, there are church structures, there's church courts and according to Scripture, they are to be filled by men.

That's the scriptural warrant. But never ever will we ever demean women and somehow relegate them to some kind of background workers of having no value at all.

That's utterly unscriptural. All, men and women, have a particular work to do in the kingdom. And can I just say, personally, one of the great blessings that I've seen in my few years, and I'm sure others can say much more than I do, but one of the great blessings being part of ETS is to witness the value that's placed on women in their particular God-given roles, men and women.

They're male and female students at ETS. They're studying God's Word together. If any of you were at the opening ceremony, we saw that. There was one young male student and one young female student that were being interviewed by the principal and Principal Martin was asking them about their experiences at ETS and they both spoke about their, if you like, their equally valid goals in their respective prospects in their particular ministries.

[16 : 23] The young man, the young student, he told of his desire for pastoral ministry. The young woman told of her desire for particular women's ministry amongst women.

and even encouraging to see in our, I think it's the recent record, but it's one of the more recent records, the obituary pages, including women, recognizing the way that God has blessed the witness of women in the church.

So unity and diversity of men and women within the church. And secondly, as Paul emphasizes, the unity and diversity of Jew and Gentile.

Because of course, Paul himself was a Jew or Jew by birth. And he's mentioning a number of people in that Gentile, obviously Gentile-dominated, non-Jewish-dominated church in Rome.

But nevertheless, there were those who were Jewish by birth in that church as well as those who were non-Jewish. How do we work that out? Well, verse 7 speaks of these two individuals, Andronicus and Julia.

[17 : 30] He speaks of them as my kinsmen, even my relatives. And if they're his relatives, then certainly they'd be Jewish. Herodian, my kinsmen, verse 11.

So, you know, these Jewish kinsmen of Paul included amongst the many non-Jewish names. And quite, you know, happily to be included together.

I mean, these Jewish believers and non-Jewish believers in Christ, they're meeting together. They're having fellowship together, as you see there in these house groups that met so frequently and mentioned so frequently.

So, if you like, there's unity and diversity. There's that mixed community of the Lord's people. They're worshipping together. They're there under the same roof, irrespective of their ethnic or maybe even at times even particular theological differences.

And I think that surely has to say much to us in today's gatherings of God's people. Unity and diversity. As we worship together, it has to be a must if we're to reflect the worldwide church of Christ.

[18 : 46] Because I want to see people in places of worship where people come from different backgrounds. Coming together in community.

I want the church to be seen as the triumphant church. Yes, the church to be seen in all its unity and diversity. To be the case until the Lord Jesus comes.

And then, yes, all the dividing walls will have been broken down. in that time when the Christ returns. Yes, one people composed of all people.

One church composed of peoples from every tribe and nation and language group. So, never ever think of church as being only for a select kind of people according to a particular background.

No. You're welcome into our church. Into the gathering of God's people. All who seek the Lord and who seek Him by faith from whatever background they come from.

[19 : 59] But then, what else do we find here in relation to unity and diversity? We find fellow workers. Fellow workers. So, that we work together.

that's so important in the church of Christ because, you know, we're not to be some kind of static organisation where believers simply are passive and unactive.

No, because being part of the church involves service, involves work for the Lord. You see how Paul shows this when he sends greetings.

Look at one or two examples. Look at verse 3, for example. These individuals who are mentioned, notice how they're mentioned. Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus.

Those who risked their lives for Paul. Look at verse 6, Mary, who worked hard for you. Look at verse 9, Urbanus, our fellow worker in Christ.

[21 : 01] Verse 12, three individuals are mentioned and we're told of these three individuals who work hard in the Lord. Work hard in the Lord.

So the church that Paul is addressing here is the church of active members who are working hard for the Lord. They're denying themselves. They're following the Lord Jesus.

They're doing that. They're showing their faith in action. They're showing it by acts of mercy. They're showing it by acts of service. They're obedient, actively obedient.

They're believers who are not ashamed. They're ashamed to get their hands dirty and their feet sore and tramping for the Lord. The church there is full of individuals, full of people who are in active service.

They're not just passive, sitting back and letting others do the work of the kingdom. And I pray that's an encouragement to every believer in Christ here this evening.

[22 : 05] Because if the church is to be church worthy of its name, it has to be a doing body for the Lord. Yes, already called out.

Yes, moving from one situation to another. but yes, that act of service, using the gifts that God has given you, moving, yes, moving into the world, moving in the world.

Yes, as we said before, we're in the world, we're not of the world, but we are to be where God has placed you and sent you to go alongside your neighbour, to go alongside your colleague at work, to go alongside that family member, to show forth the love of Christ and to do it actively.

So, Christians, yes, unity and diversity, fellow workers, Christians being the salt of the earth, having that impact in lives around you.

So, unity and diversity, seen in the composition of men and women, of Jew and Gentile, of fellow workers, and then even, unity and diversity of social class.

[23 : 18] I don't suppose we talk so much nowadays about social class as maybe in generations before, but look at the diverse nature of the church in terms of society.

For example, you look at verses 11 and 12. Paul asked the church there in Rome to greet those in the family, or perhaps even more precisely the household of Aristobulus, and then those in the family or even the household of Narcissus.

And in the way that this is actually written in the context of the time, it seems very, very probable that these Christians who have been greeted, who have been greeted, who are working in these households, these individuals, Aristobulus and Narcissus, these individuals in all probability weren't Christians, but in fact were very influential men in Rome.

I must say the way that this is written would suggest that. So those who have been greeted would certainly be servants, even slaves in these households, servants in the households of wealthy individuals, these Christians who are managing the estates of these individuals, they're in the world, but they're not of it.

So, you know, there's believers working in, we might say, the highest echelons of society. think of Paul elsewhere when he wrote in Philippians 4 about saints and Caesar's household.

[24 : 47] These were Christians who were even in the palace of the emperor. And, as we said, in the world, not of the world, but even believers, they're right at the very centre of the, we might say, the political machine of the Roman Empire.

In the world, not of the world. Working, showing their Christian witness, even within that pagan environment. Yes, separate from the world's values, separate from the world's standards, but doing the work of the Lord.

Believers there, then, as we said, fellow believers from different sections of society, different backgrounds, servants, slaves, free people, and all within the church there in Rome.

And, yes, if we want to bring that to application, the church of Christ has to be a church where men and women are prepared to witness, yes, even in the most difficult of places.

Maybe in circumstances where God's name certainly isn't honoured, where, in fact, maybe in the reverse happens, but still, you're called to be salt and light, to be the Lord's followers in the world.

[26 : 08] So there will be and are, and we give thanks to God, that there are Christians in positions of government, there are Christians in business, even the highest ranks of business, there are Christians in sports, there are Christians in education, there are Christians in industry, in the health service, and so many places of work, Christians where they will proclaim by word and witness even the Lord Jesus as Lord and Saviour.

And so the church can't opt out of society because we follow the Lord Jesus, the Lord Jesus who went around doing good in society, the Lord Jesus was sent to live amongst others, even where these others blasphemed the name of God, he was there right in the midst.

And if that's the case, then the church can never be higher than our Lord. For the church to be the Lord's witnesses, going around, doing good, doing it by word, doing it by actions, going in the locations where God has sent you for his glory.

It's a service. It's what characterized the church there in Rome, obviously, or one of the characteristics of the church. A service has to characterize the church even in our own time and generation.

So, the church, church, unity and diversity of believers. It has to be seen, it has to be evident. And where that is evident, where the church is composed of different groups in society, then there will be that characteristic that's seen above all, that characteristic of being in Christ, showing love, the love that's within the unified and diverse church as we see.

[28 : 22] Certainly at the end of that section, verse 16, greet one another with a holy kiss, all the churches of Christ, greet you. I mean, it's not just there, of course.

I mean, you can see how much Paul loved the church there, how much Paul loved the believers there in Rome. You know, you go to verse 5, you go to verse 12, greet also the church in their house, greet my beloved Eponetus, or you go to verse 12, middle of verse 12, greet the beloved Persis.

I mean, even in verse 2, he's spoken of practical love, the love shown to this individual Phoebe, and he's encouraging the Christians there to show love to her in a way that's worthy of the saints, to give her any help that she needs.

And as we said at the end of that section, it's showing the unity of love with one to another, greet one another with a holy kiss. And of course, that was the culture of the time, the kiss.

Remember when Jesus scolded a Pharisee, remember when Jesus was in a Pharisee's home, and he scolded the Pharisee for not giving him the kiss of welcome.

[29 : 35] And of course, whatever the cultural custom of the day is, the principle is universal. The greeting one another in love, whether it's a, as J.B. Phillips suggests, a hearty handshake, or a hug, I mean, whatever form you use to show your love one to another, to do it in sincerity, to show your true genuine love in the Lord.

You see, Paul had such love for these believers in Rome. And that love expressed even the very fact he's mentioned them by name. He's interested in them.

Certainly, a lot of their characters come out, even in the few sentences that are mentioned there. He knows them, he knows the work that they've been doing in the Lord.

Now, he's not in Rome at this time. He's geographically, anyway, a distance from them. And it's the case, in all probability, he'd never even met them.

And I think that, in itself, is quite staggering. You know, here we're seeing this self-giving love of Paul, that he's probably never met these individuals, and yet he knows about them, he's interested in them, he loves them in the Lord.

[30 : 53] He's not distancing himself from a fellow believer. And that surely tells us not just appalled love for believers, but surely it should encourage you and encourage me even to show forth the love of Christ one to another.

And that you know one another, and are interested in one another, and express that love, and one for another. Now, yes, we know, I know you know, the church on earth is not a perfect church.

Perfection will only come when the saints are gathered together in glory with the Lord forever. But even on this side of eternity, we are to be those, you're to be those who are in Christ, who are the called out people of God.

And remember, you are before a watching world. The world is watching, very closely watching, and the world will see the way that even you interact one with another.

But remember, you live not for self, not even for our own sakes, but you live for the sake of the one who gave himself in love for his church.

[32 : 11] Remember, the church is the bride of Christ. So, the more seek to be part, yes, part of God's church, reflect the Lord Jesus, the one who came to seek and to save that which is lost, the one who came to serve the Christ who seeks, whose true desire is that his people may be one, may be one in him, may be one in one, that you may be one in Christ.

You may be one in him who loves his church with an eternal love. So, we pray that God will bless his word to us.

This word, even here in this passage, that expresses the unity and diversity of the church. We've heard it. Now go and practice it. And show forth the love of the Lord Jesus, even one with another.

Amen. Let us pray. You've given us, Lord, your word. Your word to direct us how we might glorify you. And we pray, Lord, that we will not simply be hearers only, but doers also.

So, we pray, Lord, your blessing upon all that has been proclaimed, even this day. Forgive all that has been said that has been contrary to your word. Forgive our thoughts on these matters that have been different to your will.

[33 : 45] May truly we know that you are the one who leads and directs our hearts. May you lead and direct us to love with that greater intensity the Lord Jesus Christ.

Hear us, Lord, as we wait upon you. Hear us, Lord, as we continue to offer up unto you the praise of our hearts. And go before us, we pray, in all our ways.

We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Well, let's close in Psalm 36 on page 44.

The Sing Psalms version. We'll sing from verse 5 down to verse 9. Your steadfast love is great, O Lord. It reaches heaven high. Your faithfulness is wonderful, extending to the sky.

5 to 9, Psalm 36. To God's praise.