

Unity in the Holy Spirit

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[0 : 00] Good morning. It's so wonderful and happy to be here, worship together, and I want to thank you for the choir, because in Good Shepherd Church, when the choir sings, usually the choir stands in the Chancellor's steps behind us, so all the time I can't hear what they are singing.

But the moment when the choir is singing around us, and I can feel my heart being uplifted to the Lord, and I find myself so close to our God.

First, let me bring warm greetings from the Angan Church of the Good Shepherd. And the blessing of our Lord Jesus Christ to all of you, brothers and sisters of St. John, and of course, also your acting rector, once again, Reverend Dan Gilbert.

I mentioned this morning, Dan and I came from the same philological college, Rickriff College, which has produced many distinguished graduates, and later ordained clergy.

And among all, two of them, named Dan Gilbert and Stephen Lerf. And I also like to take this opportunity to thank St. John for the past five years, giving Good Shepherd Church much pastoral support.

[1 : 40] Particularly the time I took two months sabbatical leave in 2006, and Dan came and took my place as an acting rector in Good Shepherd.

So now you should know, Dan has been trained long ago as an acting rector. In many ways, St. John and Good Shepherd are close to each other.

Together, we are willing to pay all costs to stand firm in the Gospel, which was once for all delivered to the saints.

Together, we are called to move forward in faith, charity, and hope, trusting in our Lord Jesus Christ, His reign and blessing.

Today, Acts 15 is an inspiring chapter for us to learn how to keep ourselves in unity in spite of facing dispute and argument.

[2 : 43] In my meditation of Acts 15, St. Augustine's famous saying comes to my mind St. Augustine's famous.

St. Augustine made clear the right order of these three elements. He never said, in essentials liberty, in non-essential unity, in some things charity.

Rather, the Augustine's order, in essential unity, in non-essential liberty, in all things charity, demands our obedience.

As children of God, we are to be in unity of faith, grounded in the unity of our Trinitarian God, revealed in the fellowship of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit.

With the witness of unity in Christian faith, we then can learn how to give room to our brothers and sisters for diverse expressions of Christian life based on the agreed fundamental faith of salvation in our Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 07] In such openness, we then are able to go beyond our own paradigm of cultural brought up, ethnicity, and our socioeconomic class subculture, and reach a much larger divine world will, appreciating a variety of riches in God's creation and salvation.

All the time, we are reminded to live out God's love to embrace one another. With the transforming power of God's love in healing and reconciliation.

It is only in God's sacrificial love that we can exhibit the mark of God's children and bear the fruits of kindness, peace, and joy in our fellowship life.

Having said that, I need to point out that building Christian unity, in fact, relies on two aspects. As a Christian, the art of living together, and as a Christian community, the never forsaking endless try.

We need life effort to work it out and make it work, obviously, by the grace of God. Perhaps Acts 15 demonstrates a fitting example in the struggle for unity in the early Christian community.

[5 : 52] As you will see, they are no better than us and we are no different from them. Now let us look at chapter 15.

At the very beginning, we look at the nature and cause of the debate, what we call the First Jerusalem Council. The books of Acts can be understood as the charge of the Holy Spirit to Christian mission in two parts, namely, the mission to the Jewish world and the mission to the Gentile world.

Chapter 15 is written after Paul's first missionary journey and located in the beginning of the Gentile mission.

As a result of Paul's missionary effort, many Gentiles turned to Christ. This should be a time of joyful celebration and thankfulness.

When Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem from Antioch, the home base of Gentile mission, they shared the good news of Gentile conversions in Phoenicia and Samaria.

[7 : 13] And in verse 3B, the scripture reads, This news makes all the brothers very glad.

Ironically, but also truly as it is, not every piece of good news makes everybody happy.

A group of Jewish Christians called Judaisers claim that in addition to the gospel of Jesus Christ, Gentile Christians also need to be circumcised and obey the law of Moses.

In Jewish traditional teaching, Jews were taught to be God's appointed agent for the administration of God's salvation to the Gentile world.

And circumcision is a sign for Jews as God's chosen people. And every male Jew had to be circumcised, including our Lord Jesus Christ.

[8 : 20] That was how the teaching of circumcision was brought in and was understood to be part of the gospel. So Paul and the church at Antioch were challenged on the legitimacy of a direct ministry to the Gentiles, particularly the validity of the conversion of Gentiles to Christ, apart from the commitment to Judaism.

Openly against Paul, Jewish Christians with pharisaic background insist that circumcision was a must for salvation.

As a result, the main agenda for calling the First Jerusalem Council was to resolve whether circumcision was a requirement for Gentile salvation and how that related to Moses' teaching. However, to Paul, Jesus Christ is already the full gospel. No further addition is required. Paul, in fact, was not against circumcision, but he was against circumcision as part of the requirement for salvation.

As you read in chapter 16, Paul asked Timothy to be circumcised. Verse 3. Yet Paul saw that the debate in Jerusalem Council was essentially very much doctrinal in nature, trying to defend, trying to define what salvation was.

[10 : 02] The subject matter was therefore intrinsically the essence of salvation. And thus, there would be no way for him to make any compromise.

Paul said to the Galatians in another occasion on the same subject matter, taking a very strong stand, I am astonished that you are so quickly deserting the one who called you by the grace of Christ and are returning to a different gospel.

This is really no gospel at all. Galatians 1, verses 6 to 7a. The first Jerusalem Council is dated around AD 49, prior to the birth of the Apostles Creed or any creed in church history and the canonization of New Testament.

that is to say, all the time, there was no objective authority in place to define the parameter of the gospel.

The only authority was those apostles who learned the faith directly from the Lord Jesus Christ. That is why the Jewish enemies in Galatians challenged Paul by first denying his apostleship, that is eroding his authority and then questioned his will of salvation without circumcision for Gentile Christians as for Jewish Christians.

[11 : 38] So there was the background of the first Jerusalem Council and the leaders were asked to deal with the doctrine of salvation and then how to relate pastorally the fellowship of Gentile and Jewish Christians in the days ahead.

Now when I try to look at chapter 15, how the Jerusalem Council is going to start the meeting and how that be gone through, and this time I watch and look and observe that one interesting thing hit to me.

That is about the co-leadership. The team, the team, the spiritual team among the leadership in the early church, how they worked together finally to resolve the problem in the Jerusalem Council. In fact, when we talk about resolve conflicts, it's not just the first generation or just from for us today, but I'm afraid to every generation in church history, that is the same issue confronting us. So I would like to draw your attention how the early church apostles deal with the controversial issue. Luke, the author of Acts, wrote this part of history in a very interesting sequence of happenings.

[13:20] First, it was Peter. It was Peter who stood up to give his testimony. Peter was the main leader in Jewish mission and leader of much impact in Jerusalem church.

But what testimony? Peter saw the vision from God for Gentile mission while praying in the upper room.

And it is also his eyewitness account of the Holy Spirit descending upon the uncircumcised Gentiles in the Roman centurion, Caninius whom, as written in Acts 10.

Although the story happened more than 10 years ago, what was unforgettable was the indwelling of the Holy Spirit upon the Gentile believers.

As a result, those Gentile believers spoke in tongue and praised God. And more importantly to Peter, he saw everything happened before he baptized them, before the sacrament of baptism.

[14:47] This act showed entirely God's sovereignty in his salvation world and his grace on everyone, including the Gentiles.

Peter then understood that there were no difference between Jews and Gentiles in their confession of Jesus as Savior and Lord of all nations. Acts 10 verse 36.

With what Peter had learned and witnessed, he concluded not to lay the yoke of circumcision on the Gentiles. Why do you try to test God by putting on the necks of the disciples a yoke that neither we nor our fathers have been able to bear?

no, we believe it is through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that we are saved just as they are.

Verses 10, 11. Now, after hearing Peter's testimony, Luke then discerned the second movement come out, which is Paul and Barnabas seized this opportunity to report and testify to their first missionary journey with God's abundant grace upon Gentile believers.

[16:17] Yes, suffering, but protected by God in miracles and wonder in Cyprus, Pisidian, Antioch, Iconium, Nisra, and Debra.

Every story was a moving story to all people in the Jerusalem Council. Luke observed and then he put down.

The whole assembly became silent as they listened to Barnabas and Paul telling about the miraculous signs and wonders God had done among the Gentiles through them.

Verse 12. In Luke's observation, the turning point for the people in assembly finally came.

And then we go to the third movement. The third movement was after the report by Barnabas and Paul and there was a person called James.

[17:25] Possibly he was the chair of the assembly and he gave his theological concluding address to support Paul's Gentile mission.

Who was James? Agreed by most scholars, this James was the brother of Jesus, also known as the administrative leader in the Jerusalem church.

And the most important thing is here, respected as a devotee in the teaching of Jewish laws. By quoting Amos chapter 9 verses 11 to 12, James pawned his audience to the Jewish esoterological sin of the Old Testament prophecy.

James pawned out that at the end of the world, God's people will consist of two groups of people, namely, David's rebuilt tent, that is, the restored Israelites, and then the remnant of men, that is, the Gentile Christians.

The Gentiles will share in the messianic blessings, but will persist as Gentile Christians, without necessarily becoming Jewish, personalized.

[18:52] It is this understanding of Amos' message with the testimonies from Peter, Paul, and Barnabas. James concluded that, it is my judgment, therefore, that we should not make it difficult for the Gentiles who are turning to God.

Verse 19, at the end, the apostles, the elders, and the whole church came to an agreement.

They wrote a letter through two leaders, Judas and Silas, to the Gentile Christians. In this letter, two matters were dealt with.

One, about the sense of gospel, whether circumcision is necessary for salvation, the answer is no. Second, about the practical necessity of Gentile Christians abstaining from certain practice for the sake of promoting Jewish and Gentile fellowship within the church, and for the sake of the Jewish Christian mission throughout the diaspora, the answer is yes.

so they wrote the letter, and the letter reads, the apostles and elders and brothers to the Gentile believers in Antioch, Syria and Sicilia, greetings.

[20 : 28] We have heard that some went out from us without our authorization and disturbed you, troubling your minds by what they said. So we all agreed to choose some men and send them to you with our dear friends Barabbas and Paul, men who have been risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we are sending Judas and Silas to confirm by word of mouth what we are writing. It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us not to burden you with anything before, beyond the following requirements.

You are to abstain from food sacrifice to idols, from blood, from the meat of strangled animals, and from sexual immorality.

You will do well to avoid these things. Farewell. In my conclusion, let me remind us the most important message in the book of Acts, or some call it as the Acts of the Holy Spirit, is to assure the Christian church that the Holy Spirit is always in reign over the church.

This is a promise and also a blessing. No matter how much difficulty the church needs to go through in times of persecution or corruption, the Holy Spirit is still in reign.

[22 : 10] This is how the Apostle Peter, Paul, and also the author Luke, want to testify through their ministering to the Christian community at that time. This promise of the Spirit in reign also applies to the inevitable reality of conflict and hurt in the Christian community today.

We can plan ahead, but many times God goes beyond our plan. In the books of Acts, the Gentile mission is never the plan of the Jerusalem church.

It is entirely the Spirit mission. It is the Spirit to let Peter to convenience and witness the indwelling of the Spirit upon the uncircumcised Gentile.

after and after almost ten years, it is the Spirit who led Paul and Barnabas to the first missionary Gentile mission with wonder and signs.

And the same Spirit to move Amos, writing in Old Testament, and to enlighten James to teach God's esoterological will on the salvation to all nations.

[23 : 23] and they all work together and come up to help them to resolve their problem in the first generation of Christian church.

When the leaders of New Testament church came to the point of history and had resolved the unprecedented theological issue of circumcision in relation to the gospel of salvation, the Holy Spirit, having done pre-work and continued work among the leaders, help them to go through the conflicting opinions and find a new path out of their dead lock.

Yet the working principle is in Augustinian verse, in essentials, unity, in non-essentials, liberty, in all things, charity.

We, as leaders of the church, need to know what we should hold firm, when we should spare room for others, but in all situations, we should learn how to embrace one and other in God's love.

Church is never a poverty, nor a bequest. Church is God's people entrusted with the mission of preaching the gospel to all nations.

[24 : 52] I often say to the people of the Anglican Network Church of Good Shepherd, Church is you and I, with the Trinitarian God in reign, nothing more and nothing less.

May God bless you courageously standing together and moving forward in unity with faith, love, and hope. Amen.

Amen. Shall we kneel and pray? This morning, as is most appropriate, surely, we'll begin with prayer for Haiti.

a prayer, in fact, where words fail, as we know. So let us simply in silence, remember this most stricken of places.

Amen. Lord, in your mercy, hear our words.

[26 : 31] as we remember stricken places, we would pray this morning for peace in our world, our most troubled world.

Lord, we would pray for Afghanistan where Canadian soldiers and others serve. We pray that you would bring a measure of peace and justice to that place, as the same in Iraq, so many places in our world which need the Lord's presence and his peace.

Lord, in all places of conflict, Lord, of peace, speak your peace to these places. Speak, Lord, the way of peace, the way of peace to the nations.

Lord, in your mercy. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. And we would pray this morning as well, of course, for the church.

We've heard so much about this morning. The church of Jesus Christ. The mystery of our Lord's body in the world. Lord, we would pray this morning especially for the bishops who lead us.

[27 : 56] we pray especially this morning for our friend Bishop Stephen and his ministry. We pray for your richest blessing upon it. And we would pray, of course, Lord, for our clergy.

We pray for David and for Dan. We pray for Jim and we pray for Keith. Thank you, Lord, for the words we've heard this morning about your church.

We would ask, Lord, that you would guide us indeed in the way of faithfulness. Keep us in the truth of the gospel. Keep us in patience as we ponder how to be faithful to the gospel.

Give us an increasing love for the gospel and a deepening love for one another. Lord, in your mercy.

And this morning, as we always do, as we always should do, Lord, we pray for the suffering.

[29 : 13] In silence, let us bring before the Lord all those we know who suffer. from the mingling. . .

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. we remember especially this morning Betty and Harold and Rosemary and we pray for Lynette and for Rowena and for Jean Lord grant to all of these that we have remembered before you grant to them patience grant to them a sense of your presence Lord we ask that in your perfect timing you would bring them to healing and fullness of life in you Lord in your mercy conclude these prayers by praying the words of the apostle we pray indeed to the one who is able to do far more abundantly than all we can ask or even imagine even Jesus Christ

Lord in your mercy you you you