

Church Unity

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Preacher: Rev Iver Martin

[0 : 0 0] There is the unity of God's kingdom. Now these three things are not in the order in which they're given to us in the passage, but there is first of all the unity of the kingdom of God.

Another word for the kingdom of God, you might call it the church, the people of God. It doesn't matter. The kingdom of God is the church. And we're going to talk about, we're going to see here that Paul stresses its unity, and its unity is tied up with the unity and the oneness of God itself.

The second thing that I find in those verses is the character of each member. Now this is what we did last week. We talked about this briefly last week. The character of every member of God's kingdom, every person who follows Jesus Christ, this is that person's character that he walks with all humility and gentleness and patience, bearing with one another.

That's the character, the humility and the gentleness and the patience. But then thirdly, these verses tell me the responsibility of every member in the church of Jesus Christ, which is as follows.

Bearing with one another in love and eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. Now, if you take these words and then skip down to the rest of the chapter, what you'll find is that there is in verse 13, that God's purpose in the church is that we all attain to the unity of the faith and the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children tossed to and fro by the waves and carried around by every wind of doctrine and so on.

[1 : 3 9] Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ. So what I'm going to do, I think I said this last week, I'm not going to repeat myself, is to look into what this chapter brings out as to the character of God's people in the church, as they act together in the church, within the body which the New Testament calls the church, and the body which we belong to, which is the church to which we belong to.

I'm going to ask, you know, to what extent do we match up? We must always do this, both personally, we're always asking this, I hope, about our own lives. How much does my life match up to the demands and the commands in the Bible?

But we must also do the same thing about the church, collectively, as a body, because it's really quite astonishing how much weight there is, how much emphasis there is in the New Testament about the life of the church.

It is the church that Christ died to save. Remember, I mentioned this last week, that when Paul tells wives to submit themselves to their husbands and husbands to love their wives, it was the church that he brings up as an example of the love between Christ and his church and what he did for that church.

That's the great theme that runs through that great passage. And you remember there are many passages of a similar vein that describe to us the intensity and the immensity of the love which Christ showed and displayed towards his people as the church.

[3 : 14] And that's what we're going to be looking at, first of all, this evening, between verses 4 and verse 6, where the unity of the church is made absolutely clear to us in unmistakable terms.

Let's read it once again. Verse 4, and I want us to investigate this a little bit further. There's one body, says Paul, one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call.

One Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. Some people say this was a kind of creed.

And some people suggest that congregations might have recited these verses before 4 and 6. Some people even suggest that they might have sung those verses between 4 and 6.

We don't know for sure. But it does seem to be a very neat statement, doesn't it? It's a statement which I would imagine that the people of God in those days would have taken away and remember they would have memorized it very much in the same way as we might have memorized our catechism as we were children.

[4 : 22] This may have been an early catechism. This is where he says there's one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one. Seven times the word one appears in those words.

One. In other words, there's no question about the message that Paul is driving home. The oneness. Now the other interesting feature about these verses is that they're tied up to the oneness of God in the Trinity.

Father, Son, and Spirit. In fact, God in the Trinity appears in those verses. Look at what he says. Verse 4. There's one body and one spirit. And then he says you were called to one hope that belongs to your God.

One Lord. Who's the Lord? The Lord is the Lord Jesus Christ. And because of what he has done on the cross, there is one hope, one faith, and one baptism.

But then he goes on to say in verse 6 that there's one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. So what you have there is Father, Son, and Spirit united, the same in substance, equal in power and glory.

[5 : 29] God himself is one God in those three persons. But what Paul is saying is that just as God is united within himself, so his people are united in him and with him and because of him.

Just look at what he says. There's one body. That's the church. Paul calls the church the body in Corinthians. That's the church. The collection of the people of God is one body and one spirit.

In other words, there's a tie-up between the body, the church, and the spirit. Now, that's no surprise to us. If you go back to the chapter I read in Acts chapter 2, it's because of the spirit that the church came into being as the spirit was poured out upon the disciples on the day of Pentecost.

It was through the spirit that the church was born in the New Testament. And it's because of the spirit that the church continues to exist. The church is not some kind of legal entity.

It's not something you sign up for. It is the living collection of God's people born again, risen from the dead, raised to newness of life, from the old life, and having been made right with God, forgiven from all their sins, and going out in his name to live for him and to witness for him and to worship in spirit and in truth.

[6 : 56] That's what the church is. And we'd be nowhere without the spirit. If the spirit's not there, you can have every creed and you can have every T crossed and every I dotted. You've got nothing without God's spirit.

The church exists because of the Holy Spirit. And we need to pray continuously that the Holy Spirit will fill us individually and collectively so that we might be the kind of people that God wants us to be in the world.

The one body and one spirit. Now then he goes on. You were called to one hope. What does hope mean? Hope is the certainty that is found in the gospel.

The certainty in which God says to us, in the Lord Jesus Christ, he said, he says, if you believe in him and follow him and trust in him with all your heart, you will have everlasting life.

That's the hope of the gospel. He tells us he will create us. He will create a clean heart within us. He tells us that he will forgive all our sins.

[8 : 01] He tells us that he will bring us to be one with Jesus Christ. He tells us that not as a possibility but as a certainty. Whenever we read the word hope, it's a certainty of the future in the Bible.

Now what does it belong to? It belongs to our call when we were called into faith in Jesus Christ. One Lord, one faith, one baptism. And all of it centered and focused upon Jesus Christ and his death on the cross.

Every time we saw this last week, we witnessed a baptism. Now baptism is a very solemn occasion. Sometimes I think we get the balance a wee bit wrong. We think of communion as a very solemn occasion.

Perhaps baptism in the minds of many not quite as solemn. Solemn but not quite as solemn. Well the Bible tells us that there are two sacraments, baptism and communion. Both of them are focused on the cross.

Both of them point us in the direction of Jesus and what he did for us on the cross. So there's one faith and one baptism and one hope tied in with the Lord Jesus Christ.

[9 : 11] So we've got the Spirit and we've got the Holy, and we've got Jesus and now we've got the Father. There's one God and Father over all, who is over all and through all and in all.

And when it tells us that he is over all and through all and in all, that's not everybody. That means every kind of person. There are people tonight who are Christians from all different types of cultures and languages and people groups and they have come together because God himself has worked in their hearts and he has created them to be his children and he is their Father.

So then, I hope that just that's been very quick, that's a very quick summary of these verses that ties into the Trinity, ties into the unity of God and the unity of the church and it's very, very important.

It is not, now can you see where this is going? We're talking about the church. Paul's talking about the church and Paul's talking about he's rooting the unity of the church in the unity in God.

And you can see where this is going, don't you? You can see the question that's going to arise in a few moments' time, quite rightly.

[10 : 28] The church is one church. That's the clear message that Paul is preaching in these words. There is and there will only be one church of Jesus Christ, which means that you can no more multiply churches than multiply God himself.

If there is one God, which is what Paul says, and then there is only one church, the unity of the church, in the words of someone else, is as indestructible as the unity of God himself.

That's the message that Paul presents to us in these verses. John Stott says, it is no more possible to split the church than is possible to split the Godhead.

There are the words that prove it. Now I can hear somebody saying, you've got to be kidding. You've really got to be joking, don't you? How can you expect us to really believe what that is?

Well, the only reason I expect you to believe that is because there it is in the word of God. Reconciling it is a different thing altogether. You will say, well, that's exactly what the church is.

[11 : 39] There's no use in talking about what the church is in theory and talking about the oneness of God and the oneness of the church when in actual fact, in reality, the church is anything but united as you say.

It doesn't even come anywhere close to being as united as the description that's given here. Let's go into that for a few moments' time and ask the question, well, why is it that churches in reality are divided?

Because that's a fact. There's no point in trying to run away from it or trying to pretend it's otherwise. We might as well. It's the one question that rises in this chapter and we don't have a great deal of time to spend on it, but just let's make a few points.

Back in Paul's time, the church was one unit and that was because it was at this very beginning and numbers were not as great as they became and its breadth wasn't that wide.

But after the apostles died, of course, the gospel continued to be preached and people continued to be saved and brought to a knowledge of Jesus. But at the same time, various groups began to emerge that believed different things.

[12 : 54] Some of them believed only slightly different things and other groups believed majorly different things. Different groups were set up and so it has continued. I know I'm oversimplifying this whole thing.

It would take ages for us to go into any kind of detailed study and how, it's fascinating, by the way, fascinating study into how different ideas were held by different people down the ages.

But to simplify the thing, the process of splitting, it's always been a feature of the church. Down through the centuries, there have been various expressions of difference and diversity and today, the church exists, whether we can recognize this or not, the church exists today as lots of separate denominations and congregations all over the world, even a small area.

You take a small village in the highlands and it's possible to find, even in our own area here, not just Lewis, but north of Scotland, you might get a village with perhaps up to five congregations, five different denominations, each worshipping the same Jesus for the same reason, each loving and believing the same Bible.

Now, you're quite right in thinking, well, that's absurd. You're quite right. I believe. I agree with you. It is absurd. I think we can all agree on that, that it's not the way it should be.

[14 : 21] It's a different thing knowing what to do about it, though. But nevertheless, throughout the history of the church, that was a feature of it. Of course, I suppose in our own tradition, the major disruption that took place 500 years ago was the Reformation at the time of when the Protestant church was formed.

But even after that time, the Protestant church to which we belong to itself has seen all kinds of divisions and disagreements. Again, I don't want to go into the history, but let me ask this question.

Why is it that these disagreements and divisions exist? What are the various reasons why these exist within the church today? Well, again, first of all, some divisions are caused by differing convictions as to the teaching of the Bible.

Take, for example, baptism. I guess that's the obvious candidate. Many Christians believe that only adults should be baptized. Many Christians believe that it's quite wrong to baptize infants the way we do.

And other Christians of our own tradition will say, no, yes, we believe in baptizing adults. We've seen it ourselves in our own congregation on a number of occasions. Adults who profess their faith in Jesus, they are baptized if they haven't been baptized before.

[15 : 43] But many Christians will say, well, only adults, only those who are of an age to make their faith in Jesus public, only they should be baptized.

And we feel so strongly about this that we cannot worship in the same church as a church that baptizes infants. Now, this is probably the classic division that there is between Bible-believing Christians.

There are many divisions, but I think this is the classic one between them. But it's quite, and of course, you'll never, ever agree on this. We'll never agree on this, this side of eternity.

Only when we get to heaven itself, I guess, will we ever find out who was wrong and who was right on that one. Because both, both groups, both Baptists and Pedobaptists, we are Pedobaptists, Baptists are, they believe only adults.

Well, we'll only find out who was right once we get to glory and once the Lord himself explains to us. But for some reason, for some reason, which I, it's difficult to understand, isn't it, how there are such a, there's such a differing interpretation of the Bible.

[16 : 52] Both believe the Bible and love the Bible and hold to the Bible. And we have many friends who are Baptists, some people in this congregation, have Baptist convictions.

And I'm glad they're able to worship with us. And again, it's a sign of the unity of the church that very often it doesn't amount to separation. But historically, it has.

Spurgeon, I guess, was the great Baptist, the one that is known most to us. And it's one of the greatest acts of church unity and recognition was when Dr. John Kennedy, who was the free church minister in Dingwall, he invited Spurgeon to come one day and to preach in his pulpit.

And that was a great occasion for the whole of Dingwall, apparently. And it's a great occasion in history when the hand of fellowship was reached out between the two great men and when they were able for that one occasion to overcome their differences for the sake of the gospel.

And that is a lot we can do to do that even today. But then there are disagreements also as to how a church should be governed. For example, the Church of England has the sovereign as its head and there are bishops and archbishops.

[18 : 08] By the way, if I mention any other denomination or church, I'm not here to stand in judgment. I'm just telling you a fact. And that's that there are bishops and archbishops.

And so there's a hierarchy as to the way in which the church is governing. In other words, ministers have bosses in the Church of England. Well, sometimes I think that it might be an easier way of being in the ministry if you had a boss to tell you exactly what decisions to make and what to do.

It might be a lot easier than it is at the moment. But it's not about what's easier or not. It's about the fact that the New Testament doesn't have bishops and doesn't have a hierarchy. In the New Testament, we believe that the church is governed by elders, presbyters, elders.

And the word bishop, of course, is used in the AV, but it means simply an elder, an elder. And that's, of course, our conviction. But again, you have differing convictions about this time, about how the way in the church is governed.

Then there are major theological differences, major, major theological differences. You may have watched the Pope's visit a number of weeks ago to Glasgow and you might have asked, well, what difference is there between the Protestant and the Catholic Church?

[19 : 26] And you may be tempted to think at times, let's put the differences aside. Well, that's much, much easier said than done. It's all very well saying putting differences aside. But what happens when there are major, major differences?

The Catholic Church believes, for example, that Mary is a mediator between us and God. And they believe that there are saints, so they have elevated us saints, men who have lived what they believe is a very good life on this earth, and so they believe that these men have a special place in heaven so that they can be mediators, so that, and what they say is that I can pray to them and I can have better access to God through the saints or through Mary.

To me, that goes against everything that the New Testament stands for when it says that Jesus alone is the mediator, the one who stands between me and God.

So you see, it's not just a matter of putting differences aside. These are major differences in the message of the gospel. And so, it's not just a question of putting differences aside.

And then there are historical differences. You go back in time, maybe 100 years or 200 years to where one group broke away because of something that happened at that time.

[20 : 44] And the problem is when you get a split in a denomination and when one goes one way and one goes the other, they become accustomed to being by themselves, their own ways of doing things, their own character, their own people.

And so, in years to come, even although the reason why they split in the first place has now been fixed, it's no longer a reason, then it is difficult for them to come back together again.

I'm not trying to make an excuse for that. I'm just saying that that's a fact. It's a sad fact. It's a very sad fact, particularly in the world in which we live in where we are up against all the odds right now where the Christian church is declining and where atheism and humanism is on the rise.

We cannot afford to be separate from other people of like mind and we have to, it's important for us to look for ways of bridging where we all, where we believe in the same gospel, the same truth, the same Lord Jesus, same Bible.

And then, of course, within congregations there are splits where they've divided because of some dispute between one person or another or one group of people and another group of people. A personality clash and here is where I think the apostle is counseling the people to bear with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit and the bond of peace because any congregation is a collection of different personalities and you get that even in the New Testament itself.

[22 : 27] We'll go into this in a few moments and it was not in a few moments but next week, God willing, there are personalities and we live in a sinful world where every single one of us is stained and polluted by sin and the old nature is fighting against the new nature and we are constantly, we're constantly seeking to live the kind of life that the Lord wants us to live but the real test comes with how do you live that life with other people and with other Christians because just because a person is a Christian doesn't mean that that person is perfect.

There are differences of opinion and many is a congregation, a split because of that and then there are major fundamental differences, I talked about theological differences but there are fundamental moral issues as well right now.

Both the Church of England and the Church of Scotland stands on the brink, they both stand on the brink of major division because of the question of whether homosexuals, active homosexuals can be in the ministry or in the priesthood or be a vicar or whatever.

That's a major issue because it calls into question the teaching of the Bible which says that sexual interaction is confined to one man and one woman and that's it, that answers all the questions.

Anything, any question about sexuality that we want to ask, it's there in that very simple fact. One man and one woman. Genesis chapter 1, Genesis chapter 2 and anything that seeks to seeks to try and reconcile the Christian ministry with active homosexuality it's like doing the same with adultery.

[24 : 18] You can't do it. It makes the Bible say something it doesn't say so we're calling into question the truth of the Bible. You can't be united unless the Bible, unless you recognize the Bible as authoritative and again the word of God.

And so there are there are differences all kinds of reasons why there are differences between churches and denominations and congregations and they've occurred very often they occur as a result of one group or one faction within a body who don't like the way things are done for example and so on and so forth and so you've ended up today with a whole group a whole series of denominations and this country is not as bad by the way as other countries in America you have hundreds hundreds of denominations and little congregations and big congregations and independent congregations and all kinds of different groups I mean Holland also is a country where there are a massive number of different churches many of them you can't get a paper between them theologically or any other way and yet they seem to be divided now I'm not here tonight to explain or to try and justify that's the way it is and we have to live as it is how can we sum this up two minutes first of all the church is one church what is the church ultimately the church is the people of God those who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ by faith and God knows them who they are he sees into their hearts he knows where they belong in his kingdom he sees them and in his eyes there is only one body even although they're scattered all over the world in various groups and factions and divisions he knows those who are his furthermore the divisions within the church will not stop

God building his kingdom I will build my church says Jesus on this rock and the gates of hell will not prevail against it somehow or other God has a way of even using the separation of his people all over the world tonight as a means because God is able to make all things work together for good that's not an excuse but God is able to make all things work together for good to those who love him thirdly we are personally responsible to make every effort to foster and promote unity with between our churches especially where we agree on the foundational truths of the gospel we are blessed for example in this community to have many many ministries and congregations and fellow Christians who belong to differing churches that's a great blessing by the way and I hope we

I hope we're aware of that the large number of Christians that there are in Stornoway for example they don't just go to this church they go to other church and we need to pray for every place where the gospel is preached and every place where people gather together to listen to his word and we need to we need to foster every this Wednesday last Wednesday were a great privilege as we know many of you know you were at the meeting fearing Reverend James Lagos from Sudan speaking to us well the next day well first of all that wasn't an exclusively free church meeting that was a meeting that took in Christians from other denominations and churches and that was like that's what made it a very special occasion but on the next day the ministers in the town had lunch with James Lagos that too was a very special occasion an occasion when we can come together and to support and to pray for our brother and to hear him in the difficulties that he has that needs to be done needs to be every effort made and more use needs to be made of every opportunity that we can and we need to pray earnestly that the unity that's promised in the Bible will one day come to fulfillment

Jesus prayed to the Father in John chapter 17 Father I will that they may be those who you have given me may be one that is the prayer of Jesus and that prayer we believe one day will be fulfilled in all its glory and in all its significance we have to pray that prayer with the Lord that we will be one as one body in Christ Jesus but we must also make every opportunity every effort to do what we can to further the cause within the body in which God has placed each one of us that's where God wants us to begin here where he has placed us because for us this is the church this is our church this is our fellowship this is the place where God in his providence has set us what are we going to do for it how much effort and commitment are we going to place within that church tirelessly working and living for him within that body to support and to care for and to pray for one another and to do whatever we can and to use the gifts that God has given us to the good of his kingdom and his house let's pray our father bless your word to us now we pray forgive all our sins and we ask oh Lord that you will bless your church wherever it is worldwide we ask that you will guide your church and guide those who belong to your church and those who preach the gospel guide each one of us oh Lord into a greater vision of what your people is and what your people are a greater vision of what we can do for you as witnesses and as worshipping people we ask oh Lord that where there are wrongs and where there are deficiencies as there always is we pray that we might recognize these and that we might put them right so that God's name may be glorified amongst us even more in Jesus name

[30 : 59] Amen Psalm 100