



1 Cor 1:10-13

UNITY VIDEO

Last time we explored how Christians are called to fellowship together as the people of God. He has made us part of his family, the body of Christ – the church. We saw that how often we can be negative about the church, yet the church is God ordained, headed by Christ and empowered by the Spirit. We should be a world-changing and life-changing force.

So often we are anything but that. Why? Our reading this morning illustrates a problem that still characterises the church – they were dis-unified. “We’re Paul’s Group!” “We follow Apollos – he’s such a cool guy!” “We’re much more authentic because we follow Peter – one of the original apostles!” “No we’re even better – we follow Christ!” Paul had to speak against all of them because they had used doctrine and personalities to separate themselves from one another.

We found out last time that in terms of our righteousness, we are all equal before God. We are equally as righteous before a holy God because all our righteousness is in Christ. God wants us to fellowship with Him and grow into maturity. It doesn’t create super-Christians but those that walk in humility in Christ but in the power of the Spirit too. In Christ God has brought us into relationship with one another.

CALLED TO UNITY

Our fellowship relationship with one another can be summed up in one verse in chapter 1:

10 By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I appeal to all of you, my friends, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you. Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.

We are a people called to unity. It is a unity of agreement, a unity of mind and thought.

Why are we called to such a unity? Because as we found in the first chapter last time that we are those *who are called to be God’s holy people, who belong to him in union with Christ Jesus.*

We are called to be holy by a holy God – holy means, set apart, different. Different from the values of society and how society relates. Different from human organisation and values. Holy, set apart, like Jesus. Having God’s values.

What is the characteristic of the Godhead: Father, Son and Spirit? Complete unity of mind and thought. And if that’s the nature of God, that should be the nature of the body of Christ too. Unity is not an optional extra for people we like. Or an optional extra for people who share our point of view. We are all called to agreement – a complete unity of mind and thought and that’s a message for each one of us who are part of this church fellowship just as it was to the Corinthians.

SLIPPERY POLE

If we look down at 2000 years of church history, or maybe our own short lives, then unity is probably not your experience of the people of God. Unity sometimes seems like a slippery pole. We find it difficult to hang on to. Yet we are called to a unity of mind and thought. We are called to walk in agreement. It’s been like this since the first century.

All through the NT we see problems with Christians who did not agree. I’m sure too we all have experience of difficult moments where people not only didn’t agree, but the whole thing led to conflict in the church. Most of the denominations came into existence because people couldn’t agree.

We may feel tempted to just say that it’s par for the course. But we are called to be united in mind and thought nevertheless. That’s the message of scripture. It’s the command of Christ.

So how do we define this unity of mind and thought? We can define unity by what it's not. Unity is not uniformity.

UNITY IS NOT UNIFORMITY

Down the centuries, unity has been seen as doing things like everybody else. The idea is that we have unity when everyone is the same. It's uniformity.

MILITARY UNIFORMITY

One kind of uniformity is like the army clip at the beginning. Everyone is in uniform, marching to the same tune. How do they manage that – because the soldiers are following orders. They are being told what to do by a higher authority.

There have been times in church history – including the present, and where church organisations and individual churches where uniformity has meant doing what you're told by the leadership. The leaders do all the thinking and the *hoi polloi* do as they are told. Churches like this are always authoritarian, dominated by strong personalities and invariably split sooner or later. And of course, if people don't like it, they are encouraged, told, forced to go elsewhere. Loyalty comes through fear. Cults are the most extreme version of this where people allow themselves to become manipulated by others to do things and believe things that stretch things beyond reason or morality.

MACDONALDS UNIFORMITY

Modern denominations are more like MacDonalds. Don't like the parallel? Think about it. Wherever you go in the world, you get fed broadly the same menu. There are all the local variations, which we're proud of, but at the middle there is a core which is common to everyone whoever they are. It's a world where we accept denominations as just being a flavour of the main menu. If we don't like what's on the menu, we join up with one where the menu is much more to our liking.

But church is fellowship not a business that provides services. Central to MacDonalds unity is the notion that church is a commodity and we buy into it if it suits. I've seen a lot of it over the years. People exercise their choice and go to what suits them. It provides us with food we like. If we cease liking it then we go and get our food elsewhere. In other words this kind of uniformity is achieved by people agreeing a formula which suits them – and separating themselves from others who don't.

POLITICAL UNIFORMITY

Of course, the other way we can get uniformity is only function in relation to things we can agree on. Welcome to the coalition! A lot of ecumenical projects also work on the same thing. Everything goes down to a lowest common denominator – what we can agree on – and what we are going to agree to disagree on. The problem comes when we want to decide what that is. If the bar is set too low then we lose people because they say we're becoming wishy-washy. If it's set too high, then we lose people because they say we are too doctrinaire.

UNITY NOT UNIFORMITY

Whatever way we look at it, we are trying to create a mould into which everyone will fit. The mould tells us what we should do and how we should think. The very attempt to get unity this way means not everyone agrees the mould! And when people disagree - they are cast out or leave. Bingo! You get another new denomination. Uniformity automatically causes division. We are called to unity, not uniformity.

How is unity presented in the Bible? Let's go back to our verse.

10 By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I appeal to all of you, my friends, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you. Be completely united, with only one thought and one purpose.

We are called to be *completely united, with only one thought and one purpose*. We know from elsewhere in the letter that it was a diverse fellowship. People were from different races and backgrounds. Some were rich and some were poor. They reflected the divisions of society in the make-up of the church. There were religious factions. People were doing what they thought was right - yet the call was to be united in mind and thought and that call was to all of them.

And that's the critical point. "I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Peter". I follow. Now look again at our verse *By the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ I appeal to all of you, my friends, to agree in what you say, so that there will be no divisions among you.*

It's not a case of what I want – it's a case of what Jesus wants! That's the whole difference between unity and uniformity. Uniformity is about what I want. It's all about human will. Why church has such a bad name, and has done so down the ages is because we replace what God has ordained, with something that we set up, where people head it up and where it's run by human consent. And we wonder why it doesn't work!

But the church is God ordained, Christ headed and Spirit empowered. Jesus commands us to be united in thought and purpose. We unite under His authority, but we have a 2000 year track record of turning that the other way and doing the Corinthian thing of deciding what we think God's will is for us.

How do we know we are doing God's will and not ours? Easy. Because a church under the headship of Christ is not divided, yet it can embrace people of massively different backgrounds. In fact it can absorb anyone God brings to it. In a later week I'm going to actually explore the idea that in the church of Jesus Christ, what makes unity work best is diversity.

VERSE

Let me add the content of another passage to finish this morning.

3 Do your best to preserve the unity which the Spirit gives by means of the peace that binds you together. 4 There is one body and one Spirit, just as there is one hope to which God has called you. 5 There is one Lord, one faith, one baptism; 6 there is one God and Father of all people, who is Lord of all, works through all, and is in all.

The unity that truly binds us together is the God that has placed us into the body of Christ. There's one Spirit that empowers us. There's only one version of the Christian faith: God's!

United in mind and thought. The unity of the Spirit. Surely a unity of mind and thought is a unity of mind born out of the Spirit? We think in the way that God thinks. We're moved by the Spirit. That's true unity. It's the only kind of unity that works.

And it's all done through the bond of peace - we are bonded together as brothers and sisters in Christ. We have fellowship. We are called to loving fellowship. The desire for unity of mind comes from our love for one another and a desire for our minds to conform to the Spirit.

And as we conform to His Spirit we become the church that God wants us to be. My experience of the way that God uses church fellowships is not through them finding a perfect NT pattern or hanging on to traditions whatever, but being prepared as individuals and as a fellowship to conform to His will, to be moved by the Spirit of God.

TITLE

One of the challenges we face as a church right now is how we go forward from where we are. We have been encouraged this year particularly by Parish Nursing. We listened to the voice of God. We stepped out in unity on it, and He has poured out blessings on us.

But there's more to do. If this is God's church: if this fellowship has been brought together in all its diversity to serve God in this place at this time, then we need to see what He wants us to do with what He has brought. These are changing times for us as a fellowship. There are new challenges and concerns.

That being the case, it's important to go back to basic. This is God's church. He's ordained it, called us to it, we're headed by Christ, empowered by the Spirit. We have all the tools here to do His will and to take the church forward. How do we do that? That's the challenge and it all starts with being united in thought and purpose.

What are those strengths? Watch this space!

Father

You have called us to be people who agree with one another and who walk perfectly in mind and thought. We pray that by your Spirit who brings forth unity, that you will bind us together, that we may agree according to Your will and have Your mind and thought within us so that all the glory may go to You. In Jesus' name Amen