

A Culture of Unity

Romans 15:1-13

William Tyndale is famous for translating the Bible into English in the 16th century. And much like the work of another famous William — Shakespeare — his work has shaped the English language in a whole range of ways. Tyndale was always searching for new ways to express the unchanging truth of the Bible. Sometimes he would even invent new English words in order to make the Bible as clear as possible for everyone to understand.

And one of Tyndale's new words which is very common today came from his attempt to translate this very passage. Our translation says in verse 5 that we should have the same attitude of mind toward one another. Tyndale's Bible simply said: be *like-minded* one towards the other.

Like-minded. It's a great word isn't it. And we know what a special thing it is to find ourselves amongst like-minded people. And in our internet age, it's easier than ever to find them. Whether we're into specialty coffee or sports, Harry Potter fan-fiction or how to maintain a healthy lawn, obscure German opera or observing supernatural phenomena, there *will* be somewhere out there a community of like-minded people to connect with.

But what about in a local church? When you have people of different ages, different stages of life, different interests, different cultural backgrounds, different opinions, all gathered together into one community, how can they be like-minded. How can *we* be like-minded when we are all so different? To continue into verse 6, how can we come together with one mind and one voice to glorify God? To put it most simply: how can we be a gospel culture of unity?

1. Why Unity Matters

But before we get to the how of unity, I think it's worth considering why unity matters so much to the New Testament writers. Here's a question for you: why does Paul spend almost two whole chapters addressing this issue of unity? Why does peace and edification in a united church take up more time and space than any other issue in Romans 12-16? Wouldn't it just be easier if he told all the Christians in Rome to start different churches based on their different attitudes and practices? You know, one church for those who ate everything, and one church where they didn't? A church that observed special feast days, and a church that didn't? You could have the first Jewish church in Rome and Roman Gentile church? What would be wrong with that? It would certainly be less stressful!

Well, Romans 15 helps us to see that unity matters so much because unity is God's goal for the whole universe.

- *God's Goal*

I think this is the point of those quick-fire quotations from the Old Testament in verses 9-12. The whole story of the Bible is driving towards this great conclusion. Jews and Gentiles together, gathered around God's throne, in ceaseless praise of their One Saviour. From Genesis to Revelation, God is undoing the curse of Sin, that divides us from God, *and* that divides us from each other. We see division between Adam and Eve as they play the blame-game in the garden after the Fall. We see division as Cain resents the responsibility to care for his brother, and kills him in a murderous rage. We see division as God scatters people all over the earth, after they united against him at the tower of Babel. But God made promises to Abraham that through him the whole world would be blessed. That everything which divides us would be undone. These promises are fulfilled in Christ, and it is God's goal that all who trust in Jesus would be *one*.

And so the book of Revelation pictures the new heavens and the new as like an anti-Babel. Where people of every nation and tribe and tongue will be united in purpose. And that purpose will not be to oppose to the God of the universe, instead it will be our purpose to praise him.

And so the church ought to be an outpost of that heavenly reality here in the world. Christians are to be anti-Cains, joyfully embracing that we are our brother's keeper, and our sister's keeper. We give up on competing with one another to make a name for ourselves, and come together *with one mind and one voice* in order to *glorify the God and Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ*. In Ephesians 1, Paul describes God's purpose and plan for the whole universe as "to bring unity to all things in heaven and on earth under Christ." (Verse 10) In the church we get a head start on eternity, as we come together in one body. Diverse, inter-dependant *and united*, under the Lordship of Christ.

- *God's Glory*

And do you notice how this purpose of God is tied up with his praise. God's goal and his glory are intimately connected. It's not merely a nice thing for us to be united. It is glorifying to God. As we read in verse 7, we accept one another as Christ has accepted us, *in order to bring praise to God*. And so it's not just a "bit of a shame" for a church to be divided. It dishonours the Lord. The stakes are high here.

I think one of the most arresting things that Jesus says is right at the end of the prayer he prays to his Father in John 17. Hours away from his death, Jesus prays for everyone through history who will be his disciples. He prays

that they may be one as we are one — I in them, and you in me — so that they may be brought to complete unity. [And here is the hard bit] *Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.*

That's some prayer. What the world really needs in order to know that God so loved the world that he sent his only son, is not knockdown intellectual arguments, but that us here in the church are one. Francis Schaeffer calls this the 'final apologetic' of Christianity. It is the great sign that the gospel is true.

Or another writer puts it this way:

Without unity, the world is likely to see the church as a human organisation devised by human creativity, not a body of divine origin. Discord plagues man-made institutions—love, peace, harmony, community, and fellowship eventually break down. Jesus is praying that when the world views the church, it will not see a man-made organisation but a divine organism born from God. The church's growing *oneness* is what defines the church as having an *otherness*. Why would the world be supernaturally drawn to an institution filled with conflict, cliques, hostility, fighting and division?

Good question! The unity of the church brings God glory, both because it honours his goal for the world, and because it puts that goal on display for the world to see. As Jesus says in another place, the church is a city on a hill, so that as people see our good deeds and the light of our unity, they would glorify our Father in heaven.

Brothers and sisters, *unity matters*.

2. Why Unity is Hard

But it is not easy. We know that don't we? Love, peace, harmony, community, and fellowship very easily break down in Christian churches. Churches too can be filled with conflict, cliques, hostility, fighting and division. So what makes unity so hard to maintain?

Well I think we get something of a hint in the instruction of verse 1 "not to please ourselves." Unity is difficult because our natural instinct is to serve ourselves, rather than others. Left to our own devices, we can see other people as obstacles to our own pleasure, or as opportunities to further our own interests. To serve people in the way this passage describes will always be costly and uncomfortable. It is certainly not the path of least resistance. And so instead of bearing with the failures of people around us, we bemoan the fact that they deny our freedom. Or even worse, we deride the failings of our brothers and sisters so we feel better about our own spiritual life. We can begin to define ourselves against other people: I'm not one of those Christians who...fill in the blank. Or we can gossip about the struggles of people in our church, so that we can be more secure in our own belonging. Instead of building others up, we build ourselves up, often by lowering others down in judgement or contempt.

Or perhaps the most ironic way this plays out is that we all suspect that everyone is really out for themselves, and so we hold each other at arm's length, or to some impossibly high standard, or we stubbornly hold our ground lest we lose our own place of safety in the community. By its very nature, community constantly requires us to give up something of our own freedom for the sake of others. And so a focus on our own rights and freedoms, our own comfort and control, on *pleasing ourselves*, is a death sentence for true community.

And this is a particular challenge for us given that the dominant command of our culture is the very opposite of Romans 15:1. The pattern of this world is: *please yourself*. You do you, and don't let anyone stand in your way.

Now, at first, this seems like an exhilarating offer of freedom. You are free to determine your own meaning, to find your own identity, to chase after your own dreams. In a world of please yourself, you don't have to rely on anyone or anything, for you are free to be you. But that exciting freedom turns out to be a wearisome burden. For it means you're also *responsible* for determining meaning, finding your true identity, and justifying your existence. And so what if your meaning is wrong, or if you can't find out who you really are, or you feel like your life doesn't really matter? What then? Where do you go?

As Alan Noble suggests, the really

terrifying thing is that everyone else around you is doing exactly the same thing. Everyone is on their own private journey of self-discovery and self-expression, so that at times, modern life feels like billions of people in the same room shouting their own name so that everyone else knows they exist and who they are—which, he goes on, is a fairly accurate description of social media.

And so despite being more connected than ever, so many people around us are exhausted, lonely, and bored. No doubt some of us feel like we're carrying that same wearisome burden of belonging entirely to ourselves. Yes, living in a united community is hard. Giving up your own freedom in order to serve others is hard. Resisting the urge to please yourself and to please the people around you is hard. But living a life of pleasing yourself turns out to be much harder still. It promises a full and satisfying life. But when everyone is desperately trying to fill themselves up, we all end up empty.

3. How Unity Happens

And so how can we pursue unity in a divided world? How can we be those who do not please ourselves, but others? How can we go beyond simply tolerating people who are different to us, and be those who bear one another's burdens and build each other up?

Well, we know the formula by now don't we. Don't conform to the pattern of this world but be transformed by the renewing of your minds. And there are three mind-renewingly transformative truths that come out of Romans 15 which we'll consider now.

- *God's Encouragement*

The first is God's encouragement. Verse 5 tells us that like-mindedness is a gift that is given by God. And it's a gift that comes also with the gifts of endurance and encouragement. Because this is God's goal for his people, he doesn't just demand it from us, but he also encourages us towards it, and equips us for it.

The Scriptures teach us endurance and provide us with encouragement because they are the Word of the God who gives endurance and encouragement. I wonder if you had to pick two words to describe the Bible what would you choose. Perhaps we might say: The demands and challenges of the Scriptures? The rebuke and correction that the Scriptures give? Certainly there is plenty to challenge us in the Bible. But here Paul frames the purpose of the Bible as giving endurance and providing encouragement. In the Bible, God is an exuberant Father, standing on the side-line, cheering on his church to unity. Everything in the Bible is written for us, to help us and to give us hope.

Romans 12:1 told us that when we offer our bodies as living sacrifice it pleases God. These verses show us the other end of that equation. God is excitedly urging us on towards true and proper worship, strengthening us to do what is most pleasing to him.

This is what is happening when the Bible is read and taught at church, when we read it together in Home groups, or in our own private devotion. Reading the Bible is not some abstract religious practice, it is the very relational act of receiving encouragement from God our Father.

- *God's Acceptance*

So, unity happens as we keep hearing God's encouragement in the Scriptures. And that encouragement comes because the Scriptures keep pointing us to Jesus, and God's acceptance given in Christ. So Paul says, "each of us should please our neighbours for their good, to build them up. For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: "The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me."

And again in verse 7, "Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you." Now at one level Paul is simply setting Christ before us as an example to follow. Against the pattern of the world, the pattern of Christ is selfless service in seeking to please our neighbours.

But we can take this a step further. Paul is telling us that unity happens when we rest in the new reality created by God's acceptance of us in the gospel. Nothing holds us back more from the service of others, than the sneaking suspicion that there will be no one left to serve us. There's that lingering question, "If I please my neighbour, who will please me? If I welcome everyone, who will welcome me?" And Paul's answer is, Jesus! Jesus did not come to please himself, but to lay his life down for your good. Jesus has welcomed you into his kingdom at the cost of his blood, shed for you on the cross. All the honour that really matters, and all the pleasure that really satisfies is found in Christ.

And so we can be free from the burden of justifying ourselves, because

"all are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:24)

We don't need to forge our own identity from inside ourselves, because we are called God's children. We read in Romans 8:15

The Spirit you received does not make you slaves, so that you live in fear again; rather, the Spirit you received brought about your adoption to sonship. And by him we cry, "Abba, Father."

To our desperate need to be seen and known and heard, Paul answers: "Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Romans 8:34)

The gospel gives us this incredible security that nothing ever "will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:39) And from that place of safety and acceptance in the Father's house, we can extend safety and acceptance to all our brothers and sisters. Knowing that the Lord Jesus is helping to carry our burdens we can bear the burdens of all our brothers and sisters. Knowing that the Spirit is working in our hearts to build us up, we can build up our brothers and sisters.

We can grow in like-minded unity with people very different to us, as our minds are all together renewed by these new gospel realities. Instead of competing with one another, we can join our voices together in worshipping the Lord, and building each other up in Christ. We don't need to please ourselves because in all things God is working for the good of those who love him. And so each of us can please our neighbours for their good.

- *God's Filling*

Or you could put it like this: *unity is the overflow of a church that has been filled up by God.* Trying to fill ourselves up by seeking our own pleasure leaves us weary, exhausted, and empty. But in the gospel God fills us with all joy and peace, so that we may overflow in hope.

That's what Paul prays in verse 13. Because he knows that the sort of unity he is talking about is literally a super-natural reality. We can't get there with cleverly designed programs, or ministry strategies, or dynamic leadership. That's why Jesus prayed for this sort of unity in John 17 and it's why Paul prays here:

[Read Verse 13]

Filled up with God's joy we overflow with joyful service. Filled up with God's peace we can overflow in pleasing our neighbour for their good. Filled up with God's hope, we can overflow in helping our brothers and sisters, bearing their burdens and building them up. God fills us with the mind of Christ, that we would see our brothers as he sees them, and serve them as he serves them. We can be like-minded towards one another, as we become like-minded with the Lord Jesus.

One of my favourite moments of the year is when kids from the pre-school come into the church building for the very first time. They walk in for Bible time and you can see their heads lift up and look around, and their eyes widen as they take in this very strange building. And always they are drawn to the stained-glass windows. Especially as we're in here at the perfect time with the morning sun shining through these two big windows at the back. One of the boys said the church had rainbow windows. Now we might dismiss stained-glass windows as a relic from the pass, but the strange beauty of these windows is like nothing these little eyes have ever seen, and it blows their little minds.

When I chose the little stained glass icon for this series of sermons I I mainly picked it because I thought it looked cool. But the more I think about it, the more it captures what a gospel culture is. It is all of us coming together, with our own unique personalities and gifts, like all the individual panels of the window.

On our own, we're all a little bit dull, but as we're united together in Christ, and as the light of the gospel shines through us, we become something beautiful and lovely. We become beautiful and lovely precisely because we picture Jesus, just like all the windows in our church. Our unity puts Christ on display for all to see. And as we live out that visible unity, the strange beauty of the church will be like nothing the world has ever seen, and it will blow their minds.

That's why Jesus prays for the complete unity of his church. For then the world will know that God sent Jesus, and that God loves the world, just as he has always loved his Son. And so we join our Lord in praying for a gospel culture of unity in our church.