

PP Acts: To the End of the Earth

Part 40 Acts 15:22-34 Gracious Unity

10/30-31/2021

As we look to where we are going today, let's look briefly where we just were last week

If you recall that message, we saw that a serious disagreement created an uproar in the church, threatening their unity

A group of legalists were insisting that non Jewish believers had to be circumcised if they were going to become Christians

So Peter stood up in the midst of the debate and gave a masterful defense of the gospel of grace, leading the way for James, the leader of the Jerusalem church to guide them to a decision

He said in **15:19-20**, ***"we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood."***

What James was getting at was this: Unity in the church is a priority, and it must be protected!

Let's urgently learn this lesson because our enemy the devil is always seeking to break the unity of the church and disunity is a serious obstacle to the message of grace

PP 1-The Grace of Christian Unity

"Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders" 15:22a

PP i. Unity is achieved through careful consideration

Imagine that you are fast forwarding through a movie to get to your favorite scene, but you pause before you get there because you noticed something in the movie you never saw before

Let's all pause for a moment at the phrase ***'it seemed good'***

In the NIV, the phrase is simply translated, ***'decided'***

PP 'seemed good' is one word in the Greek that means to *personally determine*

I might say to my wife, *It seems to me that we ought to sell our car and get a newer one.*

After considering the costs of repair, *it seems* to make sense to purchase one in better condition

In **Acts 15**, the entire church considered, thought, discussed through the matter, and made a decision

A unified church is a church that is not ruled by emotions, but thinks, considers, discusses

It was no mindless uniformity, but rather personal, every-person determining that allowed ***'the whole church'*** to come together in unity

PP ii. Unity is achieved when we see it as each of our responsibility

"with the whole church" 15:22b

The aim of unity is of course, that the whole church lovingly agrees, from the pew to the pulpit
Let me address all of you who call Cornerstone your church family: *Learning to keep unity is each of our responsibility*

And as we look more deeply, unity allows grace to work among God's people

All it takes is for one person to begin to slander, or gossip, or cause strife for it to spread

God has a strong opinion toward those who cause disunity?

PP *“There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to Him...one who sows discord among brothers.” Proverbs 6:19*

God hates discord among His people, and considers the one who spreads it is an abomination
I recently heard of a church whose head deacon placed the stand that gave the attendance numbers right in front of the pulpit, an ongoing feud with the pastor who wanted it in the corner of the sanctuary

The pastor came in and immediately moved it, and the deacon ran down and punched the pastor
Not only did that man split his lip, he split the church

Churches have divided over what types of green beans to serve, people left one church because they switched to a stronger coffee brand, and divided over the length of the pastor's beard

And in, and through, and behind it all...is the devil working his favorite strategy of discord!

Though his name is not anywhere in **Acts 15**, he was trying to divide the early church

In fact, the name **PP** 'Devil' is the Greek word *diabolos*, translated to divide or separate

The devil is always trying to divide Christian marriages, families, friends, and churches

But Christian, did you know Jesus has prayed for us to be unified and maintain it?

PP *“I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me.” John 17:20-21*

God wants and helps us guard unity, but each must do their part, and how we do that is seen next

PP iii. Unity is achieved through honesty and truth

“Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions...” 15:24

Misinformation and the willingness to gloss over sin have the potential to cause an incredible amount of disunity, and the early church would have no part of that

The group troubling the church at Antioch had not been blessed or authorized by the Apostles and Elders at Jerusalem

They went and acted without authority, without a covering over them, on their own

They were not sent by the Holy Spirit, but by their own flesh, they were incited by the *diabolos* to spread discord

And the only way to clear up deception is with the truth, for it will not go away on its own

And truth must often be graciously given even if it hurts the feelings of others in doing so

This letter said the truth, that the trouble and unsettling this group caused was not from God

We can learn a lot about achieving and maintaining unity from this passage and the next is this:

PP iv. Unity is achieved through effort

“it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul...” 15:22-25

We saw last week that a legalistic group of Jewish professing believers threw the Gentile church into an uproar by insisting that they could only be saved if they believed in Jesus and submitted to circumcision

The disagreement continued as this group said the same thing in the Jerusalem church
Paul and Barnabas testified what God had done in saving the Gentiles, then Peter explained the
gospel of grace that salvation is by grace, through faith in Christ alone, and James tied
them both together with the thread of God's Word

This approach helped the whole church *'come to one accord'*

Unity is not usually instantaneous, not in our relationships, not in business, not in the church
Unity in the church takes effort, patience, clarity, love and...the Spirit of God

PP v. *Unity is achieved through the Holy Spirit's help*

"For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us..." 15:28

Here is that same word again that is translated, *'seemed good'*, personally determine
The Holy Spirit personally determined along with the church to send this letter of grace
Unity in the church is when the horizontal lines up with the vertical
Disunity in the church occurs when we become disunified with the Spirit... *'seemed good to the Holy Spirit'*

PP "[Be] *eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.*" Ephesians 4:3

PP vi. *Unity is achieved through the humble willingness to give up freedoms*

"For it has seemed good...to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements..." 15:28

Unity involves the willingness to yield, to forgo, to sacrifice for the sake of loving others
Ephesians 2 is the great announcement that God has brought believing Jews and believing
Gentiles together into one body, **PP** *'built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.'* Ephesians 2:22

So their letter instructed, *"abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality."* 15:29

The Gentile believers were immersed in a culture where idolatry was normalized and everywhere
Today we have churches on every corner, in the Roman Empire cities there were temples and
pagan stalls selling every form of idolatry imaginable

These temples had hundreds, even thousands of priests and priestesses, who were religious
prostitutes for every imaginable moral vice

Where killing a sacrificial animal by strangling it kept the blood in the meat, a delicacy to them
These Gentile believers were so immersed in a culture of idolatry that they needed to be
reminded to be holy, separate, and distinct from the people around them, so as not to
offend their Jewish brothers and sisters and bring disunity into the church

While eating meat that had been sacrifice to an idol was no sin, it didn't make the Christian
distinct from the unbeliever, and it was a stumbling block to the sensibilities of the Jews
Are there any *'rights'* that you are unwilling to yield for the sensibilities of other Christians?
When we love each other, we are willing to give them up and maintaining fellowship

Finally, and very briefly, **PP 2-The Joy of Christian Unity**

These 4 men went to Antioch with this letter, *"And when they had read it, they rejoiced because of its encouragement."* 15:31

The Antioch church rejoiced to hear that their salvation comes by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone, and nothing needs to be added to receive the forgiveness of God. The letter gave them encouragement because it silenced the unity-destroying legalists. So the leaders ***“encouraged and strengthened the brothers with many words...Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch, teaching and preaching the word of the Lord, with many others also.” 15:35***

In closing, some brief practical instructions:

PP 1-Talk *to* your brother or sister and not *about*, refusing to gossip, slander or spread discord

PP 2-Seek first to understand before trying to be understood

PP 3-Always bring grace and truth together and pray against the devil's strategy to divide

PP 4-If the conflict cannot be resolved, seek wisdom and counsel from a wise friend

PP 5-So all you can, to restore peace: ***‘If possible, so far as it depends on you, live peaceably with all.’ Romans 12:18***

PP 6-If unity cannot be restored immediately, guard against bitterness: ***‘See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no “root of bitterness” springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled’ Hebrews 12:15***

Pray