

The unity of the saints

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 01 January 2000

Preacher: Rev R.G.Mackay

[0 : 00] For why the way of godly men unto the Lord is known, whereas the way of wicked men shall quite be overthrown.

Let us turn now to the epistle to the Ephesians. Ephesians chapter 4. I want us to look particularly this evening at the verses 12 to 16.

And I think it would perhaps be good for us just to read through these verses, and we'll need to read from verse 11 to get some connection. And he gave some apostles and some prophets and some evangelists and some pastors and teachers for the perfecting of the saints, for the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ.

Till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God and to a perfect man and to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ.

that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine by the slight of men and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive.

[1 : 46] But, speaking the truth in love, may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body, fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplieth, according to the effectual working and the measure of every part, maketh increase of the body and to the edifying of itself in love.

When death and bereavement comes into the fellowship of the Lord's people, one of the most precious doctrines is the doctrine of the unity of the saints.

And those who are the Lord's people, who are bereaved of the Lord's people in these days, will know that it is such a comforting truth to remember that the saints of God are united and that that unity can never be destroyed.

That's one of the things we remember when we read from Romans chapter 8 that we often read at a funeral service. Nothing shall separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus.

And united in that love, we are united with all the people of God who are in that love. But yet we have to observe and I'm sure we all do observe that there are many outward evidences of lack of unity in the church of Christ in our day.

[4 : 01] You have lack of unity among the denominations, you have lack of unity within denominations, you have lack of unity amongst individual Christians within congregations.

And that's what Paul is addressing in these verses at the beginning of Ephesians chapter 4. He is recognizing the two sides of the truth of Christian unity.

He is reminding us that there is unity amongst all the people of God. But he is reminding us that we can spoil the evidence of that unity and the complete reality of that unity can be disturbed and marred amongst us in our imperfect condition.

And so he is saying to us that if we are the Lord's people and if we are going to walk and make progress in our Christian life in a way that is worthy of our calling, then we have to endeavor, as he says at verse 3, to keep the unity because there is one body.

The unity is there in principle, but it is not always there in practice. The unity is there in the root, but it is not always there in the fruit.

[5 : 46] And that is what these 16 verses have been about and we have looked at the first part of it already and we want to look now at the final verses of this section where Paul is painting for us the goal of Christian unity.

Where he is giving us a view of what we must aim at so that the principle becomes the practice, so that the root grows fully into the fruit.

And he uses particularly the picture of a healthy body. He speaks in verse 13 of the perfect man, till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God into a perfect man.

And then he speaks about it similarly at verse 16 when he says from Christ the whole body fitly joined together and compacted by that which every joint supplies and so on.

The picture of a healthy body working perfectly with all the different parts of the body working in a unity together functioning for the good of each other so that the whole body is complete and healthy.

[7 : 22] And Paul is saying if you're an individual Christian if you are one of God's people if you have experienced the power of God's effectual calling as the catechism puts it in your life then you've got to live a life worthy of that calling and you've got to make progress just as any healthy life will make progress progress and you mustn't even think of making progress in isolation in isolation from the church and perhaps more particularly in isolation from the congregation because each congregation of God's people if it's a proper scriptural congregation should be the church in miniature.

Every congregation should be making progress towards functioning as the healthy body of Christ and so this letter that's written to the whole church is written to a congregation to a gathering of God's people and Paul is saying you've got to walk worthy of your calling each one of you you must do it not in isolation but in the unity in the body unity of the people of God because God's aim God's goal as we have particularly in these final verses of this section verses 12 to 16 God's goal God's plan that was made clear to us right at the beginning of this epistle God's plan is for a body is for a church God's plan is for his people in unity God's plan is not for his people in glorious isolation from one another and to walk worthy we have to walk in line with God's plan seeking to be part of the unity of the saints and so of course we ask once again what will be involved and I think although this is a complicated section we can unravel from it certain emphasis that Paul and the Holy Spirit would teach us if we are really to reach this goal and to be part of this goal the first emphasis is about using gifts using gifts this will be important to us if we are indeed going to be carried along with God's purpose of this healthy body the people of God in unity under Christ the head using gifts will be an important emphasis for us and of course we've got to start there because this has been the main emphasis of the whole passage and we cannot see this final picture of the goal that God has in view for his people without seeing it following on from what's been said in the earlier verses and of course it has all been to do with gifts gifts that are given to each one at verse 7 you see

Paul had said that and to everyone and that really means and to each one this is one of the things that marks out the true people of God to each one of them is given grace or enabling if you like abilities if you like to each one is given this enabling grace the ability to work and to serve the Lord according to the measure of the gift of Christ the variety of the enablings may vary according to Christ's sovereign giving or gifting and then Paul goes on to show that the teaching gifts are central to the working out of this purpose of distributing grace or enabling power throughout all the company of the

Lord's people to Sam was given apostleship and prophets and we've been through all that so we mustn't go at it again but we've seen that it's an emphasis on the teaching gifts and what is the purpose of these teaching gifts why is it so important to have the teaching gift within every congregation because this is what these teaching gifts are for we have it at verse 12 and now we're into the section that we're really dealing with this evening it's for the perfecting of the saints for the work of ministry for the edifying of the body of Christ and many of you will have heard before now that most commentators have agreed that for the best reading of this verse 12 we have to miss out that first comma that there is in our authorized version for the perfecting of the saints for the work of the ministry that comma would suggest as if the two were different entities but that's not the best reading at all it's for the perfecting of the saints for the work of ministry so the teaching within any congregation within any church if that teaching has been blessed of God it will be bringing the Lord's people on to maturity of faith that's what perfecting means it will be strengthening them in all their

Christian convictions so that they can minister and so that they can minister responsibly so that they can minister with a heart full of grace so that they can minister with a desire and a name that's for the glory of Christ who has saved them because everyone will have received enabling for ministry everyone will have received grace distributed by the authority of Christ and we need to be taught and built up in our faith so that we will use that enabling for the good of the whole body and use it wisely and use it humbly and use it perseveringly not thinking of our own comfort but thinking of the glory of Christ and the good of the whole body of believers what can we pick out of that by way of particular application truly it's reminding us that if we are indeed to grow up into this perfect man into this united church that Christ has in mind we need to be involved we need to be involved with the church of Christ we need to be involved with the gathered company of believers there's no encouragement with this sort of teaching when this plan of

[15 : 50] God is revealed there is no encouragement here from flitting from congregation to congregation keeping ourselves foot loose when it comes to real involvement in the purpose of God God the picture here we had it earlier in the passage is of being cemented of being bonded together ministering to one another not keeping our distance so that we can just do what suits ourselves ourselves there's no encouragement in this teaching for viewing our approach to the church or for viewing our approach to a particular congregation as yes we will attend that congregation because we need to receive that's really the only reason why I become a member of a congregation because I want to receive

I want to receive the word I want to receive good teaching I want to receive God's grace there's nothing wrong with that as far as it goes but if that's as far as it goes that's an unscriptural attitude to our involvement in the unity of the saints if we're Christian believers we have to receive in order to minister and so the approach must be I am fixed to that congregation because it's in miniature my being fixed to the church of Christ because that's the environment in which I receive and in which I'm able to give and to serve because that's Christ's purpose and that's the goal he has in view for a healthy body just like the physical body where each little member and organ of the body is absolutely useless if you take it out of the body it remains healthy when it is functioning properly ministering for the good of the whole body and another application would be this

I think that we all who are Christ's people we all need to be positively prayerful about ministry we need often to pray with the apostle Paul Lord what will you have me to do you've saved me so that I can serve you that's why you call me to be part of the body of Christ's people in this earth that's why you discourage me from keeping from membership you rather encourage me to be a member oh not that we will ever find the perfect congregation but we are encouraged to profess that being Christ's we are committed to his body being committed to the head we are committed to the body and being committed we are ever asking

Lord what will you have me to do is there some ability is there some grace is there some insight that you have given to me that I can use for the good of the whole body and the complimentary application of that would be that there is a great responsibility laid on the leaders of any congregation the office bearers of any congregation as they review the workings of a congregation as we will be doing in our session quite soon to see if we are always opening up situations that will allow the people of God to minister and to function as serving members of Christ's body ministry our aim in this congregation must be for a body ministry not for a one man band or a two man band or a twenty man band but a whole membership band of serving people so that's the first emphasis then the next emphasis as we seek this goal of the healthy body united together in the unity of the saints the next emphasis that we will need to have in our lives as individual

Christians is learning doctrine maybe a surprising one but it's here and it can be unraveled really quite easily this is an emphasis that the Holy Spirit has for the people of God if they are to realize this perfect man this unity of the saints not only in the root but also in the fruit there must be a learning of doctrine and a putting of it into practice you see we yes we had the emphasis on the teaching ministry in verse 11 but the emphasis returns to teaching and to learning at verses 13 and 14 and 15 can you see it with me verse 13 till we all come in the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the

[22 : 05] Son of Man now it's not the unity of faith notice it's the unity of the faith and this faith in scripture is to do with the body of teaching that unites the people of God in true faith in Christ the faith is the teaching the gospel teaching the gospel doctrines if you like the gospel truth that is the means through which we are brought to faith and are enabled to know the God and the saviour in whom we believe so the unity that we're talking about here the unity of saints is a unity that can be described as the unity of the faith or the unity of the knowledge of

Christ in other words the unity of the saints is a unity in the truth it's a unity in the truth of the gospel that's the reason that we've always had such terrible misgivings about the ecumenical movement as we know it that has had the idea that we can create a church unity no matter what we believe no matter what's at the basis of our faith well I think even the church history of the great conference of 1910 since the world council of churches movement really had its root the history of these decades of this century even that has made clear that you just cannot have true unity of the saints where there's no unity in the truth in the central truths of salvation evolution we he does for salvation. And then we're told at verse 14 that we henceforth be no more children tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine. In other words, we're told that when we grow in this unity, we are no longer unstable doctrinally.

Now I think there's a great need for this truth, the truth of these two verses in balance, verses 13 and 14. There's need for these truths to be taught to the evangelical church of our day.

For very often it seems that there is a great emphasis on growth and numerical growth without any real emphasis on doctrinal teaching and preaching. It doesn't fit in with what the Holy Spirit is saying here. God's plan is for the saints being united and for growing into this unity and the evidence that they are growing into this unity of the faith is that they will no longer be children in doctrine. They'll know when false teachers come along. They'll be able to examine the true doctrine and the false doctrine and they'll be able to separate. This is not just spoken to ministers who have perhaps some theological training. All the Lord's people need to be guarded.

They need to grow in learning sound doctrine so that when false teachers come along, they'll be able to recognize them and they won't be tossed through about because these false teachers, just as it was in the days of the New Testament, it hasn't changed to this day. They're like wolves in sheep's clothing.

[26 : 29] They're so plausible. They seem to be like Christ himself. But the teaching is not according to God's word.

And we need to be able to examine that and to know it for ourselves so that we're not set off course. And then we finally show this unity at verse 15 when we speak the truth in love.

When we're truthing, and that's really the most literal translation of the word here, truthing in love.

That's not only our speaking, but all our interrelationships together are according to the truth and for the keeping of the truth and the advancing of the truth, but in love.

What applications do we make from that picture? From that exposition? What particular applications? And I must be very quick. The first application is this.

[27 : 47] We must be willing to learn doctrine. We must be willing to search the scriptures to know exactly what the Bible is saying on every truth.

And of course the complementary truth of that is that the preachers, true teachers within any congregation, must preach doctrine.

Oh, I don't think the way it would be taught in a theological college. It must be broken down. But the sermons must be such that the people are able to take into themselves the difference between the truth and the error of all the different doctrines of God's word.

So yes, we should be coming to church not just looking for a boost for our emotions, but we should come to church looking for our minds to be instructed.

It might be that we could do with seeing more note-taking in our congregations. That often does help to discipline the mind to learn, even if the notes are never read again.

[29 : 04] It can be a discipline to help us to pick out those truths from a sermon that we need to remember. And then, yes, the congregation has a right to tell the teaching elders if they feel that they're not learning doctrine the way they would like to, if they still have misunderstandings and difficulties, so that the teachers may know that they're not getting it across properly.

Because it's absolutely essential for spiritual growth and for being part of the final unity of the saints.

then we've to beware of the danger of false doctrine. We've got to appreciate that there will always be false teachers and that that's the thing that is most likely to spoil the spiritual work of God.

You read through the epistles and again and again and again the danger is false doctrine. And you see, people are attracted in these days to different spiritual movements without ever examining what's the doctrine, what's the teaching behind it.

people are more interested in the emotional effect that the movement seems to have or the popular effect that it has on the masses.

[30 : 56] that if there is no doctrinal truth, it is not in line with the scripture's way of uniting the people of God in Christ.

And then, of course, the other application is that if we are going to grow in the unity of the saints, it's not enough to learn doctrine.

We've got to be able to truth it in love. We've got to be able to react with our fellow Christians on the basis of that truth in love.

What is fellowship? Well, I think probably this would be one of the best definitions of Christian fellowship. Truth in love.

Truth in love.

[32 : 26] Truth in love. To be united in the truth. When we're to begin with divided in the truth, there'll be some confrontation as we find out from the Bible who's right and who's wrong.

But that can be done in love with a genuine heart's desire that the people of God become more and more united together.

And then there's a last emphasis, and we'll have to deal with this one very quickly. There's a using of gifts if we've got this goal of Christian unity in mind and we want to be part of it.

Using of gifts, learning of doctrine, and exalting the head. Exalting the head.

You see how the passage here, yes it's about painting the picture of a perfect healthy body. But it makes the emphasis that there's a head to this body.

[33 : 37] And that the proper function of the body is under the head. And Christ is that head. You see in all our interaction in the body, we've got to remember it's Christ's body.

He's the head. And what we want is that every member of that body will show by the way they function individually, individually and particularly the way they function together, that Christ is the head.

We need to remember that. Sometimes we may be working against the unity of the body, because we're working as if it was the free church's body.

And we imagine that everybody is out of step with Christ, if they don't work exactly the way that the free church works.

Or we feel it's the body of the church that we've known in the tradition of our young days. And we want everybody to be united in that tradition.

[35 : 07] That we've to bring everything under the scrutiny of the headship of Christ. It may be the thing that pleases the free church most, but is it the thing that pleases Christ the most?

We trust that often what pleases the free church is what pleases Christ. But do remember, it's Christ who is the head.

And we do not impose on one another. We do not seek to bring each other to a unity together in anything except what Christ the head dictates.

And that must be our aim and our emphasis in everything that we do for ourselves and for one another. We remember that Christ is the head.

He is the one who dictates to the whole body. We search the scriptures for his commands. And we obey them.

[36 : 30] That's the way that we grow into Christ. That's the way that we grow into the head. Just the same way as the branches abide in the vine.

And abide in the love of God by obeying his commandments. We will be more united the more sanctified we become.

The more like Christ we become. Because we are bringing his word, his commands, and his laws to bear on every area of our lives.

Show me your will, O Lord. Show me your will, O Lord. It's our constant prayer if we are growing into Christ. But notice also what is said about Christ.

That we are to grow up into him from whom? The whole body. That's at verse 15. Let me just see that I've got it right.

[37 : 33] Speaking the truth in love may grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ, from whom the whole body fitly joined together.

And what is really said is, from whom the whole body gets its strength. We grow up into him by obeying him.

But of course we never obey him without first trusting in him. Without constantly remembering that whatever he commands, he promises the grace and the power to do it.

That's what we're aiming at. That we and every other Christian may be united in obedience and faith to Christ the head.

But one last word to anyone here this evening who feels that they are still outside that body.

[38 : 54] And you cannot really say that Christ is the head of your life. Well, we know much more today about grafts.

All sorts of body grafts so that pieces can be grafted in to the body. Not just skin grafts. But now hearts and livers and all sorts of things can be grafted in.

And it's the same with the agricultural picture of the vine and the branches. Other branches can be grafted in to the life-giving trunk of the vine or of the olive tree or whatever.

And that's what you need tonight. You see, God has a plan. God has a purpose.

And it's going to be completed in the unity of the saints. And there will be this perfect man, this perfect body. And God's purposes are sweeping on.

[40 : 07] And the people of God here tonight have been encouraged to maintain that unity. And they've been encouraged to see that they can go on as part of this glorious purpose. But if you're still outside, you must be grafted in.

And there is grace that can graft you in. Christ has the power if you will go to him with your sin and with your need and ask him tonight to graft you in that you also may be part of the unity of the saints.

Amen. Now we turn to Psalm 92. Psalm 92 at verse 12 the tune is Arlington.

That like the palm tree flourishing shall be the righteous one. He shall like to the cedar grow that is in Lebanon. Those that within the house of God are planted by his grace.

they shall grow up and flourish all in our God's holy place. And I think maybe these two verses will be sufficient for us as we end this service because there is so much in them.

[41 : 44] Verses 12 and 13 of Psalm 92. But like the palm tree flourishing shall be the righteous one He shall like to the cedar grow He shall like to the cedar grow that is in Lebanon.

Those that within the house of God are planted by his grace.

They shall grow up and flourish all They shall grow up and flourish all in our God's holy place.

Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ the love of God the Father and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit remain with us now and always.

Amen.