

Preserving our Unity

Titus 3:9-11

This morning we're finishing up our sermon series "A Healthy Church" taken from the book of Titus. Paul wrote to Titus (who was on the island of Crete) and explained what characterizes a healthy church:

- A healthy church has mature elders.
- A healthy church maintains sound doctrine (while correcting false doctrine)
- In a healthy church people honor God in every stage of life - young or old, male or female, slave or free
- A healthy church lives in light of the grace we **have** received at Christ's first coming and in light of the grace we **will** receive at His second coming
- A healthy church is zealous for good deeds.

Today we're going to see that a healthy church works hard at unity. In Titus 3:9-11 Paul tells Titus how to address **divisive issues** and with **divisive people**. He is going to advocate a very strong, direct approach. The presupposition is that by addressing division, the church can experience unity.

Paul doesn't explain it here, but other Scriptures teach that unity isn't "icing on the cake" or something that's nice but not all that important. Without unity a church can't even come close to fulfilling its mission. In John 17, for example, Jesus prayed that His followers would have unity "so that the world may believe that You sent Me." ***Our unity (deep, substantive unity) is the world's best evidence that Jesus was sent by the Father.*** Superficial relationships, strife, individualism, or a dozen other maladies make it very easy for "the world" to dismiss Jesus as just another good man who had some helpful advice and the church as nothing but another flawed, selfish, human institution. But when the church exhibits unity (and joy and life), people far from God will sometimes take notice and consider the claims of Christ.

And so addressing division is critical for our unity and therefore our mission of helping people come to faith in Christ and then experience God in all of life.

A healthy church avoids many divisive topics/issues. (3:9)

In verse 9 Paul tells Titus that the first way you avoid division is by avoiding many divisive topics in the first place.

9 But avoid foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law, for they are unprofitable and worthless.

The bottom line for Paul is that certain topics and issues simply are not "profitable" and "worthy"; they are unprofitable and worthless in terms of their ability to produce lasting spiritual fruit or their ability to further the mission of the church. This stands in stark contrast with "engaging in good deeds" - which Paul in verse 8 wrote are "good and profitable." Certain topics and issues only distract the church and keep it from being "zealous for good works" (2:15, 3:1, 8).

Therefore, Paul said to “avoid” certain issues. The term means to “keep aloof from” or “keep your distance from” them. These things shouldn’t occupy his time or energy. Each person in this room has a finite amount of time and energy. By deciding to do some things you are also deciding not to do other things. The same is true of every local church. This church has a finite amount of time and energy; therefore, we should engage in those pursuits that bear lasting spiritual fruit, and we should avoid those that don’t. It’s largely the responsibility of the church’s leadership to discern what issues should occupy the church’s attention and which ones shouldn’t.

The measure of a healthy church isn’t how busy it keeps its people; a church can be busy with all sorts of irrelevant things. A healthy church is concerned whether or not it is fulfilling the mission Jesus gave us.

What specifically did Paul have in mind? He mentions, avoiding “foolish controversies and genealogies and strife and disputes about the Law.” In 1 Timothy 6:4 Paul also warned against those who “have a morbid interest in controversial questions and disputes about words. . .” The message about Jesus is controversial enough without adding “foolish controversies.”

For example, Paul mentions “genealogies.” Apparently it was common to speculate about a person’s ancestry and claim some spiritual significance. This might be analogous to someone claiming, “I’m related to Albert Einstein, so believe me when I tell you that I’m pretty smart.” In the same way someone might say, “I’m a descendant of the prophet Isaiah, so you should respect me as someone with spiritual authority.” Paul told Titus to avoid that type of talk altogether.

But perhaps the primary problem at Crete (where Titus lived) involved a preoccupation with “the Law” - meaning the old covenant. Of course there’s nothing wrong with studying the old covenant, but we need to study the Law in a way that’s profitable (as opposed to a way that causes strife or disputes).

Jesus (in the gospels) and Paul (in his letters) and Luke (in the book of Acts) taught that the old covenant (a.k.a. “the Law”) is now obsolete; it has been replaced by the new covenant in Jesus’ blood. And so ***we don’t study the Law in order to get a detailed set of behaviors*** because the Law no longer defines what a relationship with God looks like. We can profitably study the Law for other reasons: because of what it reveals about God, because of what it teaches about human nature, because it illustrates many biblical concepts (such as atonement), etc. So there are a lot of great reasons to study the Law. But some ways of using the Law are merely divisive; they would fall into the category of “foolish controversies.” Paul’s counsel was to simply avoid such issues altogether.

The problem in Crete was apparently quite similar to the problem in Ephesus where Timothy was a pastor. In 1 Timothy 1 Paul wrote this:

3 As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on at Ephesus so that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines, 4 nor to pay attention

to myths and endless genealogies, which give rise to mere speculation rather than *furthering* the administration of God which is by faith. 5 But the goal of our instruction is love from a pure heart and a good conscience and a sincere faith.

Paul said there in verse 4 that you shouldn't even "pay attention to" things that don't further God's purposes in the world. This doesn't mean that you avoid all controversial issues. It's hard to imagine more controversial teachings than the teachings of Jesus: He taught about marriage and divorce, about how to think about and use money, about not taking revenge; etc. In the Sermon on the Mount, He even said that "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father in heaven" (Matthew 7:21). That's a very controversial, provocative thing to say. You can't follow Jesus and avoid all controversial issues.

But Paul's point is that you should avoid foolish controversies and disputes about the Law that are "unprofitable and worthless" when it comes to doing the will of God.

The specific "divisive issues" will vary from culture to culture and church to church. But the principle involves discerning when an issue/topic is profitable and therefore should be discussed or when an issue is unprofitable and should be avoided altogether. In our day such issues might include debates about when Christ will return; every few years somebody claims to know when this will happen. Those types of discussions are unprofitable and worthless. Or occasionally someone will advocate following dietary laws from old covenant for spiritual reasons. In a healthy church such issues are identified as a distraction and not profitable.

A healthy church doesn't tolerate "divisive people." (3:10-11) In verse 10 Paul turns his attention from divisive issues to divisive people. He advocates a very direct and decisive approach.

10 Reject a factious man after a first and second warning, 11 knowing that such a man is perverted and is sinning, being self-condemned.

The term Paul uses for "factious" or "divisive" is found only here in the NT. [We get the term "heretical" from this Greek word, but we shouldn't read later understandings of being a heretic into this passage.] It refers to someone who splits the church into different factions by what they say and do. In Crete those who introduced foolish controversies and disputes about the Law were divisive. Instead of promoting unity within the church at Crete, they were causing divisions. Paul tells Titus to give this person a couple of chances to abandon their false teaching (and therefore their divisiveness). If he won't change, Paul says, "reject" such a man. That may sound harsh, but remember that Paul isn't talking about somebody who's immature and confused; he's talking about somebody who is confirmed in his false teaching.

Paul actually says that such a person is "perverted" (or corrupt), sinning (it's not an honest misunderstanding), and he is "self-condemned" (by his persistent refusal to change his teaching, he confirms that he's a divisive person). After a couple of warnings, there's nothing to do but distance yourself from such a person. You don't

want to give him the opportunity to be divisive and to influence the church away from sound doctrine.

Of course, divisive people almost always feel justified in causing division. Sometimes that's because they feel like they're right or because they're on God's side: "The truth is worth fighting about, right?" Sometimes it's because they've been hurt or mistreated by others in the church: "Why should I try to get along with others when I've been so mistreated?" Even if such a person feels justified in causing division, there's far too much at stake for the church to tolerate such a person.

Paul's challenge is to 1) avoid certain divisive issues, and 2) to reject divisive persons. In light of this teaching, I want us to ask the question, ***What type of church should we therefore be?*** This seems like a strategic question because you can't live out this type of teaching in a vacuum.

A church that works hard at unity. If unity is a weak, passive concept, then it won't have much power to inform and shape the way the church conducts itself. Efforts at unity will be seen as "compromise" or "giving in." But the biblical concept of unity is anything but weak or passive. Unity is strong, active, and intentional. In one of the most direct statements on unity in the NT, Paul writes this in Ephesians 4:1-5:

1 Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, 2 with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, 3 being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. 4 *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; 5 one Lord, one faith, one baptism, 6 one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

In verse 3 Paul mentioned "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit." Unity isn't something that we create; in an ultimate sense, ***unity already exists***, something we need to preserve. Paul's point in verses 4 and 5 are that when God called the church into existence, He created the body of Christ as a unity because ***He*** is a unity. The death and resurrection of Jesus didn't create many bodies of Christ; it created one body of Christ. Each local church is supposed to be an expression of that one body.

In verse 2 Paul lists some of the qualities that help preserve the unity of the Spirit: humility, gentleness, patience, and "showing tolerance for one another in love." For example, if a culture of humility is established in a church, the types of division that are so common in the body of Christ simply won't be tolerated. You might call it "positive peer pressure." When one person is talking trash about someone else (i.e., slandering another person), people call them on it. People challenge them, "Have you said these things directly to that person? If so, did you speak the truth 'in love'? If not, why not? Can I help you do this? In any case, slander is a manifestation of the fruit of the flesh. Here at Faith we value our unity too much to slander others."

Honestly here at Faith there have been seasons where our unity has suffered - when there's been far too much pride and not enough humility. By the grace of God we've

been working hard at our unity here at Faith. We've got some foundational commitments to working through conflicts in a God-honoring way. It begins with our leadership doing the very things we've discussed here this morning (e.g., being careful to avoid foolish controversies and being courageous enough to confront divisive people). But it's vital that the entire church has this same commitment to unity.

A church that is committed to the mission Jesus has given us. I mentioned this in the introduction, so I'll be brief here. But there's a dynamic here that's very observable: When the church is "on mission" petty, unprofitable things stick out like a sore thumb (as they say). A church full of people who are experiencing God deeply and that is passionate about seeing people come to faith in Christ simply doesn't have the time or energy to wrangle over all sorts of things that don't matter.

For example, I find that being part of the Alpha leadership team keeps me on mission. I love being part of a team in which we're pouring out our lives for others. Week in and week out we commit ourselves to serve, love, and pray for people. Consequently when I'm "on mission" in that way, I have very little energy to criticize and nit-pick what others are or are not doing. I can get as critical as the next person, but when I'm on mission it falls way down my priority list. And we experience wonderful unity as we stay on mission.

It may be that you need to become part of a ministry team - here at Faith or in a campus ministry or some other outreach. If you tend to be isolated and if you tend to have a red-pencil mentality in which you critique and criticize everything that others do, becoming part of a team that is trusting God for great things might be exactly what you need to do - for your own maturity and for the sake of the body of Christ. When you're pouring out your life for others - when you are actually loving others in deed - you will naturally promote unity because you care about the impact we're having in this world.

Here at Faith we need people to help with Alpha (set-up crew, prayer team, hospitality, inviters, etc.), we need people to help in children's and youth ministry, we're looking for people to help with parking and welcoming on Sunday mornings. We encourage people to participate in Life Groups with a ministry mindset, considering how you might serve others in your group. Use the connections card to register an interest in serving.

But ***if we stay on mission, we will naturally work hard at unity.***

Lord's Table. This morning we are going to celebrate the Lord's table. In 1 Corinthians 11 Paul challenged the church at Corinth to examine their unity. In 11:18 Paul wrote, ". . .when you come together as a church, I hear that divisions exist among you; and in part I believe it. . ." In Corinth there were divisions between the rich and the poor (chapter 11), between those who had (what we typically call) "charismatic gifts" and those who didn't (chapters 12-14).

In their day the Lord's Table was a meal that included food and drink. Those who were rich had the flexibility and freedom to show up early and get their fill of food and drink; by the time the poor showed up (after finishing their work or household responsibilities),

everything was gone. Instead of being a beautiful picture of the unity that exists within the body of Christ, the Lord's Table only highlighted the divisions that existed. Paul's challenge was, "Let each person examine himself" so you don't eat or drink in an unworthy manner.

In this context I would challenge/encourage each of us to examine ourselves. Ask:

- Am I the type of person who is "diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace"?
- Am I characterized by "humility and gentleness, and patience, showing tolerance for one another in love" (Eph. 4:2)?
- Or are there things I say and do that promote division instead of unity?
- Am I "on mission," pouring out my life so that others might come to faith in Christ and then experience God in all of life?

The bread and the cup represent the body and blood of Jesus. His sacrifice not only secured our salvation individually; it also brought into existence the body of Christ. Since there is "one body" we should do everything within our power to see the body of Christ healthy and vibrant so that we might live out our calling in this world.

As an expression of our unity, please hold the bread and then we'll eat together. Please hold the cup and we'll drink together.