

DISAGREEING WELL

This talk looks at the importance of Christians disagreeing well in politics and how that can be an example for the rest of society.

TALK (10 MINUTES)

You can read this out to the congregation (it takes about 8 min plus the Bible reading), or if you'd like to develop your own version, feel free. We're going to think today about unity and what that means as we approach politics. Read - or ask someone else to read - Psalm 133 and 2 Chronicles 30:12.



Psalm 133

How good and pleasant it is
when God's people live together in unity!
2 It is like precious oil poured on the head,
running down on the beard,
running down on Aaron's beard,
down on the collar of his robe.
3 It is as if the dew of Hermon
were falling on Mount Zion.
or there the Lord bestows his blessing,
even life forevermore.



Chronicles 30:12

Also in Judah the hand of God was on the people to give them unity of mind to carry out what the king and his officials had ordered, following the word of the Lord.

What is it that we understand from the word ‘unity’? What is unity? It’s not the same as uniformity, being the same, so what does it mean?

Well let’s go back a step. What is a unit? We use the term in all kinds of different ways. We use it in maths - you might remember learning to add up units, tens, and hundreds in the classroom, depending on how long ago you went to school. The military talk about units. A group of soldiers on the same team, living in the same place, get referred to as a unit. Ikea will sell you all kinds of units and give you instructions on how to assemble them at home. You can rent a unit, meaning a flat or apartment in a bigger building. (You could ask the group if they can think of other ways in which the word is used).

Couples or families sometimes get described as a unit. They are individuals but somehow they have this togetherness that also makes them some kind of joint entity or team. Describing disparate parts as making up a unit conveys a sense of togetherness, oneness, that they are not just independent parts, they also form something bigger. It’s not that they lose the sense of being something distinct, but they also function in this added way as a part of something else. Something bigger. And ‘unity’ is the term given to describe that state of harmony. So let’s think back over some of those meanings of unit and think about how ‘unity’ is displayed amongst the different parts - and how it makes a difference.

- maths?
- military?
- furniture?
- buildings?
- couples/families?
- any others you came up with.

At the heart of our faith is a unit of three persons, The Trinity. In the Bible, God is revealed as Father, Son, Spirit. The Trinity is the model of a as a perfect unit, and the relationship that the three of them share was even depicted by the early Church Fathers as a dance - known as perichoresis. It’s a powerful picture of being in step and in tune with one another, sharing a rhythm and a sense of movement.

But what does unity mean when it comes to the church, to God's people. We get a sense of its importance from the Old Testament, in the verses which we just read. Psalm 133 talks about unity as something beautiful to which God's people should aspire. The whole psalm is dedicated to this one idea that when God's people live in unity together it is a profound joy and blessing to everyone. The psalmist uses images of oil and dew pouring out over everyone, these beautiful, life giving liquids that cannot be contained.

In the New Testament, the theme of unity is presented in both theological and practical terms. Paul famously wrote to the church in Philippi, in the second chapter of his letter:

“Therefore if you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any common sharing in the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, 2 then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and of one mind.” (Phil 2:1-2)

It is assumed that through our faith in Jesus we have been united to him in a profound way, and Paul urged us that if this is really true, if we have experienced his love, then it must lead to a practical unity with other believers which is described in terms of having one mind and one spirit. Does this mean that Paul is urging us to have all the same opinions as every other Christian, to embrace a uniformity of perspective on everything? Is that what any of us have experienced in the church? Christians have always had things that they disagree with one another about - you can see that in the New Testament as well as in today's church - and even in the video we just watched. Christians join different political parties!

So what else might it mean to share the same love, being one in spirit and mind? It means that we are filled with same spirit, God's Holy Spirit, and perhaps this means that we affirm and recognise that in one another even when we disagree. It means that we are held together by our love for Jesus and our complete trust in him as the source of our salvation. It might mean that these things that unite us are more important than the things we disagree about, and that we hold in mind this unity, this togetherness in the face of anything else?

We all have our own experiences of church life, and perhaps we have both positive and negative stories to share about when we have witnessed unity and when we really haven't. All kinds of issues threaten church unity. Leadership styles. Ways of leading meetings, Who is welcome in church. Ethical questions around lifestyle and sexuality. Often what tears churches apart are the attitudes involved more than the different opinions people hold. It is especially tragic when these attitudes override the love which we are called to extend to one another in every circumstance.

The early church faced a huge number of challenges as it learnt how to be a united community. It was comprised of people from social classes at opposite ends of the spectrum. In one congregation, a slave would worship alongside their owner – united as equals in Christ Jesus (see Galatians 3v28) and Scripture instructs both in how to act wisely and rightly towards the other. We are not required biblically to have the same opinions on issues which the Bible does not address directly, including political matters. It is worth remembering that all rulers, whether democratically elected or otherwise, are ruling on behalf of God and are accountable to him. We do not live in a theocratic society and are expected to learn how to live as a Christian community within in a plural environment.

Different Christians will each have different political ideas and vote accordingly. They will join different parties and some will stand for election for different, opposing, parties. They all need our prayers, whether we agree with their political ideas or not.

The ability to disagree on secondary matters within a context of unity around primary matters is priceless. The media are constantly looking for spats and points of contention between different camps within political parties, as they make for good headlines. Christians are called to be humble towards each other, realising we are all sinners prone to pride. The way in which we discuss and debate political matters is more important than the outcome.

Good disagreement is rarely fostered outside the context of good relationships. When we don't know each other we judge each other. We need to intentionally build relationships with those whom we may disagree. And that takes time and effort. And humility.

Ephesians 1v10 says that ‘when the times reach their fulfilment, God will bring unity to all things in heaven and earth under Christ’. The New Creation (Revelation 21 and 22) will usher in an eternal age of perfect cosmic, and societal, unity. What a beautiful hope that we have. We cannot force unity, but God is bringing it about as he works to restore and redeem the whole creation. Until then, as C S Lewis notes: ‘democracy is not food, it is medicine’ – it is not ideal, but necessary to manage society in a fallen context. Debate is part of democracy, and disagreements over ideas and policy are inherent, but they all must be understood in the context of the great, perfectly united, eternal future that God has for his people in glory.

DISCUSSION



1. Do you think Christians know how to disagree well? Do you think the people in your church are good at it?

2. Do people talk about politics in your church? If not, do you think this is related to fears about disunity?

3. How can we discuss and debate political issues within the church without falling out with other?

4. Do you think that you are someone who is “quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry” (James 1:19)?