

Christian Unity

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[0 : 00] Good morning. This morning's sermon will be different than usual. If you are a guest with us this morning, I want you to know that we normally preach verse by verse expositions through a book, the regular practice of our church.

We are presently working our way through Paul's letter to the Romans, where we just concluded chapter 11. This morning, I want us to think together, though, about Christian unity as we have some news to announce to our membership, which I will share with you in just a bit.

So a little break from Romans for an important matter. We will look at a number of texts today. So, and again, I don't love preaching. It doesn't start with a text and isn't text driven.

But from time to time, it's important and necessary for us to do otherwise. But I'd like for us to begin in Romans chapter 15. So if you could join me there. Romans chapter 15, verses 5 and 6.

We will exposit this text at length. So this is not your Romans 15, 5 and 6 sermon. We read,

[2 : 18] It's the very reason we get up in the morning that Christ would be known in our lives, amongst our families, our co-workers, and to the very ends of the earth.

We want the praise of Christ to be sung amongst all peoples. And so we go to all the various places that God sends us. And Paul here is saying he hopes that the Roman Christ followers and you and I would be given grace for Christian unity so that the Lord Jesus Christ would receive glory.

Not the only way he receives glory, but Paul here says that it is a way, and I would contend an important way, that he receives glory.

But we don't always agree, do we? Sometimes we have personal conflict, and the Bible is replete with commands and instruction for how we are to set aside our preferences, bear with one another, with compassion, and reconcile.

I think this is a church that does that very well. Sometimes we have convictional differences.

Faithful Christians haven't always seen eye to eye on everything.

[3 : 33] If you're paying attention at all, you're very aware of this. Differences in understanding about what the Bible teaches. This has always been true.

It's been an ancient part of the church to find disagreement amongst one another. It is true amongst us. We don't all see eye to eye on everything.

We don't all agree on all things, and this creates some genuine challenges for unity. It would be much easier if we agreed on everything all the time, but this is also impossible.

Our disagreements certainly create the need to ask that God would be gracious to us, that we might live in the type of harmony that exalts Jesus Christ.

So, how are we to be agreeable while disagreeing? How do we disagree with charity, an old word for love, for one another?

[4 : 38] And we do so by employing, employing well, the practice of theological triage. I know that many of you may already be tired of me talking about this, but I think it's really important, so I'm just going to keep doing so.

Triage is the process of assigning urgency or importance to a matter. If a bus that is full of people were in an accident, and that number was brought into an emergency room, those patients would be ranked for treatment from most severe need to least severe need.

This is emergency room triage. This can, and I argue, should also be done theologically. If you believe that the Bible teaches a doctrine, and a well-meaning Christian brother or sister disagrees with your view, what are you to do?

How important, or perhaps unimportant, is said disagreement? Theological triage helps us to determine this.

We need to be able to think in this way and to do so regularly and quickly. Now, at this point, I want to be clear. The term theological triage was coined, as far as I can tell, by Al Mohler, the current president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

[6 : 03] So it's a recent term. However, the concept can be seen historically in the creation of confessions and creeds, Christians carefully pinning doctrinal standards for the sake of agreement, and, more importantly, as I will show you this morning in the Bible.

So, as a modern practice under that term, it's also a very ancient practice that starts in the Scripture itself.

So I want to lay out for you this idea of theological triage. Again, some of you are familiar with it, but some of you may not be. Theological triage divides doctrinal issues into four different categories. They're not creatively named. They're primary, secondary, tertiary, quaternary, or first, second, third, and fourth order doctrines.

To explain them to you, I'm going to take them out of order because I think it helps our understanding of them. So the first I want to address is the fourth, the fourth order doctrinal category or quaternary doctrines.

[7 : 14] And these are things that are just unimportant. Have a view and an opinion, but it really doesn't matter. And we don't come up with these very often because we're sensible people and we have a lot going on, and so we don't tend to muse about things like this.

So my common example for this one is their life on other planets. And I've been asked this question by typically young men because they have too much time on their hands.

And I'll tell you that my answer to them is, I don't know and I don't care. It's unimportant. Interesting to think about, but it doesn't really matter. The second I want to talk about is third order doctrine or tertiary doctrine.

These are things that are not unimportant. They are, in fact, important, but they're important for the individual. There's commands in the Bible that we have to have some mind toward.

What do we think this teaches and how am I going to practice it in my life? And you may find that you could differ from someone else that you have regular fellowship with, and that be okay.

[8 : 25] I think this area of our lives is a place in which we serve each other so well because we ought to hold it importantly and perhaps make a case to other Christians. How do we grow in maturity if we assume everything we believe the Bible teaches on the surface is right?

Well, no. There's things that we grow in and we need to be taught in and we need to be pressing one another on. So some examples of people who disagree about alcohol as an example.

There are people who are teetotlers, think we should never ever drink alcohol, and there are people who think it's okay in moderation to drink alcohol. What kind of TV or movies you might consume? There are some clear, off-limit types of things to consume, but some people may have a problem with a particular TV show and somebody else may not have a problem with that show. Schooling choices is a hot one these days.

Is it okay to send your children to public school or off to private or homeschool? These are important conversations for us to be having. Our family, homeschools.

[9 : 33] I would give you a theological foundation for why we do that. I would also give you lots of practical application. The way my wife and I think, it leads us to the conclusion that we ought to school our children at home.

But you might see things differently, and this isn't a reason for me to put you in an unfaithful category. We're all growing and we're all learning and we're all doing the best we can.

So, to find this in the scripture, you can turn back just a page to Romans chapter 14. I just want to show you an example of it. There's a number of places that Paul speaks to this.

But here you can see very clearly, beginning in verse 1, as for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions. Welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

One person believes he may eat anything, while the weak person eats only vegetables. This had to do with some Jewish customs. Let not the one who eats despise the one who abstains, and let not the one who abstains pass judgment on the one who eats, for God has welcomed him.

[10 : 49] Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls, and he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand. One person esteems one day as better than another, while another esteems all days alike.

Each one should be fully convinced in his own mind. The one who observes the day, observes it in honor of the Lord. The one who eats, eats in honor of the Lord, since he gives thanks to God. While the one who abstains, abstains in honor of the Lord, and gives thanks to God. So, different cultural issues, when Paul is writing this, but all the same, tertiary types of things. Look at the way he's pressing at, you could go on to read the rest of chapter 14, and the beginning of 15. He's pressing at unity and harmony, right, for the sake of exalting Christ on these types of matters.

So, those are tertiary types of doctrines. It seems to me that most of the conflict in local churches is when people take tertiary doctrines, and they promote them to secondary, or in many cases, into primary position.

[12:02] You can't possibly be a Christian if you don't see this thing the way I see this thing, and it's very dangerous, and we must be careful. So, let me go back up to the top and talk briefly about first order doctrines, or primary doctrines.

These are the doctrines that are important for Christian unity. These are the doctrines that must be believed in order for somebody to be in Christ.

These are the most important doctrines. When we talk about the clarity of Scripture, these are the doctrines that we would say the Bible is abundantly clear on these things.

Examples, and there are a lot of examples here, but the deity of Jesus Christ. We cannot dismiss that Jesus Christ was, in fact, God, because if he wasn't God, then he was a liar and a lunatic, and we should reject everything that he said.

He was, in fact, God incarnate. You must believe in the deity of Jesus Christ to be a believer.

Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone.

[13:17] We've just walked through some difficult chapters in Paul's exhortation to the Romans. We believe as a church in sovereign election, but wherever you fall in this, in the minutia of this, you need to believe that we're saved by grace through faith in Christ.

That's as far as the fisticuffs go for me. If you can affirm that you needed God to save you and that God will keep you to the end, then you and I can be great friends because we're in Christ.

These first order things are the things that we're meant to fight for and to die for. This is the stuff that needs to stay central to what we do together.

It's extremely important that we get this correct. It grieves me to watch Christians across our nation, mostly happening online, just be ripped apart by things that are secondary or tertiary when we agree on these first order and most important things.

The enemy is so very pleased to find us infighting about less important stuff. Not remembering that we agree on the most important stuff.

[14:35] Those doctrines that push back the darkness of this world because souls are saved by the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ. We need to help each other to do this.

I inevitably am going to become distracted by something at some time and you are welcome to remind me about the stuff I'm supposed to be fighting and dying for. Don't let me fight and die for something that's not this important.

This is the stuff that we live and die for. Very interestingly, during our members gathering earlier, Ernie actually read this text.

I'm just going to read a little bit from the book of Jude. This is verse 3 and 4. There he says, Beloved, although I was very eager to write to you about our common salvation, I found it necessary to write appealing to you to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints.

Right? I think this is what he's talking about. Primary doctrine. To contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints. Here's why I think that. Verse 4 says, For certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation.

[15:47] Ungodly people who pervert the grace of our God into sensuality. They were cheap grace gospel people. They were saying, if you just claim the name of Christ, you can live however you want to and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ.

Right? In this day, Jude is saying to these Christians, you have got to bring people back to justification by grace through faith in Christ and help them to see that that faith is a faith that will work.

So, let's contend well together and I think we do this well. Primary doctrine. And then lastly, we have second order or secondary doctrine.

And this is a little more difficult. I don't have a scripture reference for you. The one thing that comes to mind for me is the division between Barnabas and Paul when they had taken Mark with them who's a relative we think of Barnabas and Mark abandoned them because he was fearful.

And when they got ready to take another journey, Paul refused to take Mark with them and Barnabas really wanted Mark to go and so there arose amongst them what Luke calls a sharp disagreement.

[17:02] And I take that to mean it wasn't friendly. It probably wasn't the way they should have disagreed. But all the same, they go separate ways. Barnabas takes John Mark with him.

Paul goes another way. I think the thing we see that's wonderful, the redemptive thing, as we see later on, Paul is back in ministry with Barnabas as well as with Mark.

There's been some restoration that has happened in that case. So there's an issue at hand that causes them still to be faithful to Christ. They still go on mission to spread the good news. First order primary doctrine stayed intact, but they went separate ways because they weren't sure how they should go.

So maybe we see it there. This category are things that are important for church or perhaps ministry fellowship.

Those things that we ought to agree on to remain institutionally together. These doctrines are going to define our practice and possibly define what we think is or isn't sin.

[18:14] It would be important to locate ourselves on certain issues. Some examples. What is a church's view on divorce and or remarriage?

Why does that matter? Because we collectively, we're a congregational church, we believe in church discipline. Well, what are we going to call sin in these matters? It's important that we think about this together.

Another example is whether or not a church believes in the regulative principle. that is to say, if we see something commanded in the Bible for us to do when we're gathered together, we should do that without fail.

And if we don't see it commanded, then we shouldn't do that. So on a Sunday morning when our church gathers together, you will not see interpretive dancing. We don't find this in the scripture. Don't give me some example of David. We don't find it commanded to the church to do this thing in the Bible. And so we're not going to do that thing together when we gather. This is the regulative principle.

[19:21] We should agree on that. You may find that you don't and you may want to go to a church where interpretive dancing happens on a Sunday morning. As a little aside, Martin Lloyd-Jones, when he was hired, the church that he preached his life at, was known for their pageantry.

They put on plays on Sunday mornings. And his first Sunday there, he dragged the pulpit, it was movable like this one, but he dragged the wooden pulpit across the stage.

You can just imagine in the room hearing a wooden pulpit being dragged across a wooden stage. He dragged it to the center. He took out a hammer and nails out of his pocket and he hammered the pulpit to the center of the stage there in that church building.

He was a regulative principle guy and he said the preaching of God's word is going to be central to what we do together as a church and they never put on another pageant there. Again, another good and classic example is a church's view on baptism.

What do you believe but what do we believe together as it concerns baptism? We find denominational differences over this with brothers that we celebrate, rejoice with, we're so happy and thankful to be gospel partners with them but we are not serving in a church with them because we hold a different view on this issue.

[20:48] Which brings me to my aforementioned announcement. Ty Brunette is a faithful brother. He is in full agreement with the church on primary doctrine.

He has been serving us well, although briefly, but well as an elder here. But he has come to find himself disagreeing with us on the secondary doctrine of baptism.

Now he didn't go looking for a different conviction on it. He stumbled across it in his study and has become convinced of a different position.

Now we, as a church in total, I mean, are credo-baptists which means that we believe that the only proper recipients of baptism are individuals who have made credible professions of faith in Christ. It's the careful work that we do as Baptists. We want to be able to, with the fallible confidence that we have, say yes, we believe that this person is in fact in the faith.

[21 : 49] They make a profession of that faith in being baptized. We affirm that in baptizing them. This is the credo-baptist position. And I want to be clear, it's done poorly in a lot of places, but we try to do it well in the life of our church.

Ty has come to paedo-baptist convictions. Before I say anything further about paedo-baptism, I just want to say there's a lot of paedo-baptists that are terrible and heretical. Ty is not affiliating with any of that.

So if paedo-baptist, infant-baptist pops into your head and you think immediately of baptismal regeneration, that's not Ty. If you think of the Catholics, that's not Ty.

This is good, faithful, gospel-believing paedo-baptism that Ty is holding. And paedo-baptism means that he, along with many others, believe that baptism should be applied to individuals who have made credible professions of faith in Christ and also to their children.

So you may know this as infant baptism. In our circle, most commonly, we see that Presbyterians practice this form of baptism.

[22 : 59] We have worked together over the past months to sort this disagreement through. We're not going to get into the weeds this morning of the difference in the views.

I can tell you that it sharpened me. I hope that it served Ty through the process. This is the first time I've had to really engage the topic with a person who I love dearly sitting across from me, getting frustrated with them and then having to apologize immediately for being frustrated.

with them. I told him in the process, I'm becoming more a Baptist because of this conversation. And he said, and you'll appreciate, amen. He said, good, good.

I can assure you that Ty cares to honor the Lord as he seeks to be faithful to the Bible and his conscience concerning it. This is a Bible conviction that he's come to.

I am so proud of the way that he has handled himself as he has disagreed. He's just at every step been so careful, so generous and kind.

[24 : 06] He hasn't picked it up as an agenda and gone raging around the church trying to convince other people of it. He started with me. He spoke with our elders. He's just done a great job of explaining where he is on his position.

There is, by God's great grace, harmony amongst your church's leadership. I'm glad for that. I'm so thankful that God has worked in us.

I think, thinking clearly, how should we feel about this? How should we act according to it? And I hope we'll set an example for you all. That said, Ty has stepped down from his role as an elder. Ty is confessional as we are. He believes that it's important for us to say what we believe the Bible says, and he sees that we ought to be in agreement on this particular matter.

It's secondary. It's not tertiary. It's a secondary matter. So he has stepped down as an elder. He's going to be seeking what the Lord has for him next. He's going to remain employed with us as a pastoral assistant through the end of July, and he's looking for what he'll do after that.

[25 : 19] And so, while rightly we'll be sad to say goodbye to him, and Cheyenne and to their children, we don't have to be sad all at once. So, this is not your last day to see the brunettes.

We can say goodbye over a bit of time, and we'll be sure to do so well before they part from us. So, see in this example how theological triage serves us, right?

Ty is not apostate, right? Ty is not a Christian just because he doesn't agree with us on baptism. He's a Christian brother, and we need to have no doubt of this.

Ty does, though, find himself disagreeing in a matter that causes him and his family to need to seek fellowship elsewhere where their conscience can be clear, where they can practice the way they believe God would have them practice, right?

We may think it irregular for them to do that, but they don't, and so that's okay that they would find themselves in a Presbyterian context. It is okay for us not to see eye to eye on this matter and therefore to maintain unity.

[26 : 31] So, thinking about this, right, where do we place this? And here we find it's actionable. Most of our disagreements within a church are in that tertiary category and require no action at all.

Certainly, if we have primary disagreements, then we're going to go to the mattresses over that, right? So, let me conclude with some encouragements for you.

I just want to encourage you, love on Ty and Cheyenne to the max over these next three months.

It's really tempting, I find this in myself, to withdraw from people we will say farewell to.

I love their children and it's tempting to not love their kids so much, right? To not get all the hugs that I possibly can from them. But let's not do this, right?

Let's push back against that temptation for their good and for ours, right? Let's wring every bit of wonderful we can out of it over the next three months.

[27 : 32] Additionally, let's join in praying for wisdom for the brunettes as they discern their next steps. There's not a clear and obvious place at this moment for them and so they need to be careful.

We want to help them in that process to send them well to wherever it is the Lord may be calling them to go. So that's the first encouragement to you. Secondly, wrestle with varied views on baptism.

I want you to hear me say that. I'm a committed credo-baptist, right? We're not Baptists because of denominational affiliation because it's the kind of church I grew up in. I'm Baptist by conviction.

As a church, it's my understanding that we're Baptist by conviction, but I want to encourage you to wrestle with it. You need to know what you believe on the matter.

Just don't go along to get along, but understand the doctrines. It's important to think about these things. Now to help you with this, I'm going to hold a class that each of you see them, how they're arrived at from the scripture.

[28 : 35] So we would have done it sooner than that, but I didn't want to do it on Mother's Day and I wasn't ready to do it today. So it's going to be on May 19th. So join me if you will.

I really encourage that. At least somebody from your family with your Bible open and we'll consider it together. I've got all kinds of plans for a whiteboard. Just be ready for it.

I also want to encourage you not to bombard Ty. I know that he is willing to explain his position, but consider that this may not be the best way for him to spend his last three months with us, taking meeting after meeting after meeting to sit down and explain paedobaptism to you.

Maybe hang on. We'll have a class and if you have follow-up questions, you're welcome to probably ask him, not me. I'm going to give you all the information I know about it at that class. But yeah, maybe just don't bombard him with questions.

Just love on him a bunch and Cheyenne as well. Third encouragement, think long and deep about Christian unity. Seeing this as an example for us to grow as individuals and to grow as a church.

[29 : 42] How can you be agreeable while disagreeing? How can we collectively be agreeable while disagreeing? Make theological triage a part of your regular thinking process.

Whether you ever call it theological triage or not, I don't care. But that you're thinking in your mind, how important is this particular doctrine? doctrine? What doctrines are of highest order?

What truths would you be willing to die for? And are they in fact worth dying for? And do you spend the majority of your time thinking about trying to sort out all the little minutiae particulars, right?

Bouncing around on YouTube to see what so-and-so says about such and such a thing. Be sure that you're standing on the right hill at the end.

Let me ask, have you caused disunity over beliefs that should not have caused disunity? Whether in this church or perhaps another, perhaps one that you have left behind and maybe you need to call somebody up and issue an apology and look for reconciliation because you were ugly about a thing that did not require it.

[30 : 59] So those are some encouragements to you. I pray that our church will walk this out well because it matters. The fact that we are in harmony with one another, even as we disagree, exalts the Lord Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.