

# Romans 15:5-6

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[0:00] Well, good morning. If you have a copy of God's Word with you, I do hope that you do. Please join me in Romans chapter 15. Once again, this morning will be a bit different than usual. We've had a lot of that here at the beginning of the year.

It's starting to feel a little usual, isn't it? 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. I feel some need to prove that to you.

So, I'll just say, last year we completed a study of the Book of Romans, which took about two and a half years to make its way through. Spent a couple of weeks in the Book of Judges, and then just before Advent season, four weeks in the Book of Ruth.

We went on to consider the Advent themes of hope, peace, joy, and love. We're about to begin a seven-week study of the life of King David, and then, Lord willing, we will begin, once again, a verse-by-verse exposition of a gospel account.

I think, I think, John's, perhaps Matthew's. This morning, though, in doing a different thing than usual, I want to take a moment to consider confessionalism.

[1:22] You may be asked, from time to time, is your church confessional? At least, I am, as a pastor, asked that quite regularly. What is it? What is confessionalism? Why does it matter?

Why is our church a confessional church? The answer to that question is yes. Our church is, in fact, confessional.

We live in an age that grapples with the truth. Some people don't know how to define it, or even believe that it's possible to arrive at any truth at all.

This is a serious problem, and it is most likely an age-old one, although we only experience the unraveling of truth in our day.

But praise be to God that he has ordained a solution for a confused age. In 1 Timothy chapter 3 and verse 15, Paul calls the church a pillar and buttress of the truth.

[2:29] We are not originators of the truth. Those things Paul is talking about in 1 Timothy chapter 3 are those things found in the scriptures.

We don't originate them, but we are to be its support and its protection. It is a high calling to hold the truth in our generation and to pass it on to the next.

Sadly, I think the church can and often does err in this charge in one of two ways. On the one hand, doctrine is jettisoned for pragmatic expediency.

Anything that the Bible teaches that makes anyone uncomfortable is perceived as an obstacle to seeing people make professions of faith in Christ.

I think very often there's good intention that underlies this, but it's an error to be sure. You may be familiar with the apologetic attempt of a popular preacher in our very backyard to, quote, unhitch our faith from the Old Testament.

[3:44] So that's one possible error. On the other hand, doctrinal matters of lesser importance can become a distraction to meaningful fellowship when they are elevated in importance beyond their station.

When things that aren't unimportant become too important in the life of a Christian fellowship. We believe that confessionalism can, it should, help us avoid these two potential errors.

A confession is a document in which a church or group of churches, some association of Christians, states what it believes the Bible teaches on given subjects for the sake of Christian unity.

That's the aim. That's where it's headed. That's what we're trying to accomplish with confessions. We're going to look at a number of texts today, but I would like for us to begin in Romans chapter 15, verse 5 and 6, which says this.

May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus. That is in relationship to, right?

[5:09] Consistent with Christ Jesus. That together, verse 6, you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. There's one simple point I want to make from these two verses.

Christian harmony or unity, it exalts Jesus Christ. The Christian, one whose soul has been saved by the work of Christ on their behalf.

One who has been justified by grace through faith in Christ alone. The highest aim of their life ought to be the exaltation of Christ.

We, having been saved by him, ought to want all people to see how grand and glorious he is. Paul hopes here that the Roman Christ followers and that you and I would be given grace for Christian unity so that the Lord Jesus Christ would receive glory.

So it's a big thing that we're talking about here when we talk about confessionalism. This is not just some nerdy endeavor to take up, but it's for this great good of the exaltation of Christ in our Christian unity.

[6:29] 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.

Sometimes we have conventional differences. Faithful Christians haven't always seen eye to eye on everything. This has always been true.

It is true amongst us. We don't all agree on everything, and this creates some genuine challenges for unity. Beyond the general challenge of maintaining unity, our enemy we bring to it, our sinful inclinations, and our enemy is pleased to see us working against one another.

In the back of your bulletin today, there's a quotation from Charles Spurgeon. He once said this, quote, Satan always hates Christian fellowship. It is his policy to keep Christians apart.

Anything which can divide saints from one another, he delights in. He attaches far more importance to godly interaction than we do. Since union is strength, he does his best to promote separation.

[7:50] End quote. We have a lot working against our unity. 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.

We could just leave it off there and go, well, there we go. We're just going to pray for grace to be unified. But I would recommend that we take some practical steps to maintain the unity that is ours in Jesus.

So how do we do this? Assuming that you are in Christ and that your greatest desire is to exalt Jesus Christ in word and deed, how do we maintain unity amidst disagreement?

We do so by employing the practice of an idea called theological triage. And yes, if you remember here, you've heard me talk about this before. We're doing it again because it's that important.

And the way we bring theological triage to bear in the life of the church is in the formation of confessions. It's that practice brought into reality in a tangible way.

[9:05] 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, those people in that accident, were brought into an emergency room those patients would be ranked for treatment from most severe need to least severe need.

You've probably experienced this if you've ever been to an emergency room. You may not have known it was going on, but you've waited a long, long time because your emergency was not as severe as somebody else's emergency.

This can, and we 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 in some cases unimportant, is said disagreement? Theological triage helps us to determine this.

Now, at this point, I want to be clear. The term theological triage was coined, as far as anybody can tell, by Al Mohler, who is the current president of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

[10:22] So new in this formulation, this idea, termed this way, theological triage. However, this concept can be seen historically in the creation of confessions and creeds, Christians carefully pinning doctrinal standards for the sake of agreement, and, much more importantly, as I will show you this morning, we can see this idea in the Bible.

So, when we talk about theological triage, there are four orders of doctrine. First, second, third, fourth, or if you prefer, primary, secondary, tertiary, and quaternary, a word I'm always happy to slip into a conversation, I'm going to talk about these out of order because it makes sense, as I hope you'll see, why to talk about them out of order.

The first is quaternary, or fourth order doctrine. We're going to talk about it first because it's simple, and we're going to get it out of the way. These are things that are unimportant.

We are welcome to talk about them. It could be fun, perhaps, to talk about them, but at the end of the day, they just really don't matter. The only example I have in 17 years of being a pastor, the only one, but it's happened on repeat, is the question, is there life on other planets?

It's interesting, we can talk about it, but it just doesn't really matter. Where you land on the topic, who cares at the end of the day, right? We know there's life on this planet that's cursed.

[11:57] We need a savior. Moving on. Fourth order. Third order doctrine, or tertiary doctrine, are matters that are important for the individual.

So, important. Hear me say, not unimportant, important for the individual. Things that we ought to have some conviction about, but our conviction may vary from someone else's conviction.

temptation. So, I'm going to give you a really base and simple example that has changed over time, and I'm giving this one to you because I just had a conversation about it with a brother.

Over time, I've decided to wear a jacket on Sunday mornings when I'm preaching. And that's coming from a desire to not offend anybody. I just want to be sure anybody coming and visiting who might be used to a pastor in a suit, which I'm currently not convicted to do.

I want to be able to get down on my knees and play with little kids, but I don't want to get dry cleaning, but I'm going to wear a jacket. So, it's a conviction that I came to, but I'm not going to put it on anybody else who preaches here.

[13:10] I never once asked one of the other guys that preaches on a Sunday morning to also wear a jacket. It's a personal conviction, right? I've decided. I think this is a good thing for me to do.

Other examples, right? You should have some conviction about the consumption of alcohol, whether or not that's appropriate for you or in your house or out in public. There's some things to consider when it comes to the consumption of alcohol.

The types of television that you're willing to watch or allow your children to watch. There's some clear parameters to that kind of thing, but there's some gray area there where we might want to not include some stuff in our home that you might feel okay with in your own.

These are the kinds of things that we're all trying to work out as we're trying to be faithful to the scripture. It's so often being derived from the Bible, but then with the application of prudence.

Like, what is the best way for me to obey this command or that command where the application isn't as clear as sometimes we may want it to be, but we should be having conversations.

[14:20] We should be pressing at one another in these matters, right? But the way we hold this doctrine is a way that says it's really important to me. It may not be felt the same by you.

If you turn back just a page, perhaps, in your scripture, I'll show you an example of this from Romans chapter 14. There Paul says, this is the first six verses, as for the one who is weak in faith, welcome him, but not to quarrel over opinions.

One person believes he may eat anything while the weak person eats only vegetables. The concern here was food sacrificed to idols, right? And some conviction about that.

And Paul's saying, don't get in arguments about this kind of thing. It's fine that one person is a vegetarian and another is not. 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. 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.

[15:37] 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 the assumption in these matters is that there's good underpinnings. These people belong to Christ and they're trying to be faithful to the Lord. They're trying to do what is right and proper. Let's not inquire over opinions. I think that much of the disunity that we see amongst Christians lies here.

Third order doctrine being elevated to levels that it doesn't belong and then fights ensue over these things. And it's tragic that that's the case.

So here comes this process and the pinning of confessions to help us not do this. Okay, now we're going to jump up the order to first order doctrine or primary doctrine.

[16:46] I think this is a much smaller category but of course the most important. This is of vital importance for Christian unity.

These are those things that must be believed for a person to be Christian. first order doctrines. I've said to you many times before these are the doctrines that we stand on a hill together and die for. Justification by grace through faith in Christ alone. If you want to get into a debate with me about the order of salvation exactly the way all of these things pair out.

Does regeneration precede faith or regeneration I have an answer to that. But if you want to get in a debate with me about that that's fine. My question will be for you do you believe were justified by grace through faith in Christ alone.

If you say yes then I will embrace you. First order doctrine. The deity of Jesus Christ. What do we believe to be true of Jesus person? Incredibly important that we understand who he is.

[17:53] These things matter greatly for Christian unity. Jude verse three and four. 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. I think Jude is talking about these first order doctrines.

And here's why. Verse four says for certain people have crept in unnoticed who long ago were designated for this condemnation. Ungodly people who pervert Christ. These are the wolves in amongst the sheep.

And we have to be able to recognize by doing this process and by having confessions what things we need to contend for.

What are the types of doctrines that we would be willing to see somebody out of our fellowship and say there's no way you can claim to be a Christ follower if you don't believe these things.

[18:58] So tragic in our day. Across traditions people who have largely agreed on the stuff that matters most being just schism'd apart by those things that are third order that are being elevated to first order.

Over these past years not amongst us! But I have experienced this! I have been called names that I cannot say here by brothers who claim to be Christian because I didn't agree with them on things. I have been called unfaithful because I didn't agree with their positions on things like COVID policy for example. It's shameful.

A shameful way for Christians to act toward one another. Beloved, if we agree on these first order things, they are so massive and the world is against us on these things.

There's so much space for unity, for linking arms if we agree on first order doctrines, primary doctrine.

[20:10] Then it follows by implication. We're not going to agree on everything. You're thinking about things, but what about this and what about that and what about this?

that there are going to be some second order doctrines, things that are important for church and perhaps outside of the church, ministry fellowship.

Things that we ought to agree upon together in order just to function together as a church. These doctrines are going to define our practice, for example, the regulative principle.

We want to make a clear Bible argument for everything we do together when we gather as a church. Or, who are the proper recipients for baptism?

That's a thing we should agree upon as a church. If you come here, we are a Baptist church. We are credo Baptists. So, if you come here and you want to have your infant child baptized, you don't get to just decide that here because we would not accept that as a baptism.

[21:16] We wouldn't do it. We would try to show you a Bible case for it. We would love and embrace you on all of those first order doctrines. But as a church, we don't feel comfortable administering baptism to infants.

So, you're welcome to stay and change your view or go find a paedo-baptist church that agrees with you on that matter. That's a very reasonable option for you to take.

So, those are examples of how it would define our practice together. But also, possibly these second-order doctrines can help us define what is sin or what is not sin.

A very complex issue would be a view on divorce and or remarriage. Are there instances in which people can be divorced and then following instances in which they could be remarried?

And if the church is to practice church discipline, if the church is to call sin sin, what do we think about these matters? How are we to deal with them? Because life is going to present these kinds of things to us in the life of our church.

[22:26] So, second-order doctrine fits in that category. Important for church fellowship. Think long and deep about Christian unity.

how is it that we can be agreeable even when we disagree? It's going to vary situation by situation. Theological triage needs to be a regular part of our thinking practice.

I just think as people are presenting to us ideas, talking about the scripture, thinking about applications, how is it that they're following Lord? I think we need to be able to run through this process and categorize things quickly so we know how to respond to people.

What doctrines are of highest order? What truths would you be willing to die for? I'll tell you this, I'm not dying for wearing a jacket on Sunday morning.

It's not a chance. If the government declared I couldn't wear jackets on Sunday morning, I'd go, alright, that's fine. If the government tells me I can't teach a biblical ethic for marriage and sexuality, lock me up.

[23:42] Have you caused disunity over beliefs that should not have caused disunity? You may have some repentance and repair work to do.

When is it appropriate to bear with another in a disagreement? When is it appropriate to part ways peacefully for the very sake of unity? We may need to go separate ways because we do think we need to practice a bit differently.

When is it appropriate to go to war, I mean not figuratively, over a doctrine? We think that the answer to many of these questions should be defined in confessions and creeds.

Most traditionally a creed is just a short confession, just so you know how that term is typically used. Those matters of first order, and those matters of second order should be maintained in a document or documents adopted by a local church.

Doctrinal standards should be thoughtfully written, poured over, carefully considered, kindly debated, and then taught and held to.

[24:57] So, your elders have been hard at work creating these types of documents. We've been behind the scenes, many of you know this, we've not been doing it as a secret, but we've been out ahead trying to think about this kind of thing.

How do we continue to maintain Christian unity, especially in such a confused age? It's difficult to say this, because I could just be totally wrong as I say it, but I think second only to declaring the gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ, this is the most important thing I've been spending time on lately. Second only to gospel proclamation, it's been working on doctrinal standards for our church. We've not been without across all these years, we have had a confession that we've functioned under, but it was pretty brief, and we think it's time for something much more robust in the life of a church.

church. So, this evening, we're having a members meeting in which we're going to hand out documents to you, so if you're here this morning and you wish you had them in your hand, you're going to have to wait until next Sunday when I have them prepared for you.

But if you're a member and you're coming to the members meeting, we'd love to put them in your hand at that point. We've created a creed, which is a one-page document, looks like so, and a confession, which is a 46-page document that looks like this.

[26:31] It has within it 33 articles, so various matters that we feel need addressing, careful clarification. Those are the first and second order types of doctrine.

For example, the first one is on the Holy Scripture. What is the Bible? What do we believe is God's inspired word? The fifth article is on divine providence.

How is it that God functions as the ruler of this world? Article 15 is on saving faith. What does it look like when somebody places their faith in Jesus Christ?

Article 20 is on the law of God. How is it that that law works in the life of a Christian? Article 26 is on marriage, divorce, marriage, and remarriage.

These are just some examples of the 33 contained within. As I mentioned, we will distribute this evening at our members' meeting with an explanation for how we propose they be used in the life of our church to preserve Christian unity and with an explanation of the editorial and adoption process for these documents.

[27:46] If you're unable to join us this evening, we'll post a recording of that portion of our meeting. But in order to get ahead of any possible panic, I want you to know that we don't intend to adopt any of the proposed changes until the members' meeting is scheduled in July.

So a good six months to take the time to get in, to do this work, thoughtfully pour over it, carefully consider it, kindly debate it, make potential edits to it, come back together and establish a more robust doctrinal standard for our church.

So let's be good, elder-led congregationalists and get to work for the sake of Christian unity to the end that Christ will be exalted.

Beloved, unapologetically, as far as I have any influence on the life of this church, we will be confessional.

We believe the scripture teaches things and we want to be clear about what we believe it says on matters of most importance and we also want to be clear on what it may not be so clear on, things that we may be able to see differently and yet maintain Christian unity for the exaltation of Christ.

[29:13] In closing, let me read one more time Romans chapter 15, verse 5 and 6 and we'll pray to this end. May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another in accord with Christ Jesus that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Let's pray. God of