

**1 Corinthians 1:1-9**

**GRACE-FULL UNITY**

Unity is something which is aimed for by any group of people; whether there are just two, or hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands, even whole nations, or nations joining together, for people there is an inbuilt sense that we need unity for the good of all, and so we have a desire to achieve it. How does that statement sit with you? Many of us believe that we need unity not just to survive but to thrive, both as groups and also as individuals. Right now, following the shocking event which happened in our nation in mid-December, our leaders are trying to come up with ways to make us more unified as a nation, whether that is by new laws, education, or a combination of these and other things also. When we think of unity we might think of things like acceptance, support, understanding, inclusion, the whole working together for the good of each of its parts. We might say that unity is founded on commonly held beliefs, or a common goal or desired outcome, or just on the need and desire to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. Although there are exceptions, as people we are all individuals, for many of us the need to be part of a group bigger than just ourself is an intrinsic part of who we are as people.

And yet, as central as this need for acceptance and belonging is to us as people, we can have strange ideas sometimes about what unity is, can't we? Some years ago, I heard an interview with a lady whose brother had been a member of an outlaw motorcycle gang, which sadly didn't end well for him. As she learnt more and more about the dangerous and often criminal activities he became involved in as part of this gang, she would ask him why he was a part of this group. He would tell her, 'Because they accept me as who I am. They support me no matter what. After everything I've been through in my life I feel like I belong in this group of people more than I've ever felt I belong anywhere before'. As things got worse, and he was pressured into doing things he wasn't comfortable doing, his sister asked him why he didn't just walk away from the gang. He replied, 'Because, if I left, they would come after me and bash me, and possibly even kill me'. She gave the reply that possibly only a sibling could give, 'Well if you're only staying because you're afraid of what they'll do to you if you leave, that seems a pretty strange kind of

unity'. Our desire for acceptance, belonging, being part of something which is bigger than ourselves, can be so great that it can lead us into, and keep us in, situations of unity which end up being destructive both for others and ourselves.

A lot of the teachings we have in the New Testament after the Gospels, that is, after Jesus' time on earth, is based around unity. That should be no surprise to us, firstly because belonging to a bigger group is so important to us as people, and God's people coming together to know, worship, serve and follow Him is such a central part of what the Bible teaches us, and of our Christian lives. It also shouldn't be surprising because, as we know from our own experiences in many relationships, groups and communities, who we are as people often messes up that belonging, support, and inclusiveness, that unity, which we are all seeking in our lives. Added to that is the pressure from the society and the world around us which can come at and threaten any unity which is not its own.

The apostle Paul writes a lot about this in his New Testament letters; letters which were often written, like this one here to the Christians in the Greek city of Corinth, to Christian communities, churches, which he had himself founded when he had spent time in those cities. The city of Corinth was a crossroad for travellers, and so consisted of people with varied backgrounds and beliefs, as well as being a port city with all the practices that can bring with it. So, there were plenty of pressures on these new Christians as they were trying to live the way God was calling them to. On top of that, from the rest of this letter and Paul's second letter to them we learn that they were not treating one another in a way we would expect from God's people, as well as doing some things themselves which we would not see as fitting in with who they are. All in all, we could probably hold them up as being not that different from our churches, and the people, us, who make them up today.

There are many things we can base unity on, and it can often be about us; the common needs we have, the interests we share, etc. What is interesting as Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians is that He begins by focusing on God; who God is to us, what God has done for us, and who God has both made and called us to be. For Paul, it's all about God's grace, and so he talks about a unity which is full of God's grace. He knew these people well, he loved them, and no doubt he would have been very saddened, even angry, by what he heard was happening among them, and yet, what does he say? He calls them, 'God's

church', reminds them that Jesus chose them to be His people, that they worship in His name. He prays they will continue to know God's peace, and thanks God for treating them with undeserved grace through Jesus. Then he reminds them, assures them, that God's blessings are for them and they will receive them because God is faithful. All up, Paul's two letters to this Christian community are 29 chapters long, and there are times he doesn't mince his words in attacking them for things they are saying and doing. But here, at the beginning of his teaching to them, he focuses on the unity we have as Christians through God's grace shown to us in Jesus.

For Christians, what is our unity all about? It is focused on Jesus. The foundation, basis and cause of our unity is? Jesus. The purpose and goal of our unity is? Jesus. And, importantly, because we know that we as people and the situation we are in are no different to that of those people in that Greek city, the remedy for fights and disunity among us is? Jesus. Our unity is created, preserved, lived out, and achieves its goals, all through Jesus.

What does this look like for us then? First, let's change the greeting here in verse two to instead read, 'To God's church in the southern Gold Coast/northern New South Wales' (or insert wherever you are from). Applying these words directly to us now, what are we hearing from them? Remember, they are all about being a Christian community which is full of God's grace, and while that will look different for each person, it is something we pray everyone can know and experience among us, perhaps in the way that is suiting them at that time. We come together because we *know* God's love and blessings, and we come together to *share* God's love and blessings. Think about how we relate to and treat one another. How we deal with differences among us, including our preferences about how things are done? How do we support one another, both through hard times, and also through issues of living out our faith in our lives? How do we work together to share God's love both with those who come along and join us in our worship, as well as with those we perhaps have to go out to? How does our worship, our service to God and one another, how do they show and share the love and grace of God which we know in our lives (as we are praying in our *Living Grace* prayer atm)? What is the answer we are given in our reading about all of these things? Jesus. It is God's love for us in Jesus dying and rising again for our forgiveness, and our being certain that

we have God's blessings in our lives each day, it's this grace which creates our unity with God, with each other, and which we are now called to share.

And we can also bring this over to ourselves personally. As much as we need to be a part of a group, God created us to have a relationship with Him, so that is the most important thing for us. And once again, when we look at the unity we have with God in that relationship, it's all about? Jesus. How do we know that we are both loved and forgiven by God, whatever we do? Jesus. How do we know God's grace is for us? Jesus. When we feel lost, hurting, without purpose, lonely, afraid, who is always there for us? Jesus. When we see people lost and searching, who do we know, deep down, they are really searching for (even if they don't realise it)? Jesus. God's love and grace doesn't just provide the foundation for our unity as a Christian community, but also the unbreakable bond for the unity of our relationship with Him; because it doesn't rely on us, but solely on Him.

Thank God for the grace-full unity we can know together, we can worship in together, and we can serve Him through together. Thank God for the certainty of His promises this brings to us, what it means for us as a Christian community, as individuals, and what through Him we are now able to offer to others. It is knowing God's love for us in Jesus which brings us together, keeps us together, guides us in the lives we live for Him, and which we are now called to share out in our lives also. Amen.

#### **FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION**

- What do you see as being the basis of the unity of groups/communities you are a part of? Do you feel that it is important for you to have unity with others?
- Have a look at the words of our reading, 1 Corinthians 1:1-9. Are there any words or phrases which stand out for you here? How is Paul encouraging these people? What is he telling them is the basis for the unity they have as God's people?
- What are the blessings you have received from being a part of a Christian community/church? Are there times when you have witnessed or being a part of disunity? If so, what negative effect has that had on you and others?
- Think about the Christian groups and communities you are a part of right now. Reflecting on what we are told in this reading, how can you be a part of helping reflect the kind of Christian unity which is talked about here? Are there any attitudes, words, or actions you are called to change to help the communities you are in to better reflect God's love and grace?
- Think about your own relationship with God. Do you feel that you live in His grace each day? Do you sometimes struggle with having a close relationship with Him? If so, bring this to Him in prayer, asking for His strength and guidance in looking to His love and grace in all you do.

Pray: thank God for His love and grace which through Jesus He gives to us and all people. Ask Him to help us to reflect this both in our Christian communities and our lives.

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