

Unity
By Denis Lyle

sermonaudio.com

Bible Text: Acts 2:41-47; Psalm 133
Preached on: Sunday, November 20, 2005

Lurgan Baptist Church
Johnston's Row, High Street,
Lurgan, Co Armagh
Northern Ireland, UK

Website: www.lurganbaptist.com
Online Sermons: www.sermonaudio.com/lurganbaptist

Let's incline our hearts before the Lord in prayer.

Father, we acknowledge this morning that if ever there was a day and hour and age in which we needed those showers of blessing, it is the hour in which we live. We look at our nation as a whole, a nation that has turned away from thy word, a nation that despises thy day, a nation that dishonors thy Son, a nation that disobeys thy laws and, our Father, on this United Kingdom, we need those showers of blessing. And our Father, we find faith for this little province of ours and, Lord, we find faith for the stand that has been taken for truth and for God down through the years that, Lord, we need those showers of blessing. We need, our Father, that personal reviving in our own heart. We need to be in the place individually and collectively where God can bless us. And our Father, we pray that day by day as we seek to live in the light of your word and to commune with thyself in the place of prayer, that we might know personally the showers of blessing.

Our Father, we just want to thank thee again this morning for the word of God. We thank thee, our Father, for every home crusade that gets that word into so many different languages and so many different countries. And Lord, we pray that you'll be with Timothy and all the faithful band of workers down there in East Belfast. And our Father, as these tons of literature go out, bless the word of God, we beseech of thee.

Father, we thank thee this morning for thy word that we hold in our hands and we trust that we have in our hearts. We pray, Lord, this morning that you would draw near to us, that you would bless us as we turn to the word of God. Master speak. Thy servant heareth, waiting for thy gracious word. We ask this in Christ's name. Amen.

I want you to turn with me this morning to the Acts of the Apostles, chapter 2, verse 41, and then back into the Psalms again where we have been looking on Sunday morning not with any sequence or organization but looking at different Psalms. Our first reading is in Acts 2:41, and as you turn to find the place, let me just on behalf of the church fellowship congratulate our brother Ronnie Pritchard and his wife Joyce. Ronnie has been invited for to receive an award on Thursday evening by Craigavon Council for 35 years of faithful service in Mourneview Christian Community with the children. And that's some record,

35 years. Some Christians when they take a job, they can't stay 35 months. He stayed 35 years and we trust that the Lord will continue to bless Ronnie and Joyce and the band of faithful workers there in Mourneview Monday by Monday, and that the Lord will continue to use them there for his glory.

Now here's what I want to talk to you this morning about. I want to talk to you about unity. Unity. And I'm reading in Acts 2:41.

41 Then they that gladly received his word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls. 42 And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers. 43 And fear came upon every soul: and many wonders and signs were done by the apostles. 44 And all that believed were together, and had all things common; 45 And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. 46 And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, 47 Praising God, and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved.

And then come back into the hymnbook of the Hebrews, Psalm 133. It's been the Psalm that has been on my mind all week. Psalm 133, just three verses. Psalm 133. Here's what David says.

1 Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! 2 It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; 3 As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion: for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore.

An old story tells of a father who had a family of quarrelsome sons. One day, he called his sons before him and picking out the strongest of them, he handed him a stick. "Snap it," he said. Well, that young strong lad took that stick and he snapped it with contempt. The man then handed him two sticks, "Snap them," he said. Again, the son did so. The man, the old father began to hand him an increasing number of sticks, "Snap them," he said. A bundle of four, of five, of six, and soon the young man was beginning to strain to snap the sticks and finally he had to admit defeat. "Unity is strained," the old man cautioned his son, "A house divided cannot stand. Anyone can overthrow you one by one but stand together in unity and your united strength will give your enemies second thoughts."

This little Psalm that we've just read this morning is about unity. It's about the unity of the Spirit. It's the unity that gives strength. It's the unity in which God pours his benediction and his blessing. Now if you look at the subtitle of the Psalm, you'll notice that it's "A Song of degrees of David." David was king over Judah and Benjamin in

Hebron for 7 ½ years. David inherited a divided kingdom and almost a civil war, but the Lord gave him a united kingdom. David could have well written this Psalm when he began his glorious reign in the city of Jerusalem. You see, this Psalm is a song of degrees and as I have said on past Sunday mornings, these songs of degrees or songs of ascent were sung by the pilgrims as they made their way up to Jerusalem on one of the feast days. The people usually journeyed to Jerusalem in family groups for one of the feast days and so this little Psalm perfectly suits the situation. Of course, it applies to individual believers and churches today, for we have our family quarrels and we need to walk in the Spirit. We need to maintain the unity of God's Spirit. That's the work of every Christian by the enabling power of God's Holy Spirit.

So this morning, I want to talk to you about unity. Unity. That's what God desires for his people. It is one thing that Satan fears and seeks to undo day and night. It is that for which the Savior pled beneath the lengthening shadow of the cross. It is the one thing that God says will convince people that the church has something the world doesn't have. It is what the Holy Spirit came to achieve in his baptizing work. It is what the Jews saw so convincingly demonstrated in the infant church of Jerusalem, a church where all, one and all, rich and poor, bond and free, great and small, young and old, gifted and retarded, had all things common. The unity that God wants for his people is not a false ecumenism. It is not a unity that is brought about by doctrinal compromise, political expediency or organizational efficiency. This unity of the Spirit is not a unity brought about by some extra-biblical revelation or experience indulged at the expense of sound doctrine. No, for of the early church we read they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine as well as fellowship. My friends, when I think of unity this morning, and as you and I think of unity, I'm thinking about a scriptural, spiritual, biblical unity that is expressed through the local church. Do you know what Satan's strategy is for Lurgan Baptist Church? Let me tell you: it is to divide and conquer. Satan's motive is division. Satan's method is deception. Satan's mission is destruction.

I heard about a man one time who went out on a boat deep sea fishing but he couldn't swim. And he caught an enormous fish and in his excitement to pull the fish into the boat, he fell overboard. He was splashing around in the water and he was crying out, "Save me, I cannot swim!" Well, the captain of the boat very calmly reached down, he grabbed the man by the arm and he gave the man a big pull, but you see, he didn't know the guy had an artificial arm and off the arm came. Well, the man continued to kick and splash around in the water crying for help but the captain reached down again and this time he grabbed the man by the leg and he gave him a tremendous pull, but the leg came off. He was wearing a wooden leg. The man in the water went under again and he came up yelling for help and the captain, still perfectly composed and calm, this time grabbed the man by the hair of his head and he gave a gigantic pull. The man was wearing a toupee and off it came. At that point, the captain looked at the man in the water and said, "Mister, mister, if you won't stick together, I can't help you." My friends, if we're going to be as victorious, a victorious church, if we're going to accomplish all that God wants us to accomplish, all that God wants us to be, we must come together, we must work together, we must stay together, and we must stick together.

So I want to talk to you about this vastly important subject of unity. Drop your eye down to Psalm 133. I want to talk to you, first of all, about the barriers to true unity. The barriers to true unity. And then I want to talk to you about the beauty of true unity as it is exemplified in this Psalm. And then I want to talk to you about the blessing in true unity.

What are the barriers of true unity? Well, look at verse 1. "Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity!" David is saying that a fellowship that is united and a people who are one are a sight to behold. Of course, the word "brethren" in verse 1 refers to the people of God but, my dear friends, is that not where the problem so often lies? You see, it's one thing for you and I to have an experience of the grace of God for ourselves but it's another thing for you and I as Christian believers to live up to our Christian calling alongside other believers. As we all know, it's not easy to live together, it's not easy to work together, it's not easy to serve together, it is not easy to worship together. Ofttimes, personal relationships become strained, we rub each other up the wrong way, and when that happens there are barriers to unity.

What are the specific barriers that prevent unity in the local church? Well, let me give you three very quickly. First of all, there are the problems in the local church. A man reportedly came to C. H. Spurgeon on one occasion looking for the perfect church and the famous preacher told him that he had many saintly and godly people in his congregation but a Judas could be found among them. After all, said Spurgeon, even Christ had a traitor in the company of the apostles. And Spurgeon went on to say that he might have people in his congregation who might be walking dishonestly as was the case at Corinth, at Rome, at Galatia, at Sardis. Spurgeon looked at the man and said, "Sir, my church is not the church that you're looking for," but he said, "If you do happen to find such a church, I beg you not to join it for you would spoil the whole thing."

Do you know something? The perfect church is a myth. The church at Corinth was a church that was plagued by tremendous problems. There were divisions in the church at Corinth. There were little groups who were cliquing together and some were saying, "Well, I'm of Paul. I'm of Peter." Some were saying even, "I'm of Christ." There were little divisions in the church. There was sexual immorality in the church. Paul says, "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife." Incest. Immorality was rife. There was litigation between Christians within the church at Corinth. Believers were taking each other to court and that before an unbelieving world. There was an abuse of the Lord's Supper in the church at Corinth. Indeed, this was the very reason why some of the Christians at Corinth were sick. Some of them were terribly sick, some of them had been taken home to glory. God had come down into the church at Corinth in governmental judgment. I mean, do you think your church has problems? Do you think this church's problems, did you ever think about the church at Corinth?

Now do problems not prevent unity? I wonder are there problems in this local church that's really hindering your oneness, your togetherness, your unity with the saints? I think not only of the problems in the local church, I think of the people in the local church. Look at verse 1 again, David speaks about brethren dwelling together in unity. Well, that

can be the problem. You see, when you read the scriptures, you cannot help but discover the brethren always didn't live together in unity. You remember that Cain rose up and killed his brother Abel. You remember that Lot quarreled with uncle Abraham, and Abraham said to nephew Lot, he said, "Well, the whole land's before you. If you go to the right, I'll go to the left. If you go to the left, I'll go to the right." You remember Joseph's brothers hated him and they sold him into Egypt as a slave, and even the brothers couldn't agree among themselves. You remember Miriam and Aaron criticized their brother Moses. Some of David's own children turned against him. And when you cross over into the New Testament, it's the same. Do you remember that the disciples of Jesus Christ often quarreled among themselves about who should be the greatest. Paul and Barnabas, the great Apostle Paul, the magnanimous Barnabas, they argued over Barnabas' cousin John Mark and they finally broke company and chose new companions for their missionary outreach.

You see, the church began in visible unity in Acts 2, but when you read the epistles of Paul, you find a sad story of rivalry and division. Is it not just the same today? Christian believers who are estranged from each other. Christian believers who won't speak to each other. Christian believers who will have no fellowship with each other. Two sisters were always squabbling and on one occasion their mother broke them up and said, "You're sisters, you should love one another." There was an unusual silence for a moment or two and then one of them exclaimed, "I know that she is my sister but do I really have to love her? Can't I just like her?" I wonder is that how you feel about some Christian in the assembly? I wonder is your attitude hindering true unity?

Problems in the church can prevent unity, people in the church can prevent unity, and of course, pride in the local church can prevent unity. Do you know something? Pride is the ground on which every other sin grows. What was the cause of division in the Corinthian church? I'll give it to you in one word: pride. Pride. Time and again the Apostle Paul says, "Ye are puffed up." The Bible says, "He that is of a proud heart stirreth up strife. Pride goeth before destruction."

In the summer of 1986, two ships collided in the Black Sea off the coast of Russia. Hundreds of passengers perished and were drowned as they were hurled into the icy waters below. News of the disaster was further darkened when an investigation revealed the cause of the accident. It wasn't the technological problem like radar malfunction. It wasn't even a thick fog. The problem came down to human stubbornness. Both captains could have steered clear but according to news reports, neither captain wanted to yield, to give way to the other. Each was too proud to yield and by the time they came to their senses, multitudes had perished. I wonder as a Christian this morning, is it not time you came to your senses? I wonder is pride holding you back from fellowship with another believer? Is pride in your heart a barrier to genuine oneness?

Do you see how David describes this unity? Look at verse 2. He says, "It is like the precious ointment upon the head, that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard: that went down to the skirts of his garments; As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion." He uses the word "behold." He's talking now not

only about the barriers to true unity but the beauty of true unity. He says, "Behold." In the Hebrew language it would be our way of saying, "Stop. Look. Listen." David is telling us that a fellowship that is united is a sight to behold.

Is there anything more beautiful on earth when God's people are truly and biblically and scripturally united under the banner of the Lord Jesus and under the umbrella of his authority? David tells us how beautiful true unity is. He brings before us two illustrations, two pictures, one from the sacred realm, one from the secular realm. He tells us about a ministering priest and then he tells us about a mountain pasture, and what he's saying is this, he's saying there is a fragrance about biblical unity, it's like the precious ointment upon the beard. You see, at his ordination, Aaron, the high priest, was anointed. If you take time to read the book of Exodus, you'll discover that he was anointed with oil that was compounded, made according to the directions of God. David is saying unity is like oil. You say, why is unity like oil? Well, in scripture oil is a symbol of the Holy Spirit and, my dear friends, the Holy Spirit is not only the source of our unction, the Holy Spirit of God is the source of our unity. Aaron was charged with entering into the Holy of Holies. The high priest could only do that but once a year on the Day of Atonement, but before he could enter into the Holy of Holies, he had to anoint himself, he had to be anointed with this fragrant oil. He was never to go into the presence of God with odor of his flesh clinging to him. He had to be washed and anointed so that the fragrance of the Spirit of God is clinging to him. And David is saying that there is a fragrance about unity, there is a sweetness about unity. Not only is it sweet, it is diffusive. It not only rested upon his head, it flowed down to the very skirts of his garments. He says it ran down, it went down. You see, unity is not something that we can work up, unity is something that God sends down. My dear friends, Christian love scatters blessings by way of coming down. They come from God to his saints. They go from saint to saint. They go from saint to sinner. It's like throwing a pebble in a pond, they begin to multiply, and David is saying there is this fragrance, sweetness about true biblical unity.

He says there's not only a fragrance about unity, look at verse 3. He says there's a fruitfulness about unity, "As the dew of Hermon, and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion." If you've been to Israel, you know that Hermon is the largest mountain in the north. If you've been down around Judah and Jerusalem, you know that Zion in the south was one of the lesser mountains in the land but God sent dew upon both. Now why is dew so special? Well, back in the days of David, there was very little irrigation and there was very little rain, and those farmers, they were totally dependent on the dew. They were totally dependent upon the morning dew to water their crops. I tell you, there was not a more beautiful sight to a Hebrew farmer when he looked out in the morning and he saw the dew diffusing, just settling upon his crops. He realized that that dew meant food for his family, clothes for his back, a home for his wife and his children. And of course, the dew made the land great. It made it fertile and fruitful. It increased productivity. And here is what David is saying: what the dew does for the land, unity does for the church.

My friends, does that not reveal at least one reason why God's fructifying blessing is withheld? Ofttimes, there is no biblical, true, God-glorifying, Christ-centered, Spirit-

empowered, local-based unity. Sure, there's a false ecumenism that's abounding on every hand, an ecumenism that dishonors God and dethrones Christ and exalts Romanism, but that's nothing to do with true biblical unity. I'm thinking this morning about a practical demonstration of love and unity among the Lord's people. Do you know anything about it? We're so often marked by disgruntlement and division and dissension. David says, "Have a good look at it, will you?" Have a good look at it this morning. He says there's nothing so beautiful, there's nothing so special, there is something unique when brethren dwell together in unity. He says there's a fragrance about it, there's a fruitfulness about it.

They tell me out in California there are huge Redwood trees and some of those trees are 300 feet high and 2,500 years old, and the inside of some of those trunks are so big that two or three people, adults, can stand inside and just walk in there, and you would think that those Redwood trees have a tremendous root system that would go down hundreds of feet into the ground, but not so. The Redwoods have a very shallow root system unlike the palm tree whose taproot goes down into the ground deep. In fact, the palm tree's taproot goes down into the ground as deep as the tree is tall, but the Redwood tree has no taproot at all. You see, a Redwood tree in California never stands alone. It stands in groups and groves and clusters. And my dear friends, the might and strength of the Redwood tree is not in itself, the secret of the strength is this: for every foot in height the Redwood tree sends its roots not down but three times that distance out. In other words, if you go to California and you see a Redwood tree that's 300 feet tall, you'll know that its roots are shooting out not down but shooting out 900 feet. And if you could just look under the ground, you would find all the roots of those trees are intertwined and they're interwoven so that one tree is holding up the other tree. Each is holding up each other. These trees are literally locked to each other so that there is no way that one tree can fall down. It is held up by the strength of the other trees.

Is that not the secret of strength in a local church? I want to tell you, my dear friends, the greatest advertisement for the gospel of Jesus Christ is not our advert in the Lurgan Mail every Wednesday. The greatest advertisement for the gospel of Jesus Christ is not these cards and fliers that we so often put up. And the greatest advertisement for the gospel of Christ is not the holding at the front of the road there. It's not a television program. The greatest advertisement for the gospel of Jesus Christ is a church that is united under the Lordship of Christ. Indeed, if you look at verse 3, you'll discover that David not only talks about the barriers to true unity and the beauty of true unity, he talks about the blessing in true unity. Look at verse 3b, "for there the LORD commanded the blessing, even life for evermore." Where? I want to know where I can get God's blessing. I want to know where I'm going to get the benediction of God. Well, David says here's where you get it. There. Where? In the church where love abides, in the church where unity reigns, there God commands the blessing.

Now in terms of the Old Testament, what did that mean? Well, the key word, of course, is the word "there." And of course, it refers probably to two things. It, first of all, meant Zion and Jerusalem for if you look at Psalm 132:13 David says this, "the LORD hath chosen Zion; he hath desired it for his habitation. This is my rest for ever: here will I

dwell; for I have desired it." There at Zion. Jerusalem is where commanded his blessing and, of course, it's in the place where there is unity among the saints.

What does it mean in terms of the New Testament? Very simple, it means God's blessing rests upon a united church. Do you know something? The Holy Spirit is grieved by a squabbling church. It's not in a divided church that soldiers say that newborn babes grow in Christ. Do you know what the key word in the book of Acts was? That's why I read it this morning, it's "with one accord." It's with one accord. That's how Dr. Luke describes the early church, with one accord, and because they were of one accord, there the Lord commanded his blessing.

I was thinking about that through the week, with one accord, in Acts 2. Do you know what blessing they knew? They knew the blessing of effective preaching. They knew the blessing of effective preaching for how powerfully, how clearly, how biblically, how doctrinally Peter preached on the day of Pentecost. No wonder they were pricked in their heart and they said, "Men and brethren, what shall we do?" Do you know what happened? Three thousand were saved.

Do you want to see souls saved? Is it not time that you made it right with your fellow believer? Is it not time that you stop squabbling like a baby? Is it not time that you stop slighting other Christians in the meeting behind their back and go and have the courage of your conviction and go and speak to them face-to-face? D. L. Moody said, "I have never known the Spirit of God to work where the Lord's people are divided." I have never known the Spirit of God to work where the people are divided and, you see, if we're in the place of unity, we know the blessing of effective preaching.

It'll be easy for the preacher to minister the word of God in the place of unity, but this early church, they not only knew the blessing of effective preaching, they knew the blessing of attractive living. There was a joy about them. There was a radiancy about them, that they'd meet with gladness and singleness of heart. My friends, have we lost the joy of the Lord, the joy of him who said, "These things have I spoken unto you that your joy might be full"?

When you go home today, have a look at the early church. There the Lord commanded the blessing in the place of unity, the blessing of effective preaching, the blessing of attractive living, the blessing of instinctive sharing, "And all that believed had all things common." It was the body of Christ at work. It was the hand caring for the foot. It was the eye looking out for the ear. This was love, not law. This was compassion, not compulsion. You see, these believers were not only in love with the Lord, they were in love with one another.

Do we really care for one another when one another suffers physically, materially, spiritually, financially? There the Lord commands the blessing, the blessing of effective preaching, the blessing of attractive living, the blessing of instinctive sharing, the blessing of corrective teaching, for this was no wishy-washy, superficial, frothy assembly for "they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine." The sad commentary of many

local churches today is: anything goes there. Well, I'm here to tell you this morning that anything didn't go in the early church, and by God's grace anything will not go here. There in the place of corrective teaching the Lord commands the blessing, even life forevermore. Do you see where the blessing came from? It came from God through a united church.

The barriers to unity, the beauty of unity, the blessing of unity. Someone has said the world at its worst needs the church at its best. The world at its worst needs the church at its best and the church at its best is filled with humility and love, and where humility and love reigns, unity will abide. The pastor of a large and growing church in the United States of America was asked the secret of the growth in the church that he ministered to and he said this, "Just three things. 1. The people love the Lord. 2. The people love each other. 3. The people love the lost." And it's there in the place of unity that God is commanding the blessing even life forevermore.

My friends, that's what the world's waiting for this morning, for this church to show signs that we're one in Christ, for this believer, for that brother, for that sister, to reveal their oneness, and when God sees that, he will bless.

Let's pray together.