



Every three years InterVarsity sponsors the Urbana Conference, a gathering that challenges university students to get involved in missions. About 16,000 students from around the world attended in 2009.

After the main session each evening, students would leave the large auditorium to meet in smaller groups for prayer and worship. In one of the banquet halls, there was a small group of Chinese students, another group of Taiwanese students, and another group of students from Hong Kong. Large dividers stood between the three. These walls were important because historically these three peoples don't like each other. They felt it was best to pray and worship with their own people.

But as the Chinese students were praying one night, they told their leader they wanted to invite the other countries to join them. When the Taiwanese students got the invitation, they prayed and sang a little longer, and then they opened up the wall divider. It wasn't too much longer before the students from Hong Kong pulled back their divider, and some 80 students mingled together. The Taiwanese students asked the students from China and Hong Kong to lead them in worship. The next night, they invited the Korean and Japanese groups to join them, nations which also had a history of fierce animosity. One leader said, "In Christ, we're all one family. In Christ, we desire to connect."

Needless to say, this unity was a huge part of what made the NT church unique and powerful. Beginning with Pentecost, the church dismantled the barriers of gender, race, and social class that marked other groups. As a Pharisee, the apostle Paul gave thanks daily he wasn't born a woman, slave, or Gentile. But after he came to Christ he wrote, "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.*"

But ever since Jesus walked on this planet, the church has struggled to stay one. He chose twelve men to be his disciples and they were constantly bickering over which of them was the greatest. The church at Corinth was split over leadership. Some claimed to follow Paul, others followed Apollos, still others Christ. Why is unity so hard?

Philip Yancey writes, "Diversity complicates rather than simplifies life. Perhaps for this reason we tend to surround ourselves with people of similar age, economic class, and opinion. Church offers a place where infants and grandparents, unemployed and executives, immigrants and blue bloods can come together. Just yesterday I sat sandwiched between an elderly man hooked up

to a puffing oxygen tank and a breastfeeding baby who grunted loudly and contentedly throughout the sermon. Where else can we find that mixture? When I walk into a new church, the more its members resemble each other—and resemble me—the more uncomfortable I feel."

Well, he would have felt quite comfortable then in the church at Rome. They were struggling to know how to handle their diversity. There was a rift between two groups—the weak in faith and the strong.

- The weak were most likely Jewish believers who still felt bound to keep certain dietary restrictions and observe holy days from their Jewish past.
- The strong recognized Jesus set us free from having to keep all these rules.
- The weak looked at the strong and judged them for being less committed and more worldly because they didn't keep the rules.
- The strong looked down on the weak because they were less sophisticated in their faith.
- Paul said two things to them. First, instead of judging one another, you should accept and welcome one another. Second—and this was especially for the strong—instead of flaunting your freedom, don't put a stumbling block before a fellow believer.

Today we're looking at Romans 15:1-13, which is a continuation of this theme, but with a twist. Now Paul will argue unity is a miracle and blessing that comes from God, especially as we worship together with one voice. What happens when we come together here for worship? Is it like several hundred individuals are having personal devotions at the same time and in the same place with no regard for each other? Do we all just do our own thing? No! When a diverse group of people worship together with one heart and one voice we're expressing something that's God-given and uniquely glorifies Him.

### **Unity is the Product of Serving One Another as Christ Did**

Paul begins by summarizing what he said in chapter 14.

**We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak and not to please ourselves. Each of us should please our neighbors for their good, to build them up (verses 1-2).**

Notice Paul himself identifies with the strong. He says “we who are strong” should bear with the failings of the weak. We should not do this just to please ourselves, but rather to build up our neighbor. We applied this to several “disputable matters” two weeks ago—such as the use of alcohol, if we celebrate Halloween, how we vote, if we approve of tattoos. These are disputable matters about which the Bible says very little, either directly or indirectly. In chapter 14 Paul said to the strong, “Don’t cause a weaker brother or sister to do something in violation of their conscience by flaunting your freedom.” But here he takes it a step further and says, “Do whatever you can to serve them and build them up in their faith.” He gives the reason for this in verses 3-4.

**For even Christ did not please himself but, as it is written: “The insults of those who insult you have fallen on me.” For everything that was written in the past was written to teach us, so that through the endurance taught in the Scriptures and the encouragement they provide we might have hope.**

Our example for this is Jesus himself. He didn’t serve himself. Paul quotes from Psalm 69, which reminds us Jesus endured the insults directed at God. These were the insults **we** directed at God. Every time we sin we insult God, and every time we insult God, Jesus stands between us and says, “I’ll take that on. I’ll take the brunt of that.” He did that not to please himself, but to serve us. No one likes to be insulted. Paul says this and other OT Scriptures were written to teach us endurance; to encourage us and bring us hope.

But how is it possible for us to live this way? Where do we get the encouragement and endurance to live in this way of serving others? Because it doesn’t come naturally to any of us. We get it from God.

### **Unity is a Blessing from God Expressed in God-glorifying Worship**

Look what he says next in verses 5-6:

**May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, so that with one mind and one voice you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.**

This is called a benediction or a blessing. That word means to speak well; to speak something good. There are tons of benedictions in the Bible. The most famous one goes all the way back to Moses when he told Aaron, *“This is how you are to bless the Israelites. Say to them: ‘The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.’”*

For centuries, worship services ended with a leader pronouncing a benediction on the church before they left. Now we just say, “Have a good day. See you next week.” But these benedictions are

so helpful because they express what God wants to bless us with and pray to that end. In this case, the blessing God gives has to do with unity. It’s a prayer that God would grant what’s needed for unity among us. Think about that. God gives unity. We don’t create our unity; it comes from God as a gift. We may have to work hard at preserving it, but we don’t create it.

How does God give it to us? Paul says God gives endurance and encouragement. These were the same two things he mentioned up in v. 4 we get from the Bible. Now he says they come from God. When God pours into our hearts encouragement and endurance, then something happens to us, collectively. Paul says God will give us the same attitude of mind towards each other Jesus had. That’s the attitude of mind that serves others and doesn’t please itself. It is best expressed in Philippians 2:3-4: *“Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.”* In other words, submit to one another, love one another, and serve one another for the sake of Christ. But you can’t live that way apart from God. To do that we need to be encouraged by God and strengthened by God. That’s the only way we will be able to live so radically.

Then he says the purpose of all this is with one mind (heart) and one voice we may glorify God. This is where worship comes in. As we worship with one mind and one voice, God is glorified. Worshipping together displays our unity and that glorifies God. Personal quiet times can be wonderful and worshipful times, but there’s something special about gathering publicly with the entire church and praising God together. By singing, praying, hearing God’s Word, and confessing our faith together, we show the world we’re united by our faith in Jesus.

So it’s rather ironic that this whole area of worship—which ought to be a church’s greatest display of unity—often becomes one of the biggest points of division! We want to hear our own style of music; we complain we can’t worship because the music is too loud or too mellow or too old. We privately seethe because it doesn’t please us. For something that’s supposed to reflect our unity in Christ, a worship service can become an astonishing source of strife.

Let’s compare a church like ours to a multi-generational family with a grandma, a husband and wife, and several children of varying age. Pretend this is your home, and in your home you guys always eat Sunday dinner together. Of course, you expect the entire family to come to the table when dinner is served. But, one night you get home and face some challenges. Grandma has arrived early to help feed the baby while you help your spouse set the table. Soon your twelve-year-old twins enter the room arguing over television rights; nevertheless, they take their seats. But then you realize someone is missing. Your teenage son isn’t at the table. You go upstairs to see what’s the matter, and you

find him playing a video game in his room, wearing headphones to not be disturbed.

"Why aren't you at the table? Didn't you hear Mom say it's time to eat?"

"Oh yeah," he replies, with just a touch of attitude. "I heard her. But I'm not coming to dinner tonight. Mom's serving meatloaf, and I don't like it."

Now let me ask you a question: If you were a parent, how would you respond? Let me guess: You'd tell your son to go to the table whether he likes meatloaf or not! And in so doing, of course, you'd teach him a most profound lesson: It's not about the food; it's about the family.

You might say, "Look, son, I don't care what we're eating tonight. You're coming to dinner because you're a part of this family. You see, it's not so much the meal but being together that's important. And when you're not there, we miss out on all you contribute, and you miss out too. Sure it's meatloaf tonight, but tomorrow we're having pizza!"

Church is kind of like Sunday dinner in that respect. Our culture encourages us to do our own thing—to find our voice. That's okay, as long as you realize the church is supposed to glorify God with one voice. So finding your voice means learning to harmonize with other voices in the church. And if people use their voice more to complain about what's being served than to give thanks to God, it's really hard to glorify God with one voice.

You see, worship is as much about our relationship with one another as it is about our relationship with God. In it we help each other see God better. When we worship together as a church we help each other to grasp the glory of God and to respond joyfully. That's why Paul writes to the Ephesians, "*Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord*" (Eph. 5:19). When we sing on Sunday morning, we're communicating not only to God but also to each other. Why is this important? Because we're weak people who need constant reminding of who God is and what he's promised us, and our corporate worship time is perhaps the most important way we do that for each other.

### **Unity is Manifest Among Very Different People**

But how do we do this when we're very different people? Paul was speaking to a church of both Jews and Gentiles. That might not mean much to us but to them it was huge. There were racial, religious, and cultural divisions that ran as deep as anything we know in our world today. Think of the divide between Jews and Arabs today. The animosity ran that deep.

So Paul goes on and shows how this unity can be expressed between very different people.

**Accept one another, then, just as Christ accepted you, in order to bring praise to God (v. 7).**

We saw this same idea in chapter 14. Again, the idea behind accepting one another is to welcome one another with open arms. And the reason we do this is Christ has welcomed **us** with open arms. The more we understand how he's welcomed us by grace, the more we'll extend that grace to others who are very different from us by accepting them and welcoming them into our lives.

And look what Paul says this results in—praise to God! So now we're back to worship again. When you welcome someone very different from you into your life, or someone who doesn't deserve it, that results in praise to God. When we simply accept people who are just like us, that's good but that's no different from the world.

One modern Indian pastor said, "Most of what happens in Christian churches, including even miracles, can be duplicated in Hindu and Muslim congregations. But in my area only Christians strive, however ineptly, to mix men and women of different castes, races, and social groups. That is the real miracle." And when that happens, God is praised.

The greatest example of that was Jesus. Look what he says next in verses 8-9a.

**For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the Jews on behalf of God's truth, so that the promises made to the patriarchs might be confirmed and, moreover, that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy.**

Jesus came to serve both Jews and Gentiles. He became a servant to the Jews to fulfill the promises made to the patriarchs. Not only that, Jesus also became a servant to the Gentiles so they might glorify God for his mercy. So Jew and Gentile are brought together into a unity with a view to worship, as they praise God with one heart and one voice.

God's purpose was always to have a people made up of all nations. Paul proves this in four OT quotations in verses 9b-12.

**As it is written:**

**"Therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles;**

**I will sing the praises of your name."**

**Again, it says,**

**"Rejoice, you Gentiles, with his people."**

**And again,**

**"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles;**

**let all the peoples extol him."**

**And again, Isaiah says,**

**"The Root of Jesse will spring up,**

**one who will arise to rule over the nations;**

**in him the Gentiles will hope."**

There is a progression through these quotes. First, David as the king of Israel announces his intention to praise God among the

Gentiles. We're not sure if the Gentiles are spectators or participants. In the second and third quotations, the Gentiles (nations) are definitely participants. And in the fourth, Isaiah predicts the Messiah who is called the root of Jesse will rise up and rule over the Gentiles and win their confidence. Once again, notice in all of this the emphasis on worship: *"I will praise you among the Gentiles; I will sing praises to your name... Praise the lord, all you Gentiles; let all the people's extol him."*

### **Unity is Built Around a Shared Hope**

Paul closes this section with another benediction.

**May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit (v. 13).**

Why does he now pray this? The key word in this verse is "all." He wants all of us, Jew and Gentile, to be filled with joy and peace as we trust in him. Earlier he said "in him the Gentiles will hope," and he prays for us all to overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Hope, of course, looks to the future. Perhaps this is a reminder that, as we join together in unified worship, we get a little taste of heaven. Heaven is the place where all God's people will praise his name and delight in his glory. When we worship together down here we get a snapshot of that experience. We catch a glimpse of the glory of that final congregation in heaven. That's when heaven feels most real.

That's part of why we come to church. We need to be reminded, every week, of the hope of heaven and what it will be like to praise God forever with his people. Life can be difficult, and when we walk through hard times, our Lord's promises about heaven seem almost like a fairytale. So learn to savor and value

the moments when you're surrounded by brothers and sisters in Christ who are worshipping him. Perhaps you need to make that a greater priority in your life. And join with them. Add your voice to theirs. The worship time we have here is not just an optional warm up for the sermon. The point isn't to sneak in here as close to the sermon as you can, and then sneak out during the last song to beat the crowd out the door. That would be like coming to the table only to eat, missing the opportunity to bow your head and give thanks for the food, or ignoring the people seated around you.

Unity is a miracle and blessing that comes from God, especially as we worship together with one voice. We never really worship alone. There's no such thing as "personal worship." Whenever we worship, even if we're alone in our home, we're actually joining with millions of worshippers around the world, and countless angelic beings in heaven, gathered around the wondrous throne of God, to offer praise, thanks and our whole lives to him in adoration. One mind, one voice.

I can't help but think of what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. He said if you're bringing your offering to God and realize your brother or sister has something against you, leave your offering and go and be reconciled with your brother or sister and then come and make your offering. Why? Because when we lay down our differences and our preferences in order to worship with one mind and one voice, we know a God is present and we know he is pleased.

*This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.*

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