

LIVING IN UNITY

**SERIES: ONE KINGDOM.
INDIVISIBLE.**



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Fifth Message
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Church

I had long, curly hair past my shoulders for my first few years of college. It was kind of my signature. In fact, some people used to call me “blond Jesus.” I told myself it was because of my Christ-like character, but it was really because I looked like those old pictures of Jesus. Which, incidentally, we know look nothing like what a first-century Palestinian carpenter might have looked like.

I was known for my long hair. That was a huge part of my identity. The identity that people knew me by was “that blond guy with the long hair.” But then one day I cut my hair. I was no longer the guy with long hair.

I remember those next few days vividly. It was a surreal experience to walk around campus. I felt like I knew what it would be like to be invisible. I walked past people I had known for years, and they didn’t recognize me.

The reason people didn’t recognize me is that they had the wrong story for who I was. The story they knew was that I was the guy with long hair. So when I lost my hair, they didn’t see me anymore.

We’re in the fifth week of our series called “One Kingdom. Indivisible.” We’re preaching the story of the kingdom of God along with more than twenty churches around the Bay Area and beyond. We started in the first wave of churches, and now others are kicking off their series. It’s exciting to see the group of churches getting involved. You can go to our website at onekingdom.city to see the list of churches and when they are each starting the sermon series.

We began the series in creation, looked at the Exodus, and then the exile. Last week we saw how the gospel established God’s people as a spiritual kingdom that demands our allegiance over any earthly institution. This week we come to the culmination of our identity as the kingdom of God. Now we see the church—this is us. We’ve seen our history, but now we see how followers of Jesus manage their allegiance to God as they live in

an earthly empire. We’ll see those people who accepted the gospel living in unity.

There are two problems we’re trying to address in this message. First, we don’t really know who we are. Many of us don’t have a very developed sense of what it means to be the church. Secondly, the world around us doesn’t really know who we are either. They have a shallow version of who the church is based on media or TV or movies.

Some of you may know that the magazine *Christianity Today* recently welcomed a new president. Tim Dalrymple began May 1 of 2019. What’s interesting is that Tim attended PBC when he was in college at Stanford. My wife and I went on double dates with him and his wife. But what’s most exciting is the vision that Tim has for *Christianity Today*.

As Tim was considering the role of president, he shared that he heard clearly from God. The words he heard were: “My bride is beautiful, and she needs a storyteller.” His vision for the future of *Christianity Today* is to be a storyteller for the global church, which he identifies as the primary instrument for God’s redemptive and restorative grace in the world.¹

The reputation of the church in our world isn’t great. Some of the criticism received is deserved. Some of it is a misunderstanding. But regardless of where it comes from, the story of the church needs to be told.

This is partly the reason why we’re doing this series called “One Kingdom. Indivisible.” How can our identity be solidly founded on the kingdom if we don’t know our story? We have to have the right account about ourselves, and we want to be known in the world for the right things.

This morning we’re going to start with a simple definition of who we are as the church. Then we’ll think about two aspects of living out our identity: how we treat each other and how we treat the world around us.

Let’s jump into the Scriptures to find out who we are.

Who is the church

The identity of the church is one of the most important aspects of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. We talk a lot about how the church isn't the building. That's even more obvious now, but what is the church?

Remember that we aren't talking about Peninsula Bible Church. We're not talking one particular local gathering of believers. We're talking about "capital C church"—the collected sum of all those who proclaim Jesus as Lord.

Earlier in this series, we saw God give his people an identity when he rescued them from Egypt. After the redemptive work of Christ, the apostle Peter uses those same words to define the church.

1 Peter 2:9-10:

But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. 10 Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The church is the current manifestation of God's people in the world. In the Old Testament, God intended for the nation of Israel to be a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a people for his own possession. With the gospel, that identity has opened up to anyone.

Some people say that the church is an outpost of the kingdom of God. We are put here, in the world, as representatives of God's kingdom. We are living amidst the kingdom of earth.

That's why being part of the church can be so frustrating and confusing at times. We are literally living in two realms at once. We are part of a spiritual kingdom, living in an earthly realm; we live on the earth, but we are not citizens of this world. As Paul puts it in Philippians 3:20, "our citizenship is in heaven."

This is a critical distinction. When we talk about the church as the kingdom of God, we are not talking about an earthly institution. The kingdom of God is a spiritual entity.

This idea was easy for the early church to grasp. For the first few centuries, after Jesus rose from the dead, Christianity was a backwater illegal religion, followed by a small minority of unimportant people in the Roman Empire. When everyone hates you, and you have no power, you have to see yourself as a spiritual entity.

But something happened a few hundred later, which changed everything.

To understand that event, you have to understand my relationship with ice cream. Many of you know that I like ice cream—a lot. Earlier this week, on our Facebook page, I answered the critical question of what my favorite flavor of ice cream is. You'll have to go there to find out

What you might not know about me is that there lives inside of me a beast which craves ice cream. This beast sleeps most of the time. But when I eat ice cream, he awakens. And no amount of ice cream seems to fill his appetite. A little bit of ice cream only makes him more hungry. So when I eat ice cream, I eat a lot of ice cream. My appetite for ice cream can be insatiable.

In the 4th century AD, something similar awakened within the church. In the year 313, the Emperor of the Roman Empire, Constantine, converted to Christianity. He made following Jesus legal. Then in 380 AD, at the Edict of Thessalonica, Christianity was made the official religion of the Roman Empire. When this happened, the Church had its first taste of earthly power.

That taste of power awakened something within the church. The spiritual entity now knew what it was like to have earthly power. As many of us know, when the taste for power awakens, that appetite can be insatiable.

Since then, the institutional church has had a problematic relationship with earthly power. The Holy Roman Empire, the medieval Roman Catholic church, the Reformation era wars of Protestant nation-states. Even our founding of America as a "Christian nation". Each of these represents complex relationships between the spiritual entity of the kingdom of God and earthly realms of power.

As we engage with the world around us, we have to remember how seductive power can be. It's not that we should always avoid power, but we need to recognize our tendency toward self-deception and justification of our actions when power is involved. Beware earthly power.

Listen to how Craig Blomberg puts it,

We are not called to control secular power structures; neither are we promised that we can Christianize the legislation and values of the world. But we must remain active preservative agents, indeed irritants, in calling the world to heed God's standards²

One of the effects of Constantine's conversion to Christianity was the rise of monasticism. Followers of Jesus became disillusioned by the church's fascination with earthly power, so they withdrew. But that is not our call. We do not escape this world. We live within it, and we bless those around us.

How do we do that if we aren't supposed to use earthly power? How do we live as a spiritual community within the world of earthly power? What should we do?

Listen to each other

First of all, as the church, we need to be the kingdom of God to each other. Listen to the makeup of one of the first churches, described in the Book of Acts.

Acts 13:1:

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.

This description of the leaders of the church in Antioch contains people from Africa, Asia Minor, a Jewish rabbi with Roman Citizenship, and a cohort of Herod. Some commentators have said that this church was built on division. In the same way that Jesus called Simon the Zealot and Matthew the Tax Collector to follow him, this church drew together people from vastly different backgrounds.

His actions confirm the point we've been making throughout this series: unity does not mean conformity. To be drawn together around the person of Christ does not mean we think the same way about every issue.

We've been addressing some difficult topics in this series. Some of you have shared ways that you disagree with something I've said, and I'm grateful for those emails and comments. You may not realize it, but this is what biblical unity looks like—it means disagreeing with each other and working through stuff as we listen to the Spirit.

We are not going to come to the same conclusions on all the issues we've been discussing. I'm perfectly comfortable if you disagree with some of my conclusions. Go back to the Scriptures, talk with others, rely on the Spirit.

I know that it doesn't feel like unity because when we think of unity, we think of conformity—everyone thinking the same thing. We'd prefer conformity because it is comfortable, it reinforces what you already believe, and it makes you feel good about yourself. Real biblical unity is often challenging because you're constantly forced to engage with viewpoints different from yours, and you have to keep returning to God to find your center.

The apostle Peter gives us some helpful instructions on how to be unified.

1 Peter 3:8:

Finally, all of you, have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, and a humble mind.

The word translated as “unity of mind” come from the words for “common sympathy.” Other translations render that as “harmonious.” I think Peter, being the kind of person who speaks without thinking, had plenty of experience creating conflict with people. You don't need sympathy and tenderness and humility for people you agree with; you need these things for people with whom you are different.

Brothers and sisters, unity in the kingdom of God begins with us. We have to BE the kingdom of God to each other. We are all subjects of Christ as king. Each of us operates in his kingdom. If you have allowed Jesus to transform your life, he is your king. He is our king. We are accountable to him.

It saddens me to see how the members of God's kingdom sometimes treat each other. I have seen such hurtful behavior: assuming the worst of people, classifying people into narrow opinions, assigning selfish motivation based on simple actions, and flat out denying that we are part of each other. I've seen this between others, and I've experienced it myself. I've perpetrated it as well.

I recently heard the author Malcolm Gladwell talk about the 70 different wars that occurred in Europe during the 16th century. He pointed out that the vast

majority of them happened between neighbors. These were people who worshipped the same God, had similar cultures, and shared many values. But because they were so close, their differences were on display.

This situation frequently happens within the church. We tend to have the most division among people with whom we are very, very similar.

I've recently reconnected with an old friend from PBC, Rob Barrett. Rob currently works for an organization in Michigan called The Colossian Forum. Their goal is "help [Christians] engage divisive cultural conflicts in ways that reflect Christ."

Rob described their work by saying that they have observed that when Christians talk about certain topics, it's as if they immediately forget the basics of Christian behavior. It's as if certain issues are so incredibly important to be "right" on that it supersedes the essential ethic of loving each other. I know many of you have had this experience.

I'd like to suggest we start by listening to each other. Let me offer a gentle reminder that listening involves not talking, but letting the other person talk.

We shared the video at the beginning of today's message for this reason.

The hope was to hear simple statements of why specific political issues were important to different people.

We can't be unified if we can't listen to each other.

I recently learned about a psychology experiment where people were asked to complete partial words. So "___-O-U-C-H" could be "touch" or "couch" and "___-___-E-A-T" could be "cheat" or "treat". After completing many of these, they were asked whether the words they chose said anything about their personality. Almost all of them insisted it didn't. But when they were shown the words that other people chose, they claimed to know what those people were like based on their choices.

The researchers coined the phrase "illusion of asymmetric insight." What that means is that I don't think you know much about me, but I'm convinced I know a lot about you. Or simply put, "you don't know me, but I know you."³

We think we know each other based on very little data, but we don't. Don't assume you know what someone thinks or why they hold a particular viewpoint. Listen to them. Ask clarifying questions like "why do you think that way?" instead of aggressive questions like "how could you possibly think that way?" Most of us are reasonable. We make decisions using information which makes sense to us.

Being the kingdom of God has to start with us. That's what turns a lot of the world away from us. They see the way we treat each other, and they don't want anything to do with that. We have to be the kingdom to each other, and then we can learn how to treat the world.

Bless the world

We've seen throughout this series that the mission of the kingdom of God is to bless the world. This is why we were created, the purpose behind the exile, and the result of the gospel. I have two specific suggestions for what it means for the church to bless the world.

The first is to represent the "least of these." Followers of Jesus must always have a special awareness of the oppressed and vulnerable. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news to everyone. It is not only good news to those whose lives are already working out okay.

Proverbs 31:8-9:

Open your mouth for the mute, for the rights of all who are destitute. Open your mouth, judge righteously, defend the rights of the poor and needy.

James 1:27:

Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.

Our primary concern should be for the vulnerable in our world. Who is being oppressed? Whose rights are being violated? Who doesn't have power or protection? How can we advocate for them? Speak up for the least of these.

Unfortunately, in our political system, the people of God speak up the most for themselves. Sometimes Christians can sound like we are the oppressed and

vulnerable ones in the world. It's common to hear Christians talking about religious liberty. That's a great issue, but what I usually hear about is Christians fighting for their own religious liberty. I'd love to hear of Christians advocating for the religious freedom of other faiths – that would be looking out for others.

Our calling is to advocate for the “least of these.” In America, evangelical Christians are not the “least of these.” We are not the ones being oppressed.

How can you represent the least of these? How can you give a voice to those who have no voice? Are you willing to advocate for the least of these even if those people aren't living the way you think people should?

The second suggestion comes as a direct follow-up to the first. Listen to what Jesus said in the Book of Matthew.

Matthew 25:40:

And the King will answer them, ‘Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.’

Jesus encourages us not only to speak up for the least of these but to do something. We are invited to take action. In particular, Jesus calls us to sacrifice ourselves for their sake. Lay down your life for the least of these.

One of the most powerful demonstrations of the gospel was during the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. This new disease was ravaging the LGBTQ community. Some Christians looked the other way, concluding that these people deserved what they were experiencing.

But those who understood their role as the kingdom of God stepped in to help with medical care, hospice, food and shelter. AIDS patients during those years were indeed the “least of these” in our country. Here were Christians taking care of dying gay men with AIDS when no one even knew for sure how the disease was transmitted.

It's one thing to talk about the political causes you believe in. It's an entirely different thing to risk your life for the least of these.

One more example is from one of our members at PBC. He's been a part of the Gideon's ministry for years. Their calling is to distribute Bibles, and one of their strategies is to distribute Bibles outside schools. You can

imagine this can cause some conflict. He's shared stories with me of persecution and angry people.

Distributing Bibles may not be your calling; however, the point is to put into practice the things that you care about. Don't just have opinions. Be willing to do something that might end up costing you. This is what the kingdom of God has done throughout history. Not only to represent the least of these but to lay our lives down for them.

That's my suggestion. This is at least one of the things that the church does as we engage the world. Speak up for the least of these. Lay down your life for the least of these. Speak up and lay down.

Conclusion

Those years ago, when I was in college right after my haircut, I could walk past people and feel invisible. To be honest, there was a weird sort of excitement in that. Haven't you always wanted to be invisible? To do whatever you want, and no one notices?

I worry that the church in our community can be invisible. I've been a part of church my whole life. After high school, I travelled with a music ministry and visited over 200 churches in a single year. I love the church.

To be part of a people who know they are broken, but rely on the mercy of God through Christ to save them is an incredible thing. We can be honest here. We can be transparent. God accepts us despite all of our shortcomings. To know that Jesus Christ, the son of God, laid down his life for us, knits us together.

We are the church of Jesus Christ. We are a part of a long history of the people of God. But too often we are invisible, or the wrong story is told about us.

Let's be the church to each other. Let's listen and try to understand the different perspectives we come from. Let's speak up for those in our world who have no voice. Let's lay down our lives for their sake.

Of course, we do this because of who we follow. When Jesus walked the earth, he refused to amass earthly power. He loved people, and he listened to them---even some of the worst people, those with awful political opinions and terrible lives of sin. He embraced people on all sides of the political aisle.

Ultimately, he sacrificed himself for our sakes. He laid down his life so that we could be forgiven and welcomed into the spiritual kingdom of eternal life.

Jesus gave us a physical way to celebrate his sacrifice for us. He gave us the gift of what we call “The Lord’s Supper” or “Communion.” When he instituted this ritual, he said, “Do this in remembrance of me.” But remembering Jesus isn’t only a cognitive thing. It’s an appreciation for the model that he set for us.

As we take communion, I invite you to do this as a way of receiving Jesus’ gift for you and accepting his invitation to model your life after his. Our goal is not to amass earthly power, but to live as a spiritual community. We love each other patiently. We speak up for and lay down our lives for the least of these.

This is what Jesus did. This meal represents all of that. May we follow him not only with our words but with our actions.

Endnotes

- 1 Timothy Dalrymple, “A Vision Worth Living and Dying For,” *Christianity Today* Video, 4:36, 2019, <https://www.christianitytoday.org/stories/videos/2019/vision-worth-living-and-dying-for.html>
- 2 Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture* (B&H Publishing Group, 1992).
- 3 “Illusion of asymmetric insight,” Wikipedia, last modified February 11, 2020, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusion_of_asymmetric_insight.