



HELD TOGETHER IN CHRIST

VISION AND COMMITMENT

A year to focus on integration



He **i**s before all **th**ings, and **i**n **H**im all **th**ings hold together.

Colossians 1:17 (NIV)

SERMON

INTRODUCTION

Let's use a little Shakespeare to introduce the message for today!

'To be or not to be: that is the question.' Hamlet is asking, ultimately, which is better - life or death?

Let's adapt Hamlet, '*To be or not to be integrated: that is the question*'; or, taking it even further, '*How to be or not to be integrated*' - to introduce the topic and theme for today. We will discover the answer in our Bible text if we do not already know it!

What does integration mean?

Very simply, the process of uniting different things, or combining into a whole. It is the opposite of disintegration and separation. Integration, of course, is the second of the key priorities in the TIDE strategy - and the theme for the United Kingdom with the Republic of Ireland Territory in 2017.

Background to the text

The letter to the Colossians was probably written at the same time as those to Philemon and Ephesians. Colossae was, by the time of writing, an unimportant town, with a mixed population and pluralistic society, including Greeks, Romans, Jews and Christians, along with much astrology and superstition. Epaphras is widely believed to have planted the church there, in his home town.

It seems that wrong teaching was affecting the church there, but scholars are unable to agree exactly what. It's possible that syncretism was the issue - that is, a mixing of Christianity with other ideas, and that therefore the message and person of Christ was no longer pre-eminent.

Epaphras brings the news of what is happening to Paul who is in prison in Rome, and Paul then writes to the church at Colossae to address this issue of disintegration rather than integration.

DEVELOPMENT

What does this passage have to say to us today about being integrated?

Two key things are found in chapter 1:4 - '*...because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love you have for all God's people*' - and expanded upon in the rest of the passage. We could put it this way: *Faith in Christ + Love for others = the Key to Integration*

Let's look firstly at verses 3-14 which teach us about being integrated in daily life.

1. Others vv3-14

A quick glance at these verses reveals what is important. The use of the pronouns 'we' 'you' and 'us' reveal immediately that it is about people.

Eg v9: '*We have not stopped praying for you*' and v13: '*he has rescued us... and brought us...*'

If being integrated is all about uniting different things, then Paul's prayer for the Colossians is a great start. It teaches us to be integrated by doing the following things:

a. To encourage others (vv4-6)

Paul writes about how he is grateful for what God is doing in the lives of others (vv4-6). He encourages them! He highlights the importance of witness, and of sharing with others - their testimony (v4) and Epaphras' testimony (v6). Their experience was so wonderful that others were talking about it! So, when did we last encourage someone in their faith and Christian experience? Is our life the kind that encourages others? Is our corps fellowship an encouraging place to be?

b. To love all God's people (v4)

Most likely this is referring to all the Jewish Christians living in a predominantly Gentile Christian situation. But indeed all people are to be loved, even our enemies. And even those within our corps we don't always see eye to eye with. As the old chorus reminds us: 'To live **above**, with **saints we love**, that will be glory. To live **below**, with **the saints we know**, now that's a different story!'

We need to love as Jesus taught us: '*A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another*' (John 13:34-35).

Love - irrespective of nationality, colour, creed, sexuality, outward state and condition, rich or poor, weak or strong believers, of different sentiments in matters of religion or politics.

To be '*united in love*' is key in an integrated Church (Colossians 2:2). And if we are united in our love for one another, then that is what will make us distinctive and attractive to the community and in society: '*By this (loving one another) everyone will know you are my disciples.*'

c. To live a life of spiritual maturity (vv9-11)

Paul prays that the Colossians have spiritual intelligence to live a life worthy of the Lord (v9) - essentially that they are mature in their spiritual experience and don't stop at salvation. He has already highlighted the qualities of faith and love and hope (v5), wisdom (v9), and now endurance, patience and joy (v11,12) - which will result in growing in the knowledge of God. These are the qualities essential for every Christian and most certainly needed for integration in corps life. A group of babies together with no adults is an impossible thought; they are too immature to cope and survive on their own without a mature influence. In our corps we are thankful for many saints who live a life of maturity, who have spiritual knowledge and discernment. May we make Paul's prayer our own, to be one of those mature influences who help the cause of integration, and identify what it is that might be stopping us continually growing in our knowledge of God.

So the first part of this passage is all about others, and living with others, and being integrated with others. We have a response in our house as soon as someone starts on about 'I want to do this... that's not what I like...' - the others all say in unison, 'But it's not all about **you!**'

If, as four people in our family, we need to keep ourselves in check, then how much more do we as part of a bigger fellowship need to remember that in being integrated, it's not all about the individual, but about bringing individuals together, like in a jigsaw puzzle, to get the final picture and ideal.

Galileo, a devout Christian, discovered that all the planets in the solar system revolved around the Sun - and the Earth was but one of a family of planets. Back in Galileo's time, it was terribly humbling for people to realise that their planet was not the centre of the universe. People reacted violently. Galileo was thrown in jail. How dare he suggest that God had not made our home planet the exact centre of everything created? But the Earth is not the centre of the universe. Science has proven it. And we ourselves are not the centre of existence. This is also true in Christian fellowship, and mission and outreach. It is not all about us, but about those around us - those we are called to love and serve and share the gospel with.

Yet integration is not just about others, but about Christ...

2. Christ vv15-20

Ultimately, integration with each other depends upon Christ. It's all about Jesus! We know this, of course, and again the way Paul writes and the pronouns he uses ('he', 'himself', 'him') in these verses remind us of this fundamental truth.

Eg v15 - 'The Son [he] is the image of the invisible God', and v16 'all things have been created through him and for him', and v17 'He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together'.

An old recipe for rabbit stew started out with this instruction: 'First catch the rabbit!' Obvious, isn't it? You can't make rabbit stew without having first caught the rabbit! So it is with being integrated, being one, in union, with another: we can't do it without Christ.

These verses (15-20) teach us who Christ is:

1. The image of God (v15)

Christ is the image of the invisible God - the word 'image' being translated from the Greek word 'eikon' - and teaching that Christ is the perfect manifestation of God. Christ perfectly represents and manifests God to humankind in a way we can see and understand. Christ also shows us what humankind was intended to be, as Genesis 1:26-27 uses this same word when talking about being made in God's image. William Barclay calls this '*the double revelation in Jesus Christ, the revelation of the godhead and the revelation of manhood*'.

2. He is supreme (v17)

Paul writes to admonish the Colossians in placing Jesus as simply an angel or heavenly power: '*All things have been created through him and for him*' (v16) and '*He is before all things, and in him all things hold together*' (v17). He is above all of this - and more significantly, he holds everything together. He is the 'glue' of creation - the power that holds it all together and does not let it disintegrate. If this is the case for creation and the universe, how much more should we trust Christ in our own lives, and in our corps, and in our community, and in our world? We need to ensure that Christ is supreme in our daily walk with him, and in our corps and centre programmes and activity - and allow him to hold us all together.

3. He is our head (v18)

There is no clearer picture of how the Church and our Salvation Army should operate than this. In human terms, the body is powerless without the head. The head directs all thoughts, words and actions. Without the head the body is ineffective and powerless. So the challenge remains for us as the Church to give Christ his place as our Head. We are a privileged people, to be the body through whom Christ acts.

Elsewhere in Scripture we are reminded that in that body there all kinds of different parts - '*All of you together are Christ's body, and each of you is a part of it*' (1 Corinthians 12:27 NLT). Each of us has a role to play, and every role is important, because we are all dependent on each other to function. This is integration! When one part of the body doesn't work, then the rest of the body suffers and disintegrates. So Christ is the head of the body - the Head of the Church - and he is depending upon us in our diversity of gifts, skills and abilities to integrate and be the instrument through whom he can work. *The Message* paraphrase of Colossians 1:18 is: '*And when it comes to the church, he organises and holds it together, like a head does a body*'.

CONCLUSION

Albert Einstein dreamed of finding a single theory that would embrace all of nature's laws. But in his quest for this unified theory, Einstein came up empty-handed. Others followed and pursued what has come to be known as the Theory of Everything, seeking to define all the laws of the universe in one theory. In Colossians 1, Paul writes the 'original' theory of everything. For Paul, Jesus is the source of holding life together. Jesus is the key to everything. Jesus is the key to us being integrated, being one with each other, in our corps (and in sections within the corps), our divisions and territories, the international Salvation Army - One Army, One Mission, One Message.

If we return to the audience to whom Paul is writing, remember that he was attacking the deceptive philosophies infiltrating the church at Colossae - that Christ was not enough and his message was being diluted and mixed with angels and superstitions that placed Christ as merely one of many heavenly powers.

This is important for us in 2017. David Pawson calls it 'Churchianity' - where Christianity, he suggests, can be *'merely a ritual, with little attention paid to the Jesus of the Bible'*. May the truth of v17 be in the forefront of our minds in all we do: 'He was before all else began and it is his power that holds everything together' (Colossians 1:17 TLB). It's all about Jesus!

To be or not to be integrated is not really the question - we see how Scripture teaches that Christianity is all about being integrated. Rather, the question is: how are we each doing at playing our part in obeying God's word? The key to integration is faith in Christ and love for others. Let's make sure that we are not causing disintegration. Let's make sure that we have actually 'first caught the rabbit' and Christ is central and before and after all things we do. Let's celebrate our differences and use them for God's glory. Let's give thanks for our diversity in so many ways. We can do this to God's glory and for the benefit of his Kingdom - because Christ holds it and us all together, if we allow him to, and in integration we find our most appropriate, desired and true situation: *'Christ existed before all things, and in union with him all things have their proper place'* (v17 GNB).

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