



Chalk and Cheese (Acts 11:19-30)

I'm sure you've seen advertisements like these round and about. If you have some money laid aside and want a tummy tuck, or a nose job or maybe have your lips padded out, you can have surgery which will fix that. Or perhaps not. We live in a society that seeks bodily perfection don't we. Here are the results of some surveys that have recently been taken.

"47% of women are unhappy with their bodies"

"By 13, at least 50% of girls unhappy with their appearance"

"Ads with muscular actors leave men depressed and unhappy with their bodies"

And as we can see, people go to extraordinary lengths to sort out parts of their body that are less than perfect. What is the purpose of all this? Well, it's not an edition of Watchdog to warn you about a dodgy cosmetic surgeon who is wanted in six countries for gross malpractice and fraud! It isn't to encourage you to healthy living either. It's to underline a fact that as believers, we are all part of the Body of Christ, His Church. The problem is that sometimes we find that the parts of it are not quite as we would like them.

Now that can apply within the local church - the local expression of the body of Christ. You looked last week at what it meant to be part of a local church. You are all part of His body here and however beautiful or otherwise you think one another is, God has given you one another to worship Him, build one another up in the faith, serve one another and reach out to others.

But I want to take us somewhere else this morning, because the Body of Christ is more than the local Church - it is everyone who trusts Jesus. But some of the other parts of the body we often think of just being uncomely and in need of cosmetic surgery maybe. But they are who they are and are all part of the rich diversity which makes the body of Christ work. Throughout the world that's an amazing number of people. In doing so, God never intended churches to be independent islands, but for them to be *interdependent* = *depending on each other*. It's one of those basic Baptist principles and the practical outworking of that is that Baptist churches are usually part of an Association (here it is the CBA) and also associate nationally in the Baptist Union and internationally through the BMS. There is an historic element to this. Early Baptist churches developed during persecution by Charles I and association helped them protect one another as well as give them a voice. But it goes beyond that doesn't it?

I think that's something you appreciate as a church already because as a church you are involved with others here in Stevenage and also in quite a variety of places in the world through various links and contacts you have. The Lord has blessed you as a church and you've blessed others. That's part of what interdependence is about. But there's more to interdependence - than that. Remember the bit about depending on each other.

Let's have a look at the story of two churches who were like chalk and cheese. First of all, here's Jerusalem - the Big Cheese. I've put in a block of Emmental to represent it here - because it's holy! It was the original church and it had an exciting few years starting on the Day of Pentecost. It's membership had all the great and good in the Christian faith including Peter and was led by James the brother of Jesus. They had seen remarkable things and many of them had known Jesus and had listened to His teaching. They were dominated by Judean Jews that were starting to just get their head around the fact that the Holy Spirit had come on a Roman Centurion and his family and getting to grips with a vision Peter had in this connection. Their Jewish teaching had told them that salvation did not extend to the Gentiles so they needed to change.

Antioch was the opposite. Founded by Greek-Speaking Jews from Cyprus and Cyrene (N Africa) who were displaced by the persecution in Jerusalem. Because they lived in foreign lands, they understood Gentiles well and it wasn't long before Greeks started to trust Jesus. Whilst Jerusalem was agonising over Cornelius, Greeks in Antioch were believing in droves! Then Jerusalem got to hear. You can imagine what was being said by some. "Are you sure this is true? How can the Gentiles follow Jesus like this? This can't be right. Perhaps we should put a stop to this before it gets out of hand." Antioch was chalk to their cheese and it was one of those annoying squeaky bits of chalk too.

Thankfully, they sent a Greek-speaking Cypriot Jew called Barnabas to investigate. He's described as being full of the Holy Spirit and faith. He got there and saw the grace of God at work and said "WOW! God's at work here" OWTTE. He got stuck in and helped them and even more people became Christians because they helpfully invented that word to describe themselves.

Actually for Barnabas, going there like he did must have been a bit of a crisis of faith for him too. He needed to make sense of the fact that Greeks were coming to Jesus with no previous knowledge or understanding of Him. How did he reconcile that with what he knew and how was he going to teach believers from scratch with no previous knowledge. Barnabas turned to his friend Saul of Tarsus, an OT scholar to make sense of what God was doing in Antioch. And he did and showed that it was the intention of God to save the nations and that goes through the NT and through Christ He's done just that.

What's clear from the passage is that because Barnabas was astute and listened to God, the big cheeses at Jerusalem accepted the chalkies at Antioch. And the church in Jerusalem blessed them not just with Barnabas, but prophets came from Judea. So the church in Antioch benefited from Jerusalem.

It didn't mean that Jerusalem was 100% comfortable with Antioch. If you go to Acts 15 and Galatians 2 you'll find that these issues were still live in Jerusalem years later even though James and the Apostles had accepted that God was blessing the Gentiles.

You'd have thought that the big cheese church would have nothing to gain from the squeaky chalk church because they had the glitterati of the Christian faith but when the famine came, they accepted gifts from Antioch as well as received Barnabas and Saul. That's interdependence.

Because the church in Antioch had the benefit of Barnabas and others, it grew into a world-shaking church. They came up with the word Christian, they started the whole idea of practical help for other churches as they collected for the Jerusalem church and they came up with the whole idea of missionary work.

13:1 In the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: Barnabas, Simeon called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen (who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch) and Saul. 2 While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." 3 So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off.

They were the original missionary church because they were prepared to listen to God and were ready to perceive what God was doing. And as a result, the Christian faith changed from being a small Jewish sect to being a rapidly growing Gentile faith in a generation.

Jerusalem came to grips with the Gentile issue (eventually) through interaction with Antioch and Antioch benefited from the people Jerusalem sent. They were responsible for building one another up. Despite being chalk and cheese, Antioch would never have become a force in mission without Barnabas from Jerusalem and without Antioch, the church at Jerusalem would have struggled for longer. They were very different parts of the body of Christ, but they needed the experience of one another to build God's kingdom.

What's this got to do with us?

In any locality in towns like Stevenage, there are a number of churches. We are all part of the body of Christ, all tending the same vineyard, all seeking to build the kingdom, all trying to obey the same Great Commission. Yet we never see the other church fellowships in terms of the body of Christ. Did God put them there as competition to keep us on our toes? Of course not. They are trying to

build the kingdom as we are. But they are chalk and we are cheese. Perhaps that's for a reason. Our different characteristics are like the parts of the body. In our diversity we have the ability to do God's work more effectively. So why don't we partner and work more with other local churches?

Actually I do know that I'm pushing an open door here at Bunyan as you have taken the decision to plant a church at Great Ashby in conjunction with St Nicholas. You know that it has been costly for you as a fellowship and continue to be for a good while yet. It is encouraging to see how things are going in Great Ashby but it is encouraging to hear that new people coming into Bunyan to fill the empty spaces that would not have been there if you hadn't planted.

In this respect Bunyan is more Baptist than most Baptists who tend to guard their independence more jealously. But open your minds for what else God can do through interdependence. In Swaffham we have started a Men's work with two other churches. Each of us had men's ministry, but we have found that in working together that we can do so much more together in terms of the events we can plan and the ministry we can offer. As a result, men have been added to the churches which wasn't happening when we operated separately. That's interdependence.

Look at it in a bigger scale. In many parts of Britain denominational barriers are coming down locally and churches are working and praying together. I think you are having the same process here in Stevenage. In Haringey in the 90s, the situation was dire, with poverty, street crime, domestic violence, racial incidents and deprivation being rife. Churches were struggling and had been for decades, and local politics were of the "loony left" sort. Some Pastors got together with the intention of praying together regularly and encouraging churches to pray for the local community. It snowballed rapidly to cover most of the borough. Regular celebrations and missions were held. The result: Haringey is one of the most Christian places in Britain, with new churches springing up. Major social problems are being dealt with and you can see signs of regeneration all around. The local authority even asked Pray Haringey to hold civic services and pray regularly for council business. The same can be repeated all over Britain - even in Norfolk.

Individually we can do what we can, but as the body of Christ, we have strength in diversity. Look at any major move of the Spirit in the last 200 years and you'll see the ingredients from Jerusalem and Antioch - prayer, and openness to what God is doing and a willingness to work with those who do what we they do yet are chalk to their cheese.

To conclude, I want to encourage you to explore even more the path you have embarked on and pray that others will be encouraged to walk it too.

To take opportunities for friendship and prayer with other churches - Hope 08 - a real opportunity.

Start looking forward in faith to what God is going to do as you have taken the step of faith to commit resources to planting and working with others - be expectant.

Rejoice, Rejoice, Christ is in you
The hope of glory in our hearts.
He lives! He lives!
His breath is in you.
Arise a mighty army we arise.

Now is the time for us To march upon this land.
Into our hands He will give the ground we claim.
He rides in majesty To lead us into victory.
The world shall see that Christ is Lord.