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United Appeal for Mission Sunday 2017
**Sermon Notes**

## Sermon: Ourselves alone or mission together?

This can be expanded upon with illustrations appropriate to the local context and with an up to date United Appeal story from the most recent material.

## Introduction – Ourselves alone is a sola that doesn’t belong in the Reformation

This year we’re celebrating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation. The heart of the Reformation can be summed up by the great ‘solas’:

* Sola Fide, by faith alone.
* Sola Scriptura, by Scripture alone.
* Solus Christus, through Christ alone.
* Sola Gratia, by grace alone.
* Soli Deo Gloria, glory to God alone.

As Presbyterians we are proud of these, we want to be marked by these.

But sometimes we add another sola, another ‘alone’. Sometimes we operate according to the idea of ‘ourselves alone’.

*(N.B. a couple of alternatives that could be used instead of ‘ourselves alone’ would be ‘on our own’ or ‘going it alone.’)*

When instructions come down about charities legislation and equality policies, does it seem like PCI is just interfering and covering us in red tape?

When the United Appeal envelopes come out, do you think ‘we could use this money better in our own congregation. Why are we sending it to church house?’

Does Presbytery seem like a waste of time?

Or an irrelevance that you don’t know much about and would be content to know even less?

Does it seem like it would be better to go it alone – ourselves alone?

**Well Acts 15 shows us that actually it’s better to be Presbyterian, to do things together, than to be ourselves alone.**

**1. Paul didn’t go it alone**

The chapter starts with Paul in a dispute with some Jewish Christians who teach that the Gentiles have to become Jews and follow the law of Moses that the Jews followed to be Christians.

Paul has two options – he could deal with the dispute locally when it comes up, then get on with his mission to the Gentiles. Or he could taken time out of his mission to go and speak to the other apostles in Jerusalem to try and change the whole church.

Given the choice between local mission and trying to change the church, many Presbyterians would say that’s no choice at all and stay at home to get on with mission, especially if changing the church involved going down to Church House. But Paul sets off for Jerusalem in the company of Barnabas, with the blessing of the local church. He doesn’t go it alone with mission, ignoring the wider church He doesn’t even go it alone when he travels to Jerusalem.

In the Old Testament many confrontations and disputes involved miracles or great drama – think of Elijah calling down fire on Mount Carmel, or Solomon calling for a child to be cut in two and shared between the two women claiming to be their mother. But Paul gets a committee. In fact, joy of joys, it’s possibly the first meeting of the General Assembly.

Peter appears to be the Moderator, directing discussion. James tells people what to do – he must be the Clerk. And Luke appears to have the minutes, so perhaps he was Deputy Clerk that day. They have a deep discussion, they think about what the Bible teaches, then they write a report, make a resolution and send a copy to other churches. It’s all done decently and in order. It’s all very Presbyterian.

And actually, it makes a profound difference to the church. This has a radical impact on mission. A church-wide decision is made that Gentiles don’t have to become Jews. And as a result the wider church is strengthened and encouraged.

**2. The whole church was strengthened and encouraged because Paul didn’t go it alone**

What would have happened if Paul had gone it alone in verse 2?

He could have dealt with the false teaching locally. And wherever he went he could have continued to teach that Gentiles didn’t have to become Jews. He would have had more time for mission because he wouldn’t have had to travel back to Jerusalem. The church in Antioch could have spent money on mission instead of travel expenses. Perhaps that’s what some of us might have argued for if we’d been there.

But then the wider church still would have struggled with this issue. The false teaching could have taken deeper root and been harder to deal with. Certainly it would have taken longer to root out. or to even come to the attention of the rest of the apostles. They wouldn’t have heard the stories from Paul of how the Gentiles had been genuinely converted and without that testimony, without the church sharing together about mission, perhaps the assembly in Jerusalem would have voted the wrong way. Who knows what situation we would be in as Gentiles ourselves!

Paul wouldn’t have met with other Christians in Phoenicia and Samaria so they would have missed out on his encouragement. Luke wouldn’t be telling us that they were made very glad. And even the church in Antioch, where Paul was based, would have missed out on the encouragement that Christians from Jerusalem were able to bring. If Paul had focused on his local congregation, then ultimately his local congregation would have missed out and suffered, though they wouldn’t have known what they were missing out on.

Paul taking time and spending money to go to the assembly in Jerusalem was good for the mission of the whole church and strengthened his local congregation. Praise God that Paul didn’t go it alone!

**3. Being a Presbyterian like Paul means dropping a sola**

As for us, if we really care about the Reformation – and if we care about mission – then we have to abandon one sola – we have to stop being ‘ourselves alone’. We have to stop going it alone.

Everything Paul did in this chapter was with other Christians. Great good came from working together. Of all Christians, of all missionaries, he was probably best equipped to go it alone, most capable of going and achieving great things. His time was perhaps more precious than any other’s. But the church was blessed by his decision not to go it alone.

So we can’t go it alone. We have to meet with other Christians and we have to do mission together. We have to be willing to spend time and money on that. Paul does this in quite a Presbyterian way, but it doesn’t mean we should retreat into a Presbyterian bubble, not supporting missionaries outside PCI, etc. – there is only one church so it’s good to be involved outside PCI.

But it would be perverse to completely bypass the institutional structures and natural Presbyterian relationships we are a part of it. Paul’s reform of mission was achieved through the institutional structure he was a part of.

The United Appeal for Mission is one way we can do this. Twice a year there’s a leaflet produced about the work that is supported by United Appeal. It’s called ‘Mission Together.’ Not ‘Local Mission,’ not ‘Mission Alone,’ but ‘Mission Together. It’s tells you what we’re doing together.

So let me tell you about some of the stuff we’re doing…

***<insert a recent story about United Appeal>***

I hope you were strengthened and encouraged hearing about that. I hope it made you glad. If we were working by ourselves, could we have done this? Even if we had, it probably only would have encouraged us, not the whole church. But through United Appeal even the smallest, weakest, poorest congregations who struggle to do mission can know that they are a part of the work God is doing and rejoice in that. So even where we think that we could do it ourselves, that we could do it better ourselves, it’s better to work together so that others can be strengthened, just as Paul did for the wider church.

**Conclusion**

We look to Paul for much of our Reformation doctrine. We like to think of him as someone who would happily sig up to grace alone, faith alone, etc. But as Gentiles we should be glad that Paul didn’t go with ‘ourselves alone’.

Paul could have kept going his own way. Would have saved his time. Saved some resources. But through him the whole church was strengthened and encouraged and a wonderful mission field was opened that has led to our salvation.

## Possible service outline

A few readings have been suggested here are:

* Psalm 107:31–32 thanks and praises God in the assembly and council
* Psalm 22:19–28 asks God for help and praises him in the assembly
* The Apostles’ creed to remember out togetherness in faith
* A few others that could be used are:
* Matthew 28 – Jesus calls for the brothers to be gathered together and then gives them their mission.
* Phil 3:1–11 – Paul dealing the the circumcision controversy directly
* Galatians as a whole deals with the issue of the role of the law and chapter 2 recounts the conflict in Acts 15.
* Gathering to worship God
* Call to worship: Psalm 107:31–32
* PRAISE
* Prayer of adoration and confession
* God speaks through his Word
* Reading for the family talk
* Family Talk
* Prayer
* PRAISE
* Prayer
* Reading: Acts 15:1–35
* Sermon
* Prayer
* PRAISE
* Responding to God as he works in our lives
* The Apostles’ Creed
* Offering
* Prayers for others
* Reading: Psalm 22:19–28
* PRAISE
* Benediction