

Unity of the Body *I Corinthians 1:10-17*

Turn in your Bible to First Corinthians, chapter one. We saw last week that Paul opens this letter by reminding these believers, part of a new church he established a couple of years before, of their identity in Christ. They belonged to God; they had been set apart for God's divine purposes; and they were saints – "holy ones."

In verse nine, Paul reminds them that they had been called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ. This was a state into which they had come, and in which they stood, through God's grace.

Now, the English text doesn't include an important word which occurs within the next sentence in the Greek text. It is the little conjunction *de*, which mean "but."

They had been called into the fellowship of Jesus Christ – but. Paul is going to deal with a problem that lay at the root, in some way or other, of all the other problems facing the Corinthian church. It is the problem of disunity.

I want to use four words to describe the problem so it will be easy to remember: cliques, sticks, picks, and ticks.

It appears that within the church were a variety of **Cliques**. The noun *clique* means "a small, exclusive circle of people." Rather than seeing themselves as a unified whole, it was a church made up of a number of small, competing groups. The inevitable result was division. Look what Paul writes:

I Corinthians 1:10

These divisions probably were not over doctrinal issues, but rather over position and status. This is a church at war within itself: power struggles, one-upsmanship; jockeying for position. What a nasty situation it must have been.

The second word is **Sticks**. Look at the resulting interaction behind these cliques:

I Corinthians 1:11

The word *quarreling* means "discords, strifes, contentions." One writer notes that the word refers to "hot disputes, the emotional flames that ignites whenever rivalry becomes intolerable" (Welborn).

Kenneth Bailey, in his book *Paul Through Mediterranean Eyes*, notes that this same Greek word, *Eris*, translated *quarreling*, is the name of the Greek goddess “that excites to war.” He writes:

In Greek the word *eris* was also used to depict “battle-strife.” With such language, Paul was not discussing a “little misunderstanding” but bitter quarreling and contention.

These groups within the Corinthian church were beating each other with proverbial sticks, seeking to inflict wounds upon others. And here’s the root behind the quarreling: **Picks**.

I Corinthians 1:12

These cliques aligned themselves with different leaders. I don’t think we need to draw the conclusion that these leaders were necessarily part of the problem; they were the figureheads behind which these groups rallied.

Imagine a meeting of the whole church. It would have been like rival cheering sections. There’s a group over here: “Paul! Paul! He’s our man. If he can’t do it, nobody can.” Then comes the echo: “Apollos! Apollos! He’s our man. If he can’t do it, nobody can.” And so on with “Cephas (Peter)!” Then there were the super spiritual ones: “We’re of Christ!”

Cliques, Sticks, Picks – here’s the last word: **Ticks**. Why “ticks?” Because they were sucking the life out of the church!

They lost sight of the person of Christ; they lost sight of their identity in Christ; they lost sight of the mission of Christ. It was all about them.

The 21st century church is not immune from this today, is it? This week I read an article that was in a 1999 newsletter from Landover Baptist Church in Maryland. Here’s what it said:

100 years of Christian fellowship, spiritual love, Godly unity, and community growth ended last Tuesday in a fit of congregational discord not to be rivaled in this century....

The source of dissension in this once Holy house of God, is a piano bench which still sits behind the 1923 Steinberg to the left of the pulpit. Landover Baptist members who have friends or relatives at Holy Creek Baptist, say that the old bench was always a source of hostility. People should have seen this coming. ...

At present, Holy Creek Congregation will be having four services a day. There has been an unspoken agreement mediated by Pastor Deacon Fred of the Landover Baptist Church. Each faction will have its own separate service with its own separate pastor. Since the head pastor is not speaking to the associate pastor, each will have their own service, which will be attended by factioned members. We are told that the services are far enough apart that neither group will come into contact with the other. An outside party will be moving the piano bench to different locations and appropriate positions, between services, so as to please both sides, and avoid any further conflict that could result in violence.

True or not, I don't know. But it illustrates what goes on in so many churches today. Conflict, dissension, division, discord.

Comedian Emo Philips used to tell this story:

In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, "Are you Protestant or Catholic?" My new acquaintance replied, "Protestant."

I said, "Me too! What franchise?" He answered, "Baptist."
"Me too!" I said. "Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?"

"Northern Baptist," he replied. "Me too!" I shouted.

We continued to go back and forth. Finally I asked, "Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?"

He replied, "Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912."

I said, "Die, heretic!"

There are all kinds of subgroups in so many churches, vying for position and prominence. The issues that separate them include the music, the sacraments, the colors in the building, the places where they sit, and on and on.

Sometimes it seems that people can't even get along with themselves! One balmy day in the South Pacific, a navy ship spied smoke coming from one of three huts on an uncharted island. Upon arriving at the shore they were met by a shipwreck survivor.

He said, "I'm so glad you're here! I've been alone on this island for more than five years!"

The captain replied, "If you're all alone on the island why do I see THREE huts."

The survivor said, "Oh. Well, I live in one, and go to church in another. "What about the THIRD hut?" asked the captain?

"That's where I USED to go to church," he replied.

Here's one of the most dangerous problems of disunity, I think: personality cults. Groups gather behind and around prominent people in the church. Often, it's the pastor. We hold up our preacher against all others. We can't believe there is anyone else who can hold a candle to their soaring rhetoric, their exquisite use of words and stories, their dynamism and charisma.

The sad thing is when the preacher believes all this and fosters and promotes this. This was Martin Luther's response when he learned that early Protestants were being called Lutherans (my church background growing up, I should add):

What is Luther? The teaching isn't mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone....How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?

So, how does Paul deal with this problem at Corinth? What does he have to say to them? I think he should have let Bob Newhart speak for him.

Those of you who've been around a while remember the TV show when he starred as a psychologist. In one episode, a young woman comes to him, looking for help with a fear she had. She is afraid of being buried alive in a box. Nobody had ever tried that, but that was her fear. As a result she can't stand going through a tunnel, or being in an elevator, or even a boxy house. So we pick up the conversation here.

Video Clip: *Stop It* – Bob Newhart Clip Jonathan Reynolds 1:22

To the Corinthians: Stop It! S-T-O-P...new word... I-T. Stop It. Paul is a bit more tactful, but just as forceful.

I Corinthians 1:10

Paul appeals to them. This is a word filled with emotion. It's the same word which describes the father of the prodigal son, reaching out to the older son who is disgusted with the way the father was receiving back the wayward son – the brother who had gone and squandered his inheritance.

The father goes out and appeals to his older son, entreating him, seeking to bridge the hostility he had against his brother and against his father.

It's a very personal appeal. He calls them "brothers." In this setting, it is a gender inclusive term: "brothers and sisters" – a term of endearment used by Christians. Paul uses this term 39 times in this letter, more than twice that in any of his other letters.

He appeals, first of all, that they would agree. Paul clearly isn't asking them to pretend they don't see things differently. The word was used of political communities free from factions. It means "to be at peace," "to make up differences." He is appealing to them to get along with each other.

Second, he appeals that they be united. The Greek word is *katartizō*. The literal rendering is "joined together." It is a really interesting word.

When Jesus walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw James and John, sons of Zebedee. He called them to follow him. In Matthew's Gospel, we read that they were in their father's boat, *mending* their nets.

There's our word *katartizō*. They were restoring the nets to the proper condition. It was also the word used to describe the setting of a broken bone. So, it became a metaphor for resetting broken relationships, reconciling factions. Paul's appeal is for the restoration of order within the church.

That unity is to be in two spheres: united in mind and in judgment.

- Same mind: how you think about things
- Same judgment: how you weigh things

Paul writes about this unity of mind in his letter to the Philippians:

Philippians 2:1-8

This is what should characterize the church – every church! I am so grateful to God for the unity that we experience here at Knollwood. In my 10 years, I cannot remember a time where there was a spirit of rivalry, of armed camps.

Have there never been disagreements? No. We all have our preferences; we see things differently based upon our personalities, our experiences, our assessments. Yet I think we have been able to discuss those things rationally and calmly, seeking God's direction, looking to his Word for understanding. And then, being willing to

give grace to others, even if they see things differently. May God continue to protect us from a spirit of strife and contention!

Turn over to the letter of Ephesians.

Ephesians 4:1-6

Our task, our calling, is not to create unity. It is to preserve unity. Where does unity come from? Where is it created? Who establishes unity?

I Corinthians 12:12-13

God places every believer into the body of Christ, which is the Church. In doing so, he has established unity – the shared, common experience of salvation, the experience of receiving the Holy Spirit. It is our job, then, as individual members of the body, to do all we can to preserve and maintain the unity which exists through the Spirit.

Paul goes on in his appeal to the Corinthians to set the record straight:

I Corinthians 1:13-16

Paul cuts right through the haze, doesn't he? He brings their focus right back where it belongs – to Christ.

And then look where he takes this – **I Corinthians 1:17**.

Verse 17 sets the stage for this entire section of his letter. You can divide Paul's letter into two parts: Chapters 1-4 deal with problems that grow out of divisions and disunity. Then in Chapters 5-15, Paul will deal with various questions that the Corinthians raised in their letter to him.

In these first four chapters, Paul addresses the issues of his calling, of the wisdom of the cross versus human wisdom, and finally his apostolic role.

He tells the Corinthians that his primary calling was to preach; it wasn't to baptize. This doesn't mean that baptism was unimportant; indeed, it was a central feature of a person's experience soon after coming to faith in Christ. But it wasn't an apostolic necessity of who did the baptisms.

Paul was focused on the preaching of the Gospel. And note that he said he didn't base his preaching on words of eloquent wisdom. Now, Paul could speak

eloquently; he often did so in reaching out to various audiences. But he saw that God's power was not through eloquence, but through the power of the cross of Christ.

David Garland writes: "Eloquence that elevates the status of the preacher conceals the power of the cross."

This is central to Paul's ministry, to his calling, to his preaching. Jump over to chapter two: **I Corinthians 2:1-2**.

Apart from the cross, there is no gospel; there is no hope; there is no salvation; there is no church.

Verse 18 in chapter one is a hinge verse. It bridges Paul's appeal for unity and the problems caused by disunity.

I Corinthians 1:18

Paul could not speak about Christ without speaking about the cross of Christ. We can talk all day with people about Jesus' life, his love, his teachings, his miracles, and find common ground. But when we talk about the cross, that's where we face the challenge. You see, the cross divides. You cannot talk about the cross without talking about the reason and necessity of the cross – our sin, our separation, the judgment we face and the condemnation we bear.

As Paul says, the cross is folly to those who are perishing, to those who reject what Christ did for them. But for those who respond in faith, to those who place their trust in Christ and his work on their behalf, it is saving power.

This is the great mission of the church: it is to be a showcase of God's love and grace, his saving power through the sacrifice of Christ. It is living out and sharing the good news of forgiveness and pardon, of *katartizō* – a mending of relationship between God and us – a restoration to the original condition.

When we fight over – and you fill in the blank – we lose sight of the real battle. Paul describes the battle front in Ephesians 6:

For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. – *Ephesians 6:12*

It is so easy to see other people as the enemy. They are not. Our battle is spiritual above all else. If we are consumed by disagreements, arguments, contentions, we lose our focus on Christ and his mission to seek and save the lost.

But when we center on Christ and on the cross of Christ and all that that means, we become instruments of reconciliation. And we experience the unity of the Spirit – a unity which is our calling in Christ. It is that unity that is expressed in the observance of communion.

And so, this is what we celebrate as we come to the Lord's Table: we remember together what Christ has done for us. Paul, in chapter 11 of this letter, says that when we eat the bread and drink the cup, we "proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." We proclaim the cross of Christ.

Listen to Paul's explanation in **First Corinthians 11:23-32**.

As we remember the cross of Christ, we celebrate our unity, our oneness, in him. We are here to serve Christ; we are here to serve one another. It falls to each of us, before God, to be a builder, not a wrecker. Someone has written an insightful poem that captures this truth.

"A Builder Or a Wrecker"

As I watched them tear a building down
A gang of men in a busy town
With a ho-heave-ho, and a lusty yell
They swung a beam and the side wall fell.
I asked the foreman, "Are these men skilled,
And the men you'd hire if you wanted to build?"
He gave a laugh and said, "No, indeed,
Just common labor is all I need."
"I can easily wreck in a day or two,
What builders have taken years to do."
And I thought to myself, as I went my way
Which of these roles have I tried to play?
Am I a builder who works with care,
Measuring life by rule and square?
Am I shaping my work to a well-made plan
Patiently doing the best I can?
Or am I a wrecker who walks to town
Content with the labor of tearing down?
"O Lord let my life and my labors be
That which will build for eternity!"

[Author Unknown - The Increase, 35th Anniversary Issue, 1993, p. 9
(www.bible.org/illus/c/c)]

God calls us in the body of Christ to be builders, not wreckers. May he grant our prayer to be the people of God at Knollwood that he desires.