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1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Second Message

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CONFRONTING CLIQUES IN THE CHURCH

SERIES: EXAMINING LIFE IN THE LOCAL CHURCH

The hymns we sang this morning articulate so beautifully the calling that is ours as Christians, that calling the apostle Paul emphasized in his introduction to First Corinthians. Unfortunately, however, our conduct sometimes betrays our calling. This is probably what led someone to write the following parody on the hymn "Onward Christian Soldiers":

Like a mighty turtle moves the church of God.
Brethren we are treading where we've always trod.
We are much divided; many bodies we;
Strong in truth and doctrine; weak in purity.

I am reminded of a story I heard about a man was walking by a used book store. He happened to look in the display window and a certain book, entitled *How to Hug*, caught his eye. He was feeling a bit lonely and, being of a romantic nature, he thought to himself "That's what I need." He went inside to look further, but to his dismay discovered that the book was the eleventh volume of an encyclopedia, covering the subjects "How-Hug"!

When I heard that, I thought to myself that is a lot like the local church. People come into a church with deep needs. They often feel lonely, discouraged and confused. They expect to find help, but instead are sometimes treated to an encyclopedic, academic, theoretical treatise on a kind of love that means very little in the lives of the people present. The Christianity they see looks more like a philosophy than a personal relationship with God.

That too was the struggle in the church at Corinth. It seems the Corinthians had begun to view Christianity as a new philosophy (a "wisdom," they called it). They regarded apostles as itinerant philosophers. The church had over time developed a cold, academic, sterile atmosphere.

Ever since Apollos (and probably Peter) had visited the church the Corinthians had begun to pick sides, some preferring one man over another. Paul is very concerned about this matter of division in the church. In fact, he will take four chapters to deal with this problem of disunity. He will explain to the Corinthians what divine wisdom really is, and he will correct their view of Christian teachers, showing that they are not philosophers who are competing with one another but rather servants of the same God.

This morning we will examine the beginning of Paul's argument. From it we will gain help in examining the causes and cures to schisms in the church. The apostle opens with a powerful appeal for unity. Verse 10:

I. Defining our unity: A powerful exhortation (1:10)

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Cor 1:10 NASB)

Notice the urgency and the emotion of the apostle as he enters upon his subject with a tender appeal. As we saw last week, Paul held a very high view of the church. This is why he is hurt and distressed to have discovered division in the body.

Unity among Christians is a very important matter. Paul stresses this throughout his letters. This too was the our Lord's major concern for the church on the night before his crucifixion. He told his disciples that their love for one another would be the mark by which people would know that they belonged to him. Our unity was what he prayed for in his high priestly prayer, in John 17. This is why Paul addresses first the matter of disunity in the church in Corinth. Many other problems in the church surfaced due to these divisions.

Along with his appeal, the apostle shows in this verse the basis for our unity. Notice that the ground of his appeal is the unity that is already ours in Christ. That ground, of course, is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. No other person could take such a diverse group of people from such different backgrounds, different races, different personalities, and bind them together. No other person could take the different individuals in this room and bind them together as one. If Jesus Christ by his grace has called us and made us one, and if we share in him, then we must learn to become what we are. We share a common life.

Notice that Paul calls the Corinthians *brethren*. We do not just belong to the same organization, we are part of the same family. We are brothers and sisters. It is our relationship to Christ that binds us together. Notice also the phrases Paul uses in his appeal in verse 11: "that you all agree" (literally, "say the same thing"); that "you be made complete." It is interesting that this phrase "that you all agree" was found on the gravestone of a first century couple to describe the harmonious relationship they shared. That is the relationship that we are to share in the body of Christ. Paul is about to describe four cliques that have formed in Corinth. His appeal is that these groups work together; that each has an emphasis that the body needs, and each must not allow their different emphases to produce division.

The phrase, that "you be made complete," is the same word used in the gospels for the mending of fishing nets. It was used in medical literature for the knitting back together of broken bones. It is also used in Ephesians 4 to describe the role of a pastor as he equips the saints, as he brings them together, shapes them up and mends them. It means "to be perfectly joined together." It pictures a mosaic or a puzzle where every piece fits and there is no break, no disharmony. Maturity in the Christian life is not merely a personal matter; it is also a corporate issue. It is the process of learning to function together as a body in love.

Notice that the call here is not to uniformity, but to harmony. We are not called to think alike about everything: raising our children the same way, reading the same books, thinking alike politically, having the same hobbies. Unity is not loving the same things but pos-

sessing the same love. The same mind we are called to is the mind of Christ.

The oneness of mind that Paul calls us to is described well in Philippians 2, where he reveals to us the mind of Christ:

Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! (Phil 2:5-8)

That is the mind we are called to share. It is the mindset of learning to give up our rights and humbly value each other's opinion and judgment as much as we value our own. It is then that we will speak the same things, as we both exalt Christ together. It is the opposite of the selfish pursuit of our own interests, which produces quarrels.

Supposing we could bring together different believers from different generations who have impacted the world for Christ. Let's say Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, John Calvin, John Wesley, George Whitefield, Jonathan Edwards and Charles Spurgeon were here this morning. There is one thing we could say for certain: They would not be in unanimous agreement on very many things. Yet, in the midst of all their diverse personalities, their gifts and theological distinctives, they would be unified in their diversity, as each would lift up Christ and focus on him.

John Wesley and George Whitefield were friends in their earlier years. As a matter of fact, it was Whitefield who encouraged Wesley to begin his preaching ministry. As time went on they disagreed, however. Whitefield leaned toward Calvinism, and Wesley toward Arminianism. When Whitefield died, someone asked Wesley if he expected to see Dr. Whitefield in heaven. Wesley answered, "No. He will be so near the throne of God that men like me will never even get a glimpse of him." Though all their differences these men never lost their sense of oneness in Christ.

It is harmony, unity in the midst of diversity which is the goal of the church. The church is designed to be a symphony, but when everyone insists that their particular role or emphasis is the only true emphasis, and does whatever they want to do in spite of how it effects others, the symphony becomes a cacophony. That is when the world laughs at the church. An orchestra made up of any one instrument could never produce the beautiful chords that strike our hearts so deeply. The same is true of God's congregational orchestra. It needs all the different instruments playing the full score to produce a rich, harmonious sound, one that is pleasing to his ears.

Having defined the church's unity, Paul now goes on to describe the Corinthian cliques.

II. Describing the cliques: A discouraging situation (1:11-12)

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I am of Apollos, and "I am of Cephas," and "I am of Christ." (1:11-12)

We are not exactly sure what caused the divisions in Corinth, but we will discover some causes that are implicit in the text. These believers had taken their eyes off the Lord Jesus and they had begun to depend on men. Personality cults were emerging, focusing on three major figures in the early church. We might add that these groupings formed with no encouragement from either Paul, Apollos or Peter.

Four cliques had developed within the congregation. Each had its own slogans. Each rallied their support around one personality or another, although they had not broken away to form new churches. It will be beneficial for us to spend time looking at the nature of each clique because in a very real sense each manifests itself in the church throughout history, and they are present in the church today.

It is significant that Paul mentions personalities, not theological issues. I believe what often happens in churches is that differences grow around personalities, and afterwards become focused on doctrinal disputes. There may well be genuine doctrinal disagreement, but strife occurs because personal relationships are not good. When the love of God is allowed to control relationships, then the area of disagreement gets put in the proper perspective and no strife results. As we go through these four, see if you can identify any sources of temptation to division in your own life.

A. The Paul Party

For many in Corinth there were natural reasons to be strongly attached to Paul. In chapter 4 Paul calls himself their "father in Jesus Christ through the gospel." He had brought them to faith, and they were forever grateful. The transformation they had experienced in their lives, from the darkness of sin to the light of God's grace, made them appreciate Paul's ministry. Whatever the apostle said, this group immediately responded and accepted it verbatim.

We can understand how this happens. We all have significant people in our lives who were in on the ground floor of our conversion or spiritual growth; people who have had a tremendous impact in our lives, and when they speak, we listen. David Roper was our speaker this year at the Men's Retreat. He had a significant influence in many lives in this congregation, and upon two men in particular on our staff, Brian Morgan and Steve Zeisler. A number of us were having brunch together on the last morning of the retreat and Steve was at our table. I asked how everyone was responding to what was being taught. A few shared how much the weekend had meant in their life but Steve's comment stuck with me. His answer was, "Dave could read the phone book and I would be on the edge of my seat!"

Every pastor of a church that has a great history behind it has discovered a Paul Party in their church. They have taken their eyes off Jesus and begun to think back on the good old days, what things were like "when so-and-so was here," what he would have said, etc. That is the Paul party.

B. The Apollos Party

We do not have a great deal of information on Apollos, but what we do know is sufficient to give us a clear portrait surrounding this clique. According to Acts 18, Apollos came from Alexandria in Egypt, the most respected university city in the Mediterranean. The text speaks very highly of his gifts and abilities: His intellect, eloquence, expository skill in the Old Testament, his accurate teaching about Jesus, his enthusiasm and boldness in preaching as he confronted the Jews in public. It is not surprising that he would immediately attract a following, especially in Corinth, which placed such an emphasis on intellect and eloquence. The Book of Acts tells us that he had a great teaching ministry with young believers in Christ. There are some who feel that, with his intellectual background, this man was responsible for introducing an intellectual elite into the Corinthian church. Young Christians can certainly be seduced into personality cults centered on the gifts and abilities of impressive speakers, especially strong teachers. People began to compare Apollos with the apostle, who certainly could hold his own intellectually, and in his

mastery of the Old Testament, but who by his own admission did not possess great eloquence.

C. The Peter Party

Those belonging to this group might well have said, “We don’t know about Paul and Apollos, but let’s get back to the beginnings. Peter was one of the first apostles whom Jesus himself called. We’re on solid ground with him.” These people probably represented Jewish Christianity in some form. Peter may have visited Corinth once, and some of his followers may have made follow-up visits to push his concerns. It is obvious in reading this book that there were certainly some there who had legalistic tendencies. For instance, read the debate about eating food offered to idols in chapters 8-10. Galatians 10 records that Peter and Paul had a clash about food laws, and the “kosher” issue may have continued to be troublesome in their relationship. In the midst of the immorality and license of the Corinthian church the tendency to return to legalism probably was strong.

When one is saved out of an utterly pagan lifestyle into the freedom of the gospel, that early freedom in Christ can easily turn into legalism. As one Bible teacher said, “Many Christians feel secure in straitjackets.” The temptation with people in this group is to begin to measure spirituality by outward evidence. We must be careful to not reduce to a set of rules what it means to be a Christian.

D. The Christ Party

This fourth group, though sounding very spiritual, is probably the worst of the four. It is quite likely that the forming of the other three had led to this fourth group, to whom “hero-worship” was sickening. In their self-righteous smugness, they asked, “Who needs leaders anyway? Christ is our leader. He is the head of the body. We will depend on him and listen to him—not Peter or Paul or Apollos or anyone else. Jesus will let us know his will.”

This group is difficult to deal with because they can be intimidating. They act like they have a hotline to God, and this makes others feel inferior in their presence. People feel inadequate because they don’t have that kind of intimacy in prayer, that kind of certainty about God’s will. There is also an air of spiritual superiority with this group that is communicated with phrases like, “The Lord told me this or that.”

But when you examine this group further, you discover that the real problem at times is an insecurity that manifests itself in a resistance to being told what to do. They find they need to support what they say with some subjective experience—and these experiences are not up for evaluation. It may have been this mystical group that gave impetus to gnostic tendencies in the church at Corinth. It is this group that will most often break off and form their own church because they begin to feel that the average church just is not spiritual enough.

It is obvious that these same issues still divide people today. The temptations to do so are right here in this body. Some become emotionally attached to a teacher who has greatly helped them. They come to church only when he teaches. They have become accustomed to having their spiritual food served in one particular way. They respond only when he says something because he says it the “right” way: “Nobody can say it like Brian Morgan. I’m only going to buy Brian’s tapes,” etc. That temptation to act like this is right here among us. When Ray Stedman retires in May, we will have to fight the temptation to say, “That is not how Ray would have said it.”

Some of us like particular styles of worship. We have strong feelings about what we like and dislike. Certain doctrinal issues are important to some, and they feel those need to be emphasized more often. We could go on. But when any Christian or group of Christians becomes absorbed with one aspect of the truth to the neglect or exclusion of the whole truth as it is in Jesus, then the danger point has been reached. This is what Paul is warning against. We ought never to gather around one particular truth or one particular person. When we do, we’re in for trouble. I appreciate so much the healthy diversity we have here at PBC. We are free to be who God has called us to be, and to express the gifts that God has given us. I pray that we will never lose that.

In verses 13-17 Paul shows us what is wrong with these kind of divisions.

III. Directing our focus: A compelling argument (1:13-17)

Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name. Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanus; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void. (1:13-17)

Notice that the entirety of Paul’s reasoning against disunity focuses on Jesus Christ. It is still true today that most divisions arise because we focus our eyes on someone or something other than our Lord.

In verse 13 Paul asks three rhetorical questions, each of which gives us a clue to his reasoning, and why these divisions are wrong. I will phrase each question into an exhortation to help us apply it.

A. Focus on His completeness

Is Christ divided? The word “divided” literally means, “to divide and distribute, to parcel out.” Paul asks, “Do you suppose there are fragments of Christ that can be distributed among the various groups?” There is only one, undivided Christ. If you have him, you have all of him. We cannot divide him up. That is why I get uncomfortable with phrases like, “I want more of Christ,” or, “I wish God would pour out more of his Spirit.” It is as if he came in doses.

We don’t need more of Christ. He needs more of us. The Spirit is not poured out like something out of a bottle. He is either living in us or he is not. Jesus is a person. What we should seek is not to get more of the Spirit, or more of Christ, but to allow him to have more of us. We are the broken ones whom Christ is making whole and complete. Let us focus on his completeness.

B. Focus on His sacrifice

Was Paul crucified for you? The Corinthians owed their new life Jesus. It was he who died for their sins, not Paul or Apollos or any human being. There is no single teacher who can help us be forgiven of one sin. No one can heal the hurt of a broken heart, or supply the adequacy needed to someone who feels worthless. There is only one Savior, and his work was completed on the cross. The cross is the only place where true unity can take place among men and women. The cross of Christ will heal the disunity of Christians no matter where they find themselves.

When we understand the meaning of the cross, we will find all our divisions disappearing. The cross of Christ cuts across all hu-

man value systems. As someone has said, the ground is level at the cross. We are all equal there. T. S. Elliot suggested that the reason the cocktail glass has become so important is that the communion cup has lost its meaning. Communion is a sacrament of reconciliation. That is why disunity is such a serious matter. The communion cup reminds us of the special relationship we share because of the work of the cross.

C. Focus on His Lordship

Were you baptized in the name of Paul? To be baptized into the name of someone is to be identified with that person. It means one has come under their authority and belongs to them. Paul is saying that in baptism we are declaring our allegiance to Jesus Christ and proclaiming that we have become his possession.

It seems there was some misunderstanding over this symbol of baptism. Paul wants to clarify that there is no mystical relationship between the baptized and the baptizer. Instead, he takes every believer back to their own baptism and reminds them that it was no empty ceremony, rather it was a picture of their total dedication to the Lordship of Christ. The significance of the sacrament is what is important, not the manner in which it was administered.

As we focus on Christ's completeness, his cross and his Lordship, we will express the unity that is ours in Christ. This is my prayer for us: that instead of glaring at each other's weaknesses we might focus on worshipping our common Strength.

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