

A Call for Congregational Unity

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

INTRODUCTION

As reported in the Washington Post just this past Friday, The United Church – Canada’s largest Protestant denomination began an usual process.

The denomination is not known for its conservative or biblical approach to Christianity – it has been quite liberal for quite some time.

They are faced with a very real case of disunity.

For many years, the church has pursued what one of their theology professors has called a “mantra of inclusiveness and now it’s been tested. It goes against the grain to tell somebody that you have to leave.”

How is this mantra of inclusiveness threatening the unity of the United Church in Canada?

A special committee of the Toronto Conference of the United Church requested that a formal hearing be convened by the General Council to determine the fate of one of their ministers.

The Rev Gretta Vosper is, according to the article, a dynamic, activist minister with a loyal following at her Protestant congregation in suburban Toronto. She is also an outspoken atheist.”

As she preaches:

“We don’t talk about God,” Vosper said in an interview, describing services at her West Hill United Church, adding

that it's time the church gave up on "the idolatry of a theistic god."

And – she pursues this approach as a means of inclusion – unity – and especially as a means of more effective evangelism.

Vosper's decision to reject God, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit and to turn her church into a haven for nonbelievers "looking for a community that will help them create meaningful lives without God" has become too much even for the liberal-minded United Church of Canada.

"In our opinion, she is not suitable to continue in ordained ministry because she does not believe in God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit. Ms. Vosper does not recognize the primacy of scripture, she will not conduct the sacraments, and she is no longer in essential agreement with the statement of doctrine of The United Church of Canada," the committee said in a report released recently.

Yes – disunity – in a church named "United" and a church that prides itself on inclusiveness as a means to broader unity.

One congregant wrote about this:

"My understanding is that the United Church of Canada is a Christian church based on the teachings of Jesus Christ," Pamella Fell wrote on a United Church website. "Why, why, why is she still in the United Church if she isn't a Christian?" "I don't understand in the least why someone who doesn't accept the basic beliefs of our church would fight to remain," added Avis Michalovsky.

And there has been sarcasm as well. "Churches are ipso facto in the God business," wrote Rosie DiManno, a

columnist with the Toronto Star. “To deny God’s existence logically means you’re in the wrong business. Like Bill Gates swearing on a stack of handwritten computer code. Or Alcoholics Anonymous hosting a pub crawl.”

Unity demands shared core convictions.

And that is actually difficult.

Have you ever noticed: unity doesn’t just happen – and it is actually quite challenging to keep it – even in the most intimate of relationships.

Unity is marriage, friendship, business, church, government – is never a default position

We never drift toward unity – but always away from it.

Disunity is often attributed to normal life change – or what we might call an internal change of heart

But – it always requires that someone’s life or internal heart hasn’t changed.

Unity and disunity are not founded on how we feel about something – though strong feelings are always involved

Unity and disunity are always founded on what we think – what we believe to be true and best

And for unity to be maintained – either everyone has to actively work at maintaining that core of belief – or if anyone begins to shift – disunity begins to creep in – or in some cases, crash in.

We all know that to be true – not merely in the basics of life relationships – but especially in congregational life.

We won't go into testimonials we have experienced in regard to congregational disunity. They are bitter and painful.

And let me remind you

We all drift toward disunity

Unity is something you have to consciously pursue with rigor and discipline

That is one of the telling signs of the sinfulness of every human heart.

Congregational unity is the theme of 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.

And a very important unity

When unity cannot be maintained – the gospel will be corrupted.

While no one in Corinth seems to be advocating the acceptance of atheism,

The disunity that exists is not a sign of a healthy pluralism – but it actually has the possibility of leading to eternal disaster.

And so disunity in any congregation can quickly be connected to the possibility of an eternal disaster – because where biblical unity does not exist – gospel corruption will.

How should we approach building and maintaining the kind of unity that keeps us not only together – but the gospel which we say we all believe – vibrant – full of power and truly effective?

How do we maintain a unity that supports rather than corrodes the power of the gospel among us?

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 is a call for true Christian unity in the Corinthian congregation.

The appeal for this unity is founded upon 4 different pillars of support

And they are foundational – and each is dependent upon the other for true unity to be achieved.

While the rest of the book (and particularly the first 4 chapters) will unpack these themes we see here – they are nonetheless foundational for all true Christian congregational unity.

Being foundational – these pillars that support congregational unity

Are universal also – they apply not only to the particular Corinthian problems – but they impact any congregation in any era, in any city

So these are supports for unity Summit Woods needs to meditate on and consider the implications of

So, in this call for congregational unity, what are the 4 pillars that will support true unity?

I. A CHRIST-CENTERED UNITY V 10a

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ

Unity for any organization – any team – any family – has to have a rallying point

A point to which the whole group – the entire team – the complete family – agrees to submit themselves to

Unity cannot exist where there is not agreed upon standard of authority and identity

And that is precisely where Paul begins

I appeal

Important shift that takes place here

From the introduction to the body of the letter

Lit – “Now” or “but” I appeal to you – or Now I exhort you (post-positive δε begins the sentence) – indicating we are now moving to a new section – a fresh topic – the opening topic

And this kind of “appeal” will dominate the remainder of the book.

Virtually all of 1 Corinthians is an appeal – or an exhortation – to reconsider what is happening among them and make clear and compelling adjustments

So we begin here

Not only an important shift – but an important word – here and throughout Paul’s writings

Appeal = παρακαλεω – 109x in the NT/54x in Paul’s letters/6x in 1 Corinthians

3x – found in this form – I appeal – or I exhort – or I ask you

1:10; 4:16 (I urge you to be imitators of me); **16:15** (Now I urge you, brothers . . . about the household of Stephanas)

There is a sense of urgency here – no mere passive request

The fact that he makes the appeal on the basis of the Lordship of Jesus makes this an exhortation – not a request

Yet it is not a command – not a demand – not an exercise in Apostolic ordering

But a call to give intense consideration – because much is at stake

That's why we often use the term “exhortation” – it has a stronger feel to it

An appeal with emotional intensity – urging

By the name of the Lord Jesus Christ

This is significant

Many of their divisions are attached to personalities they align themselves with – in order to use as a trump card to legitimize their approach to congregational life – and as a means to disparage another approach to congregational life

But Paul bases his exhortation and appeal upon not an earthly leader of the visible churches

But upon the authority and identity of the founder of any and every visible church on earth – the Lord Jesus Christ

Authority is emphasized here

He uses the full title, name, and calling of the Savior here

This is a call to all come around and under the sovereign ruler of the church – the one and only savior who reconciles men to God by his saving death – the promised Messiah – anointed – the divine Son of God – Messiah/Christ – God in human form

There is a centralized pivot point for every Christian to be found underneath the authority of Jesus

That is the foundation for any kind of Christian unity – our center point of decision making is not ourselves or our personal experience – not our religious tradition – a denomination or personal conviction

But the Lordship of Jesus

There is no true Christian congregational unity – where Christ is not viewed as the ultimate authority over all things that pertain to the congregation's life

But on the other hand – where there is a common zeal among everyone to acknowledge and joyfully submit to the sovereign headship of Jesus as Lord of the Church – the fountains for invigorating unity can flow freely

But – not merely authority is emphasized here

Also – Identity

Remember how Paul ended his prayer of gratitude for them – v 9

By whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

This is a statement of reality and fact connected to every Christian

If you are a Christian – you are so – because you have entered into – savingly called into the fellowship of his Son

This defines your relationship to Jesus and to each other as Christians – we are all a part of a joint unity in the participating in the very life of Jesus flowing among us

That's what the gospel does – brings us into common participation in the life of our resurrected Lord

Now – Paul says – because of that reality of fellowship and connection with the Son of God – the Lord Jesus Christ

My call to unity – is based on what will best represent the person, position, and promise that comes from him

This call is to see your identity in his name
What represents all that would demonstrate who he is

Every name has a representation attached to it – to say your name is to not only conjure up a mental picture of your face – but also to bring up what you are like and what you stand for

Our family name is a mark of identity – The Capranica's stand for and represent something; some mental picture of what we are like – and all of us who bear that name live under what that name stands for

There is a central identity for us as believers that is completely authoritative

The name of Jesus

I don't pass over this too quickly – but it is so significantly fundamental to any kind of true biblical unity

We don't represent ourselves – or anything or anyone else other than the name we all wear and share together – the name of the Lord Jesus Christ

With whom we have been graciously called into fellowship – union – joint participation in life with

There is no issue of disunity that cannot ultimately be solved when two people – let alone – a congregation of people

See themselves under the authoritative identity of one who is our Master – our Lord – Jesus Christ

If we all see ourselves as bearing his name – we all bow ourselves to honoring his authority together.

That's the first pillar of true unity – our unity must be built on Christocentrality

It must be a Christ-centered unity – a unity that focuses upon representing him and submitting to him first and foremost above all things

But along with that Christocentric unity comes a 2nd necessary pillar that upholds true Christian, congregational unity...

II. A DOCTRINAL UNITY v 10b

That all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. . .

“that” = so that – in order that you might all agree

agree = “you all say it” – you all say the same thing

speak in unity – have a harmony and unity in what you say as a congregation

 say about what? i.e., 1:18 – the message of the cross – and the implications of that message for gospel ministry

 Interesting – there should be – expected to be – a level of unity in what the congregation says about what they believe – particularly about matters that define what the gospel is and how the gospel is to be applied to personal and congregational life

And that there be no divisions among you

 No *schismata* – not official schisms that had officially organized – but a tearing apart of the church into splinters of different viewpoints on gospel related matters

 Term is used 2 more times in the book
ESV **1 Corinthians 11:18** For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are **divisions** among you. And I believe it in part,

 They were torn apart in how they took the Lord's table – showing one group against another – or separated from another in an act that was meant to be done together to show their unity in Christ because of his death on the cross

ESV **1 Corinthians 12:25** that there may be no **division** in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.

 They were torn apart in how they expressed their gifts – the body of Christ = the local church was divided into individualities – individual expression of their gifts to the exclusion of how it cared for or impacted the whole

Instead of being torn apart

But that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment

United = idea of mended – put back together

^{ESV} **Matthew 4:21** And going on from there he saw two other brothers, James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, in the boat with Zebedee their father, **mending** their nets, and he called them.

Restored:

^{ESV} **2 Corinthians 13:11** ¶ Finally, brothers, rejoice. Aim for **restoration**, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

^{ESV} **Galatians 6:1** ¶ Brothers, if anyone is caught in any transgression, you who are spiritual should **restore** him in a spirit of gentleness. Keep watch on yourself, lest you too be tempted.

Many note that this was a surgical term to describe setting broken bones back together

Restoring – mending – united – make incomplete relationships complete

But notice what is to be mended and complete and restored

In the same mind and in the same judgment

In how you think and thus decide

Mind = mindset - the stance you take, which includes your outlook and attitude

But it is primarily mental and internal – what you believe

Judgment = the faculty of decision making – what you believe informs how you decide

And there should be a mending of belief and the consequent decisions that are made according to that belief

Again – this is not in regard to what they think about carpet colors, pews vs chairs, hymn books vs screens, drums vs organ, young vs old

But about what they believe about the the message of the cross and how that translates into how they function together as a congregation in unity

This is about a fundamental doctrinal unity.

Which, if it is even an issue today, is typically taken for granted and seldom emphasized – but readily obvious when people don't have the same doctrinal bent and outlook

We need to be specific and careful with this

Doctrine shapes practice – and practice reveals doctrine

What you believe makes the gospel effective – is what you will emphasize as a congregation

What you believe about the glory of God will shape what you emphasize when the church gathers

What you believe about the nature of man will shape what you expect of people and what you think is necessary in how people are converted to Christ

If we believe the psychologized views of man adopted by the culture, we will appeal to them with similar terminology

If we think people are essentially good – we will not emphasize repentance

If we believe it exists for social order – we will become more political.

We could go on and on – belief impacts judgment – decisions – applications

We always live out our theology
Everyone is theological – and theology – what you believe about God – permeates every activity and even our inactivity

Theology is personal – shapes every facet of what you do with your life, your body, your relationships

Theology is imminently congregational – it shapes the whole atmosphere of what we expect and what we do with and for each other

That's why doctrinal statements should be healthy – vibrant – celebrated – understood – taught – respected – clear – speaking to the prominent issues of our times – tied to Scripture

And even our doctrinal statement sets the tone for the depth and degree of our unity

If it is too small – we will be given to pluralism

If it is too detailed – we will exclude genuine believers in unnecessary ways.

How do we determine the level of doctrinal unity that we will have among ourselves?

Perhaps there are three concentric circles of unity we could begin to focus upon

1 – the inner circle = what defines the gospel – orthodoxy – who is a Christian – what is fundamental to all Christian belief

2 – a secondary level surrounding = what defines the church – what makes a congregation the church? Who can be a part – how is that signified – who is excluded and why – what makes the congregation the congregation under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and how will that congregation function under his lordship

3 – a third circle – further removed – but still important – Additional matters Scripture directly addresses

These might be items that do not necessarily define what a Christian is or what makes up a local church – but are still important issues that shape the average Christian life

Some of these may not be as clear or central to defining the core of Christianity or the nature of the church as others (eschatology, continuation or use of the sign gifts, approaches to parenting, education, matters of conscience and liberty)

And then there are a host of practical matters beyond that – which are not unimportant – all doctrine is important – but may not be as critical in determining the core of Christianity, the borders of the church, and the practice of Christians in general

Musical style and instrumentation, etc.

But many of these issues can become large enough to encroach into the inner-most doctrinal issues.

There must be a level of unity in what we believe – or we will splinter into a thousand different varieties of emphases – all based on what we prefer or what we desire to believe is right.

Experience, not Scripture will drive us and divide us.

Preference will dominate and pull us apart.

Always be wary of people who want to diminish the role of doctrine – it leads to disunity and eventually to dishonoring the Christ we say is Lord.

Christ must be central for congregational unity.
Doctrine must be clear for congregational unity

Third – if we want biblical congregational unity – we need a third pillar to uphold it:

III. A PERSONALITY-NEUTRAL UNITY VV 11-16

What we believe will be reflected in who we tend to hold up in our leaders.

Personalities we rally around reflect convictions we hold – but personalities are never to be the benchmark for our convictions

Every emphasis of a person – diminishes the emphasis of Christ himself

Every exaltation of a leader can pit people against another.

And this is readily evident in Corinth

VERSE 11

It has been reported – not mere accusations – but clear and convincing evidence had been given

Lit – it has been made evident – evidence has been provided

By Chloe's people

Don't know who she is – likely a prominent business woman – perhaps a widow (otherwise those associated with her would likely be named in association with her husband)

Business associates – slaves – She is likely in Ephesus where Paul is – and her people who traveled from Corinth to Ephesus are not giving Paul clear indications of the factions and disunity that exists in Corinth

Perhaps they have brought a letter from the Corinthians to Paul

Notice – they should have been saying the same things so they make similar judgments and decisions

But see what they are saying – v 12

What I mean is that each one of you says:

I follow Paul...

Lit – I of Paul, I of . . .

First note – none of these personalities were in this church at the same time – and none of them would every have advocated their name be the slogan behind a division within the church

Further – what is ascribed to following the particular personality – probably did not even accurately reflect the convictions of the one being exalted

Paul certainly did not agree with those who said they were “of Paul”

Apollos was not supportive of those who lifted him up against the other personalities (ch 16 – he was not willing to go to Corinth again)

Consider this also

Every time a personality is lifted up in support of a particular ideology advocated by a splinter group in the church – it always pits one against the other

In this situation

The key problem appears to be between Paul and Apollos – or at least the way the Corinthians were exalting Apollos against Paul

These are the two men who are mentioned more than the others – ch 3 & 4

We know little to nothing about how or what these factions were saying or doing in the name of each – we can only surmise

Of Paul:

Perhaps those converted under Paul – those who still appreciate his ministry

But more than that – if they were of Paul – it meant that they were against the of Apollos, of Peter and of Christ groups – they were distinguishing themselves from others by their using Paul's name for their persuasion

Of Apollos

Easier to surmise

Acts 18 – paints the picture of Apollos as one who is highly gifted in oration – powerful approaches to speaking – no doubt trained in the Greek and Roman skills of persuasion, logic, and public speaking

Paul was not given to these things – 2:4

Not that Apollos ever preached the gospel relying upon or emphasizing secular philosophical argumentation – or cultural affirmation

Fee 57 – It is not so much that Apollos himself advocated understanding the gospel in terms of wisdom ... but that the Corinthians themselves had become enamored with *Sophia* and saw Apollos as best fitting their new understanding. This would be especially so if their love for wisdom included a fascination for the values of the Greek philosophical, rhetorical tradition.

Of Peter

(Khfa) Little we can know about this

No evidence that Peter ever visited Corinth

Could be people who were converted under his ministry – particularly Jews

Could be – likely – a recognition of him as a legitimate apostle – chosen by Christ – saw Christ – recognized by the entire church as an apostle, etc.

Why – he is mentioned again in ch 9 – in defense of the legitimacy of Paul’s apostleship – v 5

Of Christ

This is a hard one

Don’t we want everyone to be of this group – certainly Paul wanted everyone to say something like this

But it may be that this is not an official group – but the kind of people who are not for any of the others – but they are against all the others and pit themselves against the Paul, Apollos and Peter groups by simply being for Christ

We aren’t like those divisive people – we oppose those groups – by claiming Christ

Fee: here are some people who form no distinct group at all, but who in their own attempt to rise above the rest, those boasting in mere men, have fallen into their own brand of spiritual elitism that makes them no better than the others.

Notice further

V 13 – Has Christ been divided

Illegitimately – yes – legitimately – no

Paul picks on the group that associates with him – should someone claim his name against others within the same church?

Only if Paul was crucified on their behalf

Was Paul crucified for you?

Paul did not buy your soul – don't elevate him to a level of spiritual priority like that

Consider some of the other ways people were exalting leaders against one another

By who baptized them – why this?

Perhaps an overspiritualized view of baptism – some magical sense to it

Or – baptism has to do with who you are identifying with – you are being visible immersed – symbolizing your spiritual identity

So if Paul baptized – easy to become inextricably attached to him – you have, in short, replaced being baptized in the name of Christ – with the one who was Christ's servant to do the baptizing

Or were you baptized in the name of Paul

Is that who you were said to be unified with in baptism

Note his response about baptizing

Vv 14-17a

Paul wasn't against baptism – he did baptize a few – likely the earliest converts

Cripus – the synagogue leader in Corinth 18:8

Gais – a leader in the Church in Ephesus (Acts 19:29) – host to Paul when he was in Corinth (Rom 16:23)

Stephanas – 16:15 – first converts in Achaia (the region of Corinth)

His household does not mean necessarily every individual in his house – but those who believed who were within his home

17a – not that baptism was unimportant – it was simply not the demand behind his apostolic calling

Baptism is essential –

The visible sign identifying you with Christ because you are spiritually in Christ

The visible sign identifying you as a part of his spiritual body the spiritual church – thus – the physical church carrying out the sign related to the spiritual church

It is crucial – part of the Great Commission

To be an unbaptized Christian or a Christian not associated with the visible church was not practiced in the early church

All of this to say – what is attaching you to personalities – in opposition – or above another person or group?

Why would you do that – it doesn't reflect the centrality of Christ or his Lordship

While respectful of those who have led you – obedient to their biblical instruction – grateful for their work and labor in the Lord – maybe even personally close to them

When you identify doctrinally in the church – we should learn to be personality neutral

And openly Christ-focused

There are a thousand ways this shows up today

With the prevalence of mass media and the internet – we can be tied to some of the best known and most respected teachers and theologians in our day

With our own penchant for connecting ourselves with personalities – or particular ministry styles and philosophies – we can easily align ourselves with a modern brand or a particular personality and what he emphasizes – all so we can identify ourselves and being against another

And all of this can take place in the context of the local church.

I'm of MacArthur, I'm of Saddleback, I'm Purpose Driven, I'm a Marxist, I'm of Bret, Brandon, Adam, Brett, Todd, Rob, Sam, Mark, Dan, Steve, Marco . . .

And all we have done is diminished the glory and character of Christ as we have stood against a brother or sister for whom he died

Love and respect those who God sovereignly uses to influence your life – enjoy them and value them

But do not emphasize them to exclude another – or brand yourself

Do not claim to represent them – when they have not so represented themselves that way in the church

IV. A GOSPEL EMPOWERED UNITY v 17

Here is the critical issue – and the pivot point to the upcoming section

The church is full of disunity –
They need to exalt Christ

They need to be doctrinally unified
 They need to be personality-neutral

All so that they can show the power of the gospel – and not
 gut it with their disunity

Words of eloquent wisdom – σοφια λογος –

Words or a message characterized by wisdom

Wisdom – likely the wisdom that is reflective of the
 system outside of Christ and his Word

Wisdom – likely connected to the world of trained
 rhetoric and persuasion

NAS – cleverness of speech – good rendering

Paul’s ministry was apostolically tied to evangelizing the
 word – gospelizing – preaching the gospel

And not in a way that highlighted his ability – or
 ingenuity – or training – or cleverness – or personal insights

Because what would happen if he preached that way

Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power

Only happens when the cross is overshadowed by
 something else emphasized as essential

“eloquent speech” – “cleverness of speech” – whatever
 seems to attract the listener to the attractiveness of the
 speech – how it is said – and eventually who is saying it

Every generation has its persuasive approach to public
 speaking

And sometimes it appears to be connected to varied
 approaches to elocution, presentation, authenticity, etc.

The orators of the mid 19th century through the mid 20th century who were often given to dramatic dress, style, pronunciation, voice inflection, gestures – all now rejected

You used to be really spiritual if you wore a multi-thousand \$ white suit in the summer and could pronounce the word “believe” like Billy Graham – or say “God” in two syllables

But a new approach that is much more casual – but nonetheless intentional in its emphasis on being less formal and more casual in appearance – emphasizing appearances of casual authenticity – walking around – sitting on a stool, using a round table, including savvy uses of media, harsh and colloquial kinds of language

We are all given to this to some degree

We will prefer someone due to their personal passion – or their ability to connect well with the congregation – all having more to do with how something is said than what is said.

To the degree we think and emphasize the necessity of how something is presented for it to be spiritually effective, is the degree to which you are distracting from or emptying the message of the cross of its power

The foundation upon which someone is convinced or attracted to us

Will become the means by which their loyalty and unity with you must be maintained.

When “Presentation skill” is viewed as essential to the effectiveness of the gospel presentation, skill, not gospel will

become and receive the greatest emphasis – then attraction, rather than conversion will become the acceptable result.

Christ-centered unity
Doctrinal Unity
Personality-Neutral Unity
Gospel-Empowered Unity

These are the pillars that will support biblical unity in the church

And we never drift toward these – but always naturally away from them

They must be cultivated through self-confrontation – congregational affirmation – prayerful encouragement and dependence upon the Lord – intensified involvement with one another along these bases.

CONCLUSION

We aren't talking about group think – which makes the group the center point of how we should think

We aren't talking about cultish conformity – where something outside the Bible is used to demand unity and promote intolerance around such extrabiblical and unbiblical criteria

We are talking about Christian unity

- Which never venerates unity by itself
- Does not elevate teacher above the congregation
- And does not diminish Scripture underneath compromise

Instead – we are constantly shedding everything that tends to dim a right understanding and application of the gospel