

**1 Corinthians 1:10-17**  
**(Psalm 133; John 17:20-26)**  
**“Lest the Cross of Christ Be Emptied of Its Power”**

## **Introduction**

Paul is dealing with a church marked by quarreling and division, and yet – as we saw last week – he begins this letter by expressing his affection and gratitude for them, even for those things that were sources of division. He writes of their being called by God, gifted by God and kept secure to the end by God. He reminds them of all that is theirs in order to call them back to the loving unity that should mark God’s people and serve as an attractor to the surrounding world, just as in Jesus’ high priestly prayer, “that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they may also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (John 17:21). It is to be our loving unity that gives the world reason to believe the gospel of Christ.

So, in the verses we are studying this morning, Paul makes his appeal for unity in these words: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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” (1:10). But what exactly is he asking them to agree on? What is the nature of the problem in Corinth? And how does it related to us on a hot summer Sunday in Knoxville? I would propose that in our text Paul identifies a three-fold problem, that he exposes its absurdity by posing a three-fold question, and that he then offers a three-fold solution.

## **Body**

### **1. A three-fold problem (1:11-12):**

#### *Division within the church*

It is obvious that, whatever else was going on in Corinth, the Christians had broken into factions, each identifying with a different leader. Chloe’s people have reported to Paul that there is quarreling, with some claiming to be followers of Paul, others followers of Apollos, still others followers of Simon Peter (Cephas), and some actually putting Jesus on the level of another teacher and claiming him as the leader of their faction.

It should be obvious to us – given the shattered nature of the church into Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant, and the Protestant churches into over 30,000 denominations world wide – that we have failed miserably to listen to both Paul and Jesus and to share their passion for unity.

It is a lovely thing when various branches of the church treat one another with affectionate respect as brothers and sisters, and a sad thing when we spend our days in shrill condemnation of other groups. It is right and good to examine doctrine and contend graciously for what we believe to be true. However, the kind of personal attacks that mark a broken world should not mark the church.

### *Rejection of legitimate leadership*

But this was not merely a matter of the Christians in Corinth being divided into factions. The fact of their identifying with one apostle or another shows a rejection of apostolic authority and legitimate leadership. Those who identified with Apollos were, in effect, rejecting Paul's right – as the founding apostle of the church in Corinth – to speak into their division and to exercise legitimate leadership. Let me hasten to say that leadership within Christ's church is never, as Jesus made clear, to resemble the top-down authoritarian rule that marks the world:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must also be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must also be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:25-28).

We are living in a difficult time in our culture, a time when anyone in leadership is de-legitimized by his or her opponents. It became an issue during the Watergate scandal, but subsided for a time. It then came back to the foreground during the attempt to impeach President Clinton, and from then on, whichever party has not held the White House has sought to delegitimize whoever was president, whether Democrats demonizing George W. Bush or Republicans demonizing Barack Obama.

Sadly, we have come to expect such brutally selfish, destructive antics in the public square. But we dare not let such attitudes or behaviors mark the church, or the Lord will hold us accountable, as Paul makes clear in chapter three of this letter: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple" (3:16-17).

Paul is not speaking of suicide, as too many teachers misunderstand him as saying. He is, rather, speaking of those who cause destructive division within the church, especially those who do it by rejecting, demonizing and delegitimizing those exercising servant leadership. The author of Hebrews pleads with the church to make the work of their leaders a joy, for, he

cautions, if their work is onerous, it is not good for the church (Hebrews 13:17).

### *Confusion with regard to the gospel*

Finally, the issue at the heart of quarreling and division is always a misunderstanding, or even a rejection, of the gospel, which calls us to “submit to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Ephesians 5:21). Thus, Paul reminds another church that we are to have the mind of Christ:

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father (Philippians 2:5-11).

## **2. A three-fold question (1:13-16):**

### *Unity question: Is Christ divided?*

I said last week that the early church’s understanding of our union with Christ was far more than metaphorical. They saw humanity’s creation in God’s image and likeness (Genesis 1:26) involving the same kind of unity and communion among human persons as the Scriptures teach obtains within the three persons of the one Triune God. Thus, Jesus prayer that we may be one *just as* he and the Father are one. To think of Christ as divided and shattered into pieces and parts is to conceive the new humanity in Christ as just as shattered and alienated as the old humanity in Adam (see Romans 5:12f). This is a denial of the gospel and of the doctrine of Christ and the new humanity.

### *Gospel question: Was Paul crucified for you?*

Paul graciously uses his own name rather than that of his apostle friends whom some factions identified with in their rejection of Paul’s leadership. And he simply asks if they have forgotten the heart of the gospel, the message of the cross. What is this arguing about which teacher is the greatest? No mere teacher could have suffered and died in your place and risen triumphant over sin and death. How can you put a mere teacher and leader, however eloquent or attractive, in the place of the Lord Jesus?

Let me warn you against over-identification with any teacher, however gifted, however eloquent, however helpful to your understanding of the Scripture and of the gospel. We are followers of only one – Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord.

*Leadership question: Were you baptized into the name of Paul?*

Why would you want your identity to be tied up in that of another person when Christ has made you his own? To be baptized into someone's name is to be fully identified with that person. So Paul is also asking, what is the nature of leadership in Christ? Why would you identify with Paul or Apollos or Peter? He makes this explicit at the end of chapter three: "So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future – all are yours, and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's" (3:21-23). In other words, the apostles and all leaders who have followed them down through the centuries are called to be servant-leaders, sent to lay down their lives for you.

### **3. A three-fold solution (1:17):**

*Keep gospel proclamation preeminent.*

Paul does not intend here to denigrate the importance of baptism. He knows that the Lord Jesus commissioned his apostles to make disciples by baptizing them in the triune name and by teaching them to obey all that he commanded (Matthew 28:19f). However, he makes clear that what saves sinners, what rescues the lost, is not the act of baptizing, but rather the preaching of the gospel.

Too many parts of the church for too many centuries have misunderstood this, and thought that people are saved by the act of water-baptism. Paul makes clear the priority of the proclaimed gospel, just as we see in Acts the call to repentance and faith among all people, the circumcised and uncircumcised, the baptized and the unbaptized. Next week, Lord willing, we will look in greater depth at the heart of the gospel as Paul proclaims the message of the cross, the message that alone is able to make all things new.

*Never confuse true task of a Christian leader.*

Because the gospel is preeminent, the Christian leader is charged – whatever else he or she may be called to do – with proclaiming the gospel, first and foremost. As we approach over the next year-and-a-half a transition in pastoral leadership, please don't lose sight of the one thing required of a pastor: that he preach the gospel with clarity and passion. Whatever else his gifts, whatever else his strengths, this is the heart of a pastor's calling.

*Never confuse the gospel with merely human wisdom.*

Paul makes clear that we must not confuse message of the cross or the power of the gospel with mere human wisdom, however eloquently proclaimed. In fact, he ends this section, and introduces the next, by insisting that mere human wisdom and eloquence – far from communicating the gospel – may well serve to empty it of its power. If the message exalts the preacher rather than Christ, it is not the gospel, if it feeds human pride rather than humbling sinners, it is not the gospel.

With these words, we come to a transition, for Paul will now begin to proclaim, in some of the clearest contrasts ever drawn between the wisdom of men and the wisdom of God, the reason that the message of the cross seems so very weak and foolish to those reputed to be strong and wise, and yet why it supremely reveals and communicates the wisdom and power of God in the salvation of humanity.

## **Conclusion**

Make no mistake, the apostle argues: when we quarrel and divide, when we reject legitimate leadership, when we confuse the gospel with human wisdom, we render the gospel powerless, because we in effect incarnate a three-fold denial of the meaning and aim of the cross of Christ.

Brothers and sisters, in this fractious, divisive, accusatory, election season, let's encourage one another to be different for the sake of the gospel, to refuse to demonize, to refuse to join factions in their contempt for the other side. And if we should be sane, reasonable and gracious, in political matters, how much more should we be so within the family of God, the Church of Jesus Christ? Let us be united in our love for one another and our compassion for a broken world, having the mind of Christ.

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