

Unity of Mind and Purpose

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

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For all intents and purposes, this is actually the second part of a sermon that began last Sunday dealing with the issue of finding unity in the midst of our diversity.

While the combined occasions of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, the Inauguration of Barack Obama, and the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity were the backdrop for that sermon, I want to bring this issue a little closer to home in addressing how finding unity in the midst of diversity applies more specifically in a religious context, such as a denomination, or even more specifically, within a congregation. For after all, that was the context that the Apostle Paul was actually addressing when he wrote the letter that we know as 1 Corinthians.

Let me begin with a short recap, especially for those of you who were not here last week. We briefly looked at the situation within that ancient church in Corinth, mentioning that it was an uncharacteristically diverse congregation in an exceptionally diverse and pluralistic city in Greece.

We also looked at how **that ancient Corinthian question of how to find unity in the midst of their diversity has become one of our most pressing modern questions – in cultural, political, as well as religious circles.**

Last week's sermon ended with this statement: "So with all this in mind as we enter into this truly exciting and historic week, let us remember, then, the words of Paul, '...be united in the same mind and the same purpose,' and Ezekiel's vision of the two sticks '...that they may be one in God's hand.'"

I found it impossible not to be thinking upon such things as I watched the unfolding of events over this past week. Needless to say I was overjoyed when in his **Inaugural Address**, Barack Obama including the line, "On this day, we gather because we have chosen hope over fear, *unity of purpose* over conflict and discord." [Emphasis added.]

It was almost as if he was directly quoting Paul from 1 Corinthians. His intent was certainly similar. For Obama followed that sentence with, "On this day, we come to proclaim an end to the petty grievances and false promises, the recriminations and worn out dogmas, that for far too long have strangled our politics."

And I don't think it's hard for most of us gathered here this morning to make a small edit to the end of that line to read, "...that for far too long have strangled our religion."

Interestingly, President Obama immediately followed that admonition with a direct reference to the Apostle Paul, when he added that "...**the time has**

come to set aside childish things." Obama applied that rebuke to the ways we have been interacting with one another within our nation and the world. The Apostle Paul applied his rebuke to the ways folks were interacting with one another within the church.

Perhaps another way to state all this in a more positive way is: How can we build respectful, trusting relationships among persons with varied perspectives and views, especially on the most controversial subjects? In efforts to do just that, many of us are trying to learn that **our conversations and debates need be just as heart-based as they are head-based.** And if (and this is a big "if") we can learn to respect each other even with our differences, and with mutual forbearance, then we will truly be learning how to "do church in a new and different way."

I want to return, now, to what many biblical scholars think might have been going on in that ancient Corinthian congregation that led Paul to make his appeal to unity of mind and purpose. For I think that when we understand what might have been at the heart of their differences, we may learn that many of the same elements are at the heart of many of our differences as well.

Paul writes that he has heard directly from "Chloe's people" (unfortunately we don't know anything more about Chloe or her people than this one mention of her name), that there had been disruptive quarrels among members of that congregation. The exact nature of the dissension and division within that Christian community remains unclear, however. But there are some clues.

Paul's reference to various church leaders suggests that cliques and factions had aligned themselves around those personalities and the particular emphasis of their teachings.

Paul writes, "Each of you says, 'I belong to Paul, or 'I belong to Apollos,' or 'I belong to Cephas' (who is Peter), or 'I belong to Christ.'" **Let's look at these four leaders and the factions that may have followed each of them. There are pros and cons to each – attributes as well as traps and temptations.**

Each of these four caricatures can provide some insight (albeit in broad generalized strokes) to why, for instance, some denominations differ from others; why churches differ within a particular denomination; and why people differ even within a specific congregation – including our own.

First is the "**I belong to Paul**" faction. Paul, of course, started the Christian movement in Corinth and was their first teacher. Those loyal to Paul were most likely the **charter members** of the church, the **long-term members.** Due to their longevity, they most likely had the greatest collective wisdom of the life of the congregation.

However, that status of "original" member can often lead folks to feel that they hold a position of privilege and entitlement when it comes to church leadership and influence, thus looking down on those who haven't 'paid their dues.'

Next was the “**I belong to Apollos**” faction. Apollos was the preacher and teacher who replaced Paul when he left to start other churches in other regions. Apollos, whose very name suggests that he was of Greek heritage, was an eloquent orator, highly knowledgeable in the Scriptures, and considered to be very wise and intelligent.

Those in Corinth who converted to Christianity out of a background in Greek philosophy and academia would be naturally drawn to Apollos. These were the folks who drifted toward the tendency to **intellectualize** Christianity. Their temptation was to look down on those who didn't take a similarly logical and intellectual approach to their faith.

Next, those who claimed that they “**belonged to Cephas**” (Peter) were probably the **traditionalists** in the congregation, most likely the Jewish Christians, since this was certainly Peter's background. Members of this group were probably not too comfortable with the Gentile members who had been converted out of paganism, and who paid no attention to Jewish history, tradition, and culture. These folks probably embraced a much more conservative, legalistic approach to living the Christian life, and most likely were tempted to look down on those who took a more progressive approach, those who were less concerned with the letter of the law.

Now, before we proceed, we need to remember that these three men, Paul, Apollos, and Peter, basically agreed in their theology. They weren't really competing with each other. **The problem was with the people in that Corinthian congregation who had rallied around one or another of these leaders because of his particular style, personality, background, or unique emphasis of Christianity.**

The fourth faction was named the Christ party. This didn't simply mean that they were Christians – because all of them were considered Christians. The “**I belong to Christ**” folks were most likely the **purists**, those who believed themselves to be the most spiritual. And like most who believe that their way is the one true way, this faction was probably the most divisive of the four parties.

Their basic attitude would have been something like, “We don't need a human leader at all. Jesus is the head of the church, and we'll just listen to him, not to whomever happens to be the preacher of the day.” (Not very comforting to us preacher types.) Some biblical scholars believe that these folks were **spiritual elitists** with a bit of self-righteous smugness, who were unwilling to submit themselves even to the apostolic authority that Jesus himself had defined and put in place for the church.

Well, as I described these various cliques and factions I'm sure that you have been able to recognize some parallels with folks throughout many typical congregations today, or with the “corporate personality” of a variety of different congregations themselves:

- the original or long-time church members,
- the intellectuals,
- the conservative traditionalists,

- and the spiritual elitists.

If Paul were alive today, I'm sure he'd write to the entire Christian church and say that he'd heard comments like, "I belong to Luther," or "I belong to Calvin," or "I belong to the Pope," or "I belong to Billy Graham," or "I belong to Rick Warren." And even within each denomination can't we see ourselves as aligned with, for example, progressive social activists or conservative evangelicals, traditionalists or feminists, national denominational leaders or local charismatic figures?

The fact is, Christians today are divided by essentially the same problems that divided that Corinthian church 2000 years ago. It seems to be built into our human nature to pick a side and then ruthlessly defend it (hopefully not to the death, but that has happened, and not just in the distant past).

The problem, as defined by Paul, is when we focus too much on individual leaders, or worship styles, or types of music, or theological perspectives, and not on God. One pastor writes:

Personality cults, then and now, always divide people into 'us' and 'them;' 'we' and 'they.' We are always right, they are always wrong; we are superior, they are inferior. Personality cults lead people to worship a particular person [or theological viewpoint] rather than worshiping Jesus Christ. Personality cults cause people to worship the creature rather than the Creator.

I not only agree with this assessment, I believe that we are all guilty of it some one extent or another. **For no one Christian, no single denomination or particular congregation within a denomination has the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth! Every Christian, every denomination, every congregation, including this one, has their strengths AND their weaknesses; their truths AND their prejudices, their focus AND their blind spots.** And yes, the same can be said concerning politics.

So, perhaps through honest and open dialogue we can discover, respect, and even accept others without having to "convert" them to "our way." For in God's sight, we are equals, yet different - that's what makes us the Body of Christ. That's what makes America, America. Perhaps it is in our very differences, our diversity, that we find the real treasures and gifts we can offer each other and the world.

So, then, the words of the Apostle Paul are indeed my words to you: **Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters of College Hill Presbyterian Church, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that there be no divisions among us, but that we be united in the same mind and the same purpose.**

That will certainly been one of my goals in the position to which I am honored to have been called, as your pastor.

Amen.