

UNITED IN CHRIST

1 Corinthians 1:10-25

We've probably heard jokes about St. Peter giving a tour to some new arrivals in heaven and as they are walking down the streets paved with gold, they see a group off to the side all by themselves and not mingling with others. Someone asked Peter about the group and he replied "Shh-hh, that's the Baptist, they think they are the only ones here." One thing is certain that the only ones who will be there are "those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ." Today, we would use the term "Christians" which is seldom used in the Scripture except in a negative connotation.

We tend to categorize people into various groups and this can be helpful in some cases and might be abused in other cases where we might stereotype people and fail to recognize differences that can effectively be used in getting things accomplished. It is essential to know what things are important in which to recognize differences and what should be ignored since some distinctions do not matter. It is equally foolish to blend everyone together and see no differences as it is to make a big deal about minor distinctions.

We see differences of opinions in a number of contemporary issues such as "having no borders" for various countries versus strict control on who can enter and exit a country. Another issue that was in the news for a while was with regard to accessibility to rest rooms in public buildings such as schools and places of business. Both these examples have fairly broad ramifications and many think the differences are important.

If a business had hired engineers from various universities and these people were part of a group assigned to design a new facility, then it would not work very well if some would refuse to help because they went to school at Alabama and other persons on the team were from Auburn. Most of us would classify this issue as trivial and of no consequences.

Those who have served in the military certainly make note of which branch in which they served and many times there will be discussions regarding which group was the toughest, the most dedicated, the most important or had the best looking uniforms. However, when battles are being fought, all such distinctions are overlooked and everyone is united in a common purpose.

What is great is when we recognize that differences can be beneficial if we can learn to apply the strengths of the differences to help accomplish the overall goal. When we can recognize that we are different for a purpose, then people can better deal with their differences. It is a great tragedy when our differences produce division that actually hinders getting the job done and cause people to discriminate based on differences.

The issue of differences came up in the church at Corinth and this issue caused a lot of problems since it was causing division and the various factions were tearing down the church rather than building it up. We will look at ways to avoid division and promote unity that we can discover from Paul's first letter to the church of the Corinthians.

Call for Unity – 1:10

¹⁰ Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NASB95)

This is the tenth time in the first ten verses of Paul's letter to the church at Corinth that Paul invoked the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. If we are going to emphasize unity rather than division, then we must have a cause or purpose that takes priority and is seen to be the most important thing about whatever situation we are in. There was no doubt in Paul's mind that the

most important distinction that we can or should recognize is “those who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ” and “those who reject him.” We have already mentioned that in the eternal spiritual realm that this distinction determines where a person will spend eternity. If we recognize Jesus as Lord, then we must make His priorities our priorities and actually do what He commanded or commissioned us to do.

We know what He told us to do in general such as “be His witnesses” to all people. Additionally, and closely related to that, is the charge to “make disciples” of all nations. More detail is found in the specifics that Jesus told Paul and that is “to open their eyes and turn them from darkness to light, and (even) from the power of Satan to God, so that they may receive forgiveness of sins and a place among those who are sanctified by faith in Me.” The purpose of our witness (which ought to be evident in the way we live in addition to what we say) is to open the eyes of those who are in darkness and show them the light of the Kingdom of God. This is sharing the “good news.” This is the ultimate outcome of the “work of ministry” of those who are “the church.” Much of what routinely happens in the church should be to equip us for the “work of ministry.”

Some have likened the church to a patchwork quilt. My mother used to make quilt tops and she would spend hours sewing all the pieces together. Unless all these individual pieces are connected, then it is not any more useful than a group of cloth scraps. Sometimes the quilt pattern called for a group of blue pieces to be connected together and a group of red pieces and another group of white pieces to be sewn together. Then the blue group was connected to the red group and the white group so that everything was connected. All the pieces formed a completed quilt top because they were appropriately joined together which is the opposite of being divided.

Being joined, knitted, or sewn together is what Paul was admonishing the church at Corinth to be. Their way of thinking about themselves and the way they ministered to others needed to be coordinated with the larger scope of what God was doing in Christ rather than ignoring the purpose for which they were saved.

Contempt for Divisions – 1:11-16

¹¹ For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe’s people, that there are quarrels among you. ¹² Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.” ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one would say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. 1 Corinthians 1:11–16 (NASB95)

In the political realm, there is a growing trend where we see a tendency for people of a particular religion, race, social background, etc., to form exclusive political alliances, moving away from traditional broad-based party politics. This has been called identitarian politics. This is why the legislative and executive branches of our government can’t get anything done – too many splinter groups with different agenda have high jacked the government.

This problem has been around since there have been people around. In first century Greece, there were many philosophers who gathered disciples around them and these various “gurus” demanded loyalty from their disciples. Even the Jews were not immune from such considerations. The disciples identified themselves with their mentors somewhat like what some preachers do in identifying themselves with a particular seminary. Those in the church at Corinth were faithfully practicing what the world system had conditioned them to do.

Paul had to deal with the problems people have when they failed to grow spiritually. Many times, the behavior of new Christians is somewhat similar to what it was before they were

saved. As we study and learn what God has for us, then we start to change our way of thinking and acting and the spiritual truths that are revealed to us are worked out in the reality of our everyday lives. Sanctification is a process in which we are being transformed by the renewing of our minds. We typically find that in our behavior we are a mixture of the old nature and the new nature – the carnal and the spiritual. If we have not grown spiritually, then the old nature ideas that we learned will dominate our thinking and we will be less likely to embrace or appreciate spiritual truths.

When we divide the church into labeled compartments, then we are dividing up Christ. Paul rightly asks the question, “Is Christ divided?” The central figure in the church is Jesus Christ. He is the One who was crucified for our salvation. He is the One who rose from the dead. He is the One who sent the Holy Spirit to live in us. It wasn't Paul, Apollos, Cephas or anybody else. The Church is not to become a personality cult that focuses on an individual. Those who have been used by God in a mighty way to lead many to salvation can be tempted to think it is their own dynamic personality and innate charisma that caused it to happen. When we think that it is the individual that is making it happen, then we deny the atonement of the cross.

Baptism was a really big deal during the first century since it was an accepted way of formally renouncing a person's past and embracing a new system of beliefs. Even today, in certain areas of the world a person who is baptized as a testimony of being a Christian might lose his job and be rejected by his family or even risk being killed. Nik Ripken (*The Insanity of Obedience*) wrote about converts from Islam who had been baptized by the person who led them to Christ and then insisted on being re-baptized if they were being disciplined by another mentor. Those who do this clearly see baptism as an association with a particular mentor rather than a testimony of their salvation from a condition of “perishing” to a condition of “being saved.”

The Cross that Divides – 1:17-25

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void. ¹⁸ For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written, “I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE CLEVERNESS OF THE CLEVER I WILL SET ASIDE.” ²⁰ Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? ²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Corinthians 1:17–25 (NASB95)

When we are more concerned with how many people are baptized in a particular year in our church and who is getting the credit for baptizing them than we are about how those who are being saved are growing in Christ and being involved in the work of ministry, then we need to refocus. When we are more concerned about who is preaching rather than the message that is being preached, then we need to refocus. When we are more impressed with the physical antics and the clever cute sayings of the preacher than with his adherence to the truth, then we need to refocus. When the message has few if any references to humility (rather than pride) and putting self to death (rather than having it your way) and taking up one's cross daily, then the effective outworking of our identification with Christ on the Cross is negated.

Life is a process and people are literally divided into two groups: those who are perishing and those who are being saved. The Cross (the message of the cross) is what determines the two groups. Those who see the message as silliness or foolish are operating their lives according to what some would call unsanctified common sense. Self-preservation is the ultimate goal of this

kind of life which is self-seeking, self-serving, and ultimately self-destructive. Jesus described it this way in Luke 9:24: *For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will save it.* The preaching of the gospel is indeed foolishness to those who are perishing. To win by losing, to live by dying, and to trust a God you cannot see seem illogical to the natural man.

The problem of “unsanctified common sense” was an issue for the Jews as well as the Greeks. The Jews were said to “stumble” at the idea of the Messiah being crucified. They were looking for a Messiah who would bring back the glory days of the reign of David and Solomon and dying on a Roman cross did not fit that story. Warren Wiersbe said “Because the Jews were looking for power and great glory, they stumbled at the weakness of the cross. How could anybody put faith in an unemployed carpenter from Nazareth who died the shameful death of a common criminal?”

If we don’t know the “rest of the story” of how God was at work throughout human history to redeem and restore mankind to a proper relationship with Himself and that only a perfect sacrifice of God who became man could pay the price of redemption and bring about that salvation, then it is really difficult to understand. However, given the situation of man’s condition after he sinned, there was no other way for mankind to be restored. Jesus had said “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life and no one comes to the Father except by Me.” If the cross is foolishness and weakness, then God’s foolishness and His weakness are truly greater than anything coming from the mind of sinful man.