

Seek the Unity of the Body [Slide 1] 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Read Comedian Emo Philips story. Okay, maybe Christians aren't that bad about dividing over trivial things, but unity usually takes some compromise and a lot of us are not too big on compromising. However, once we leave the categories of morality and foundational doctrine, we should be willing to compromise for the sake of the unity of the body of Christ.

The Corinthians church was a divided church. Various parties or factions vied for influence within the church. Those divisions weakened the church and threatened the church's witness to a watching world.

Hope Fellowship has been blessed in that for a long time we have enjoyed a unity of purpose and values. But there are a couple of ways I can see this passage being of relevance to us. First, once the new Senior Pastor comes the temptation could exist to compare him to me, even with groups forming around whether you want to do things the new way or the old Pastor Mark way. What Paul writes in our passage today would be directly relevant to that situation. Second, if our church is going to be welcoming to all people we really have to be sensitive to cultural differences that can cause divisions. To be a church that truly represents God's multi-faceted Kingdom we have to handle those differences in a way that produces unity rather than division.

[Slide 2] So, I invite you to turn in your Bible to 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. 1 Corinthians is the seventh book in the New Testament coming after the four Gospels, Acts, and Romans. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. I going to begin with verse 10 where Paul writes that you should contribute to the unity of the body. Read.

Paul writes, "I urge you or I exhort you by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul challenges them by the authority of Jesus Christ to agree or literally in the Greek "to speak the same thing." The expression, "to speak the same thing" was a classical Greek expression used of political communities that were free from factions. Paul is calling for harmony in the body with no divisions or schisms.

Paul is not saying we shouldn't have differences of opinion. What he is saying is that those differences should be resolved. They should not be allowed to continue to fester and bubble beneath the surface. The last part of verse 10 makes this clear when he says that you be made complete or restored in the same mind and in the same judgment. The Greek word that is translated as "be made complete" means to restore something to its rightful condition. The rightful condition of the body of Christ is unity. Differences of opinion will necessarily arise over time, but those differences are to be resolved so that the believers remain unified.

Paul clarifies at the end of the verse that the unity consists of being of the same mind and same judgment. What exactly is Paul asking for when he is calling them to one mind and the same judgement? Paul does not expect them to think the same way about everything. We can eliminate complete conformity of thought from the outset because later on in this letter Paul will talk about the differences the Corinthians had over the eating of meat offered to idols, how you could have a strong brother and a weak brother thinking different things and each was to give the other freedom to hold their own conviction. So in the gray areas where Scripture does not clearly speak there is freedom to hold your own convictions.

When it comes to doctrine we should be unified on what is the Gospel and the fundamentals of the faith such as the Trinity, the Bible is the Word of God, Jesus is coming back, we are saved by God's grace through faith in Jesus Christ, the existence of Heaven and Hell and the resurrection of the body. I think the EFCA does a good job in our Statement of Faith of defining what we all need to believe and then saying that if it is outside of the Statement of Faith you are free to believe what you want.

In addition the EFCA promotes three values which promote unity. The values are unity in the essentials, which is the Statement of Faith. Freedom in the nonessentials, doctrine that does not fall within the Statement of Faith, and charity toward all. Since we allow for freedom in nonessentials we promote love toward those with whom we disagree.

Now, we are only talking about freedom in doctrine, not moral commands that are black and white. You can't commit adultery or lie or slander or act violently and claim freedom of conscience. We should be united in our thinking concerning the Gospel and the fundamentals of the faith.

The second word is translated judgment or thought in the NIV. The Greek word can mean purpose, mindset, way of thinking, opinion, or judgment. I think it is best to understand this word as meaning purpose or intention. We are to be united in our purpose. We are here to glorify God. We exist to make a difference in the Brazosport Community and the World by winning, building, and equipping reproducing disciples of Jesus Christ. Our purpose really is what unites us because we may differ on the means and methods to achieve our purpose, but we all should be unified in our understanding that this is Jesus' church and we are supposed to follow him and make him known to others. And we should all be committed to the unity of the body, willing to set aside our preferences and desires, when necessary, for the benefit of others.

Our unity is very important to God. Listen to what Jesus prayed on the night of his arrest concerning our unity in John 17:20-23. I've written that passage out on your outline so that you can follow along. Read.

Notice that twice Jesus prays that we will be one as the Father and Jesus are one so that the world will know that God sent Jesus to the world. The unity of the church is a witness to the world that Jesus has come to the Earth from God the Father. When people outside the church see Christians in the church acting in unity and love, that reality testifies that Jesus really is God. When the wealthy and the poor sing together, when Jew and Gentile fellowship together, when Republican and Democrat greet one another, when white and black and brown and yellow and red all serve together, pursuing the same purpose of honoring Jesus Christ, that unity speaks powerfully to our fragmented world. That kind of unity is supernatural and the world knows it.

Read Boys in the Boat illustration.

So, if God plans to use the unity of his people as a testimony to his Son, what do you think the Devil's going to try to do? He'll try to stir up conflict, discord, arguments, and fights wherever he can.

Again, I want to be clear that not every difference or disagreement is of the Devil. Conflict and differences occur because we are all different. If we were carbon copy automatons then there would never be any disagreement. Conflict is not necessarily a sign of disease. It is often a sign of life. But the Devil and his demons can take even healthy disagreements and spin them into destructive fights. So I go back to what Paul wrote at the end of verse 10 where he exhorted the Corinthians to be made complete or to be restored to unity by thinking the same about doctrine and purpose. We choose to handle our differences in healthy ways.

[Slide 3] In verses 12-17 Paul handles the flipside of the coin. One side of the coin is to promote the unity of the body. The other side of the coin is to not support divisions. That is what Paul says in verses 12-17. Let's read those verses. Read.

Paul heard from Chloe's people, probably people who worked for her and traveled on business for her, that quarrels existed among the Corinthians. The Greek word for quarrel or strife refers to a bitter discussion that could easily degenerate into a permanent division. Paul then describes what he has heard. The quarrels centered on personalities. Some say "I am of Paul" or "I am of Apollos" or "I am of Cephas or Peter" and "I am of Christ."

We know Paul and Jesus were not living among the Corinthians at that time and it is likely that neither were Apollos or Peter. Apollos was an itinerant preacher who traveled around to the different churches. We have no evidence that Peter ever made it to Corinth. So, it is not like any of those leaders were involved in forming those divisions.

It is likely that the Corinthians had identified a way of doing things or a way of acting with a spiritual leader and then argued something along the lines of: This is the way Paul did it. We should do it this way since Paul founded our church. No, this is how Apollos did it and he was a much better preacher than Paul. Others may have argued that since Peter was the leader of the Twelve that they should follow Peter's way of doing things. And then there was probably a fourth group that looked down on the other three and sneeringly said, we're going to do it the way Jesus did, the WJD group, the way Jesus did it group. Now, Jesus is our Lord, but the way Paul lumps this last group in with the first three, you get the idea that they're claiming something in Jesus' name that may not at all be true. The same is quite possibly true for the Paul, Peter, and Apollos groups. People may have been claiming things in the name of Paul, Peter or Apollos that those men never said or did.

We don't know the specifics of what each group advocated, but the Corinthians would have known.

Paul asks a number of rhetorical questions to point out the folly of their divisions. Speaking to the Christ group, Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided? The church is the body of Christ. Has Christ been divided into a bunch of small pieces? No, so then why are you acting in a way such as to divide and split apart the body of Christ? Was Paul crucified for you? No. So why are you making Paul a figurehead when Jesus is the one who died for you? You weren't baptized into Paul were you? Therefore why are you identifying with Paul when in baptism you were identified with Jesus?"

On a side note, Paul gives thanks he can make this particular argument about baptism because he hardly baptized anyone, only Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanus. Beyond them he cannot remember if he baptized anyone else, but it was obviously a very small number so that he could make his argument without fear of contradiction. The vast majority of the church he did not baptize and they certainly were not baptized in Paul's name but in the name of Jesus. Paul is making it pretty clear that he is disavowing anything to do with the group that is claiming to be of Paul.

Finally Paul writes very clearly that Christ did not send Paul to baptize but to preach the Gospel and to do so simply, without eloquence, so that the cross should not be made void. The text literally reads "so that the cross not be emptied." Emptied of what? Emptied of its self-evident power. By preaching simply the message of the cross, Paul could point to those whose lives were transformed by the Gospel and declare that the power of their change lay in the message of the cross itself, not in the flowery or emotional way in which the preacher delivered the message. Paul wanted it to be clear that truth changes peoples' lives, not rhetoric.

I don't think Paul or God are against gifted preachers using eloquence to present the Gospel. However, I think it was important to God to make clear from the beginning that the power of the Gospel resided in the truth of who Jesus is and what he did, and so it pleased him to use a very simple spoken man like Paul to bring thousands to Christ because Paul's audience all knew it was not the preacher that made the difference, but the prophetic word of God.

Let that be a lesson to us that we not resort to any kind of manipulative devices or emotional appeals devoid of truth to challenge people. Trust the power of the Gospel to work in people's lives. Be patient because the Holy Spirit often works as a slow burn in people's hearts rather than as a sudden explosion. The truth of the Gospel is slowly tearing down walls of resistance. You don't need to help it; you just need to declare it faithfully.

So, let's stop and take some moments to apply this lesson on unity. At Hope Fellowship we really have not had divisions based on personalities in a long, long time. We are not a personality-driven church. We really are a truth-driven church. Part of the reason for that is that we do not have any highly charismatic type personalities in our church. We don't have anyone famous or who the paparazzi are chasing right now. Now, if I could get enough people to buy my books, then maybe we could change that, but so far it hasn't happened. Anyone of us could walk through Walmart and no one would give us a second glance. None of us is going to attract a bunch of church groupies. There are a lot of advantages to that situation.

However, what will happen when I'm gone and the new pastor is here? This passage speaks directly to that situation. We don't want to have some people saying, "I'm doing it Pastor Newbie's way" while others say, "I think the Pastor Mark way is better." When churches have had a pastor for a long time, it is sometimes hard for people to accept the new pastor's way of doing things and they can split up into factions, those supporting the new ways and others wanting to cling to the old ways. Don't do that. Spiritual growth necessarily requires change, so trust that God is in control and that he is leading.

The other way to apply this passage is to recognize the subtle divisions that exist because of race, socio-economics, and politics. Most of these things are cultural things that are not good or bad in themselves but they can work against the unity of the body. When I first came here I wore a suit and tie to preach and then I learned that only about 10% of American men owned a suit. I removed the suit. Then I realized rarely did anyone wear a tie to church so I stopped wearing ties. This is a socioeconomic thing. Can you imagine how hard it would be for some people to come to our church if all the men in the church wore a suit and a tie every time they came? We would automatically but up a barrier and create a division for those who did not possess a suit or a tie.

Most of us don't want to wear a suit or a tie anyway so it's no big deal not to wear them, but there are other aspects of our socio-economic class to which we may be oblivious that subtly form barriers between us and others, perhaps the cars we drive, the vocabulary we use, the way we talk about our vacations and pastimes, the way I preach, the songs we sing.

The same thing is true for racial differences and political differences. We should work at it so that either a Republican or a Democrat could come here and feel welcomed and at ease, which means that we really have to think through even the casual comments we make to ensure they are not offensive. When you begin to think about what it would take for anyone to walk in here and feel comfortable by our conversation, by our actions, and by our manners, then you begin to recognize how hard it is to achieve real unity among great diversity. Whenever everyone thinks the same way, lives the same way, has the same background, it's not that hard to be unified, but then you don't reach a lot of different people. If you want to reach anyone other than who is just

like you, then you have to start making compromises in what you wear, what you say, what you sing, how you do church. If you're going to have true unity, one group cannot always get its own way. There has to be a lot of healthy compromise. When you look at this passage through those lens, it suddenly becomes a lot harder to apply this truth. Share Heather King testimony.

[Slide 4] I want to close with a side note about water baptism and the Gospel. Paul did not set out to provide a theology or explanation of water baptism in this passage. He brought in water baptism to make a point about how inappropriate it was for there to be a group of Paul followers at Corinth. Nevertheless, what Paul says about water baptism has some clear implications concerning one of the standing controversies about water baptism: Is water baptism necessary for salvation?

The simple answer is no and here's why. Notice in verse 17 that Paul says that Jesus did not send him to baptize but to preach the Gospel. Notice the word, "but" which indicates a contrast between baptizing and preaching the Gospel. Baptizing is not part of preaching the Gospel. However, if you have to be water baptized in order to be saved then water baptism necessarily is part of the Gospel, but Paul strongly distinguishes between the two in this verse.

Even more telling is Paul's comments that he hardly baptized anyone in Corinth. If you truly believed that water baptism was necessary to keep people from going to Hell, why wouldn't you personally baptize as many people as you could? This is even more significant when you hear Paul say that he did all things for the sake of the Gospel. Listen to what Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23. Paul would make himself a slave to all people and do all things for the sake of the Gospel, except baptize people. If water baptism were truly a requirement of the Gospel, according to Paul's own words, he would have been baptizing people for the sake of the Gospel.

Finally, a unified whole is a highly ordered system but it is the natural tendency in both the spiritual realm and the physical realm for things to go to disorder, not to order. You have to add a lot of energy to maintain order. Just think about the time and money you spend keeping your car running right. It also takes time and energy to maintain the unity of the body. It takes lots of communication. It takes listening to others and letting go of my desires and preferences. It takes healthy compromise and conflict resolution. It takes more energy to build unity than it does to maintain unity, so when you have unity like we have here, you want to be very diligent to maintain it as Paul writes in Ephesians 4:3, "being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." Let's maintain the unity we have and seek to build more where we can. End in prayer.