

November 11/10/24

Sermon: “United We Stand, Divided We Fall”

Scripture Reading: Eph. 4:1-6

Therefore I, the prisoner of the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ *There is one body and one Spirit, just as you also were called in one hope of your calling;* ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Sermon Text: 1 Cor. 1:10-17; 3:5-9

¹⁰ Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all ^{10a} agree and that there be no ^{10b} divisions among you, but that you be ^{10c} made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 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 ^{13a} Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized ^{13b} in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ ^{14a} I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one would say you were baptized ^{15a} in my name. ¹⁶ Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in ^{17a} cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

⁵ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. ⁷ So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. ⁸ Now he who plants and he who waters are one; but each will receive his own ^{8a} reward according to his own labor. ⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s ^{9a} field, God’s building.

Intro

So, years ago I saw a guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" The guy said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Don't you believe in God?" "Yes." he said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What denomination?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Wow me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." "*Me, too!* Northern *Conservative* Baptist or Northern *Liberal* Baptist?" "Northern Conservative Baptist." "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Great Lakes Region, of course." I said, "Me, too! One more question, “Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region *Council of 1879*, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region *Council of 1912*?” He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "You heretic!" And I pushed him over the bridge myself.

Now, obviously this is the most exaggerated form of denominational division, but it highlights the extent that some Christians will go in placing their secondary beliefs with such an authority, as to accuse other believers of being inauthentic Christians or heretics if they don't hold the same views...

Definitions of Heresy

...even though it's pretty clear in the New Testament what type of teaching should be considered false doctrine or heretical. And that is, whatever contradicts or undermines the core doctrines of Christianity as received from Christ and presented by the apostles.

Heresy often comes in the form of denying the divinity of Christ or denying the resurrection or the authority of Scripture. We also see that Paul and Peter spoke explicitly against a works righteousness from the Judaizers, along with that which threatens the integrity of the gospel.

Following the apostles, the early church had a pretty unanimous understanding of the essential truths that were handed down from the apostles and prophets and passed to each generation of Christians through Scripture, sermons, and creeds, for instance the "Apostles Creed" and the "Nicene Creed." These were widely accepted to represent a "right doctrine," crucial for combating heresy.

I love how we often quote those creeds because it's a constant reminder *and* an affirmation of the core foundational and unwavering doctrinal truths that we hold fast to. And while keeping that in mind, let's take a look at what Paul confronts here in the beginning of this letter.

Context

So, before Paul addresses some of the various problems in the Corinthian church, he gives them a short but encouraging introduction. And this is important because in verses 4-9, he expresses that even though there are some serious problems in the church, they belonged to God and are set apart for a purpose. He thanks God for them in that, through Christ, and only through Christ, they were enriched in knowledge and spiritual gifts (cf. 12:4-11).

And though there were problems in the employment of those gifts, they're assured that God would continue to work in them until the end. So, he still regarded the church as fellow believers and was confident of God's work in them.

Exposition

In the first few chapters, Paul addresses some different problems in the church, exhorting them to change their behavior. And in some later chapters we see that he calls out issues like sexual immorality, taking each other to court, conflicts about what foods to eat, and even about their gifts and services being from one Spirit and ultimately for one purpose. But he starts with the issue of division, returns to the issue in chapter 3, and later on really highlights the unity of the body. So, not only is division a *critical* issue and unity imperative, but division was at the root of a lot of their problems.

In verse 10, Paul appeals to them by the name of Jesus Christ. This is the tenth reference to Christ in ten verses, leaving no doubt as to the One who should be the source and focus of church unity. He tells them they should be in agreement, be of the same mind and judgment, without any division. And we'll see that he's not discouraging diversity or even disagreements on smaller issues, but that being of one body in Christ, they shouldn't be divided.

In verse 11, he explains the cause of division. They must have stirred quite a conflict, because some of Chloe's people felt it necessary to tell him what was going on. It wasn't simply that they didn't agree on every detail, but it was causing conflict and separation among them. Each of them were saying, "I am with Paul," or "I am with Apollos," or "I am with Cephas."

Instead of simply following Christ and keeping the fundamental doctrine of the gospel as authoritative, they were labeling themselves under particular men. And whether Paul was naming himself, Apollos, and Peter as rhetorical examples or not, I'm sure there were leaders in the church who held particular theological views than another. And rather than being united by the foundations of the gospel, some of them were probably saying, "Well, Apollos teaches this. This is the superior view." And others saying, "Well we're from the Pauline camp," and still others saying, "We go under Peter's discipleship, one of the *original* apostles, we're the originalists!" And perhaps it wouldn't have been so bad if some simply stated, "I prefer Paul's discipleship or align more with Apollos." But they were separating themselves into factions and disputing over it (cf. 11:17-19).

In verse 13, Paul asks, "Has Christ been divided?" Was I crucified for you? "Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" No! It's Christ who's our Savior. We're baptized in Christ's name. It's the gospel of Christ that you were first taught. And the church is from Christ and of Christ and in Christ! And then, in a sort of cheeky way he says, "I'm glad that I didn't baptize most of you! I don't want to be one of the reasons for your division. He explains in verse 14 that, *who* baptized you is not as important as who you were baptized *in*—which is Christ.

Christ sent Paul, not to baptize but with the primary purpose to preach the gospel. And not his own message or doctrine but the doctrine of Christ. And he finishes this section with something really important, and that is that the gospel was not delivered with worldly wisdom or words of eloquence (vs 17). The power and effectiveness of the gospel is not in any particular man but in the simplicity of the cross of Christ.

If we jump over to chapter 3 verse 5 Paul reiterates, that when it comes to your state as believers in Christ, what is Apollos? what is Paul? but just servants of the One whom you put your faith in. I've played a part, Apollos played a part, but it's God who causes the growth. Your wisdom and knowledge and spiritual gifts didn't come from any of us, they came from Him! So why are you now putting your stock in man?

Commentary

In some of the text in between these passages, Paul points out that it was their way of thinking that led to these divisions, while listing the consequences of functioning in a divided church.

He goes on to remind them that the source of our power and of all grace, and all wisdom is of the Spirit. And he continues through the rest of chapter 1, chapter 2, and all of chapter 3 supporting the point that the knowledge and grace of Christ doesn't rest in the wisdom of men but the simplicity and power of the gospel itself.

Toward the end of the first chapter, it's critical that he points out that God didn't choose the wise, that they didn't preach the gospel through their own wisdom. Because this seems to imply, they were holding in higher regard perhaps the style or delivery of a particular apostle more than the gospel itself (1:18-31). He tells them, your problem is that you're still thinking according to the flesh—in worldly terms (3:1-4).

That's human tendency to idolize men, to separate into cliques according to your favorites, and to see yourself as superior because of who you're aligned with. Paul is saying, this is the way the world thinks. The church is different. It's not like the tendency of the world where in sports we have rivals as you side with our favorite team. It's not like the divide of politics where we pick a party or a candidate that we align with.

Ironically, even though our nation was founded on such principles as “united we stand, divided we fall,” every year we see more of a divide. But the type of division we see in the world ought not to be in the church.

Paul explains, there's an entirely different way of thinking with the body of Christ. It's unlike any other institution in the world. We don't pick teams, parties, groups, and cliques. What's so unique about the church is in spite of its many parts, we are one unified body as Paul illustrates later on in chapter 12.

It's an encouraging thing, or at least it should be, to know that no matter what background or ethnicity, no matter what cultural differences or personalities, a fellow believer is just another brother or sister in Christ. It's normal outside the church to see the type of rivalry, competitiveness, and opposition like we do in the world. But inside and among the church, it should be different.

Paul conveys that when it comes to fellowship of the church, being unified as a single body *in the local church* is obviously the first and highest priority. Churches on a universal level can't begin to come together if they don't share the same love and shared purpose in their own body. Nevertheless, unity was intended to be extended across the church as a whole. We can see from what the way the apostles taught and wrote to each church, that they aimed for uniformity among the churches.

We were just learning in our Wednesday Bible study how there was an issue in the Jerusalem Church that wasn't in line with Christ's gospel. So, Paul, Barnabas, Peter and some other apostles traveled there and met with the council to essentially straighten them out and get on the same page concerning those critical issues of doctrine. What else was cool is that we were

able to get a visual picture of Paul's missionary journeys. And in one of them, he traveled back around to various churches that were planted and established, continuing to build them up and steer them back in line if need be. It was critical that they were all in one accord in regard to those essential points of doctrine. As they were establishing the early church, it was imperative to be unified in doctrine and in love, as they would lay the foundation of the Christian church for thousands of years to come. We could only hope to achieve the same level of uniformity in the church today, as you see in the early church.

Funny thing, I became a part of a few different Facebook discussion groups some time ago and a couple of them are apologetics groups. So, it's expected to have some pretty rough disputes and heated arguments. Because, some atheists are pretty hateful toward anything Christian, and of course because some Christians don't quite know how to act either. But I found one called "Theology for Christian Nerds." So, I figured, an all-Christian group, this should open up to some pretty interesting discussion.

But instead of finding points of agreement or interest, you've got the Calvinists who argue with the Arminians, the Cessationists vs the Continuationists, the Complementarians vs the Egalitarians. And sadly, you'll see the same type of heated arguments, rude comments and insults, and spewing of hatred as you get with the other groups. And worst of all, there are many who accuse another of not being a "real" Christian, because they don't share their specific and superior theological view.

And this brings us back to the issue in the Corinthian church. Paul would suggest, when you hold a particular man's doctrine as your standard, you are 1. Placing *that* as the final standard instead of Christ's doctrine as the standard of authority. And 2. Having held that man's doctrine, or teaching, or leadership as authoritative, you're prone to pride, and arrogance, and division. Anyone who disagrees with your standard of doctrine holds an inferior view. If members were quarreling about which apostle they follow and align with, then you can imagine that it probably looked similar to my Facebook group, except they were all physically in one place.

The only 100% authoritative and superior view is the one built on the foundational doctrine of the gospel of Jesus Christ. One that was first given by Christ himself. It was explicitly agreed upon by all the apostles, handed down by the prophets and the apostles through Scripture and creeds. Three, it was universally accepted by the church in Acts. And finally, it was agreed upon by consensus for the first couple centuries of the church. And to this very day, still agreed and accepted as the essential doctrine, the foundational truths of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul would say, your doctrine shouldn't be built on me, Apollos, or Peter. Don't place *as* your authority Calvin, Luther, or Arminius. What's first and final in respect to doctrine and keeping unity in the body, is that believers agree upon the foundational dogmas of Christian doctrine.

Is it wrong for one to call himself a cessationist, a premillennialist, or a complementarian? Of course not. In fact, we learn that God wants us to seek truth and the full

knowledge of his wisdom and eternal truths. Proverbs 15:14 and 18:15 say, ‘The mind of the discerning acquires knowledge.’ But when I begin isolating myself from other Christians because they don’t share my theological views or I start accusing other Christians of being inauthentic if they don’t share the views of “my theologian,” then I’ve lost the heart of what it means to be one body, in and under Christ.

Conclusion

Sometimes I wonder if there’s anything I can do about the greater problem of church division. To see churches come together for one unified purpose is like trying to turn around a gigantic ship with a tiny rudder. And at times it seems like a lost cause.

But I am encouraged as individuals we can at least start within the local church, as we are doing now. We’ve made it a point to place at the center and first priority of our doctrinal belief a solid and sound statement of faith. The secondary things don’t define us, nor should they separate us.

You’ll notice within our mission statement we stand by the phrase “In essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.” What I love about this is...it tells me that:

1. We should be in absolute agreement and united in one mind regarding the essential doctrines of Christ.
2. That we extend liberty in secondary points of disagreement. and
3. No matter what the issue or who the person is, we strive to show love in all things.

In Ephesians, Paul urged them “to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called...being diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (4:1-4). To ensure that the church walks according to the leading of the Spirit, they have to walk in the same mind and of the same love. Otherwise, they can’t be sure if they’re not following the vision of a man instead of God’s vision. There’s something about a body of believers operating in harmony that allows God to move and work within the church as one whole.

Finally, a unified body of believers is one of the greatest forms of witness. Jesus said, “They will know you are my disciples by your love for one another” (John 13:35). In a time like we’re in now, where we see division, and conflict, and hatred in every institution and area of life—among co-workers, between friends, even among family members—it’s a strange and comforting thing to see a people who, in spite of differences or even disagreements at times, display an exceptional love for one another.

To see a people come together for one purpose with one vision, that’s when unbelievers will pause and perhaps come and see, and say, “what is it that drives that kind of love and unity? And then, hearing the unhindered Word of the Spirit, not the agenda of man, is what has the power to transform hearts and minds. And I think this principle in John, like church unity, is meant to be extended to the universal church not just the local church.

Perhaps one day, sound churches will realize that the less divided we are, and the more we can come together in one faith, under one Christ, and in one love, that we would be a better light to the world who often only see another divided institution instead of a unified kingdom of a shared purpose in Christ. Amen.