

Sermon for January 26, 2020 – 3rd Sunday after Epiphany

1 Corinthians 1:10–17 EHV

Theme: Is Christ Divided?

- 1) Our actions sometimes give that impression.
- 2) True unity, however, can only be found in faithful adherence to the Gospel of Christ.

¹⁰Brothers, I am making an appeal to you using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I ask that you all express the same view and not have any divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹For the news I heard about you, my brothers, from members of Chloe's household, is that there are rivalries among you. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that I baptized you into my own name. ¹⁶(I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides them, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel—not with the wisdom used in speeches, so that the cross of Christ would not be emptied of its power.

Why is there so much division among Christians? I mean, it's bad enough that there are so many denominations (Catholic, Lutheran, Baptist, Reformed, Orthodox, etc. . .) but then there are the subdivisions within the denominations (like ELCIC, LCC, WELS-Canada). And, if that weren't bad enough, sometimes within a synod there are factions – like the High Church Liturgical faction or the Contemporary Worship faction. The Bible speaks of unity, but visible Christianity seems anything but united. What are we to make of this? Is Christ Divided?

Divisions and subdivisions within Christianity are not something new. Already in apostolic times, the devil used false doctrine and sinful egos to try to tear Christians away from Christ and each other. For this very reason, the apostles often warned against false doctrine and encouraged true unity in Christ. Our sermon text is a good example of such encouragement.

Therefore, with the apostle Paul as our guide, let us be encouraged to always seek true Christian unity, under the theme: **Is Christ Divided?** 1) Our actions sometimes give that impression. 2) True unity, however, can only be found in faithful adherence to the Gospel of Christ.

Part One: Is Christ Divided? Our actions sometimes give that impression.

Our sermon text is part of a letter Paul wrote to a congregation he founded in Corinth. The LORD blessed this congregation with many spiritual blessings. Unfortunately, the devil also raged against this church – doing what he could to cause division amongst its members. Not only did the Christians in Corinth live in a very immoral city and struggle against false teachers, but factions were growing inside the congregation itself.

For this reason, the apostle Paul writes: ¹⁰*Brothers, I am making an appeal to you using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. I ask that you all express the same view and not have any divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

Wow! In one sentence the apostle Paul masterfully encourages true Christian unity – explaining exactly what it is, in order that the extremes of sinful discord and false concord might be avoided.

What, you may be wondering, is false concord and sinful discord? False concord is pretending to be united to Christ and each other when, in fact, no true unity exists. Promoters of false concord often say: “Can anyone really be sure what the truth is? Instead of fighting over doctrine, let’s just agree to love God and each other in our own way. That’s all God wants, right? Let’s agree to disagree and stop quibbling over the small stuff.”

Now, such sentiments seem nice. I mean, who wouldn’t want love over hate and peace instead of war. But is it true? Is God “ok” with us agreeing to disagree about what the Bible teaches for the sake of unity?

Consider Paul’s words: ¹⁰*Brothers, I am making an appeal to you using the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. [That is to say, this is God’s will for us in Christ - this is how he wants us to live our Christian faith.] I ask that you all express the same view and not have any divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

In other words, Paul does not say: “Let’s all get together and sing Kumbaya around a campfire – regardless of what each of us believes.” No, he says that true unity can only be found having the same mind and judgment regarding the Scripture – a mind and judgment that is not merely based on what a person “thinks” or “feels” is right, but that is actually rooted in Scripture. We will talk more about this a little later.

But, as mentioned before, Paul not only warns against false concord, he also warns against sinful discord. What’s that? Sinful discord is basically the opposite extreme of false concord: it’s allowing things to divide us that really shouldn’t. Let’s look at what Paul writes next to get a fuller understanding of what this means. He says:

¹¹*For the news I heard about you, my brothers, from members of Chloe’s household, is that there are rivalries among you. ¹²What I mean is that each of you says, “I belong to Paul,” or “I belong to Apollos,” or “I belong to Cephas,” or “I belong to Christ.”*

Paul, Apollos, and Peter (Cephas) were all well-known Church leaders. Just as each player on a hockey team is uniquely gifted and uses his talents for the good of the organization, so also each of these Church leaders used his unique talents for the good of Christ’s kingdom.

Paul – the bold, go-getter apostle of Christ was the one who founded the Church in Corinth. God used Apollos’ gift of persuasive rhetoric to help strengthen the congregation as he preached the Gospel of Christ. God used Peter (Cephas) to encourage many Jewish Christians in their faith to Jesus. All these men served Christ. Everyone was on the same team.

How sad it was, then, that people started bragging about being followers of Paul – that he’s the best, because he founded the congregation. Others claimed that Apollos was the best because he was a skilled rhetorician who captivated his listeners. Jewish Christians, no doubt, had an affinity to Peter’s preaching – claiming he was the best. And still, others abused the name of Christ. How? I imagine them saying: “We don’t need any human teacher because we have Jesus” – thereby ignoring the public ministry that Christ himself established for our benefit.

Yes, instead of rejoicing in the diversity of gifts God had bestowed on the Church – meant to work together for the benefit of the whole - the Corinthian Christians were acting like a bunch of “fanboys” – bragging about how “their guy” is the best and how every other preacher should be like him.

Are we ever tempted to act this way? Sadly, we are. Our church body has been blessed with talented people with a variety of gifts. Sadly, instead of rejoicing in this diversity, we might get attached to a person’s worship or ministry style. Since we are comfortable with it, we might begin to think that this person’s style is the only proper way to conduct ministry. Soon we start to criticize others for not thinking like us – thereby sowing the seeds of discord.

Probably the clearest modern-day example of this can be found in the area of worship. Some people are such fans of the historic liturgy, that they almost make it sound like it’s a sin to use anything else in worship. On the flip side, I have heard others talk about contemporary worship in such glowing terms, that they make it sound as if the church won’t grow without it. Yes, bitter rivalries have popped up over things like this, for which reason Paul asks:

¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?

The Apostle’s point is that our worship life is not about following any particular preacher or style. It’s only about Christ. Just as the human body has many different members working together for the whole, so also the body of Christ has many different members working together in unity.¹ To say, “I follow this way of ministry and see no value in that other way of doing things” is like saying: “All I need are my hands, and not my feet. Feet don’t belong to me.” Dividing up a body in that way is foolish, and yet this is exactly what we do when we don’t rejoice in the different gifts God has placed in the body of Christ.

St. Paul continues: *¹⁴I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that I baptized you into my own name. ¹⁶(I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides them, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel. . .*

What is Paul saying here? Didn’t he value the sacrament of baptism? How could he say that he thanks God that he only baptized a select few? How can he say that he wasn’t sent to baptize?

First of all, we have to take Paul’s words in context. What was happening in Corinth? People were bragging about who baptized them as if the person performing the act was more important than the sacrament itself. For this reason, Paul is grateful that he baptized only a few people. As

an apostle, his ministry was to preach the Gospel using the special gifts and power God bestowed upon him. He knew that if he baptized people, they would be tempted to take pride in the fact that “he” baptized them. I mean, think about it for a second: if you were baptized by some great preacher, wouldn’t you be tempted to brag about that fact? But such bragging would empty baptism of its power – taking the focus off of Christ’s promises. For this reason, the apostles didn’t seem to do a lot of baptizing but allowed other called workers to do it for them. This would encourage people to focus on God’s promises in the sacrament, and not the person performing it.

Yes, Paul never wanted people to focus on him; he wanted them to focus on Christ for the forgiveness of sins.

Part Two: True unity, however, can only be found in faithful adherence to the Gospel of Christ.

For this reason, the apostle Paul writes that Christ sent him *to preach the gospel—not with the wisdom used in speeches, so that the cross of Christ would not be emptied of its power.*

The Gospel is not about nice-sounding platitudes, nor is it about worldly ideas and philosophies of how we think things should be. The Gospel is about Christ and his cross. In other words, the Gospel is not about God ignoring our sins, it’s about the LORD forgiving them.

Christianity is all about Christ and his cross. It’s all about God’s free gift of salvation that we only receive through repentance and faith in the Gospel. And this brings me back to the first verse of our text and what Paul says about Christian unity: *I ask that you all express the same view and not have any divisions among you, but that you be joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

Why are there so many divisions in Christianity – so many different denominations and whatnot? It’s because many refuse to express the same view on Scripture that it actually teaches. Instead of allowing God’s Word to interpret itself, they infuse their own thoughts, feelings, and logic into the Bible. And whenever a person adds to, subtracts from or changes Scripture in any way, they misrepresent Christ. Does the LORD want us to be united with those who misrepresent him? Absolutely not, rather the Scriptures say: *Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous wolves.*ⁱⁱ And again: *I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and offenses contrary to the teaching that you learned, and keep away from them.*¹⁸*For such people are not serving Christ our Lord . . .*ⁱⁱⁱ

In summary, then, the LORD truly desires Christians to be united to Him and each other. This unity, however, does not come by “agreeing to disagree.” No, it only comes through careful study and submission to all of His Word. It’s only in the Scriptures that we will find the truth: that we are completely sinful and deserve eternal damnation, and that God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son to save us from our sins through his perfect life, innocent death and glorious resurrection from the dead. This is the truth God’s Word teaches, and faith in this truth sets us free.^{iv} Yes, it is only in the Gospel that we find Jesus and, being united with Him through repentance and faith, we become united with each other. Rejoicing in our Saviour, let us also rejoice in each other – thanking God for the various gifts he has given us. Let us be united in using

our various gifts in service of the Gospel so that many more might hear about Jesus and be saved.
Amen

ⁱ Cf. 1 Corinthians 12

ⁱⁱ Matthew 7:15 EHV

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 16:17-18a EHV

^{iv} Cf. John 8:31-32 EHV