

February 6, 2011
A Church that is larger than us ...
1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Comedian Emo Philips is credited with this story: *"In conversation with a person I had recently met, I asked, 'Are you Protestant or Catholic?' My new acquaintance replied, 'Protestant.'" I said, 'Me too! What franchise?' He answered, 'Baptist.' 'Me too!'" I said, 'Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?' 'Northern Baptist,' he replied. 'Me too!'" I shouted.*

"We continued to go back and forth. Finally I asked: 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1879 or Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912?' He replied, 'Northern conservative fundamentalist Baptist, Great Lakes Region, Council of 1912.'

"And I said, 'Die, heretic!'"

I'm sure we all know how draining it is when we don't get along in our nuclear families. It's also spiritually draining when we can't get along in our local church family, or in the larger Christian community. And the world at large looks at us - when we fight among ourselves - and shakes its head in disgust at the lack of grace, love, and compassion we can show to our Christian brothers and sisters. Thankfully this is less prominent and public than it used to be! It is good for us to remember the key confessions that unite us - it's all about Jesus.

A Symphony

Jesus prayed this prayer to the Father on the night before He was crucified: *"My prayer is ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you ... May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them and even as you have loved me."* (John 17:20-23). The problems of divisions today are nothing new. Even before the church began, Jesus was praying about this!

In 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, the Corinthian Christians were throwing rotten eggs at one another: some were members of Apollos Baptist Church; some were members of St. Peter's Anglican Church; some formed the Independent Congregational Church of Paul. And some called themselves the Jesus Fellowship. Paul reminded them that the personal (or denominational) traditions they celebrated were human constructions.

Many of us have Christian heroes. Some may be close friends, others people we've only known from a distance such as writers and speakers. But there is a danger lurking here. The people who God uses to bring us closer to him can also become a substitute for him. Christian celebrity culture is nothing new and the Corinthians had embraced it enthusiastically.

The first problem was that it divided them from each other (v 10). The Greek word is "*schismata*," from which get our word "*schism*." The word is used to refer to torn cloth. The Corinthians were dividing into tribes, like rival football fans, tearing the church apart. Paul, Apollos, Peter (Cephas) - all had their followers (v 12). One group went to the other extreme, claiming to be so spiritual they didn't need any teaching, somehow vaguely "following Christ."

- Is it conceivable that following a particular Christian leader can become more important than following Christ? Can our love of particular writer/teacher cause division?
- Is the phrase 'Christian celebrity' a contradiction in terms?
- What about music? Can our love of particular singer/songwriters cause division?

Paul, however, sets a great example for leaders. He points them away from himself to Christ who died for them. We need to hear Paul's challenge: is Christ divided? Of course not! And if there are those who genuinely love Him in other churches, how dare we attack the body of Christ, the Kingdom of God? "*All of you together are the temple of God and the Spirit of God lives in you. God will bring ruin on anyone who ruins this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you who believe are that temple*" (1 Corinthians 3:16-17).

1 Corinthians 1:10 commands us:

- "*Agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you.*"
- "*Be perfectly united in mind and thought.*"

Unity is not optional. It is God's command! The Greek word for "*agree*" is the word which gives us the word "*symphony*," meaning "*to sound together, primarily of musical instruments.*" It could be translated into English as "*harmony.*" So ... unity is not uniformity! As a symphony orchestra needs many different instruments, playing many different - but complementary - roles, the church needs many different people, playing many different - complementary - roles. The key to an orchestra is that everyone follows the conductor. And the key to the church - locally and globally - is that we follow the conductor - Jesus.

Unconditional love and unconditional truth

Writing to followers of Jesus in Ephesus, in Ephesians 4:1-7, Paul encourages them to be committed to unconditional, rather than conditional, love for one another. It is a lot easier to love those who agree with us, who share common interests, and who have no irritating qualities. But anyone can have that kind of love. Christ-like love goes profoundly deeper (Matthew 5:43-48). The New Living Translation wonderfully translates Ephesians 4:2, "*Be humble and gentle. Be patient with each other, making allowance for each other's faults, because of your love.*" Unity comes, not as we seek to change one another, but as we appreciate that each of us has our faults - we are all "works in progress" - but we decide to love one another regardless.

In the church we hold on to unity on the essentials - an absolute commitment to, *"one faith, one God and Father who is over all and in all and living through all, one Lord, one Spirit, one baptism, one body, and one glorious hope for the future."* These are the essence of our faith. These are salvation issues - issues which fundamentally define whether we have genuine Christian faith.

Christian unity is NOT uniformity. It does not allow division, but it does allow variety. It allows for diversity of action and function. We are created differently. The Holy Spirit uses us differently. A symphony that was all violins - all playing exactly the same thing - is not much of a symphony! A symphony needs horns, percussion, strings, woodwinds, etc. - diversity, playing in harmony. A symphony plays the same piece, but in a variety of ways, working together to create something beautiful. Paul's teaching is that people who can celebrate this diversity are maturing and growing in their faith. It's a sign of spiritual maturity.

Diversity - within unity - is what makes the church so interesting - and so strong! In any natural ecosystem, biodiversity - a wide range of plants and animals - make the ecosystem strong, resilient, able to resist disease and adapt to changing conditions - and interesting! Ecosystems with only one type of plant or animal are easily wiped out. Churches with people-diversity - gift-diversity, personality-diversity, interest-diversity, skill-diversity - are strong, resilient, able to adapt to changing conditions - and interesting!

Putting aside the non-essentials

Other things may be important in our obedience to Scripture, but they are not essential to salvation. And so, in "humility and gentleness," we make allowance for our differences. There are issues which we may feel very strongly about are important in our obedience to Christ, but which are not necessarily essential to our salvation. We allow people to play different instruments in the symphony. Consider Romans 14: *"Accept Christians who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong ... Who are you to judge God's servants? ... Why do you judge your brother? Why do you look down on your brother? ... Let us stop passing judgment on one another ... Let us make every effort to do what leads to peace and mutual edification ... Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourselves and God."* (Romans 14:1, 10, 13, 19, 22).

It's interesting, isn't it, that Paul's assumption is that those who are all caught up in these sorts of disputes are those who are "weak in faith." Those who are still discovering the joy and freedom, the love and acceptance of Jesus Christ tend to define true Christians by outward appearances: what church one attends, what Bible version one prefers, what authors one reads, etc., etc. In my experience, most Christians who are critical or judgmental of others are *afraid* of something ... afraid the church will not survive change ... afraid of new ideas ... afraid of this and that. Remember, *"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear"* (1 John 4:18).

Christian maturity recognizes outward appearances are notoriously deceiving: God looks on the

heart; the Kingdom of God is within you. The love of Christ is so vast, that it can cover a huge variety of differences, with the common denominator being that saving faith in Jesus Christ. Mature Christian love doesn't need to be afraid, because it knows the power of God to defend His own holiness and honour. He does not need to rely on us to do it for Him. Mature Christian love truly believes the Holy Spirit will do the convicting - justly and lovingly (John 16:8-10).

Our task is to aim for perfect love - the love modeled by Jesus. He can care for His church quite well!

The glory of the Kingdom

Sometimes, sadly, our insecurities mean we place ourselves within a specific stream of Christianity, marked by particular beliefs or practices. We identify with others within our stream, but feel different to those outside it. Such 'tribal' behaviour has plagued the Christian Church through the centuries, from Corinth on down. This fledgling congregation had fallen into factions, each emphasizing their affinity with a particular leader. The "schisms" - tears, rips - in the church was destroying its good reputation and its effectiveness.

In truth, our faith should accomplish exactly the opposite. By rooting our identity so deeply in Jesus, we should know a security that allows us to reach out to those who are unlike us. The Christian message is a profound challenge to 'in group'/'out group' mentalities. Paul makes it clear that he has no time for it (vs. 10, 13).

We are part of something far greater than First Baptist Church! Through our own denomination we are part of ministry to the poorest of the poor in Nairobi! We are part of ministry unwanted street children in Brazil! We are part of caring for homeless children of women prisoners in Bolivia. We are part of educating Christian leaders in the Middle East. But even more than that, we are part of a Kingdom, way beyond anything labeled "Baptist" that brings the gospel to refugees in the Sudan, to political prisoners in Asia, to the ends of the earth.

The Kingdom of God stretches from us here in Lethbridge right around the world, from pole to pole. So as you go out today - as you drive by another church, of whatever denomination - thank God for the Kingdom! Pray for the believers in that church! And if you meet another Christian this week - from whatever church - celebrate those things that you share in common! Be encouraged that you are not alone. You are part of this local church family. We pray for one another here. We care for one another here. But you - and us as a church - are part of a much, much larger family, too! Let us celebrate that which unites us, which is above all: faith in the Jesus Christ as our Saviour!

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