

1Cor. 1:10 Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

12 What 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." 13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? 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 can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

1Cor. 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

A CHURCH DIVIDED

A preacher wrote,

"Imagine hearing this message on a friend's answering machine:
'Hello. We're in the middle of a family fight right now. Leave your name and number at the beep and whoever wins will call you right back.'"

If they had telephones and answering machines back in the ancient days, this would have been the message at the First Church of Corinth. These Christians were in a knock down winner take all fight for the soul of their church.

The trouble was this. The fight was taking their soul. Ministry had stopped so that they could have time for the fighting. The disagreement seemed to stem from their devotion to various leaders.

Some loved the passionate preaching of Apollos. Some were enamored with the precise theology of Paul. Others followed Peter. He was the first to see the risen Christ. He was the rock on which the church was built. Surely his followers would take precedence over other Christians.

Apparently some in the church became disgusted with all the bickering and said, "We're the real Christians. We follow Jesus only."

But, they too participated in all the bickering and divisiveness that was rampant in the Corinthian Church. They might have claimed the name of Christ, but their actions were anything but Christ like.

DISAGREEMENTS TODAY

Those poor Corinthians just didn't get it. They didn't understand the importance of being one in Christ. It's a good thing that we're not that way.

Oh wait. We are that way.

Why can't we disagree without being disagreeable? Why can't we emphasize what we have in common instead of always concentrating on what we have in difference?

Those are questions we have been asking as a nation recently, and those are also questions that we need to ask in the church.

This past week has been designated a week of prayer for Christian unity. And we need to pray now more than ever.

I heard a story about a church that had two different groups who each "owned" a locking (and locked) cabinet in the church basement with their own tableware and cutlery. Each group refused to share with the other.

The pastor had served that church early in his ministry. When he visited the church decades later, he said, the cabinets were still locked, and the fractures within the community had yet to be healed.

That seems like a silly disagreement. But, there is more to that disagreement than knives, forks and spoons. That is just a visible sign of a deeper problem.

Another pastor told about a board meeting in his church. One of the members in a moment of frustration and anger shouted,

"I don't care what Jesus said. This is what our church bylaws say!"

Sometimes the truth slips out.

We continue to disagree in the church.

We disagree about leadership. We disagree about what we believe. And we disagree about what color we paint the fellowship hall.

Nothing seems to have changed all that much in the 2,000 years since Paul wrote his letter to the Corinthians. If anything things have gotten worse.

So what's a church to do? What can unite us when so many things are pulling us apart?

RENEWING OUR MINDS

Quite often our disagreements, large and small are merely symptoms of a greater theological problem.

Paul told the Corinthians that they needed to be united in the "same mind and purpose." Paul also spoke of this in his letter to the Romans when he said that we are transformed by the renewing of our minds. (Romans 12:2)

Theology is important.

If we can get our head straight about the faith, then our whole life will be changed. And the converse is also true. If our theology is wrong, our life will be out of whack.

Poor theology leads to divisiveness. Good theology properly applied leads to unity.

The church at Corinth was hung up on baptism. They were bragging about who baptized whom.

"I was baptized by the great preacher, Apollos.

That wonderful theologian, Paul, baptized me.

Well, I was baptized by Peter, the rock on which the church is built."

And so forth. On and on they went.

But, in the midst of all this banter, Paul asks a theological question. What is the meaning of baptism?

Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul?

Were any of you baptized in the name of Apollos? Were any of you baptized in the name of Peter?

Was Paul crucified for you?

Of course not, you were baptized in the name of Christ.

Baptism is an outward sign of an inward and spiritual change.

Baptism in itself is not important. The important thing is what has already happened on the inside.

Many denominations are still in disagreement on these very points. We are divided over baptism.

Should we baptize by immersion?

Should we baptize by sprinkling?

Should we baptize by pouring?

Who is authorized to baptize?

Should we baptize believing adults only?

Should infants also be baptized as a sign of the covenant?

Whenever we talk about baptism at a Bible study I can always anticipate a lively and sometimes heated discussion.

BAPTISM NOT THAT IMPORTANT

I think if Paul could attend our Bible studies he would say something that would sound very shocking to many of us.

Paul would say,

“Baptism is just not that important.”

Since the Corinthians had made such a big deal about who baptized whom Paul flatly states that he is glad that he didn't baptize anyone in Corinth.

And then the old apostle pauses and writes,

“Oh yes I did baptize Crispus and Gaius.

Now let me think. I also baptized the household of Stephanas. That's it when it comes to baptisms. I think. I'm not sure who I've baptized.”

Apparently Paul was not Presbyterian.

We keep a roll of those who are baptized and who did the baptizing. Copies of our records used to be preserved for all time at that great historical archive in Montreat, N.C.

Now I think the records are beamed to that great server in the sky, the cloud.

When the roll is called up yonder I'll be there.

Unless, of course, the server crashes!

Paul would not be impressed by our computer technology.

Paul would say it doesn't matter who baptized whom. Paul would say that it doesn't matter how much water we use when we baptize or if we even baptize at all!

What matters is the message.

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

Did we have the basic message right?

Did we preach the gospel?

Did we let the power of the cross shine through by preaching in a humble and straightforward way?

One commentator put it this way,

“Paul beckons his readers to participate in the story of the cross—a narrative in which all we think we know about the world, its value, its knowledge, its wisdom, its virtue is reconfigured by God's great act of salvation in Christ.”

To put it another way, the world is turned upside down by the power of the cross. Salvation does not come through power and success. God's salvation comes through what seemed like a failure.

This is important. The cross is not just about what happened to Jesus way back when.

The cross is a practical guide to our life together as the people of God.

How can we brag about belonging to a particular church or the charisma of a particular Christian leader when at the center of our faith is the emblem of suffering and shame?

Paul suggests that bragging about anything negates the message. Bragging empties the cross of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:17)

The cross will always be foolish to those who think that success always comes through power and prestige. But, for those who understand the way of the cross it is the power of God's salvation.

Paul asks the Corinthians to quit working at cross-purposes and instead start working for cross-purposes.

THE LESSONS OF THE CROSS

I found one of those don't sweat the small stuff books and began reading it this past week. It was "Don't Sweat the Small Stuff for Teachers."

But, I found that it also applied to preachers!

I admit it. I have been sweating the small stuff, and it's not a good thing to do!

But, how do we stop sweating the small stuff? We do it by focusing laser like on the big stuff. We focus on what is really important.

For Christians, that means focusing on the cross. The cross is at the center of our faith. And what are the lessons of the cross?

There is the lesson of forgiveness.

From the cross Jesus said, "Father, forgive them. They don't know what they are doing." (Luke 23:34)

There is the lesson of selfless sacrifice.

In the Garden of Gethsemane Jesus prayed, "Not my will but yours be done." (Luke 22:42)

There is the lesson of humility.

Jesus told his disciples toward the end of his life, "The son of man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20:28)

It seems to me that if the cross stands at the center of our faith, our life together should reflect the power of the cross.

Our life together should be marked by forgiveness. Our life together should be marked by a willingness to sacrifice for the greater good.

Our life together should be marked by service and humility.

This is the power of the cross.

It is a cross because it requires us to give up our way of doing things and the world's way of doing things.

It is powerful because it is the gospel. It is God's good news of salvation that transforms everything.

It is a whole new way of thinking and a whole new way of being.

DIVISIONS HINDER THE GOSPEL

Divisions in the church are more than a matter of people not getting along. Divisions are a profound theological challenge.

They threaten the integrity of the church. They threaten our ability to effectively proclaim the gospel.

If they will know we are Christians by our love, what will they know by our anger and harsh disagreements?

If we say that Christ is at the center of the Christian faith, what does it say to the world when we make some other charismatic leader the center of our faith?

What does it say to the world when we in the church preach a doctrine of humility and self-sacrifice and yet spend untold millions of dollars on gigantic building projects?

From the tower of Babel to the fall of the temple at Jerusalem the Bible is consistent. You cannot find God in charismatic leaders, big buildings and success as the world defines it.

We see the love of God on the cross. We see the power of God in humility.

BACK TO BASICS

It is easy to grouse about what is wrong with this old world. It is easy to ask rhetorically, "Why can't we all just get along?"

But, Paul is bringing the Corinthians (and us) back to the basic values of the Christian faith. The church's one foundation (as we will soon sing) is Jesus Christ our Lord.

Jesus is the measure of our faith and the measure of our life together. He is the charter of our salvation.

In education we often talk about the need to get back to basics, the so-called three "rs," reading writing and 'rithmetic.

The same is true when it comes to faith.

One basic that Paul often points to in a broken and divided church is the cross of Christ.

In the sacrifice of the cross we get to see the very heart of God, and that powerful image transforms everything.

The cross, more than anything else can convince us to leave our petty arguments behind and go the way of downward mobility.

What a foolish message for a world that is built on getting more and more.

But, for those who are being saved it is the very power of God.

Amen.