

The Power of God

January 22, 2017

Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor

First Presbyterian Church, Kissimmee, Florida

1Corinthians 1:10-18

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. 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

In last week's lesson, Paul said that the Corinthians had every spiritual gift. They lacked nothing when it came to knowledge or speech. And he was confident that when the day of the Lord arrived they would be found blameless in Christ Jesus.

But, in today's lesson we learn that there was a big gap between Paul's vision for the church in the future and the present reality. We learn that success in God's kingdom cannot be guaranteed by gifted leaders and talented congregations.

If congregations are not united by a common purpose, a common mindset, then no matter how talented the leadership and the congregation, it is inevitable that there will be division.

Division in the church today has been institutionalized for many years. If you ask a person what church they go to, how do they answer? They answer with a denomination.

I go to the Presbyterian Church. I go to the Roman Catholic Church. I go to the Lutheran Church, I go to the Baptist Church ... and so forth.

Now admittedly we have slightly different understandings of what it means to follow Jesus (and I do mean slight), but those very small differences often keep us apart.

In history there have been major political upheavals associated with these minor theological differences. Wars have been fought using theology as an excuse.

I believe that most Christian denominations have always had more in common than they have had in difference. But, it's human nature to emphasize the differences instead of what we have in common.

And this has led some of us to give up on the unity of the church. What's that old piece of advice? Don't talk about religion and politics.

We let faith be one of the things that divides us instead of uniting us. And we have come to accept this as normal. Conflict and disunity have become a way of life in the Church.

How do we deal with it?
We just don't talk about it.
And these days we don't even worry about our divisions.
We just accept them.

And yet this was not Paul's vision for the church.

Paul envisions a church where there are no divisions.
Paul envisions a church where people are in agreement.

Paul envisions a church where people have the same mind and the same purpose.

How can Paul maintain this hope for a united church when he is writing a letter to a church that is divided in so many ways? It is because they have a common Savior.

They have been forgiven and freed to live in a new way in Christ Jesus.

They have been given this amazing grace.

And that grace changes their relationship with and with other people.

UNITY IN DIVERSITY

The church at Corinth was very diverse.

There were Jews and Greeks.

There were slaves and masters.

Some came from pagan religions.

Some came from no religion.

Some were extremely rich.

Some were dirt poor.

But, despite these significant differences, they had one thing in common.

Their life had been changed by the Spirit of God in Christ.

They were new creations.

More than that, they were family.

In our lesson for today, Paul refers to these Corinthians as “brothers and sisters.”

Do you ever quarrel with your brother or your sister?

Of course you do.

My brother is confused on many issues, and when we get together I try to help him understand the truth. Unfortunately, my brother has the same opinion of me, and he tries to help me understand the truth as he sees it.

And our efforts to help each other see the truth can lead to some rather heated discussions!

Now does that mean we don't play golf the next day?

Of course not.

Does that mean we tell each other, "You're no brother of mine?"

Of course not.

We're family.

We have the same mother and father.

We grew up together.

We care about each other.

And that fact matters more than anything that might separate us.

That's what unites us through thick and thin.

Paul is telling the Corinthians that they all have the same spiritual parent.

Jesus is their Lord and Savior.

And their unity in Christ Jesus is more important than anything that might divide them

Now don't misunderstand.

Paul isn't envisioning a dull uniformity in the church.

The church has always been filled with a bewildering variety of people.

And we bring with us all kinds of different ideas and experiences with us into the church.

But, Paul didn't see that as a problem.

He saw it as a strength.

Later in this letter he will say that the church is the body of Christ.

... And each one of us plays a unique role in that body.

All the various parts of the body work together to make an effective person.

In the same way, the various members of the church work together to make an effective witness to the gospel.

But, the Corinthians had a hard time catching this vision.

Instead of valuing each member of the church as a member of the body of Christ, they put certain church leaders on a pedestal.

Some said, "I belong to Paul."

Some said, "I belong to Apollos."
Some said, "I belong to Cephas (Peter)."

And some piously said,

"You guys have got it all wrong.
Unlike you, I'm the real Christian.

I don't follow men.
I belong to Jesus."

This desire to follow a certain Christian leader ... and maybe even the desire to follow a particular understanding of Jesus created division in the church.

There were reasons that the Corinthians might be attracted to certain leaders.

I BELONG TO PAUL

Paul had founded the churches in Corinth.
And many in that church became Christians because of his teaching.

Do you remember the person that helped you understand the Christian faith and accept Christ as your Savior? I bet you do. No doubt that person or the memory of that person is very important to you.

But, there comes a time when you have to move beyond what that person taught you and deepen your knowledge of the faith in other ways.

The Corinthians could not live forever in the reflected glory of the apostle who met Jesus on the road to Damascus. They had to seek and develop their own understanding of the risen Christ.

It's okay to learn from the example of a great Christian leader.
But, we need to remember that every new disciple must be ready to hear the call of Jesus personally.

As Jesus called the disciples long ago, he calls us today.
Today he tells us, "Come, follow me."

But, our path will be different.
And our call to service will be unique.

We cannot let the call of Christ be drowned out by listening only to the voice of human leaders. This can create division, and it can create great disillusionment when those human leaders fail us.

I BELONG TO APOLLOS

This warning is especially true when it comes to those Christian leaders that are great preachers. Apollos had a following in Corinth because he was a great preacher.

Most really large churches have one thing in common.
Their lead pastor is a great preacher.
This is often the glue that holds the larger church together.

Now, there's nothing wrong with that.
All of us can be inspired by preachers who winsomely preach the word of God.
For example, I grew up listening to Billy Graham, and his preaching had a big influence on my thinking at an early age.

But, the point of great preaching is not to attract large crowds.
The point of great preaching is not to build gigantic churches.
The point of great preaching is to introduce people to Jesus and help those people follow him.

In that regard, the preaching of Apollos was not successful ... at least in some cases.
Some people were attracted to the preacher instead of the Savior.
The proof was in what they said.

"I belong to Apollos."
No, we belong to Jesus.

I've said this before, but some friends put on sign on this pulpit that I read every week. It's a quote from the Bible when some Greeks came wanting to see Jesus. "Sirs, we would see Jesus."

That's become a good reminder to preachers down through the ages. It's not about us. It's about enabling other to see Jesus.

Anything less creates division in the church.

I BELONG TO CEPHAS

There was a third group creating division in the Corinthian Church. These were the people who said, "I belong to Cephas."

In the church there are people who want to emphasize tradition and theology.

I'm one of those people.

I believe that if we don't understand the whole Bible, we are doomed to have a faith that is too shallow. We will often be lead astray by slick talking leaders who care more about money and their own reputations than the gospel.

I think this was the concern of Cephas (or the apostle Simon Peter). Peter felt like his Jewish faith helped him understand and correctly interpret the life of Jesus.

And he had a point.

One of the early heresies in the church tried to separate the God of the Old Testament from the God of the New Testament.

But, Peter understood Jesus to be the Messiah. Jesus was the culmination of the mighty acts of God that were revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Jesus was the embodiment of God's salvation.

This salvation had been foretold through the prophets, and by the spiritual journeys of God's people in the past.

In Peter's mind, in order to truly understand Jesus, you had to know the whole story.

But, then Peter took that one step farther.

He said that not only did you have to understand the Jewish faith; he also seemed to suggest that a person had to become a Jew in order to become a Christian.

Men had to be circumcised.

All Gentiles had to be baptized in order to wash off the influences of the pagan world.

I can understand why Jews living in Corinth might have felt this way.

Remember that Corinth was a cosmopolitan place where sexual immorality was not only a part of daily life but also a part of some religions.

Corinth was a place where people fiercely competed for economic and political advantage. Even in the church there unjust divisions between the rich and the poor.

These divisions were even apparent when they celebrated the Lord's Supper.

In almost every area, the Corinthians had twisted the message of the faith so that it would fit with their lifestyle and culture.

This twisting of the gospel was the reason for Paul's letter..

Those who followed Peter, probably converted Jews, looked at this immoral behavior and said something like,

"We have to go back to the old ways.

We have to circumcise the men and baptize people.

We have to make these converts into good Jews so that they can later become good, moral Christians."

Of course what these disciples of Peter forgot was that rules and regulations would not produce good behavior. Salvation would not come through stricter adherence to the law.

In fact, as Paul made abundantly clear in many of his letters, the more we try to "do the right thing" the more we find ourselves doing the wrong thing. We see this pattern when we read the history of God's people in the He-

brew Scriptures. Despite being God's people and having the Word of God in the prophets, they often choose the wrong way.

Something new had to happen.

And in Jesus Christ something new did happen.

Jesus died for the sins of the world on the cross, and so we can say, "In Jesus Christ we are forgiven."

And, as we talked about last week, what is the response to that forgiveness?

Gratitude.

We serve God and others out of gratitude.

We forgive others as God in Christ had forgiven us.

This was not the message that Peter preached ... at least consistently. He switched back and forth between preaching a message of salvation by grace to preaching a message that seemed to be more focused on based following the law.

This is still a problem in the church.

Sometimes we become so enamored with rules and regulations in an immoral world, that we forget that our main message is grace and forgiveness.

We say in essence, "I belong to Peter."

I BELONG TO CHRIST

Finally, one group said, "I belong to Christ."

Now you might wonder, "How could that cause division?"

Isn't that what we are supposed to do?"

I don't know for sure, but I would suspect that those who said this had a particular interpretation of the life of Christ. And maybe they were suggesting that their particular interpretation of Jesus was the only one worth following.

They were saying in essence,

"I have the mind of Christ ... and you don't!"

This is an equal opportunity mistake.
Conservatives and liberals alike do this.
And causes great division in the church even today.

Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth and the life."

But, we cannot make the same claim.
The Christian faith is not about our way, our truth, and our life.

The Christian faith is about Christ's way, Christ's truth and Christ's life.

This means that we must have open minds and hearts when it comes to the faith.
We must have a sense of humility and be willing to change in response to the gospel.

Like many who have gone before us, we might have some things wrong when it comes to Jesus. We might not have heard Jesus clearly on some topics.

Like the Corinthians, maybe culture and our own desires have distorted Jesus' message.
We are disciples, but we are not Saviors.

Paul made this point when he asked rhetorically,

"Has Christ been divided?
Was Christ crucified for you?
Were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

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

BAPTISM

The traditional way we talk about baptism is:
Baptism is an outward sign of an inward and spiritual work.

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

Like the Lord's Supper, baptism is one of those things that can divide the Christian community.

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 God has made with God's people?

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

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."

This humorous little aside lets us know that Paul thought it didn't matter who baptized whom.

It doesn't matter how much water we use when we baptize or if baptism even is done.

(You might be interested to know that at least one important Christian group, the Society of Friends, The Quakers do not baptize. I played golf with a Quaker once, and he suggested that they dry cleaned their members!)

Rituals are not important.

What matters is the message.

What matters is that baptism is a sign that a person has been forgiven and freed to live a new life in Christ Jesus.

When John the Baptist proclaimed the coming of the Messiah, he said that this Messiah wouldn't baptize with water. He would baptize his followers with the Holy Spirit.

And John the Baptist was right.
Jesus did not baptize with water.
But, he did baptize with the Holy Spirit.

Wherever he went, he changed lives through the power of God's love and forgiveness

Baptism is a not a sign of what we have done.
Baptism is a sign of what God has done.

You see, in the final analysis the important thing, the thing that saves us is not baptism.
The thing that saves us is the gospel, the Word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

THE POWER OF THE CROSS

Paul summarizes it this way:

It's not about fancy preaching.
It's not about baptism.

It's not about morality.
It's not about knowledge.

It's about the cross.

Our lesson for today tells us that the power of God is found in the message of the cross.

The self-giving love of God in Christ changes everything.

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 the self-sacrifice of the cross.

This is important because the cross is not just about what happened to Jesus long.

The cross is a practical guide to our life together as the people of God. Jesus told his disciples to deny themselves, to take up a cross and follow him.

How can we brag about belonging to a particular church ... how can we fawn over the charisma of a particular Christian leader ... when at the center of our faith is a cross?

Paul suggests that bragging about anyone or anything negates the message.

Bragging empties the cross of its power. (1 Corinthians 1:17)

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.
We need to get back to basics.

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.

And it brings a broken and divided people back together.

Amen.