

## **1 Corinthians 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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. 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." Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 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. 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.

Today's sermon requires a bit of an introduction. It won't be Jo who is talking to you; it will be Paul, the author of many of the letters found in our New Testament. Or at least what I imagine Paul to sound like. To that end, I have attempted to update Paul's language for a 21<sup>st</sup> century audience.

Also, since I am not Paul, I did my usual sermon preparation—reading, studying and praying. I do pull from scholars, and quotes are so noted in my text.

To the church in Greensboro, North Carolina, Guilford Park Presbyterian. Grace and peace to you in the name of the one who binds us together, Jesus our Christ. I give thanks to my God for you, that the faith has been kept, and that you all are followers of Christ Jesus.

Praise be to God that you have kept the faith in a world where people worship idols of money, fame, popularity, and success. I see you are feeding the hungry in your community, coming together for worship each week, and using your spiritual gifts to continue the work of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I find that your time has many similarities to my own, and some problems that plagued the church in Corinth seem to be present in many churches today. I addressed the issue of unity within the church as key to

their identity. It seems that many churches could stand to hear this message again themselves.

Let me remind you what I said to the Corinthians, “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.”

I can guess what you’re thinking. That the people of my day don’t have the differences you all have to contend with. I tell you that you are not as different as you think you are. The church in Corinth was filled with diverse people: rich and poor, Jew and Greek, slave and free. Of course there were divisions among them! But we don’t have to calmly accept those differences as the norm.

What does a poor slave have in common with a rich merchant? That Jesus lived and died for both of them equally. My desire is for you to live beyond the divisions of this world. You might remember in my letter to the Galatians I said, “As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave and free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:27-28).

I do not deny that these divisions exist, and that they have shaped your experiences and perceptions of the world. My own perceptions were shaped by my rigorous upholding of the law and persecuting the ones I now champion. But in my baptism, my old life was washed away and I became a new creation, living for Christ.

Is not my baptism the same as your baptism? We have all been washed clean and given new life, every single day. We are all children of God, brothers and sisters together, and equal in God's eyes.

Clearly there are many more divisions between churches today than there were in my time. There are so many more churches! I see Baptist and Methodist, Presbyterian and evangelical; black churches, white churches, Korean churches; small churches that hold on with 7 people, large churches with 700 people, mega churches with 7,000. Are there not enough divisions already?

So what is the unity I speak of? It is "Christ's work of reconciling the world and bringing peace."<sup>1</sup> It is standing before the cross and knowing it "as self-sacrifice, giving oneself up in response to and care for the other, the cross as bearing the burdens of others—not as self-denial and resignation, but in joy and thanksgiving."<sup>2</sup> It is following in Jesus' footsteps, not claiming

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<sup>1</sup> Sedgwick, Timothy. "1 Corinthians 1:10-18." *Feasting on the Word.*, Ed. Barbara Brown Taylor and David Bartlett

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

to have all the answers, but seeking to live and act as the one who was without sin. It is not easy.

In writing this letter to you, Guilford Park, I have learned the term, “purple church.” Have you heard it? The term refers to your political parties, red for Republicans and blue for Democrats. When these parties come together in one church the red and blue make purple. Perhaps if I was rewriting those verses of Galatians, instead of saying Jew or Greek, I should say Republican and Democrat?

Don’t get me wrong—I’m not saying I want this church (or any church) to be all of one party or another. I like this purple church. To me it indicates that these differences of “red” and “blue” can still come together and work for the One who is bigger than us all.

I lift up to you two Presbyterians like yourselves. The Rev. Scott Black Johnston from Fifth Avenue Presbyterian in New York and the Rev. Patrick O’Connor of First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens met with your new president this week. President Trump’s mother was an immigrant from Scotland, and attended the First Presbyterian Church in Jamaica, Queens, and President Trump himself was baptized there. Rev. Johnston’s parents were also immigrants from Scotland and members of that same church. Fifth

Avenue Presbyterian, where Rev. Johnston serves, is the closest Presbyterian church to Trump Tower in New York City.

These two pastors met with President Trump for about 20 minutes to tell him about their purple churches, to strengthen the thread that binds them together, and to pray together. This is an example of the unity in Christ that I pray for you.

You who have read my letter to the Corinthians may remember how I compare the church to the body of Christ. We are all individual parts, different parts with different gifts and functions, all necessary to the body, none more or less important. All parts are necessary for the body to be whole.

Let me give you a different image today, based on your hymn “Blest Be the Tie That Binds” that I alluded to in the story of the two pastors. Imagine the church as a tapestry. Each of us is a thread that is woven together to make this tapestry. Individually, each thread is small, its color easily overlooked, it can be broken with a firm pull. But as each thread is woven together, it becomes stronger by its closeness with its neighbor.

When many threads of one color are woven close together, there is visual unity. But a cloth of one color has only a simple story to tell. When many colors are woven together, there is contrast and interest. Each color

becomes vivid when juxtaposed next to another. With many colors, a complex story can be told.

Now I appeal to you, sisters and brothers, do not pick at the threads. When you worry a thread, it can break, and the tapestry begins to unravel. If this happens, take care to mend what was rent. Let the mending be done in many colors, so the result is more beautiful than before.

As you would say, give others the benefit of the doubt before you judge. When in disagreement, listen with your heart first and your mind last. There is no doubt that unity, even unity in our common Lord Jesus Christ, is difficult. The Corinthians never got it, but that's no reason not to keep trying and trying.