

"What's Being Said About Us?" 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Introduction

- I'm sure all of you have had this experience. I've got a shirt I wear a lot. I really like this shirt. One day I notice a thread hanging from the edge of the left sleeve. So what do I do? I pull. You'd think that after pulling about two feet worth of thread I'd have stopped. I'm not that bright. Two handfuls of thread later I still hadn't reached the end. It's to the point now I don't even have to pull; the shirt unravels all by itself. It's ruined.
 - Apostolic Faith Church
 - Christ Gospel Church
 - Church of the Nazarene
 - Free Methodist Church
 - Park Street Christian Church
 - St. Barnabas Episcopal Church
 - St. John Lutheran Church
 - First Assembly of God
 - First Baptist Church
 - Richland Christian Academy
 - St. John the Baptist Catholic Church
 - St. Mary's Catholic Church
 - Christ Lutheran
 - Ash Creek United Methodist
 - Peace United Methodist
 - Trinity United Methodist
 - Willow Valley United Methodist
 - Richland Center Fellowship
 - Seventh Day Adventist Church
 - Beulah Wesleyan Church
 - Grace Community Church
- Ephesians 4:5 *There is one body and one Spirit.* Something is not right. Not only here in Richland Center but worldwide. The [Center for the Study of Global Christianity](http://worldchristianity.org), part of Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary, conservatively lists over nine thousand Christian denominations in their database. In the United States alone they list six hundred and thirty-five.¹ Show Slide #1.
- Please hear me very clearly. I want to say right up front that I am in no way advocating a World Council of Churches kind of lowest common denominator ecumenism for the sake of unity. What churches believe matters very much. And throughout the church's history it has needed to separate and reform itself in order to preserve the integrity of the gospel. But the sad reality is that the majority of Christian denominations, especially the subgroups into which Protestantism has splintered into, are as much a result of personal rivalry, animosity, and a spirit of intolerance as they are serious doctrinal disagreements.² And that's not right.

¹ *Center for the Study of Global Christianity*, <http://worldchristianity.org/wcd/default.asp>

² Blomberg, p. 47, 50.

- What I am suggesting is that views on baptism, the Lord's Supper, spiritual gifts, and other doctrines where Christians have and continue to disagree "should not stand in the way of intensive networking and cooperation among a wide variety of churches in a given community or region for the larger purposes of the kingdom."³ Does this mean pushing aside so called divisive doctrines? Does it mean silence when it comes to those non-essential doctrines? Not at all. Just the opposite. We should be theologizing and dialoguing. We need to hold our theological distinctives as informed by scripture and we need to talk about them. That sharpens. That enriches the body of Christ. My point is that those differences should keep partnerships for the sake of the gospel from happening.
- But that's not happening in Richland Center. There is no unity among certain churches where there could be unity. And I'm as guilty as the next pastor. Honestly, I think God is disgusted by the disunity among the churches in this town. Think of the Church like a garment—like my shirt. To outsiders, what does our unraveled appearance say about the shirt? What do outsiders, those who aren't Christians, say about the garment's owner because of its appearance?
- What's really at stake with this matter of unity? More than we realize. New Testament scholar [Craig Blomberg](#) says, and I agree, "The disunity of the church of Jesus Christ remains one of the greatest scandals which compromises its witness today."⁴ Let me take it a step further.

Proposition

- **Disunity among Christians threatens the very fabric of the gospel itself**
- People nowadays won't become Christians because of Christian disunity. To add insult to injury, Christians leave churches because of factions and divisions and fights and the hurt is so deep, the wounds so painful, they never set foot in a church again. To our shame, that's the story of the Church in this city. This matter of unity; it's crucial. And we've got to see ourselves as part of the problem. Deep repentance in this area is needed. The disunity among churches in this town may be the single biggest thing holding back an influx of people into Christ's kingdom. People can't and won't believe the gospel because we've lost our credibility. "The only way unity can have an impact on a non-Christian world is for it to be visible."⁵
- In the most recent edition of the [EFCA Today](#) magazine there is an article by the President of the Free Church about unity. It's called *The Reputation of Your Church: Do Outsiders See a Healthy, Attractive Body of Christ?* I want you to read it. I've made copies for you in the foyer. Please take one. Listen to the opening paragraph. "Every local church has a reputation within the community that is a product of its relationships, its ministry priorities and its culture. The truth is, that reputation either makes God look good and His Son well-known, or it makes God look bad and His Son poorly known... Few things are more discouraging than the disunity, disharmony and sometimes all-out warfare we see in local churches. These are fueled by individuals who want their won way, by factions that choose not to submit themselves to the larger body, by gossip, and by relationships that lack love, patience, grace and forgiveness. These are symptoms of an unhealthy, sick church."⁶ What's

³ Blomberg, p. 49.

⁴ Blomberg, p. 47-8.

⁵ Blomberg, p. 47-8.

⁶ Bill Hamel, *The Reputation of Your Church*, [EFCA Today](#), Spring '07, p. 14-15.

our reputation? And is the reputation of Christ suffering because of our behavior? How are we contributing to the problem of disunity? **Disunity among Christians threatens the very fabric of the gospel itself.**

Transition

I think the passage we are going to look at this morning has some fabulous advice for us. Turn with me, if you haven't already done so, to 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.

- Listen to Paul's words again. *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

Transition

Because our own experience is of a church divided, because of the quarrels we've been a part of and witnessed, this passage naturally hits home. This passage describes the state of the church in this town. Show slide #2. Given our situation, what's the way forward? What does this passage suggest as a solution to the problem of disunity among Christians? Is it in structural unity? Do all churches need to meld into one? No.

Organizational Sentence

- **I think this passage suggests two corrections to the problem of Christian disunity**

Transition

Look at verses 10-12 for the [first correction](#).

Main Points

- What comes through very clearly in these verses is that the reputation of Christ's name is on the line when it comes to Christian unity. Paul makes a heartfelt plea on behalf of the name, the reputation of Christ, for the divisions in the Corinthian church to end. The way you relate to each other matters incredibly to the success of the gospel. The [first correction](#) is this. [How Christ is perceived by those outside the faith is determined by the behavior of those on the inside.](#) *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another.*
- What's intriguing about the situation in Corinth is that we have no idea as to the true nature of the division. It's all speculation. And I think, by divine Providence, the problem in Corinth is generic enough that we are able to see ourselves in these verses. So what do we know? Well we know that word travels to Paul as he writes from Ephesus via outsiders, those of Chloe's house, that there are divisions in the church. We have no idea who Chloe is

but chances are good that she wasn't part of the church in Corinth. We know it's not an organizational division. There is no church split. Paul writes to one church, the church of God in Corinth, verse 2. But we do know the division is real. There is a schism—a tear in the fabric of the church, as it says in verse 10. But it's not because of theology or doctrine. It's because of personality cults.⁷ Apparently people in the church were taking the side of their favorite teacher and basically saying "I'm on Paul's side" or "I'm for Apollos" or "Peter is my man" or "I'm in the Messiah group."⁸

- I think the application of this passage can be broadened to include all kinds of things that cause division, not just personality cults. But for the sake of argument, imagine a fictional parallel today in which church people so strongly flaunted the views of their favorite teacher that they neglected the ministry of the gospel. "I'm on John Piper's side." Or "Tony Evans has all the answers." You got all these little factions, the Tony Campolo faction, the Brian McLaren faction. That's what's going on in Corinth.
- And, in light of these tears, Paul makes an appeal. And this is what's important for us. It really doesn't matter the cause of the division; it's the behavior in response to one another and in front of outsiders that counts. Look at what Paul says. *I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another...* Literally, Paul says, *all of you speak the same way*. That doesn't mean giving up your opinion. It doesn't mean becoming a yes-man. It doesn't mean you can't speak your mind. Churches need divergent opinions and different perspectives. That's strengthening. Paul doesn't have in mind a church in which nobody's opinion counts. That's not what Paul is saying here. His point is that for the sake of outsiders watching; agree with each other that your status as brothers and sisters in Christ is more sacred than your pet issue. How often do we agree to disagree, go humphing off into our own corner and call it unity? That's not unity. That's a false peace. Speak your mind and then love each other from the heart. That's unity. *All of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought*. What's the goal? Perfect unity. "C'mon Paul. You've got to be kidding, right? Perfect unity? That's so unrealistic. That's a pipe dream. That's not going to happen." And yet, isn't that the standard Jesus set forth in the upper room? John 17:22-23 *I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me*. How Christ is perceived by those outside the faith is determined by the behavior of those on the inside.
- You see, we just don't take unity seriously enough. And the gospel suffers for it. Listen to what [Cyprian](#), the Bishop of Carthage, wrote about Christian unity around 250 AD. "He that holds not this unity of the Church, does he think that he holds the faith? He that strives against and resists the church, is he confident that he is in the Church? For the blessed apostle Paul also teaches this same thing and sets forth the sacrament of unity, saying, 'there is one body.'"⁹
- The goal is perfect unity. That word, perfect unity, is a "surgical term used for the setting of broken bones and it's used as a metaphor for 'resetting' broken relationships."¹⁰ It doesn't

⁷ Thistleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*.

⁸ Eugene Peterson, *The Message*, 1 Corinthians 1:11-12.

⁹ Bettenson, *Documents of the Christian Church*, 2nd ed., 1967, p. 71-74.

¹⁰ Garland, p. 43.

mean Christians will never disagree. It specifies what Christians are to do when they disagree. Reset the broken relationship to maintain the unity that is there in Christ. Do you know what we settle for? Have you ever seen a child who's broken a bone and it hasn't properly healed? That's the kind of unity we settle for. We just don't do the hard work of resetting the bone so that the unity we get is disfigured and marred and sad to look at.

- As I think about the state of the church in this city and its history of church splits leads me to believe that broken relationships have not been reset properly. I implore you, for the sake of Christ's reputation you've got to reset those relationships. I don't care how long it's been. If you are in any way holding a grudge, or are bitter or angry with someone in the body of Christ, whether in this church or out of it, you have an obligation to reset the relationship. The success of the gospel is at stake. Christ's reputation is on the line. People are forming opinions about Christ based upon your behavior. You've got to go to them and mend the relationship otherwise the body of Christ is disfigured, the reputation of Christ suffers, and the gospel is perceived by those on the outside to be a sham. If you take God's word seriously, you have only one recourse. No more personal rivalry. No more animosity. End it. Now. Today. This week. Talk to them before next Sunday. If you need to, repent. If it means humbling yourself, by all means that's the least you can do. Do everything in your power to reset the relationship. [How Christ is perceived by those outside the faith is determined by the behavior of those on the inside.](#)

Transition

Look at verses 13-17 for the [second correction](#). In light of the divisions in Corinth, the way forward is to [focus on the cross of Christ not human leaders](#).

- Listen. *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel--not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*
- The issue for Paul in these verses is not baptism. Baptism is a Pauline rabbit trail. You can almost hear Paul get sidetracked retracing his steps about who he might have baptized because he just can't believe the Corinthians have divided into these little cult followings—and that he—just by baptizing some might have contributed to their division. Paul's real concern has to do with the nature of the gospel itself. His point with verse 17, in saying that he came to preach the gospel, is not that preaching is more important than baptism. He's not lessening the significance of baptism. It's his way of distancing himself from those who may have been using baptism as a lightening rod issue by saying to them, "I'm not going to be a part of this. It's not about a personality people. It's not about so and so and their giftedness and the pastoral flavor of the month. If it is, you're missing the point. It's about the gospel. And I happen to preach this gospel." I think you can hear the pain in Paul's words as he reflects on how the gospel has been cheapened by their behavior. And so what does Paul do? He shoves the gospel back in front of them. He shoves it to the front and center where it belongs. The way out of disunity is to have the same mind, to be about the same thing, to focus on the same gospel, Christ crucified, not human leaders.

- By the way, there's your litmus test for whom to partner with in ministry. What's their understanding of the gospel? How do they define it? Is it the power of God for salvation of all who believe? What did the gospel accomplish? Did it redeem a sinful people and restore a fallen creation? What is the nature of the transaction behind this gospel? Is it Jesus Christ, our representative and substitute, who died on the cross as the perfect, and sufficient sacrifice for our sins? How is one saved by this gospel? Is it by faith alone through grace alone? If you unite, you unite over things of the gospel. If you divide, you divide because of perversions or dilutions to this gospel. But in all things, Paul is telling the Corinthians—don't be people centered—be gospel centered.
- Somehow I think, just maybe, the reason the churches in this community have splintered so much is because, to people in this city, the idea of church has become more about a personality than about the gospel of Jesus Christ. And when the personality lets you down, or hurts you, you go to church XYZ or you start new church ABC. It's not about a person. It's about the glorious message that on the cross Christ has died for sinners. I love how [Eugene Peterson](#) translates verse 17. *God didn't send me out to collect a following for myself, but to preach the Message of what he has done, collecting a following for him.* One of the ways you preserve the integrity of the gospel and maintain Christian unity is to focus on the cross of Christ not human leaders.
- Do you know what [Martin Luther](#) said when he heard the first Protestants were being called Lutherans? His response captures the gist of Paul's angst in these verses. Luther protested by saying, "What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone...How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name?"¹¹ If pastors and church leaders in this community had Luther's attitude, this—Christ is everything, gospel centered attitude, then this community would be a lot less divided. Would it mean a melding of churches? No. You can have organizational disunity and still have unity of thought and purpose. But it would mean that more people would end up receiving the message of the cross because we'll have regained some credibility in the eyes of outsiders.
- In light of this passage, I want to suggest three application questions. Think about what Paul says in these verses. Now listen to these questions and think about our church. One, do any divisions exist within our leadership or congregation that are compromising (or have the potential to compromise) the name of Jesus in the church and in the community? And if the answer is yes, please know that you can talk to me about those things. Two, is everything being done to keep the relationship of the church with our neighbors and community on a plane that will uphold the name of Christ? If not, what are those things? Let's fix it. And finally, what is our congregation doing to be proactive in upholding Christ within the community through a visible presence of service? How we answer these questions, to a large degree, will determine the extent of our witness for Christ in this community.

Conclusion

- Do you remember our last Sunday in the old building? Do you remember the repulsive smell from that skunk under the front steps? Disunity is like an odor. You live with it long enough; you get used to it and don't smell it anymore. But those passing by sure notice. Disunity among Christians stinks up the place. Whereas unity spreads everywhere the fragrant aroma

¹¹ Garland, p. 49.

of Christ. The question is not "what's being said about us?" but how do we smell? As we pray, close your eyes and think about that unusual image. As a congregation, how do we smell to the community around us?

- Heavenly Father, "when we gather as Your family, it's more than merely good, and better than just pleasant. Uniting in worship and purpose is what we have been made for...But that sweet unity is only a memory for many of us. We come to You as a broken household. We have offended and sinned against each other. Our petty differences have shattered pleasant friendships in the family of faith. Bring us together again. Train us in what is good. Restore what is pleasant."¹² John 17. *I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one: 23 I in them and you in me. May they be brought to complete unity to let the world know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. God,* "giving us Your glory without making us one is a dangerous thing. When we are divided by petty agendas, grudges, or hatreds, we become spectacles of foolish arrogance and religious superiority. But when we are fused as one in Your purpose, we can reflect Your glory to all the world. You have loved us and saved us that we may bear Your beauty. Make us one so that the world will know your glorious love."¹³

¹² Waymakers, *Seek God for the City 2007*, p. 18.

¹³ Waymakers, *Seek God for the City 2007*, p. 18.