

Perfectly United
1 Corinthians 1:10-17
October 22, 2017

Back in September our Elder Board met for our regular monthly meeting. Terry Hewitt had agreed to share a devotional. Because of some of the challenges in our church lately, he shared some verses from 1 Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 says, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 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.” 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

It was an impactful devotional that I really needed to hear. It was sobering and humbling. And, ever since that meeting, I’ve been thinking it would be good for our whole church family to hear it. So, today is our opportunity to think about what we just read in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. After some initial words of greeting to the church in Corinth and a reminder about God’s grace and faithfulness, Paul jumps right in. In 1 Corinthians 1:10 he says, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say¹ and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.”

Paul’s appeal stops me in my tracks. Wow! “PERFECTLY United?” That is a pretty high standard for any church. Nonetheless, this is his appeal. And his appeal goes out to a very immature and imperfect church. Later on, in 1 Corinthians we read about all kinds of difficult challenges that the believers in Corinth were facing: everything from divisions over leadership to terrible sexual immorality and lawsuits between fellow believers. 1 Corinthians also contains a rebuke for abusing the Lord’s Supper and questions about what is appropriate during worship services. One commentator summarizes Corinth as a church that was “torn apart by factions and spiritual immaturity.”² Corinth was far from the perfect church. And yet Paul appeals to them to be “PERFECTLY united.” It was filled with everyday human beings who were striving to live out their faith, TOGETHER. The EFCB is not a perfect church either. Nonetheless, this morning we will consider Paul’s appeal to be “Perfectly United!”

1. What was going on at the church in Corinth?

Paul writes “To the church of God in Corinth.” (1 Corinthians 1:2) And it is a church that he loves dearly. This is why he jumps right into his appeal so early on in the letter. He gets right down to his pressing concern: there is division among them. This division is not just a concern for one particular person, but rather a concern for the entire body of this local church. Later on, in this same letter, Paul will emphasize their unity expressed in the Lord’s Supper. In 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 he asks them, “Is not the cup of thanksgiving for which we give thanks a

¹ Consider Romans 15:5-6, “May the God who gives endurance and encouragement give you the same attitude of mind toward each other that Christ Jesus had, 6 so that **with one mind and one voice** you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

² See 2011 NIV Study Bible note, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 1919.

participation in the blood of Christ? And is not the bread that we break a participation in the body of Christ? 17 Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all share the one loaf.”³

But, what was going on at the church in Corinth? In 1 Corinthians 3:5-6, Paul gives us a clue, “What, after all, is Apollos? And what is Paul? Only servants, through whom you came to believe—as the Lord has assigned to each his task. 6 I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.” So, Paul and Apollos had both been a blessing to many of the believers in the Corinthian church. And, in that process, they had each gained some followers. But now, that individual support was breaking the Corinthian church into factions. Their individual popularity, or lack of it, was creating divisions that were unhealthy. 1 Corinthians 1:12 says it this way, “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.”

Now, Paul may have been a little flattered by hearing that some people liked him better. Being liked better than the Apostle Peter probably felt kind of good. But, then again, some people liked Apollos better than Paul, and Apollos wasn’t even an Apostle! Paul recognized that these kinds of sentiments, which may have been well-intentioned, were actually damaging the unity of the Corinthian church. Therefore, Paul rightly scolds them in v. 13, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?” “Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Well, of course they weren’t. So, whoever was rooting for Paul as the one to follow, was forced to do an attitude check. The church cannot become divided by a popularity contest; where we take sides against one another.⁴

Even if we think we have better grounds for why we follow one leader over against another leader, that’s not the point. I can think of reasons why Paul would have been a better one to follow than Cephas (aka Peter). But, I can also think of reasons why I might choose to follow Peter rather than Paul. Now, Apollos, I’m not sure why people were choosing to follow him because I don’t know as much about him. But when I read Acts 18, I learn how Apollos was a really smart guy, who knew his Bible really well and who spoke with great fervor and boldness. I can see why people might have chosen to follow him. But, any time we say things like “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos” as a statement of superiority or separation⁵, we end up separating ourselves from fellowship with other Christians. We end up planting seeds of division⁶ rather than embracing unity as those who are “in Christ” together.⁷ In light of these unhealthy divisions,

2. Paul appeals to the church in Corinth to be perfectly united.

Paul says in 1 Corinthians 1:10, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” The word “division” can have two different meanings in the Greek⁸: 1. A division can mean a tear that you might find in a garment. 2. It can also be the condition of conflicting aims or objectives; a dissension

³ And, in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul goes into great detail about how their church is one body, with many parts and even though they are all a different part, they are each part of the same body.

⁴ This becomes difficult in churches who practice congregational polity, because at some point we do need to discern and vote on who become our next leaders. For example, see Acts 1:23-26. See also the discussion in Richard Pratts Jr.’s commentary, *Holman NT Commentary: I & II Corinthians*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 2000, pp. 9 & 14.

⁵ It’s interesting that Paul also includes a 4th group, those who say “I follow Christ.” But, even this group isn’t commended for being in the right. Apparently, the context in which they were saying “I follow Christ” was one of prideful superiority and divisiveness, rather than one of trying to be helpful or bring healing. (Note 1 Corinthians 1:31)

⁶ Staton, Knofel, *First Corinthians*, Standard Publishing, Cincinnati, OH, 1987, p. 31

⁷ See 1 Corinthians 1:4-9.

⁸ (σχίσμα)

or schism.⁹ Therefore, Paul is appealing to them to not have any tears among them. He urges them not to allow any schisms to continue in the church.

Paul uses the phrase, “perfectly united” which can refer to mending the tears in a net. Here it means “to cause to be in a condition to function well.”¹⁰ Therefore, Paul wants them to put themselves in order, to mend any tears so that they might function well as a church. These differences over earthly leaders were clouding their focus on the gospel. They were no longer able to effectively serve Christ together.

Here’s what struck me most when Terry shared this devotional with us as elders: The divisions in the Corinthian church had nothing to do with salvation or any major Christian doctrine. Their quarreling was over who was their preferred leader. In light of our own church’s recent challenges, this, of course, really got my attention. We find out later on in Paul’s letter that their division was most likely due to pride and asserting their own human wisdom. 1 Corinthians 3:21a says, “So then, no more boasting about human leaders!” And, 1 Corinthians 4:6b says, “...Then you will not be puffed up in being a follower of one of us over against the other.” Effectively, after spending 3 chapters on this topic, Paul says, “Quit it. Stop arguing over who is the best leader. Let it go and get your focus back on the gospel.” That’s good advice. Good advice for me. And good advice for you. It’s good advice for our church.

3. What lessons can we learn from the church in Corinth?

1) We have to admit our struggles honestly. Paul doesn’t beat around the bush or sweep this under the rug. He calls it what it was. And then, he calls for humility and maturity to knock it off and get back to focusing on the gospel. Scandinavians aren’t always so good at this. We take MN nice too far when we fail to practice honesty in having hard conversations. We’d rather pretend like nothing is wrong; that things aren’t really that bad. It’s uncomfortable to think about words like tear and schism. None of us want that for our church, or for any church. All of us can pray and work together toward healing any divisions. None of us should allow things to fester because we know that these kinds of issues don’t go away on their own.

A 2nd lesson from Corinth is that **2) We have to work through our differences so that our church can heal.** As we become aware of schisms in our church, we must take steps to heal them. In the past few weeks and months, I’m very glad to know that a good number of us have chosen to have hard conversations with other people in our church. Some of us have meet 1 to 1 and others have met in small groups. We’ve done this because we love this church and we want to heal and find unity despite our differences. We’ll always have some differences but we can’t let those differences lead to division. Our appeal to others would be this, if you still need to have an honest conversation with someone in this church, please do it today.

Sometimes it means there is sin we need to confess. Sometimes it means giving an apology or accepting an apology. Sometimes it means holding someone accountable and following the counsel laid out in Matthew 18:15-17:

1. To talk just between the two of you.
2. Then, if necessary, to take 1 or 2 others along.
3. Then, if necessary, to take it to the church leadership. In our church, this is our Elders.

⁹ Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 981). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

¹⁰ (καταργίζω) Arndt, W., Danker, F. W., Bauer, W., & Gingrich, F. W. (2000). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature* (3rd ed., p. 526). Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Whatever our differences have been or whatever they may be in the years ahead, we need to move toward becoming perfectly united as a church. We do this in the name of the gospel!¹¹ For the sake of the gospel, because the Great Commission matters most to us. This call to unity is a pattern throughout the New Testament. The Lord does not go easy on us in this. We see it again in Ephesians 4:1-3, “As a prisoner for the Lord, then, I urge you to live a life worthy of the calling you have received. Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love. Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” This unity of the Spirit was not produced through us, our unity was produced “through the reconciling death of Christ. It is the heavy responsibility of Christians to KEEP that unity from being disturbed.”¹² We need to cherish and guard the unity that Jesus died to provide us with.¹³

Working through our differences, calls us to show grace towards each other every time, just as God treats us with His grace. And, it calls for each of us to do our best, to do our part to the fullest. Romans 12:17-18 urges us, “...Be careful to do what is right in the eyes of everyone. 18 If it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone.” As we prepare our hearts to share communion together, let’s make it our goal here at EFCB to become perfectly united. To find our way forward as Bros/Sis in Christ who find our common purpose in the gospel. Psalm 133:1 says, “How good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity!” Lord help us to humble ourselves. Help us to heal and mend from any tears or factions in our church. Grant us the spiritual maturity that we need to move ahead in a way that honors You. Amen.

This sermon was preached at the Evangelical Free Church of Bemidji
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¹¹ Pratt, Richard L., Jr., *Holman NT Commentary: I & II Corinthians*, Broadman & Holman Publishers, Nashville, TN, 2000, p. 3.

¹² *2011 NIV Study Bible*, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI, p. 1989.

¹³ See Ephesians 2:14-22.