

How to be united in Christ – 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Pastor Colin Rieke – January 22, 2017

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ My brothers, 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 into the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized into 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 words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

This is the day the Lord has made, let us rejoice and be glad in it,

Today is Championship Sunday. If you have any interest in football you know what I mean. If you don't have any interest in football, bear with me for a moment. It is Championship Sunday today, which means that four teams will be playing for the right to represent their Conference in the Superbowl which will be played two weeks from today. The Green Bay Packers will play the Atlanta Falcons for the right to represent the National Football Conference in the Superbowl, and the Pittsburgh Steelers will play the New England Patriots for the right to represent the American Football Conference in the Superbowl.

One of the reasons these teams are in the positions they are at not only is the talent represented on their rosters, but also the unity in purpose toward the same goal. There's nothing that tears a team apart more than distractions and divisions. When you are distracted, when a team is divided, there is less attention on the goal, there is less focus on the purpose. This can play out on the field or off the field. When a team is divided, the chances of that team succeeding drop tremendously.

This is certainly true on the sports field, but it's also true in business, it's also true for a nation, it's also true for a church. When you have all the employees for a company on the same page, that company has a better chance for success. When you have all the citizens of a nation on the same page, there's a better chance of moving forward. When you have all the members of a church on the same page, there's a better chance of spreading the gospel. It is this topic of unity that the apostle Paul addressed to the Corinthians this morning.

But unity itself isn't a guarantee of success. A football team may all think that Justin Bieber is the greatest singer of all time, but that doesn't help them win a football game. A company can be united in liking a particular football team, but that doesn't mean the company will make money. A church can be united behind a particular political party or leader, but that doesn't mean it will be a successful church. And so Paul encourages the Corinthians to be united, but to be united behind the right thing. And that

right thing is Christ, the Light of the World. For it is Christ that unites his Church. Paul also knew that this was easier said than done. And so in this section of Corinthians, Paul goes on to share with the Corinthians and us HOW TO BE UNITED IN CHRIST.

1. Humility to admit you're wrong
2. Wisdom to accept what's right

(1)

Last week, we read the opening words of the Apostle Paul's letter to the Corinthians. A comforting opening to a church that had more than its fair share of problems, a comforting reminder of who the Corinthians were. This letter he wrote to the Corinthians was a letter of encouragement, but it was also a letter designed to cause repentance, and a return to the truth of the gospel that he preached to them while he was there.

Our verses for this morning pick up from last week, and Paul dives in to a few of the things causing problems in the church at Corinth. He begins, **"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."** For Paul had heard about the divisions in the church that broke out after he left. He probably even had certain people in mind. These were divisions that were deeper than the division of what color carpet should be in the sanctuary. These were divisions of doctrine, these were divisions of teaching, and these divisions were ultimately caused by selfishness.

Paul writes, **"One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'"** Paul, the founder of the church in Corinth would have naturally attracted a certain following. Apollos was the pastor who followed Paul at Corinth and was well learned and sent by Paul. Members of the church in Corinth also would have come from Jerusalem where Peter played an important role, and we don't need to guess why people would say they wanted to follow Christ. But this was more than the Corinthians deciding who their favorite pastor was. These became distinct factions that was dividing the church and undermining the work Christ had called them to do. What exactly this looked like we don't know, but it was detrimental to have divisions in the church.

After stating the problem, Paul taught and reminded the Christians in Corinth about unity under God. He did that by saying, **"Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?"** Of course Christ is not divided, of course Paul wasn't crucified for you, of course you weren't baptized into the name of Paul. He says it even more clearly in his letter to the Ephesians where he writes, **"There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to one hope...one Lord, one faith, one baptism; one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."** Paul is saying that there should be one church, not multiple churches.

These divisions were caused by selfishness, they were caused by people not wanting to back down from their positions. Which is why HOW TO BE UNITED IN CHRIST starts with humility to admit you're wrong. Paul appealed to the Corinthians to be **"perfectly united in mind and thought."** This cannot happen, unless there's a good dose of humility. The humility to admit that you may not know everything,

the humility to listen to the other side of the story, but most of all the humility to admit you're wrong and follow Christ. This is what was missing in Corinth with all of the divisions dividing the church.

It even seems like the so-called "Christ party" may not have had this humility, since they seemed to be digging in their heels without care for others. HOW TO BE UNITED IN CHRIST is the same for us today. We all need a good dose of humility. But humility is rare to come by now, isn't it? We see a lack of humility in professional sports athletes, we see a lack of humility in our politicians, and we see a lack of humility in the people we hang out with on a day to day basis. But we also see a lack of humility in ourselves as well.

Humility to admit I'm wrong is something that I'm not very good at. Instead, what I am good at is digging myself into a deeper hole, doubling down on my errors, digging in my heels. There are plenty of times in my life when I would be well served with a good dose of humility, but nowhere is it more important than in God's Church. Humility to admit you're wrong is something that we all must do – from me as a pastor, to you as a worshiper. It's a humility to admit I'm wrong when God's Word convicts me of my sins, of my rebellion against God, instead of blaming it on someone else, instead of blaming it on my circumstances.

How many problems in the church could be solved with this good dose of humility? But not only would many problems in the church be solved with this humility, but we would save ourselves as well. For when we are humble, confess our sins and admit that we've done God wrong, he comes right back and assures us of our forgiveness in Christ. This is what it means to be united in mind and thought, this is HOW TO BE UNITED IN CHRIST.

(2)

But humility can only go so far. There are plenty of humble people in this world who don't have a clue as to where they're going. That's why this humility must be coupled with wisdom. For not only do you need humility to admit you're wrong, but you need wisdom to accept what's right. Paul addressed this in the last few verses of the section we consider this morning.

"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 Apostle Paul was asking the Corinthians not only to be humble, but to be wise. He was asking them to remember what he taught them while he was with him. In short, he reminded them about the gospel found in the cross of Christ and how everything pointed to that. This is true wisdom, which is not the wisdom of the world.

HOW TO BE UNITED IN CHRIST is about wisdom to accept what is right. Certainly this applies to a certain standard of morality – to accept that adultery, stealing, gossiping and coveting is wrong. This wisdom also applies when it comes to comparing Christianity with any other religion. For as much as the world's wisdom pushes "all paths lead to heaven," Christian wisdom promotes Christ as the only way, the only truth, the only life. This wisdom even further applies when it comes to evaluating the different teachings and divisions that are seen within the Christian church.

We would hope that BEING UNITED IN CHRIST would also mean we would be united with all believers, and there's plenty of people that think this way. But BEING UNITED WITH CHRIST actually can look exactly the opposite. Because when we're UNITED WITH CHRIST we have the wisdom to accept what's right, which also means pointing out what's wrong. This is where the rubber hits the road. You are well aware that there are more churches than just Grace Lutheran Church. What is it that keeps a division between these other churches and Grace? Is it because Grace and other WELS churches don't want to be united with churches like Vail Christian, or Revolution Church? Nothing could be further from the truth, in fact, I would love to be united with them. But this unity would need to be based on Christ and his teaching.

The Apostle Paul recognized this too as he wrote to the Christians in Rome, **"I urge you brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions, and put obstacles in your path that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them."** Jesus himself said as much before he ascended into heaven, **"Go into all the world and baptize all nations, teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."** And so the wisdom to accept what is right does mean diving into God's Word on a regular basis. The wisdom to accept what is right means we may have to point out what is wrong, or at very least lovingly question a particular belief of a church or an individual.

This is HOW TO BE UNITED WITH CHRIST, with the humility to admit you're wrong, and having the wisdom to accept what is right. The hymn that the vocalist sang last week, and we will continue to sing for the next several weeks as we work our way through 1 Corinthians puts it well, *"How good it is and how pleasant, to live in unity and peace, how good it is and how pleasant, to live together in one Lord."* May all our days be lived in service to this unity, and striving for this unity. Amen.