

“Schism”  
I Corinthians 1:10-17/Mark 9:38-41  
FPC/January 8, 2012  
By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Introduction

(Read as dialogue, preacher and worship assistant)

Apples.....and oranges. (pause)

In...out. Up...down. On...off. (pause)

Honda...or Toyota. Books... or IPad. PC...or Mac. (pause)

Steelers....BROWNS!!! (pause)

Claude Monet....Andy Warhol. Coffee...tea. Jazz...opera. (pause)

Republican...Democrat. 1%....the other 99%. (pause)

“Charlie Brown Christmas” .....”It’s a Wonderful Life”...of course.

Differences that become divisions. Preferences that become boundaries. Likes and dislikes that become personal. It is often a way of life that distorts community. It is a way of life that throughout history has found its way into the life of Christian communities and the church. It is more a way of life in the passing world than the way of life in the coming kingdom of God.

II. Text

Today we begin our new sermon series in I Corinthians. As Paul writes to his friends in Corinth, he writes to the church there he founded, which is being torn apart by petty rivalries, hardening boundaries, and growing egos.

Read I Corinthians 1:10-17.

III. Exegesis

Differences, factions, splits and schisms..... “my side and your side,” “I’m right and you’re wrong,” “for me or against me,” “my way or the highway”.....this type of thinking and way of living life has come to dominate the Christian community in Corinth. Paul will address a number of problems in this letter to the Corinthians, but this is the basic problem that is the foundation of the other problems. After founding the church in Corinth, Paul stayed 18 months and left the church in relative harmony. He has now heard that quarrels are tearing the church apart.

Perhaps we should not be surprised. Corinth was a prosperous, commercial center, in the crossroads of trade between Asia and Rome. The current city was only about 100 years old, re-founded by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE as a Roman colony.

Corinth was international, cosmopolitan.....a bit of New York City in the 19<sup>th</sup> C when immigrants came there from all over Europe to make a better life. So in the busy economy of Corinth there were people from different places, speaking different languages, believing different religions, practicing different trades, with different levels of education.....spread wide across the whole economic spectrum. Corinth was a very diverse place. And the Christian church there was an anomaly. In a stratified, international, cosmopolitan culture, people from all sorts of backgrounds, races and places became Christians.....in one church. It was amazing. But before long, it seems, the way of the culture was finding its way into the church; schisms.

And as often happens, the church splits were covered with a thin veneer of religion so they look righteous. In this case the divisions appeared around church leaders. Paul had heard the religious slogans that people were actually using in Corinth: “I belong to Paul,” “I belong to Cephas,” “I belong to Apollos,” and “I belong to Christ.” It is not known what was meant by the name of each leader and preacher, but perhaps it had a very contemporary “ring” to it:

The “Paul” group may have had 100% commitment to the founder of the church, and some of what he did and taught, as happens in churches when a pastor has been in a place a long time (i.e. “Well Dr. Paul didn’t do it that way”);

“Cephas” is the Aramaic name for Peter, so the Peter group may be the more conservative folks who are committed to Peter the Apostle, the first church in Jerusalem, and its Jewish-Christians roots;

The “Apollos” group may be the more progressives who rallied around the eloquent and knowledgeable preacher Apollos, who came to Corinth after Paul, and was instrumental in the more recent growth of the Corinthian church;

And the “I belong to Christ” group may have been the folks who in an exclusive and somewhat self-righteous way claimed allegiance to Christ alone (i.e. “I really belong to Christ.....but I’m not so sure about you.”)

As I was thinking about this text this week the Iowa caucuses were going on, so I got this vision of a similar thing happening in Corinth around these church leaders. I imagined people in different parts of the church with their signs and slogans, committed to their leader, and trying to draw others to their position. So I’ve done a crazy thing, and I’ve ask some folks in worship today to hold up a sign, and then we can get a feel of what it might be like. When I call out your leader, hold up your sign, and keep it up:

“I belong to Paul” (the traditionalists); “I belong to Cephas” (the conservatives); “I belong to Apollos” (the progressives); “I belong to Christ” (the religious). And, of course, I have my own: “I belong to Glenn.”

Look around. It feels crazy, doesn't it. (You can put the signs down now.) Crazy.....that's Paul's point as he asks a series of biting, rhetorical questions: "Has Christ been divided?" "Was Paul crucified for you?" "Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" The obvious answer is, "No, no, and no." The truth is the salvation, hope, life, mission, and worship of the church is depended on the one Lord, Jesus Christ, and his cross and resurrection. As Paul will say in Ephesians 4: "There is one body and one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph. 4:4-6). One!! The Christian vision of the future is a type of unity in the presence of God....heaven, one heaven, not different heavens.....and the closer we get to that, the closer we get to the heart of God, and the kingdom of God.

The problem is revealed in the first word in the slogans; "I ...I belong"...I...I...I." They have let pride, ego, and "it's all about me" shape the way of their faith. The Corinthians reflect more their culture than their salvation and the way of God. Divisions in the culture have created divisions in the church.....and the Corinthian Christians believe that is OK. And notice, there is no "we" in their slogans. There is no "us." There is no community. It's the difference between; "I live in my own little world," rather than "we" share in the kingdom of God together." Without humility, maturity and love their way of life together is ridiculous, and a scandal to the "good news" of Christian faith, and the mission of God for the world.

#### IV. Reflections

But after having said all of that, we know that unity among Christians is a difficult thing. Perhaps we have been part of some divisions and schisms. And certainly church history is a history of church splits, conflicts, violence, egos, pride and even wars. Paul himself was engaged in a heated conflict with some followers of Jesus who believed that salvation was dependent on faith and works, while Paul took the non-negotiable place of "faith alone." In the days of the early church there were many different beliefs, leaders and communities, and often those with the power labeled the others heretical. This past year I read Philip Jenkins new book, Jesus Wars, in which he describes the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> C church councils that fought over the nature of Jesus. And they were anything but holy, as bishops from powerful positions brought soldiers, clergy and gangster monks to these councils to threaten, beat and intimidate others, so to win their particular political and theological positions. Schism is not strong enough to describe what happened. In 1054CE the Orthodox Church split off. In the 16<sup>th</sup> C Protestant churches split off. And our own Presbyterian heritage over the past 500 years is filled with splits between Presbyterians. Even now our Presbyterian Church (USA) life is filled with quarrels, conflicts, factions and splits over issues around sexuality and ordination. And amidst all the changes going on in our communities, conflicts and

schisms are distorting the ministry and community of local churches. We know what Paul is talking about. It sounds very modern.

So, what's the answer? Answer is not relativism....."You believe what you what to believe, and I'll believe what I want to believe, and it's all equally valid." Not all beliefs are true. Not all beliefs are right. Not all beliefs are good. And there is a core to Christian faith; the Trinity, the incarnation, the resurrection, the message of the cross, and the way of love. Beliefs outside of these would be outside the boundaries of the Christian faith. And neither is uniformity the answer. You cannot force a "sameness" in belief, as belief is an act of freedom for all of us. From the very beginning there has not been a uniformity of belief and practice in Christianity.

And these questions of schisms and diversity are not just academic questions. These are questions for First Presbyterian Church, as we are a diverse community of followers of Jesus. I like that, and love sharing in this community with your...but it is not always easy. Amidst changes all around us, where do we find a unity of belief and practice necessary for community? And in a few weeks I'll be going down to Orlando on behalf of our Presbytery, with 1800 other Presbyterians from across the country, to learn about something that may be a new Presbyterian denomination or fellowship. This is important right now for a number of local Presbyterian churches, as they are troubled by the Presbyterian Church (USA), are pondering leaving, and are watching and waiting for Presbytery leadership. We know about schism and divisions.

So, what is the answer? I don't have an easy answer.....and if anyone did, I wouldn't believe it. But I do have at three things I think about, and try to practice, as a Christian living amidst schisms and the biblical call to unity.

The **first** is in the reading from Mark 9:38-41. In that text the disciple John is upset that someone who is not a disciple is casting out demons. He's outside their group with Jesus, and doing these works of power. John wants Jesus to stop him. But Jesus' response is instructive. He says, "Whoever is not against us, is for us." Jesus' point is that the mystery and purposes of God are sometimes achieved beyond our limited knowledge and understanding. God's purposes are also fulfilled by others who are not part of our group. That does not mean that everyone is serving God. But it does mean that some people outside our group are serving God. Therefore we need to be slow to label and judge, and quick to practice humility.

**Second**, as Paul mentions Christ and the cross in our text, I think that is about the way of salvation. There is one cross, one salvation, one Lord, one God, and one future hope. In Jesus Christ God has saved all people to be the one people of God.

Our job is to grow into what we already are; the people of God. It's like a couple that gets married. On their wedding day they make promises of faithfulness, and say "I do." But it will take the years that follow, the ups and downs, ins and outs, fights and forgiveness to grow into being a married couple. From the day of their marriage they have been married. But only down the road in years to come will they live into the fullness of what that means. And I think it is similar with Christian unity. In the cross and Christ we are already the one people of God. It's now about growing and maturing into the fullness of what that means.

And **third**, as Paul mentions Christ and the cross, I think it is also about a way of life. Christ and the cross model the Christian way of life. It's setting aside my way, my plans, and my ego, for God's way. It's forgiveness instead of grudges. It's humility instead of pride. It's sharing instead of taking. It's encouragement instead of gossip. It's putting down the signs that say "I belong to Paul," or "Peter," or "Glenn," and believing, really believing, "we belong to God." It's giving myself on behalf of someone else. It's love. It's trusting that God's way will change the world.

In the May 1987 edition of National Geographic photojournalist L. David Mech told the story of a pack of arctic wolves. One day the pack of wolves targeted some musk-oxen calves. As is their practice, as the wolves approached, the adult musk-oxen gathered in a circle with the calves in the middle, and the powerful rear hooves of the adults facing out. As the wolves circled and feinted a charge, the musk-oxen stood firm, and the calves were safe.

However, as the wolves continued to circle, the anxiety in the herd increased. Finally a single ox broke rank. Then others divided into groups of 2 and 3. The wolves then attacked, and after a few brief skirmishes, the adult musk-oxen fled. None of the calves survived.

There are real wolves that target communities of Christians. There is real anxiety and fear. And certainly the members of the herd are not perfect. But I believe we do better when we believe in, and work on, ways of being the one people of God.