

Following the Leader

the town church • 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 (Pg. 952) • 2/16/2020

This is one of my favorite times of year. We've gotten a little glimpse of spring—the days are getting a little longer, there's been some sun after months of rain, the trees are blooming...and we've got political yard signs! And in the news, we've got our primaries, trying to winnow down who will represent the party in the general election. And somehow along the way, we can become identified by who we endorse, whose team we are on. Our identity gets wrapped up in who we follow.

But this doesn't just happen in politics. As I've become more involved in running, I've seen this: what shoes do you wear? What gear do you use? Are you road vs. trail? What training philosophy do you follow? What runners do you admire? Who is your coach? There are whole websites, podcasts, an industry based on these differences. Pick your hobby, your sport and you'll be able to identify these same tendencies.

This also happens within the church, within the community of those who follow Jesus. This week I've had conversations about what authors I read, which preachers do I listen to, what conferences do I go to, who are some of my influences. Essentially: what team am I on—what camp am I a part of. That's just this week. There are bigger issues in play here as well: denominations, affiliations, networks, Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox.

What is at the heart of all of this? It is to define ourselves. Humanity has this incredible desire to define who we are, to assign our own identity, to be part of something that embraces who we are individually but connects to other people who are like we are. And one of the main ways we do this is by connecting ourselves to movements and leaders of movements who will strengthen and empower that identity, ultimately showing the superiority of our identity, our movement, our philosophy. We love it when our “us” is shown to be more powerful than their “them.”

It turns out this is not a new issue. As we've seen in our series through the NT letter 1 Corinthians, the church community in the city of Corinth was full of the same divisions we see in the culture—and the church—today. The Apostle Paul is calling the followers of Jesus to something better. In the passage we will read today, we will see 1) *A Call to Unity*, 2) *A Hindrance to Unity*, and 3) *The Way to Unity*. **1 Corinthians 1:10-17 (#952)**

A Call to Unity

As we've seen the past couple of weeks, the heart of this whole letter that we call 1 Corinthians is a call to unity. We could say that what the Apostle Paul says here in vs. 10 is a thesis or a summary of everything he's going to say in this entire letter: *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*

In this call to unity, Paul uses language and concepts that we will see throughout the letter. Let's walk through the different aspects of what he's calling us to as the people of Jesus.

First, he begins with an appeal. He could say "I command you"...but he doesn't. He appeals to them. He earnestly asks them. We can even translate this as "I beg of you..." What we need to see here is the heart of Paul as a leader. He *loves* the church community in Corinth and there is a tenderness to his words. While he is discouraged that there is division within them, he isn't approaching this as a job, as just a mess that he's got to clean up, to get the factory up and running again. At the same time, he *is* addressing the issues within their community. He doesn't just ignore the conflict and hope that it will go away. Often times dealing with conflict is one of the hardest parts of being a leader. The principle that we see in the good news of Jesus is that we should always speak the truth...but we should always speak the truth in love. Our tone matters.¹ This means that we must pray before we address difficult issues. This means that we must care more about the other *person* than we care about what that person is *doing*. So...because these are people that he loves, Paul *leads* from that place of love. This is the kind of servant leadership that we learn from Jesus and see throughout the NT.

Who is he making his appeal to? His *brothers and sisters*. This reminds us that the church is a family—and not a group of families but a single family. This relationship is the basis, the foundation of our unity. It's not about what works best or what looks best or what Paul prefers. It is our *identity* in Christ—we belong to him, his family, his body. He is present in us, his people. As Christ is one, so are we, his people. Now, we all know that being part of a family doesn't automatically mean we all get along and that everything goes smoothly. But we are still family. And that relationship is unbreakable—even when we want to break it.

Paul continues his call to unity by making his appeal *in the name of the Lord Jesus*—he does invoke authority—but it's Jesus' authority. Jesus is the Lord. Jesus is the Master. So Paul is not demanding his *own* way. He's not asking for absolute loyalty as the man who first brought the message of Jesus to Corinth. He's not pulling rank. Any authority that Paul has—that any leader in the church has—comes from Jesus.

What does this unity look like? That *all of you agree, that there be no divisions*. We need to take a moment to see what is happening here, because I think it is so essential for us to see. Notice that Paul doesn't take sides. His chief desire is for harmony and unity—not a victory for himself or some group within the church. He isn't looking for one particular point of view that everyone falls into line with. Craig Blomberg says that Paul isn't looking for Christian "cloning." Instead, he's calling them to cooperation, mutual concern for one another, consideration for the diversity within their community, self-sacrificial love, edification and encouragement.²

Real Christian unity isn't about finding the "right" way to do things and then make everyone conform to that standard. It's not about everyone singing the same note at the same time. Instead, the picture we get is one of harmony, of singing together in a way that is made up of different parts but following the same music.

This is how Paul concludes vs. 10, by calling us to this kind of harmonious unity, where we are *united in the same mind and the same judgment*. Again, it kind of sounds like we are being called to be some kind of drone, operating off some kind of program or algorithm. But it helps us to see the wording that Paul uses. When he calls the church to be united, the Greek word he uses is a surgical term for the resetting of a broken bone. He's calling them to something that is the way that it is supposed to be, something that is working properly. I've never broken a bone, but I do know that if you don't get the bone reset, that it will cause great pain and it will be dysfunctional until it is set right. This is the unity that Paul is looking for, a kind of perfection in design, where we have the same understanding, the same convictions, the same mission, the same cause. We are in alignment. Stephen Um says that: *He's calling them to adjust their opinions and worldviews to be in line with the gospel that they have received. The upside-down content of the gospel is supposed to shape their mental framework, their "mind," and their worldview. And out of that mental framework they are to arrive at judgments and opinions that are in line with the truth of the gospel.*³ To put it more simply, Mark Taylor says that we are to...*take up a perspective that is conditioned by the cross.*⁴

This is the appeal, the call to unity. Next, we see a hindrance to unity.

A Hindrance to Unity

Here we see why Paul is making this appeal in the first place. He's received some letters in the past, he knows there is tension in the church community. But then he learned some new information: *[11] For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. A woman named Chloe, who was probably from Corinth had sent some of her slaves or business associates to Paul in the city of Ephesus to let him know just how bad things had gotten. It's not just "quarreling,"...that English translation is probably too weak to convey the depth of division happening in the church community. There is bitter conflict happening. What is the problem? [12] What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ."*

Each of these names are familiar to us. Paul obviously planted the church in Corinth. Apollos was another early church leader who is mentioned in Acts 18-19 and whom we know went to the city of Corinth to help instruct their community. Cephas is the Apostle Peter, who may have visited the city and church of Corinth at some point. And of course, Jesus. There is no theological difference between these people. Paul, Apollos, and Peter all preach the same gospel message about Jesus.

There is no division between them. They weren't planting separate churches with different missions. They weren't recruiting followers for themselves. So then, what is the problem?

The problem is Corinth itself. The culture of Corinth highly valued methods of public speaking, rhetoric & philosophy to the point that they were sharply divided as a city. This was common in the Greco-Roman culture, but Corinth was a city especially known for such behavior. The Greek historian & philosopher Dio Chrysostom give a description of Corinth at the time of Diogenes: *That was the time, too, when one could hear crowds of wretched Sophists around Poseidon's temple shouting & reviling one another, their disciples, as they were called, fighting with one another, many writers reading aloud their stupid works, many poets reciting their poems while others applauded them...& peddlers not a few peddling whatever they happened to have.*⁵

Rather than being distinct from the culture around them, the church community in Corinth brought this same mindset into the family of Jesus. They were rallying around individual leaders whom they held to be superior to others. They were picking a team. As Brian Rosner says: *Such a personality-focused approach to leadership, with its emphasis on the high rank of the leader and the status conferred on the follower, betrays the influence of Corinthian society. The Corinthians made too much of specific leaders and specific styles of leadership.*⁶

We are no different today in the church. One of the most discouraging and difficult aspects of being a leader in the church is how easily we connect ourselves to influential leaders and "camps" or "streams." We name drop. This has been a tendency I have often struggled with, sometimes been completely blind to. I can't tell you how many books I have bought or haven't bought based on the endorsements on the back. I have decided which conferences to go to based on who was speaking. Even Acts 29, the church planting network that we are part of, has struggled with this particular issue of being aligned with personalities and leaders. And now that I have been in some form of ministry for 20 years, I can't tell you how many times I have been let down by those personalities, those leaders. Many of them have disqualified themselves from ministry, have burned out, have started to believe their own press and have led with a heavy hand. One pastor I used to follow closely, whom I spent time with, whose books I have read...when he was confronted by other leaders about his arrogant and verbally abusive behavior, allegedly said "I am the brand." Just a couple of weeks ago, the CEO of Acts 29, our network, was removed from his position by the board for heavy-handed spiritually abusive leadership in his church & within the Acts29 staff. And there will be more disappointments.

Paul knew this. He saw the division and he knew where it would lead: to a splintering of the church and to its ultimate harm. And so he calls the Corinthians back by asking them 3 questions:

[13] Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

The answer to all 3 questions is of course “NO!” It is crazy to give our loyalty & devotion to individual teachers & leaders in the church because:

- a) there is only one Savior
- b) Paul wasn't the one crucified and he isn't the basis for the salvation of any person. The same is true of any leader we might align ourselves with.
- c) We are baptized in the name of Jesus, not in the name of the leader who is baptizing us.

When we are baptized, it is not an expression of what earthly leader we are following. It's a declaration that we have entered the kingdom of God through the person and work of *Jesus*. The person who does the baptizing doesn't really matter in the long run. People who got baptized by Billy Graham don't hold special status. It was precisely this reason that Paul avoided baptizing people. *[14] I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, [15] so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.* He was hoping to avoid the very problem that they are in.

Becoming enamored with teachers and leaders in the church is a dangerous temptation for us as we follow Jesus. As we've seen here in Corinth, it is a hindrance to unity. *Finally, we see **the way to unity**.*

The Way to Unity

From here through the end of chapter 4, the Apostle Paul directs the church in Corinth to the way to unity. But here in vs. 17, we get the first taste of it: *For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

What is our mission? What is our calling? It isn't to create followers of *us*. It's to declare and display the good news of Jesus, to make disciples who delight in Jesus, who *follow him*. When we turn that mission into a personality cult, into something impressive and admirable, we remove the very thing that makes it distinct. The gospel of Jesus isn't impressive. The cross isn't pretty. The way of Jesus isn't easy and it won't make you famous. But it is the power of God. And if we want to live and operate from that place of authentic kingdom power, we have to give up on our desire to be impressive. We have to embrace a mission of saying, as John the Baptist did: *He must increase, I must decrease.*

In the film *Miracle*, college hockey coach Herb Brooks (Kurt Russell) is hired to helm the 1980 U.S. men's Olympic hockey team. Brooks was a different kind of coach for the US; he brought a unique and brash style to the ice. He assembled a team of hot-headed college all-stars from all over the country, many of whom had already formed rivalries in college.

After a fight between some of the player in an early practice, he asks them to introduce themselves and say where they are from, who they play for. I'm from St. Paul Minnesota, I play for the University of Minnesota. I'm from Charlestown, Mass. Boston University. North Dakota, Wisconsin, all over. After they are humiliated in an early exhibition match, Brooks forces the team to stay on the ice and run drills back and forth. At one point he says: *When you pull on that jersey, the name on the front is...a lot more important than the one on the back.* After hours of drills, the team is utterly exhausted. As they line up once again, suddenly one of the player yells: Mike Eruzione: Mike Eruzione! Winthrop, Massachusetts!
Herb Brooks: Who do you play for?
Mike Eruzione: I play for the United States of America!⁷

It's a great movie moment. Why? Because it symbolized the kind of teamwork, of unity, that it was going to take to take to beat the much more talented Russian hockey team. But in the 1980 Winter Olympics in Lake Placid, NY, a miracle happened: the USA beat Russia and went on to win the gold medal.

The US hockey team needed Coach Brooks to show them the way to unity. In the same way, as we follow Jesus, we need to be shown the way to unity. In a sense, we need to be called back—again and again—to the name on the front of our jerseys, not the name on the back. The way to unity in the church is to focus on Jesus, who he is and what he has done for us. And as we decrease, as he increases, we will live and walk in the power of gospel unity. We will be an incredibly effective display of the good news of Jesus. Let's walk together as a church family in the way of Jesus and show the world what real power looks like.

- 1 Um, S. T. (2015). 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross. (R. K. Hughes, Ed.) (p. 24). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- 2 Blomberg, *1 Corinthians (NIVAC)*, 45
- 3 Um, S. T. (2015). 1 Corinthians: The Word of the Cross. (R. K. Hughes, Ed.) (p. 25). Wheaton, IL: Crossway.
- 4 Taylor, *1 Corinthians (NAC)*, 52
- 5 Witherington, B., III. (1995). Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians (pp. 100–101). Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- 6 Ciampa, R. E., & Rosner, B. S. (2010). The First Letter to the Corinthians (pp. 77–78). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- 7 All *Miracle* quotes from https://www.quotes.net/movies/miracle_7558, accessed 2/15/2020