

## **DIVISIONS**

### **1 Corinthians 1:10-18**

Comedian Emo Phillips told an interesting story some time back. It is a fictitious story of course, but makes a strong point worthy of our consideration.

I was walking across a bridge one day and I saw a man standing on the edge of the bridge about to jump off. So I ran over and said, "Stop! Don't do it!" He said, "Why shouldn't I?" I said, "Well, there's so much to live for!" He said, "Like what?"

I said, "Well, are you religious or atheist?" He said, "Religious." I said, "Me too! Are you Christian or Buddhist?" He said, "Christian." I said, "Me too! Are you Episcopalian or Baptist?" He said, "Baptist!" I said, "Wow! Me too! Are you Baptist Church of God or Baptist Church of the Lord?" He said, "Baptist Church of God."

I said, "Me too! Are you Original Baptist Church of God or are you Reformed Baptist Church of God?" He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God!" I said, "Me too! Are you Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1879, or Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915?"

He said, "Reformed Baptist Church of God, Reformation of 1915!" At that I said, "Die, heretic scum!" and pushed him off the bridge.

Lutherans, Episcopalians, Roman Catholics, Assemblies of God, Presbyterian, Evangelical Free, Christian and Missionary Alliance, Christian Reformed, Disciples of Christ, Methodist, Baptist, Russian and Greek Orthodox. ... Plus the Alphabet soup. LCMS, ELCA, WELS, OPC, PCA, PCUSA, UMC. Etc. Etc.

Listen to all the different choices. Amazing, isn't it? One can't help but wonder how we can have so many divisions in Christendom and still read St. Paul's poignant words in our text about unity. Instead of "I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas." is it "I follow Luther, I follow Calvin. I follow Zwingli, I follow Wesley?"

"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." says St. Paul. Indeed, Rodney King's oft quoted question seems to be an important one in the Christian church, "Can't we all get along?"

Certainly it is quite clear from the Scriptures that all this division is a bit of a sad thing ~ that God would desire a unity of His Church that would give it a powerful impact upon the world. Imagine, if Christians weren't so busy building their own different places of worship with different logos and architectural designs and denominational names ~ imagine if we all were working together and investing all our resources and all our efforts in reaching the non-Christian world with the Gospel of Jesus Christ. How much more we could accomplish with a united effort.

Listen to the words of "Onward Christian Soldiers," verse 2: "Like a mighty army, moves the Church of God: Brothers, we are treading Where the Saints have trod. We are not divided, All one body we, One in hope and doctrine, One in Charity. Onward Christian soldiers, Marching as to war, With the cross of Jesus Going on before."

Sounds fantastic, doesn't it? But instead, each church body has its own headquarters, its own administrative staffs, its own seminaries, colleges, buildings and schools. Some so strikingly close to one another that it is almost unbelievable. In one town named New Britain, Connecticut, for instance, I can remember two Lutheran Churches right next door to each other ~ First Lutheran ELCA, the other St. Matthew's Lutheran LCMS. Their services were at exactly the same time. So, if you were disappointed with the way the sermon was going in one congregation, you could literally walk 100 feet and hear another one. In fact, I sometimes wondered if that's why First Lutheran was named First Lutheran --"First I'll go to First, and then I'll go to St. Matthews!" Perhaps they should stagger their service by an hour so that you could catch both sermons in one day.

Seriously, though, disunity has become so common to us that it hardly disappoints us anymore. We don't grieve over it like we should. Instead, we've adapted to it so much, that the term "church-shopping" has become quite common. And in this area, where we are so replete with Lutheran Churches, it's like going to Baskin-Robbins. What flavor do you want? Big, little, contemporary, traditional, Gothic, modern, long, short, — and so on and so on. Next thing you know we'll have Country Western, Jazz, Folk and Rap Churches.

But our text for today should make us take a second glance and desire unity again. It should make us want to see our Church Body and Christian Church Bodies throughout the world, continue in dialogue with one another to try and achieve agreement ~ to try and iron out our differences ~ to try and build bridges and combine efforts and become a singular voice for Christ in the midst of diversity and division. We should be praying for unity, and doing what we can, on an individual level, to break down the walls and barriers that we erect over inconsequential issues.

Far too often we have said, "Let them have their corner and us have ours." and not been willing to learn about our differences and plow through the differing traditions to find the real heart of what hurdles we really have between us.

Yes, we should value unity.

At the same time, though, we must also recognize that our Lord Jesus and St. Paul and the rest of the Scriptures do not call us to give in and compromise matters of significance and importance for the sake of unity. It is easy in our relativistic age to say that no differences are important --that truth is a relative thing -- that everyone has their own brand of truth and that, in the end, we're all just different facets of one beautiful diamond. It's politically correct. It makes everybody happy.

But that does not honor our Lord. As St. Paul says to Timothy: "Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage~with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths." We are called to preach the Word of God in its fullness and in its truth, not to come up with some "lowest common denominator" faith that makes everyone happy and says almost nothing.

And while St. Paul certainly talks about unity, he also declares that his people should "watch out" for those who teach contrary to the message of the apostles. "Keep away from them." he says. "For such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites. By smooth talk and flattery they deceive the minds of naive people."

Yes, unity is important ~ but so is truth.

Back when I was in college, I vividly remember one of my professors driving the point home as he talked with a one of my fellow students. The student approached him in a mocking way about the deep questions about Christian doctrine. He made fun of different denominations and said, "My only doctrine is Jesus."

"That's great/the professor said to him. But let me ask you a few questions: "Do you believe that it's an important thing that Jesus really rose from the dead?"

"Absolutely," said my friend.

"Not all those who claim Jesus as their Savior believe that," said the professor. "Is that a teaching you're willing to compromise?"

"No!" said my friend emphatically.

"Well, that's a doctrine. And there's others I bet you would think are important." said the instructor. "Do you believe that Jesus was the Son of God -- that He died on the cross for your forgiveness?"

My friends head nodded.

" Not everybody does, who call Jesus their Lord. -- Do you believe that the Bible is the word of God and is the cornerstone of our hope in Christ — that it is inspired and inerrant and accurately teaches us what we need to know to come into a relationship with the living God.

"Yes." said my friend, clearly beginning to have a change of heart.

"Do you believe that God created the world - that comes to you through the waters of life in Holy Baptism - that faith is a gift that we can't earn or deserve — that salvation can't be bought and sold ~ that in Holy Communion Jesus comes to offer you forgiveness? You see what I mean? You can say your only doctrine is Jesus, but there's a lot more invested in those words than you think."

My friend walked away feeling a lot better about being at a denominational school -- and it wasn't long before he embarked on a journey toward the pastoral ministry within the Lutheran Church -Missouri Synod.

You see, my friends, Jesus came to break down barriers -- to knock down the walls that exist between us and God and us and our fellow man. By carrying our sins upon His own body, He rescued us from the dominion of darkness and opened up the kingdom of heaven so that we might be one family even as He is One Lord.

Unity under His Headship is something we should not only desire ~ but strive for and work at and attain to. For He wants us to be the mighty army that brings His Good News of salvation to all the world. And the more the Spirit moves us away from petty arguments over inconsequential matters the more powerful we become. We stop spinning our wheels in the dirt. I am so glad when I hear that God is breaking down artificial barriers that once existed between races, between foreigners, between tribes. I am so glad to hear when congregations heal divisions between two factions -- when healing takes place and mission zeal is renewed.

That is the work of God. But it is also the work of God to maintain the truth and purity of His Word so that we aspire unto something real --something substantial -- something that we can count on.

To do any less for the sake of a paper unity is to dilute the word of God unto nothing — to pour it within the great vast expanse of human opinion and human desires and watch it dissipate to nothing. It is to dishonor the work of Christ and leave behind a "feel-good" faith of no consequence.

But thanks be to God that, under His Headship, the body of Christ can come together. "In Him we live and move and have our being." said St. Peter. And indeed, His Holy Spirit is the One who will help us knock down the barriers of inconsequence and attain unto the unity He desires.

Please pray for your Church -- for its leaders and teachers and theologians. That God might mightily move in us all to draw closer to one another and to be faithful to the truth.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.