

Working it Out wk2: Understand Unity
Jan. 14, 2024

“A house divided against itself, cannot stand.” Those are the opening words to a speech known as the “House Divided Speech,” that Abraham Lincoln gave in 1858 in what would be his failed Senate campaign.

Lincoln was talking about government and the struggle over slavery, but he was quoting Jesus from Mark 3:25. Jesus had been accused of driving out demons by the power of Satan. He pointed out the foolishness of that argument with His wisdom that no kingdom divided against itself could stand.

Jesus would demonstrate how much unity mattered to him in John 17, at the close of what we know as the Last Supper, he prays for the unity of his followers. He says that our unity will be a testimony to the world that God had sent him and that God loves us.

That unity has been difficult to come by from the beginning, which we will see in the opening of this letter to the Corinthian church. I mentioned last week that we are going to spend 6 weeks now and then more later walking through the Book of 1 Corinthians because it is a book that is incredibly relevant and instructive for us today.

This church had a lot of problems, the problem of division was a major one and he addresses it throughout the letter; there are also problems with how they were conducting themselves in worship -those that wanted to feature everyone and their spiritual gifts all at the same time – making the meetings chaotic; those who were making pigs of themselves at the Lord’s Supper and those who were getting drunk at the service; there was confusion and tension over gender roles and sexual practices and many more.

Yet, we need to remember the affection and encouragement that Paul and Sosthenes demonstrate towards this church, not only in the introduction, but throughout. These people and church with all the problems, were God’s people and dearly loved by Him and other leaders of the early church.

Here's how Paul addresses them to begin – **1 Corinthians 1:4-9 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵ For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge— ⁶ God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷ Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸ He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹ God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.**

With all the problems he is going to address, Paul looks at this church with thanks and amazement that God is at work among them, giving them all they need for success in the faith; and for them to be seen as blameless – think of it – blameless in spite of some of the bickering and sin we are going to look at. They are the body of Christ, the family of God and he sees beauty in the church; even as he works to correct it. And he is going to start with addressing the division that threatened the church.

1 Corinthians 1:10-12 I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] 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^[b]"; still another, "I follow Christ."

Sometimes when we talk about unity, we confuse what that actually means. We see these words about being perfectly united in mind and thought and we think that means that we have to agree on every little thing. Anytime you have more than two people involved in any type of decision making, you are going to have some disagreements and you are going to have some conflict and problems.

To understand the kind of unity that Paul is talking about and that I believe Jesus prayed for us to have, we need to agree on the Primacy and Centrality of the Gospel. We have to agree that the main thing, our foundation and reason for existence lays in the message of the cross of Christ. We will spend more time on

this next week because Paul is going to make an impassioned argument about the cross defeating the wisdom of this world.

But our story, our foundation is that Jesus, the Son of God, came and lived a sinless life among us; revealing what God is like. He took on the punishment for our sin on the cross and dying, defeated death by raising to life and he offers us his life. There are good reasons to drill down on good theology and doctrine, but when we come to something we might disagree on – we need to yield to and fall at the foot of the cross until we come to perfect knowledge with the resurrected Jesus – we strive for unity on that central foundation.

There are times where it may be necessary to leave a church or a church may need to disassociate from a denomination; a parting of the ways. But those should be heavy decisions; it should be over issues that distort that Primacy of the Gospel.

If I'm being honest, one of the most discouraging things to me over the last few years was how quickly people left churches or made what really should be secondary issues tests of fellowship or worse.

People who had deep roots in churches and in the faith became hostile about any number of these kinds of issues. Did you speak up about social issues enough? Did you speak too much about social issues? The approach to mask or not mask; to meet or move online; to promote or denounce vaccines. It fractured churches, it drove ministers away from ministry.

And ministers were certainly not immune to doing the very same thing as some chastised who would take a different approach than they had.

It was ugly and discouraging – and that fractured unity resembled what was going on around the world, with little difference between followers of Christ and those who don't.

I was glad that we didn't experience too much of that, but we weren't immune. And it's one of the reasons that I'm encouraging you to join me in prayer on

Tuesdays through the election, because there will be plenty of temptation to divide and be whipped up into anxiety or anger -when we also have an opportunity to be a witness to the world of where our hope comes from and what unites us.

I heard JD Grear talking about unity and some of our confusion on what unity is recently and I thought he explained it really well. I want to share some of what I learned from him.

Unity is not Uniformity. Churches in different locations are not required to be franchises that look and function exactly the same. We will have different things that we excel in service and interests, and opportunity.

Unity is not Relativism. Relativism says that everybody is just a little bit right, so we don't take a stand on anything.

Unity is not Abandoning the Faith. There have been various attempts at unity movements throughout the history of the church. Northside is actually the product of something called the Restoration Movement, that thought all the divisions and denominations were a violation of the call and prayer of Jesus. Yet - that movement fractured 3 ways.

Some of the more recent calls for unity have focused on peace and humanity while not taking their stand on the Gospel. One of the things that I so appreciated about my friendship/relationship with Tony Johnson at First Baptist in Liberty was that in our pursuit of relationship, we each-but particularly Tony made sure that we lined up enough doctrinally to work together. It wasn't unity for unity sake- it was Gospel unity. We have some theological differences, but we come together at the cross.

The church in Corinth had multiple sources of division, which we will see throughout the letter, but the one that Paul addresses right off the bat is a form of Tribalism that was threatening the church.

It dealt with who their preferred pastor or preacher or leader was. There was a Paul faction, an Apollos faction, a Cephas or Peter faction, and those that claimed to be above it all – the Christ faction.

These allegiances don't seem to be supported by any of those leaders. It appears that the allegiance was built on a combination of preference and a misguided loyalty to whoever baptized them.

Paul, who started the church, might have been a dull preacher. He went on forever. There's an event in Acts where he goes on for hours and a guy falls asleep and falls out a window. Paul himself says in chapter 2 that he wasn't eloquent-but he was a deep theologian

Apollos was apparently a gifted speaker. We read about him coming to Corinth near the end of Acts 18. He was a great preacher, but his theology was apparently a little thin. Priscilla and Aquila pull him aside to correct some of his teaching – which by the way is a much better approach than writing social media articles blasting him as shallow.

Peter was one who had spent time with Jesus. He sometimes struggled with the tension of Jewish traditions and law and the acceptance of the Gentiles.

That last group was the one that thought they were above it all – the “I follow Christ” group. It's proof that the Jesus juke has been around since the beginning of the church. “Jesus Juke” is a term that writer Jon Acuff coined. It refers to like an athlete in a game starts one way, and changes direction shaking off defenders...but doing it in a conversation. Something like when someone says, “I can't believe I binged 6 hours of that show” -the Jesus juker says something like – “Imagine if you had spent that 6 hours in prayer.”

Unfortunately, it is still a common thing to have divisions based on popular or favorite Bible teachers and preachers. There is a group that wants more John MacArthur and John Piper – 1st & 2nd John of our time. Super deep, verse by verse – people that think that's the only way to study.

Those that love Andy Stanley and Loui Giglio – both are amazing communicators – but there are groups that look down and despise them because of their approach – or think they are shallow (certainly not taking the Aquila and Priscilla approach to Apollos).

Others are in a Beth Moore or Russell Moore camp – and there’s a group that rejects them.

And these divisions over Christian celebrity can be really ugly and don’t reflect the witness that Jesus has called us to. It was a problem in Corinth-it’s a problem now.

Paul reveals his source, Chloe- don’t know anything about her other than the people who were in this church knew who she was; and he strongly reminds them that not only are the divisions hurtful, they dismiss the Primacy of Christ. So he reminds them.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17 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.

The body of Christ is not meant to be divided. The cross is sufficient for all. The only thing that can save any of us is what Christ accomplished through his death burial and resurrection. He calls us to follow him, being baptized in his name and then to be obedient to his teaching. When you are baptized its not in the name of the one who does the baptizing – the one who does the baptizing is not really important. Paul isn’t minimizing baptism, he will make arguments supporting that throughout his writings – but he is making the case that is the preaching of the word of God that changes lives and brings people to take that step of commitment to Jesus.

That's what Paul is driving at – and I love this part, and it's clearly a letter he's dictating. I'm glad I didn't baptize any of you...well except Crispus and Gaius – oh and yeah I remember Stephanas...but it's cloudy after that.

Your favorite teacher or preacher can be your favorite teacher or preacher. They can help your spiritual journey, but they did not die for you and their teaching does not save you.

I should have had you read chapter 3 this week as well, because Paul is going to come back to this same theme and argument and hit it one more time for clarity sake.

1 Corinthians 3:5-9 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. ⁷ So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. ⁸ The one who plants and the one who waters have one purpose, and they will each be rewarded according to their own labor. ⁹ For we are co-workers in God's service; you are God's field, God's building.

And he ends with this last thought:

1 Corinthians 3:21-23 So then, no more boasting about human leaders! All things are yours, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas^[c] or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, ²³ and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God.

Paul is going to talk about other divisions in other parts of this letter – specifically chapter 6 which we will get to.

Where we need to land today is a reaffirming that secondary issues need to stay secondary – there will be heavier issues coming that we will have to make stands on – but recognize that most of what we hold to so tightly and divide over is a disservice to the body of Christ and the witness we are called to give. Let's align behind the Supremacy and Primacy of Christ!

Homework – read the second half of chapter 1 and chapter 2 throughout this week.

Asking God for the faith to embrace His wisdom.