

# UNITY IN CHRIST

## 1 Corinthians 1:10-18

*Preached by Carolyn Grohman at North Presbyterian Church, Williamsville  
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[before reading Scripture]: Ordinarily I read the Scripture lesson at the beginning of the sermon, but today I'm going to read it a bit later.

Many of you are aware of conflicts in our denomination. For example, the question of whether to ordain practicing gays and lesbians as ministers, elders, and deacons; the divisiveness between conservative groups such as the Confessing Church Movement and New Wineskins and the more liberal groups such as the Covenant Network; the court battles over whether the conservative congregations that want to leave our denomination can take their buildings with them.

You also know that there are differences of opinion in this congregation. Should the American flag be in the sanctuary, or not? Should Sunday School be held during worship, or during a dedicated hour for education? Should the turkey baskets be presented during a parade at the beginning of worship, or during the offering with our other gifts? Should the church move forward with the accessibility project, or not? Should the budget be balanced by cutting staff and programs, or by finding additional sources of income? These are some of the issues your Session has been dealing with over the past year. And there are strongly-held opinions on both sides of every issue. Any one of these issues could erupt into open conflict at any time.

In conflicted times, people often say things like: "I wish we could go back to the time of Jesus and Paul and the early church, when churches didn't have conflicts and everyone got along." You see, we have idealized the New Testament church, thinking that people who knew Paul personally and who were just one generation away from the time of Jesus would certainly live by the law of love and not fight with each other. But the reality is far different. Listen now to our Epistle reading for today, from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 1, verses 10-18. [read]

Doesn't that situation in first-century Corinth sound a lot like our own time and place? Because the early Christians were human, they had church conflicts, just like we do. We don't know the exact issues over which they were fighting, but clearly the church members in Corinth had chosen up sides. Some of them were saying, "I belong to Paul, because he was the missionary who founded our church, and he baptized me." Others were saying, "I belong to Apollos, because he was our most recent pastor, and he was such an eloquent preacher." Still others were saying, "I belong to Cephas (or Peter), the great apostle, because he's the one we should follow." And finally some were simply saying, maybe with a touch of self-righteousness, "I belong to Christ."

Fast-forward 2,000 years to the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). We can almost hear people saying, "I belong to the Confessing Church Movement," or "I belong to the Covenant Network." Or "I read the *Presbyterian Layman*," or "I read *Presbyterians Today*." We have chosen up sides in our denomination.

And people here at North Church have also chosen up sides. Can you hear people saying, “I belong to the group that wants Sunday School during worship,” or “I belong to the group that favors the dedicated hour for education.” Or “I belong to the ‘turkey basket parade’ group,” or “I belong to the ‘turkey baskets during the offering’ group.” Or “I belong to the group that insists upon a balanced budget,” or “I belong to the group that can live with a deficit budget.” While these differences of opinion are not causing major conflict in the church, they need to be acknowledged and addressed. In some ways, your situation is not all that different from the first-century church in Corinth.

At the time Paul wrote this first letter to the Corinthians, he was living in Ephesus. He had found out about the conflict in Corinth because a church member named Chloe sent word to Paul, informing him of the quarrels among the church people. Naturally, Paul was distressed, because he had founded that congregation and felt a pastoral and parental concern for them. So he immediately wrote this letter, giving them advice on how to resolve their quarrels. There are three things I want to highlight from his advice that might speak to you in this congregation and to all of us in our denomination.

First, Paul appeals to them “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” Now Paul could have appealed to them through the strength of his own reputation as their founding pastor, or he could have appealed to them on the basis of their affection for their most recent pastor, Apollos. But Paul does not ground his appeal on any mere human. Instead, he grounds his appeal on the Lordship of Jesus Christ. Paul asks rhetorically, “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Now obviously the answer to these questions is, “No, of course not. We were baptized in the name of Christ, Christ was the one crucified for us, and the body of Christ cannot be divided.” The ground of our unity in the church is the Lordship of Jesus Christ.

The second thing I want to highlight from Paul’s advice is that we are to be “united in the same mind.” This phrase, “the same mind,” is similar to what Paul wrote to the Philippians, when he told them to “be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind....Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 2:2,5). In other words, to be “united in the same mind” means to have the mind of Christ. We are to have the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. We are to see things the way Jesus did, to look at the world through his eyes. If we can focus our attention on Jesus, and on what he said and did, instead of on ourselves and on what we want, then we can have unity. Unity comes from being centered on Jesus Christ.

Now this unity does not mean uniformity. In the words of New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa, “Unity in faith does not mean uniformity in thought and practice” (*Texts for Preaching, Year A*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1995, p. 115). We do not have to think alike or agree on every issue in order to have unity. Biblical scholar Carl Holloday, in commenting on this passage, says that “the true test of Christian unity is the ability to disagree in our formulation of the truth, even in our convictions about the truth, without compromising our ultimate loyalty to Christ---and to each other” (*Preaching the New Common Lectionary, Year A: Advent, Christmas, Epiphany*, Abingdon Press, 1986, p. 135).

In our Reformed tradition, we have always valued freedom of conscience. In fact, the first “historic principle of church order” listed in our Presbyterian *Book of Order* is that “God alone is Lord of the conscience” (G-1.0300-.0301). One of our cherished principles as

Presbyterians is the motto, "In essentials, unity; in non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity."

Paul makes a distinction between unity and uniformity, and he affirms diversity of viewpoints. Later on in this first letter to the Corinthians, he defends the diversity of views about whether Christians should eat meat that had been offered to idols, and he acknowledges and affirms the diversity of gifts from the Spirit. For Paul, unity comes from our common allegiance to Jesus Christ, not from uniformity of belief.

The third thing I want to highlight from Paul's advice is that we are to have the same purpose; and if we have the same purpose, we will find unity in achieving that purpose. A few verses later Paul goes on to say what that purpose is: to proclaim the gospel. Our purpose as the church, the body of Christ, is not to be a social club, or a welfare agency, or a place of refuge from the storms of life. Rather, our sole purpose is to proclaim the good news of God's love for all people through Jesus Christ.

Now we achieve that purpose in a variety of ways. For example, we offer opportunities to worship God and to praise God. We offer opportunities to learn and study about God's work in the world. We offer opportunities for fellowship, sharing, caring, and bearing one another's burdens. We offer opportunities for serving the spiritual and physical needs of people in this community and around the world. There are many ways to achieve our purpose of proclaiming the gospel. When we work together to achieve that purpose, we discover the unity that comes from our common allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Several years ago in Indiana, I served on a presbytery's administrative commission to work with a church whose building had burned down. That congregation was traumatized not only by the fire but also by a high level of conflict with their pastor. The root of their conflict went back to a previous pastor and was about what shade of red the new carpet in the sanctuary should be. One prominent woman in the congregation had chosen the shade she wanted, but when the carpet was delivered, it was a slightly different shade of red; and the pastor, feeling caught in a time crunch, decided to go with what had been delivered. The woman angrily left the church, and the other people chose up sides, either for the woman or for the pastor. The pastor was forced out, and the woman came back. But that conflict had never been resolved and was still impacting that congregation many years later.

When I led that congregation through their mission study, we worked on resolving this conflict about the carpet. They acknowledged how petty it was and how destructive it had been to the peace and unity of the church. Most important, they realized that the way to achieve unity is not to agree on everything, but to be centered on Jesus Christ and his mission. That congregation now has a new building and a renewed sense of mission. They also have a unity that is amazing to behold. They still disagree on many things, but they are united in their allegiance to Jesus Christ.

Our unity, you see, is in Christ.