

## **Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church**

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Sermon manuscript

### **Sermon Series: The Church - a Work in Progress**

(Studies in 1 Corinthians)

#### **A Priceless, Elusive Gift**

(1 Corinthians 1:10-31)

Study #2

#### **Introduction: In the world, you will not have much...**

We all want this one, priceless gift. I know I want it, and I'm pretty sure you want it, too. We hunger for this gift. We look for it and we listen for it. But it is elusive.

We don't want the opposite of this gift, but that opposite is all around us. If we could, we'd avoid the opposite. But it's unavoidable.

We've had enough of the opposite of the gift we want. And the opposite of the priceless gift is what we read about and see and hear on the news every day, it's what we experience at work and at school, in the neighborhood, and in politics. We're weary of party spirit, factions, conflict, and division.

Jesus once said, *[John 16:33] "In the world you will have tribulation."* He could have also said, *"In the world you will have discord."* Discord and disunity and strife are the reality of our world.

What we long for is the elusive gift of unity.

We want to be part of a team that all pulls in the same direction, to be a part of a group that jells around a vision, to have connection with friends who share the same goals and values.

In my morning time in the Bible this past Wednesday, I read Psalm 133, which contains this line:

***[1] Behold, how good and how pleasant it is  
For brothers to live together in unity!***

That sounds good, doesn't it?

Our longing for unity was hard-wired into our hearts by God. Today we listen as the Apostle Paul points the way for us to experience the unity for which we hunger - in Jesus' church.

*Review...*

Last week, Paul's theme at the start of his first letter to the church in the city of Corinth was our identity in Christ, the transcendent purpose we have in life now that we belong to God.

It was a great starting point. Now, Paul begins to deal with the problems he had heard were present in the church.

#### **Vision-Casting for the Church: UNITY (v. 10)**

My studies tell me that when a letter written by an apostle arrived at a church in the first century (whether the author was Peter, Paul or John), the letter would immediately be read out loud during a worship service.

I think Paul was counting on that broad exposure for this letter. He wanted the whole congregation to hear what he had to say beginning with this opening exhortation.

***[10a] Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...,<sup>1</sup>***

Love is all over these words. He refers to the Corinthians as his ***"brothers and sisters."*** This is a family letter.

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<sup>1</sup> Notice that this is the tenth time in ten verses Paul has referred to Christ.

But he expressed his love on the way to pointing out a problem and “urging” (maybe better, he “admonished / begged / exhorted”) them to deal with it.<sup>2</sup>

Here’s what Paul urged the Corinthians to do.

***[10b]...that you all agree<sup>3</sup> and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.***

What Paul describes here is not peaceful co-existence and it isn’t a cookie-cutter uniformity. It’s unity.

When we read in the New Testament about the unity of the church we find the idea of Christians - who have all kinds of opinions and perspectives and backgrounds - relating to each other with love to accomplish Jesus’ purposes.

There are lots of images that Jesus and the biblical writers used to get this idea across. Jesus talked about a grapevine and its branches. Paul used the image of the human body and of a building.

The images all speak of Christians loving each other and moving toward a mutually agreed upon goal. Love. Make disciples. Introduce others to Jesus. Worship God. Love well. Together.

That is unity. And unity was not a distinctive in the church at Corinth at the time that Paul wrote this letter, which was one reason why he wrote the letter.

We know that unity was absent because at the end of verse 10, Paul further urged them to “***be made complete,***” implying that they were not, at the time, “***complete.***”

Interesting word, “***complete.***”

When Matthew described what the fishermen, James and John, were doing when Jesus walked by and called them to follow Him, he told us that they were “***mending***” their nets.

After a hard night of fishing, fishermen needed to mend their nets so that they were usable again on the next night.

“***Mend***” in Matthew 4:21 is the same Greek word that Paul used here in 1 Corinthians. Meaning that just as James and John needed to “***mend***” or “***restore***” their nets, Christians need to be made “***complete.***”

When Paul told the Corinthian church to be “***made complete***” he was urging that their relationships be “***mended.***” There were rips in the fabric holding brothers and sisters in the church together and he wanted those rips repaired.

So, far from hitting the bull’s eye of unity, the church in Corinth was made up of divisions, factions, and cliques.

### **The Reality of the Church: Quarrels And Divisions (vv. 11-12)**

***[11] For I have been informed concerning you, my brothers and sisters,<sup>4</sup> by Chloe’s people,<sup>5</sup> that there are quarrels among you. [12] Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am with Paul,” or “I am with Apollos,” or “I am with Cephas,” or “I am with Christ.”***

People in the church had formed loyalties to different leaders, either because of personality, teaching / preaching style, or ministry emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> The range of meaning of the word we here translate “***urge***” spans from “***strong exhortation***” to “***encouragement***” to “***comfort.***” Here, “***urge***” may be milder than is warranted, as Paul is calling the church on the carpet for their disunity.

<sup>3</sup> “Agreement” was a term used in the first century of political communities which needed to be free from factions, despite their differences.

<sup>4</sup> Paul appealed to the Corinthians, again, as brothers. Don’t miss how frequently he reminds his readers - and probably himself - that they are related to each other as he scolds and exhorts them.

<sup>5</sup> This is the only time Chloe or her “***people***” are mentioned in the Bible. We assume that she was a Corinthian woman who had somehow reported to Paul the tragic news that the church in Corinth is NOT united.

It's easy to see why some developed a special loyalty to Paul. He brought the Gospel of Jesus to them.

And we know that Apollos, who was a gifted speaker and teacher, had visited Corinth and had helped establish them in their faith.<sup>6</sup> So, there was an Apollos clique.<sup>7</sup>

As far as we know, Peter (or Cephas) never visited Corinth. But it might be that his reputation as the chief Jerusalem apostle,<sup>8</sup> and as the apostle who first brought the Gospel to the Gentiles (to the household of Cornelius) led to people identifying with Peter.

And then, there was the Christ faction. While we applaud them for siding with Jesus, the way Paul lists them as just another faction makes me wonder if they weren't just as divisive as the others, with an extra heap of arrogance.<sup>9</sup>

So, in Corinth, people were taking sides, with one faction likely claiming superiority over the others, looking down on the others.

All concerned were concerned only for their own clique. And Paul considered that a terrible situation.<sup>10</sup> So would Apollos and Peter. So would Christ. So would we.

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<sup>6</sup> Apollos went to Corinth AFTER Priscilla and Aquila gave him instruction in Christian truth while they were all in Ephesus. (Acts 18:26)

<sup>7</sup> It is not surprising that an eloquent man like Apollos would attract a following in Corinth, as they were enamored by oratory and eloquence, traits that, it seems, Paul did not possess. (See 2 Cor. 10:10; 11:6).

<sup>8</sup> His group in Corinth may have represented Judaistic, Jerusalem-based, legalistic Christianity.

<sup>9</sup> Some have suggested that the statement "*I of Christ*" was actually Paul's statement, standing instead of the others' statements of the men they followed. The grammar of the verse argues against this understanding. The four phrases all stand in perfect symmetry. There was a group in Corinth saying, "*I am of Christ.*" The difficulty is in determining if Paul is cheerleading for this group's orthodoxy or saying that they, too, contributed to the spirit of partisanship in Corinth.

<sup>10</sup> After the report from Chloe's people, Paul has no doubts as to the situation. This may imply that prior to this report, he had suspicions but had not been willing to believe them, and this report substantiated his worst fears and there is now no possibility of living in denial of how bad things are in Corinth.

In a church, unity is love, flowing between diversely gifted and diversely interested Christians. Unity is members of a church moving toward a goal, together, each one playing his or her own part.

Let's get a bit more personal and move from Corinth to here.

There are a good number of very effective and God-honoring ministries here at our church.

I'd list ministries to Youth, Children, Nursery, ESL, Praise Team, Missions, Financial Team, Tech Team, Women, some things stirring for Men, Adult Bible Fellowships, Prayer, and Care Groups - and that's so say nothing of all the wonderful, God-honoring things that are happening in and through Encuentro.

That's a good list, but it doesn't take into account personal ministries that lots of you here engage in to serve Jesus in your life at home, or at work, or at school. These are all wonderful ministries, too.

God forbid that any of us would ever claim superiority of a ministry in which we are involved over other ministries, look down on those who don't serve in our ministry, or dismiss the value of another ministry.

If it could happen at Corinth, it could happen here. It is great to be sold out to a ministry effort, as I know so many of you are. What we don't want to do is stoop to jealousy or arrogance or dismissal as if we were in competition.

Here, we are on the same team. In our church, there are various ministries. We all thank God for all of them. Pray for all of them. Cheer all of them on. To do anything else is to work against unity.

Paul is fighting for unity by what he writes here. And we're going to pay special attention to what he writes because we want a Jesus-centered unity here.

Ironically, we don't experience unity by focusing on the life of the church. Unity is a by-product of the pursuit of something else. We experience unity as we center on the things Paul mentions next.

First, and foremost, we center on the cross of Jesus.

### **The Path To Unity (vv. 13-31)**

#### **There is One Savior and One Baptism (vv. 13-17)**

*All who have been saved are saved by Christ's cross (v. 13a)*

Christians owe allegiance to Jesus. Period. Jesus died on the cross for us. Nobody else.

***[13a] Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he?***

If there is any rationale for Christians to NOT be divided, it is this: Jesus died for me. Jesus died for you.

That fundamental reality levels the playing field between all Christians, makes all differences between us pale to insignificance and makes all disputes petty.

The only One I owe eternally is Jesus and the only thing I owe Him is everything. Same for you. We are united by Jesus' cross.

Then, Paul mentioned a common experience for Christians. Baptism.

*All who have been baptized are baptized in Jesus' Name (v. 13b)*

***[13b] Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?***

Everyone here who has been baptized here was baptized in the name of Jesus. Not anybody's else name, the church's name.

We quote Jesus' words from Matthew 28 when we baptize: ***"in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit."*** Same for Corinth. They were all baptized in the name of Jesus.

This shared experience of baptism for Christians is another integral piece of the unity puzzle.<sup>11</sup>

And continuing with the baptism theme, we come across what I think is one of the funnier sections of this letter.

*Paul, and baptism (vv. 14-17)*

***[14] I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,<sup>12</sup> [15] so that no one would say you were baptized in my name! [16] But I did baptize the household of Stephanas<sup>13</sup> also; beyond that, I do not know if I baptized anyone else.***

I love this.

After calling to mind a few of the people he did baptize, Paul interrupts himself, claims a *"senior moment"* and reminds everybody, ***[17] For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made of no effect.***

Paul downplayed the role baptism played in his ministry. Again, not that baptism wasn't important. It just wasn't his "thing."

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<sup>11</sup> Believer's baptism was and is extremely important. It was commanded by Jesus and practiced by the early church. As an enduring ordinance of the church, it gives testimony to God's work in someone's life. But it does not contribute to salvation from sin and death. We are saved by grace through faith. Then, the believer is to be baptized as an expression of faith in Christ.

<sup>12</sup> We don't know much about Gaius. It could be that his was a common name and that there are two Gaius' in the New Testament, one who lived in Corinth and is mentioned here and one who hailed from Derbe (Acts 20:4). One of these two (probably) accompanied Paul on the third missionary journey (so, Acts 19:29). When Paul wrote Romans, while he was staying in Corinth, he identified Gaius as his host and the host to the whole church. (Romans 16:23)

<sup>13</sup> The household of Stephanas was the first household of Achaia (the region in which Corinth is located) to have trusted Christ (1 Cor. 16:15). This Stephanas also (along with Fortunatus and Achaicus) must have visited Paul supplying him with material support, in the absence of support coming from the Corinthian church, as a whole (1 Cor. 16:17).

And it seems to me that a big part of WHY Paul didn't give a lot of attention to baptizing people was that he didn't want anyone to be personally committed to him.

He wasn't pleased or flattered that there was a "Paul Party" in Corinth. So, he purposefully didn't baptize many in Corinth.

So, what does all of this tell us?

It tells us that we are united because of our common salvation in the cross of Jesus and our common baptism in the Name of Jesus.

When I see you, I see someone who was saved by Jesus, just as I have been.

When you see me, you see someone who was placed under the waters of baptism after the words, **"in the Name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit,"** a man who has determined to live for Jesus and has been raised from death to life by Jesus - just as you were.

Our commonalities are far greater than our differences. And in what follows, Paul keeps on hammering away at the unity theme by focusing on the message.

So, how did Paul preach the Gospel? Simply.

He didn't try to impress his audience. He didn't use **"cleverness of speech."**<sup>14</sup> He didn't use the tricks of rhetoric or try to be cute.

He just gave the message. He knew that there was inherent power in the message, so he let the message do its work.

### **A Weak-Looking (not) and a Foolish-Seeming (not) Message (vv. 18-25)**

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<sup>14</sup> Paul refrained from **"clever speech"** for the same reason he avoided baptism. Clever speaking could win converts and supporters to himself. A reliance on rhetoric would cause men to trust in him, the very antithesis of what the preaching of the cross is meant to effect.

*The message of the cross looks foolish (vv. 18-21)*

**[18] For the word of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved<sup>15</sup> it is the power of God.**

**[19] For it is written:**

**"I WILL DESTROY THE WISDOM OF THE WISE, AND THE UNDERSTANDING OF THOSE WHO HAVE UNDERSTANDING I WILL CONFOUND."<sup>16</sup>**

**[20] Where is the wise person? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has God not made foolish the wisdom of the world?**

The message of Jesus' Gospel will bring a variety of responses from different people. When we believe it, we see it as the powerful message of God's salvation. To those who have not yet believed in Jesus, it is **"foolishness."**

And we get that. The message of Christianity is not the sort of message any human could come up with. Nor is it the sort of message any human would come up with if they could.

The Gospel flies in the face of what we would think God would require for salvation, forgiveness of sins, and eternal life.

Human "wisdom" would say that God requires a certain kind of life, good works, or trying hard. The Gospel says, **"Nope. He doesn't."**

**[21] For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.**

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<sup>15</sup> Not that people are ever 2/3 saved or 40% not saved, or that salvation is a process. Paul looks at salvation as a point in time reality that is worked out piecemeal.

<sup>16</sup> Paul illustrated his point by an example of Israel who, following humanly wise counsel, formed an alliance with Egypt as a defense against Assyria, when in fact only the miraculous intervention of God was able to save them (Isaiah 29:14; 2 Kings 18:17-19:37). This quotation is a slight variation from the LXX (the Greek version of the Old Testament).

When you have thought about telling someone you love the good news about Jesus, have you ever wondered, *"If I tell them that all they have to do to receive the gift of eternal life is believe, I'll appear ridiculous?"*

If you have had that thought, I get it. Paul would get it, too.

Sharing the Gospel in the spirit in which we are to share it requires that we trust NOT our intellect and NOT our persuasive powers and NOT our personal charm.

Evangelism is trusting that the **"foolish"** message can break down resistance, that the Spirit can open a closed heart, and that a sinner can respond by faith to Jesus' offer of eternal life.

In addition to believing in an "[apparently] **foolish**" Gospel, we also believe in an "[apparently] **weak**" Gospel.

*The message of the cross looks weak (vv. 22-25)*

***[22] For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; [23] but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block, and to Gentiles foolishness, [24] but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. [25] For the foolishness of God is wiser than mankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than mankind.***

The Gentiles of Paul's day especially resonated with the thought that the Gospel message was foolish. They were absorbed in speculative philosophy,<sup>17</sup> and were proud of their intellectual pursuits. Jesus' Gospel was unsophisticated and offensive for its simplicity.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The Jews have historically been little given to speculative thought, have been more matter-of-fact, pragmatic, practical.

<sup>18</sup> There is a well-known anti-Christian caricature, found in ancient Greek graffiti, of a slave bowing down to a crucified figure with an ass's head, inscribed, "Alexamenos worships god." Remember the city Paul was in just prior to Corinth? Athens. If we will review his experience on Mars Hill, we will remember that the Gospel was especially derided as foolishness there.

But the Jews of the first century thought that the Christian message was flawed because it was weak.

And Paul agreed, just like he agreed with the charge that the message was foolish. The Christian message is weak because it requires that we believe in a crucified Messiah to be saved.

To the Jew, **"Christ crucified"** was an oxymoron.

Given the history of the Jews, it is not surprising that they would expect a message accompanied by powerful signs and wonders.

Over the course of centuries, they had seen plenty of signs from God, including stories of split-open seas and water from rocks, manna and fire from heaven and widows' sons raised from the dead.

They had expected Christ to arrive with majesty and power.

They refused to believe that the Messiah's story would be linked in any way with weakness and defeat. The possibility that the Messiah would be nailed to a Roman cross was unthinkable.<sup>19</sup>

The Jews demanded a victorious Christ, heralded by signs and wonders, who would restore the glories of God's kingdom to the line of David.

To the Jew, the cross of Jesus was evidence that whatever He might claim - Jesus was NOT the Christ.

**Summary:** Paul says that from the world's way of looking at things, the Gospel is weak and foolish.

In reality, it is neither foolish nor weak. But it requires the openness of faith to see the wisdom and strength of the message.

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<sup>19</sup> Especially given the Law's laws about **"cursed is everyone who hangs on a tree."** (Galatians 3:13, quoting Deuteronomy 21:23)

When we believe (“**receive Him**” as John puts it in John 1:12), we see God’s wisdom in putting a plan for salvation together that required a faith-alone response.

When we believe, we see God’s strength in the Gospel both because it took strength for Jesus to offer Himself on the cross AND because the cross is not the end of the story. He rose from the dead, demonstrating strength beyond measure.

Or, as Paul writes: **[25] For the foolishness of God is wiser than mankind, and the weakness of God is stronger than mankind.**

Everyone who has received the gift of eternal life has embraced this *apparently* foolish and weak message. Given that, shouldn’t we then be standing together, loving each other?

We are united because of Jesus’ cross, because of our baptism, because of the simple message - and one more thing.

That “one more thing” has to do with what God intends to do through people like us. I imagine Paul smiling to himself as he wrote these words.

**Saving People Like Us (!) Brings Maximum Glory to God (vv. 26-31)**

*God works with “people like us” ON PURPOSE (vv. 26-29)*

**[26] For consider your calling, brothers and sisters, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, [27] but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, [28] and the insignificant things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, [29] so that no human may boast before God.**

God could have put the Gospel in a form that would have appealed primarily to the super-rich, the powerful, the influential, the athletic, the intelligent. But, of course, He didn’t.

He put the best cookie on the bottom shelf. Those looking for brain-teasers or tests of skill and strength to attain salvation will be disappointed. There is no need to stand on tip toes to be saved. Kneeling works better.

Those who are already kneeling because of poverty, grief, hardship and disability are in the best position to receive the Gospel.

Paul says that this is why the church at Corinth flourished. It was made up of men and women who were neither wise nor strong nor noble.

It is a shame that we aren’t given a snapshot of the church as these lines were read out loud. I wonder how they reacted when he gave them this left-handed compliment.

*“Take a survey and you’ll see that you are precisely the kinds of people for whom the Gospel is tailor-made because you are such losers. If God was choosing on the basis of breeding or ability, He would have passed right over you.”<sup>20</sup>*

How does such a message sit with you?

It is as true for us as it was for Corinth, you know. The only people who are qualified for membership in the Body of Christ at Northwest Community Church are those who:

- have admitted that they have nothing to commend themselves to God.
- admit to being card-carrying members of the sinners club.
- know they bring nothing to bring to God but abject need.

We will either be impressed with Christ and His power to save or with ourselves. But we can’t be impressed with both. And here’s why God has put together a plan of salvation so wonderfully geared for the needy.

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<sup>20</sup> In truth, the names of most of the people mentioned in the New Testament are suggestive of slaves or freedmen.

*All the glory for the finished product goes to Him! (vv. 30-31)*

**[30] But it is due to Him that you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption,<sup>21</sup> [31] so that, just as it is written, “LET THE ONE WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD.”**

To every person who would say, “The Gospel really is great news. I accept it. Just let me add my own righteousness.”, God says, “Nope. Jesus is your righteousness or you are not righteous.”

To every person who would say, “I embrace the Gospel. Let me now make myself holy in Your sight by my own efforts so that I can measure up.”, God says, “Nope. Jesus is your sanctification or you aren’t sanctified.”

To every person who would say, “I believe the Gospel. Now, having believed it, I’ll work as hard as I can to get to Heaven.”, God says, “Nope. Jesus is your redemption or you aren’t redeemed.”

### **Conclusion:**

The next time you are tempted to quarrel with a fellow Christian, or look down your nose at his ministry, or dismiss her concerns as invalid, **remember** that you and that other person are IN Christ Jesus, not because of what either of you have brought to the table, but because He orchestrated the inclusion of both of you into the church.

He did it the way He did it so that He could receive maximum glory. And it may very well be that He will be most glorified if you reach out to that brother or sister with whom you are tempted to quarrel.

Step three on the Calvary Road that leads to unity is taken when we realize the desperate situation from which God rescued us and seek the glory of God.

### **Conclusion:**

Believers in Jesus share a common Savior and baptism, believe the same saving message, and are all in need of what only Jesus can provide.

These are the foundation stones of the unity we all crave. Let’s walk in them and display our unity in Jesus before a unity-starved world.

If you were to say, “*I’ve never had a cross word with anybody at church*” or “*I get along with everybody at Northwest*” or “*What problems?*” I might suggest that you either haven’t been here very long OR that you don’t know people very well OR that you have been hanging on the periphery OR that you have been avoiding hard issues.

When Christians interact with each other, there is bound to be, from time to time, friction. Only Jesus will provide a way to work THROUGH the friction.

Why was the church at Corinth experiencing quarrels and divisions? They had forgotten that they:

- shared a common salvation and baptism,
- embraced a common Gospel,
- affirmed a common neediness.

If we want to be a church free from quarrels and divisions and rich in unity, we will be a community centered on the cross of Christ.

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<sup>21</sup> Wisdom, in the Greek, includes the other three qualifiers, they are exegetical to wisdom.