

Alan Paton told this true story about a South African judge in his book, *Ah But Your Land is Beautiful*. A black pastor invited the judge, Ian Christiaan Oliver, to attend his church on Maundy Thursday. It was during the worst period of apartheid, and he knew that he was risking his career if he went. The judge meant to be a good man, so he accepted the invitation. He learned on his arrival that it was a service of foot-washing and he was urged to participate. He was called forward to wash the feet of a woman named Martha Fortuin, who as it happened, had been a servant in the his own house for thirty years. Kneeling at her feet, he was struck by how weary they looked from so many years of serving him. Greatly moved, he held her feet with his gentle hands and kissed them. Martha began weeping as did many others in the room. The newspapers got word of it and Judge Oliver lost his political career. Paton then adds, but “Perhaps he found his soul.”

A teacher drew a diagram of the Christian church in this way: He drew it as a circle with a number of circles overlapping the center circle which he labeled “Christ.” On the other circles, he wrote the names of different church denominations. Underneath the drawing he wrote the words, “The nearer to the center, to Christ, the nearer to each other.”

Christ is the center of our faith. Christ is the head of the church. In Christ all divisions between church bodies, races, backgrounds, educational levels, incomes, political affiliation, break down—or at least they’re supposed to. In Christ there is no north or south; no east or west. We are all one. We are one in the Lord—or should be. The cross of Christ is “*foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God,*” says Paul.

Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians both *describes* the first century church and *prescribes* that which will heal and strengthen the Corinthian church. Not much has changed in 20 centuries. He explains what was happening in that church and happens to churches even here and now. What was going on in the church at Corinth is different factions or divisions in the congregation. It is reported to Paul by Chloe’s household that there is quarreling in the church. If you’ve never been to a meeting of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) you may think we don’t do a lot of quarreling. You’d be wrong. Lance Morrow has written that one of the root problems of our culture today is that we have *politicized* everything. Everything becomes political and therefore able to be manipulated. We have “spin-doctors” who try to shade the truth for their own political advantage. We have an intellectual political correctness that often stifles independent thinking. We have an institutional political correctness that forbids anyone should “rock the boat.” What is true of the wider culture is also true within the church.

I was talking to a church staff member from another congregation recently and this person was telling me about her great disillusionment with her church. She said she had seen infighting and back-biting, an obsession with the financial bottom line rather than ministry, what she summed up as “politics.” She had experienced such political maneuvers in the business world but couldn’t believe it would be the same in the Christian church. She wondered, aloud, about the commitment of those involved. Gently, I tried to tell her that unfortunately the church is made up of people—sinful but forgiven people—with all their faults and flaws and we don’t check our sinful nature when we enter the church door.

One of the most astute voices in the Lutheran Church is James Nestingen at Luther Seminary. One of his mentors, Warren Quanbeck, often repeats the following story: It seems Quanbeck was on an airplane seated next to a woman who went on and on about all the hypocrites in the church and how awful it really was. Dr. Quanbeck asked her if she ever went to church. She answered him, “No, I’ve never been in one.” He then answered her back, “Oh. Well it’s much worse than you can imagine.”

Sometimes I’m afraid if you asked almost any pastor you’d get the same answer. It’s much worse than you can imagine. Like this conversation between a mother and her reluctant son: He says to his mother, “Mom, I don’t want to go to church today.” The mother says, “Oh son, I really think you should.” “But Mom,” he says, “I don’t think anybody likes me there and I don’t want to go. Give me three good reasons why I have to go to church.” “Okay. First, I’m your mother, and I want you to go, and you should be obedient to your mother. Second, Sunday is the Lord’s Day and you know what Jesus said about giving unto the Lord what is the Lord’s. Third, you have to go to church because... you’re the pastor!”

The strongest evidence of the truth of the Christian faith is that it’s been able to survive for two thousand years and even thrive in places around the globe. Congregations today are riddled with factions, beset by divisive issues, prone to quarreling, not too different from the church in Corinth, but united by the “*foolishness of the cross.*” This is the reality. We are fallen human creatures with a sinful nature that can be transformed only by the power of God’s love.

Along with Paul’s description comes his prescription. We must never be satisfied with things as they are, but must work and pray for things as they can be. Paul is clear about that. He is beseeching the Corinthians—and us—to set aside our differences and be (I quote), “*perfectly united in mind and thought*” (v. 10). The words Paul uses in the Greek are very strong. Paul appeals to them, “*in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you...*” (v. 10). The word *appeal* basically means “to beg.” Paul is begging people to set aside their grudges and grievances and live out their faith in the unity of the Spirit.

We too are called to be one with Christ and with one another. That doesn’t mean we are licensed to set aside the truth. But drawing closer to the Lord means that we will draw nearer to each other—even those who are very different than us. And to draw closer to our fellow believers means that we also come nearer to the Lord. Bible scholars have looked very closely at the divisions in Corinth. Some of the Corinthians seemed to have followed Paul closely. Others, who join with Apollos may have been more intellectual, more concerned with philosophy and rhetoric. Paul seems to suggest that he did not have such a refined Greek education. Still others of the party of Cephas may have been of Jewish background and looked to Peter and James as advocates for keeping the Jewish law while living as followers of Jesus. Finally there are those who would appeal directly to Christ. They may not have been quite as innocent as it sounds. They likely were enthusiasts, spiritualists, proto-agnostics who believed they could discard the Scriptures, deny all laws and live according to their own personal wisdom. But Paul quickly points out that “*wisdom and eloquence*” can empty the cross of its power! Whew! We simple folks are relieved to hear that. If we really wanted, we could go through Christian history and find similar groups with similar viewpoints. Even today there are different church bodies and congregations that emphasize one or another of these positions.

Paul is not saying that any one group is entirely wrong, but they should come together in their common faith. As they find themselves closer to each other, they come nearer to Christ. As they look to Christ and not their own strong opinions, they will come closer to one other. Likeness of mind will produce a common bond and purpose that is a compelling witness to the world of the love and power of Jesus Christ. The unity of the church is not only to please God. Remember that Jesus prayed in John's Gospel for his followers to be one with each other just as he and the Father were one—for the sake of the world. The unity of the church results in vital mission to a world that is longing for truth, forgiveness, and salvation. Energy spent quarreling could go toward reaching out to others with the good news of Jesus. Time spent in conflict could be better spent helping those in need. There's nothing foolish about that.

Let's be clear that Christian unity should not substitute for Christian truth. We can't gloss over differences that are foundational. For instance, I do not agree with everything taught by the Pentecostals or Methodists or Roman Catholics or Baptists or Orthodox. But you know me well enough to know I'm not a doctrinaire person. Yes, I disagree with anyone who sees baptism and the Lord's Supper only as a human act rather than something God does. And questions always seem to arise about essentials of the faith. One of the marks of a cult is that they major in the minors, overemphasizing a belief that's not really so important. When we work with other Christians we must ask ourselves, "Do they follow the Word of God and do they preach it? Do they add to the Bible their own ideas, or let the Scriptures speak to us clearly and plainly? Do they practice baptism and the Lord's Supper? Is salvation taught as given through the life, death and resurrection of Christ alone? And I always want to know: Do they divide the Body of Christ by disparaging other Christians?"

Not every Presbyterian practices their faith in the same way, or thinks the same way, by any means! When Paul talks about being "*united in mind and thought*" he is speaking of unity, not uniformity. It's enriching that we are a rainbow of peoples, languages, ideas, cultures and aspirations in the church. Our unity is not in our wisdom, our behavior or our background, but in Jesus Christ the Lord. Our unity is in our Savior. It is God's power in the cross of Jesus Christ that has formed us into a community; that sustains us on our life journey; that makes such unlikely people as us brothers and sisters in the Lord.

We are one in Christ through faith; we are one with each other because we have *One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism*. If we come together "*perfectly united in mind and thought,*" we grow into the church God intended us to be, the body of Christ. As we accept each other, speak well of each other, interpret the actions and motives of each other in the kindest way, truly love one other, we come closer to Christ.

I like something I read recently so well that I put it on our church sign: *Positive gossip is sharing thanks and appreciation for another person*. Spread the word!

When we move closer to each other, we move closer to the Lord. Amen.

(Thanks to Dr. James Kegel for sermon material)