

Church conflicts happen for some absurdly strange reasons. In the 1890s there was a small Baptist church in Mayfield County, Kentucky. The church had only two deacons, and those two men seemed to be constantly arguing and bickering with each other. On a particular Sunday, one deacon put a small wooden peg on the back wall so the pastor could hang his hat. When the other deacon discovered the peg, he was outraged. “How dare someone put a peg in the wall without first consulting me!” The people in the church took sides and the congregation eventually split because of it. Over a hundred years later residents of Mayfield County still refer to the two churches as the Peg Baptists and the No-Peg Baptists. Despite these petty issues, the church is called and formed by God. The church is the ecclesia, literally, the “called out” of God.

In the days of the Apostle Paul whenever a Roman city had a town meeting the ecclesia would gather together. These were the ones “called out” to decide the business of the town. The word was carried over into the NT to refer to the church. But it isn’t the only name for the church in the New Testament. The church is also called “God’s household,” “Christ’s flock,” “the bride of Christ” and the “body of Christ.”

The word ecclesia is used three ways in the NT in reference to the church.

1) It is used to designate all the redeemed that belong to Christ. Easton’s Dictionary says, “It denotes the whole body of the redeemed, all those whom the Father has given to Christ, the invisible catholic church,” catholic being used in the sense of the universal church. In the book of Ephesians, the Bible says Christ is the head of the church and he is the Savior of the body.

2) Ecclesia is also used to designate a small group of believers. For example, in Romans 16:5 we read, “Likewise greet the church that is in their house.” Every Christian is a part of the overall church, the body of Christ.

3) It was also used to designate all the believers in a city, whether they gathered in one place to worship or not. For example, if we lived in that time, we might have received a letter from the Apostle Paul addressed to all churches

in the Allegheny County presbytery or parish. It would be intended for all who believe in the name of Jesus Christ living in Allegheny County. That is no doubt what the Holy Spirit of God meant for us because the message of the Bible is for every believer in all times and places. Yet sometimes the church runs into trouble just as it did in Corinth. She finds herself embroiled in the midst of something that threatens to divide her members. We Presbyterians are real “pros” at church conflict, by the way. What is the church supposed to do when it encounters divisive issues? This morning I’m going to suggest that if our church is going to get along, we must stay focused on three things:

First: The Messiah. As Paul addresses the Corinthian church and some of the divisions they were faced with, he began by asserting the authority of Jesus Christ. Why does he use the phrase “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” in verse 10? Paul was speaking in his place as the Apostle of the Lord Jesus Christ. Under the leadership of the Holy Spirit and the role assigned to him by God, Paul spoke with authority to the church. It wasn’t Paul’s authority, but authority given to him by God. He wants to refocus their attention on the One to whom their devotion and true allegiance lies—Jesus Christ. The allegiance of the church does not lie with the pastor, although the pastor has a unique role and responsibility assigned to him or her by the call of God upon their life. Nor does the allegiance of the church lie with a few select members of the body. In verse 13 Paul asks three rhetorical questions. a) Is Christ divided? b) Was Paul crucified for you? c) Were you baptized in the name of Paul? The answer to all three questions is the same in each case: NO, Christ is not divided and NO, Paul did not die for us and NO, we were not baptized in the name of Paul. What happens when we lose sight of the Savior?

- 1) We divert our eyes to other people. That’s what happened at Corinth when they lost sight of the Lord Jesus. They began to focus on the personalities around them rather on the Person who saved them.
- 2) We divert our eyes to other problems. They began to focus on the problems they were having with each other. They began to argue and fuss and even began to take each other to court.

3) We divert our eyes to other priorities. Even in church we can often get our eyes on the wrong priorities. The priorities of the Corinthian believers began to be whatever they desired most. They began to live according to their appetites, becoming carnal rather than the spiritual people they were called to be. This led to the abuse of spiritual gifts and even the abuse of the Lord's Supper.

Among the hall of faith (not fame) in chapter 11 of the book of Hebrews no one comes close to Jesus' example. Whether we are speaking of Abraham or Moses or any other patriarch or prophet we find none of them, no matter how tremendous their walk with God, that can match our Lord. If you ever feel that the strain of life is too much, look to Jesus. Never set up a pastor or a church leader as the one you ultimately look to as your example, but let your eyes be on Jesus. I know that we pastors and leaders serve as examples, but you will always find fault with us and with any human examples of faithfulness to God, but you will never find a flaw in our Savior.

Truth is, as the book of Hebrews plainly tells us, there will never be another to match our Lord. He is the Author and Finisher of our faith. They say Michael Jordan was the greatest basketball player that ever lived and that may be true. They say that Mohammed Ali was the greatest boxer who ever lived and that may or may not be true. Some say the greatest evangelist who ever lived was a man named Billy Graham. The point is that there will probably come along another basketball player who is better than Jordan or a boxer better than Ali or an evangelist better than Graham; but there will never be anyone greater than Jesus. Our focus must be on Jesus our Lord, always. We owe no greater allegiance to anyone or anything than what we owe to him. We also must stay focused on...

Secondly: The Mission. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to focus on Jesus. If their focus was on Jesus, then their focus would also be on the mission Jesus gave to the church. One of the problems in the Corinthian church was that some were identifying with certain leaders rather than with Christ. This is why Paul includes this baptism discussion at this point in his letter. The Apostle Paul, while not diminishing the importance of baptism—our way of identifying with

Christ—points out that his commission was not to “baptize” but to preach the gospel (v. 17). He probably said this because the divisions in Corinth were along the lines of the person that had done the baptizing. I’m familiar with how this works because I have baptized 321 children and adults in my ministry.

Paul states his mission in precise terms. His mission was to preach the gospel. His mission was to gospelize, not to baptize (I might be making up that word 😊). The gospel is the death of Jesus, according to the Scriptures, his burial and resurrection from the dead, according to the Scriptures. We are called to keep our focus on the Messiah and on the Mission, but also on...

Third: The Message. The mission of the church is not to proclaim the latest and greatest fad or fashion of the world but to preach Christ crucified. That is the only message that will do the world any good. I saw that on a sign in front of a country church: We preach Christ crucified. Paul perhaps was seen as a fool by the world for preaching Christ crucified but he would rather be seen as a fool by the world than a fool by God for adhering to the vain and pointless philosophies of the culture around him.

Back in 2011 Gene Collier wrote in the soon to be defunct Post-Gazette about the upcoming AFC championship game the Steelers played against the NY Jets. On Monday before the game Rex Ryan said, “I have a huge amount of respect for Mike Tomlin. He’s one of my favorite coaches.” That was Monday. On Tuesday Tomlin lowered the temperature even more. “I love Rex,” said the Steelers coach. “He has a lot of fun with the media, but when you look past that, you see a great football coach.” So, Collier asks, “Seriously? This is how it’s going to be? I’m sorry, this won’t do. So I read the New York Post for something that smells halfway incendiary and the best I can come up with is a page six item reporting that Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman kept “a safe distance” from each other at a Golden Globes after-party. No specifics about what that distance would be and no explanation of what might happen should that distance be compromised. Do they go into some whirling wrestle-off like the Tasmanian Devil and Bugs Bunny?” writes Collier.

Truth be told, the culture in which we live doesn't usually consist of complimentary respectful exchanges from opposing parties. Except, I guess, in the violent sport of football! No! It's a dog-eat-dog world. Trash talking makes headlines. Getting along does not. One philosophy of our culture is to embrace relativism that claims there is no absolute truth, which by the way is itself a statement of absolute truth! Some say, if you are just sincere in what you believe that is enough. There is no right or wrong, just what you conceive of as right or wrong, which I've always believed ironically leads to even more conflict because no one steps up and says, "This is what is true."

News flash, Christian friends, the message matters! It is important to be sincere in our beliefs, but what we believe according to the Scriptures and why we believe it is vitally important, not just to us, but to anyone in the world who hears the Christian message through us. It's possible to be wrong and to be sincerely wrong! In other words, friends, the Messiah, the Mission, and the Message all matter, if we are going to get along!

The church has One Messiah: One Savior. The church has One Mission: To tell the good news to the whole world and make disciples. The church has One Message: The Message of the Cross which Paul summarizes in the key verse of chapter one of 1st Corinthians. It's the last verse of today's Scripture, verse 18 he writes: *"For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God."*

Let that be our Message—the good news of Jesus that is the power of God. That's what our neighbors need and that's quite simply what needs to be our main focus in ministry and mission here at Ken Mawr. Please understand that getting along with others in the church is not an end in itself! (repeat)

When we focus on the church's Messiah, the church's Mission and the church's Message, we will get along, so that through the church God's kingdom comes and God's will be done. God bless this witness to God's word! Amen.