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Title: OUR CALL TO UNITY

Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-24, ESV

Divisions in the Church

¹⁰"I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹²What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas [Peter],' or 'I follow Christ.' ¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."

Paul had planted this young church in Corinth on his first missionary journey. Some of the details are found in Acts chapter 18. Corinth was one of the most up and coming cities of the Roman Empire. It had a beautiful port that turned the city into both an economic powerhouse and a vacation destination. It attracted young, upwardly mobile people from all over the Empire. Amazon warehouses were going up everywhere and Apple had acquired several prestigious pieces of property. (Not quite, but you get the idea.) Sports were a big deal. It was a diverse city consisting mainly of the young and rich. The city boasted scores of temples to the Greek and Roman gods. The architecture was amazing. Paul had lived in this city for about a year and a half and led a bunch of young Corinthians to Christ. He LOVED this church. They represented some of his best work. He felt close with these people, BUT... AFTER PAUL LEFT, he started getting reports that this young church wasn't doing so well. He started seeing things on the Corinthians Facebook page that concerned him. Not really – but Chloe's household had informed Paul that there were quarrels among them. Word was out.

Paul observed 5 areas of concern. FIRST, there were lots of divisions among the body – factions, tribes, cliques. We'll look at those today. Paul deals with this problem in the first 4 chapters of this epistle. SECOND, they had sex and romance confusion, to put it mildly. Perhaps that's what you'd expect in a city full of young people, BUT... Sexual sin was happening IN THE CHURCH. A lot of members were like, "I mean, what's the big deal – everybody in Corinth seems to be okay with it." So, in chapters 5-7 Paul dishes out a lot of truth about sex, marriage, singleness, and divorce. THIRD, there were a lot of ill feelings over differences of conviction on what Christians were and were NOT allowed to do. Specifically, whether they could eat meat that had been offered to idols or not. I know that doesn't seem like a super relevant question to us, but in dealing with this Paul is going to lay out principles that help us in dealing with differences of conviction today, like – How to approach politics, differences in the best way to educate our children, whether to drink alcohol, whether or not to get vaccinated and wear masks. That's chapters 9-10. FOURTH, their church services were by many standards chaotic. People were interrupting the church services saying, "the Holy Spirit put something on my heart" and if they weren't recognized, they accused the leadership of quenching the Spirit. AND... People were shouting out in tongues in excess. So, in chapters 11 through 14 Paul lays out some guidelines for how to let the HOLY SPIRIT work in the church. FIFTH, there were some saying the resurrection of Jesus – and some of His miracles – were not that important. MORE important, THEY said, was what Jesus taught and how He lived. So, in chapter 15 Paul explains to them why the resurrection – an actual, physical, bodily resurrection – is everything to the Christian. In discussing each of these problems, Paul follows a pattern: He defines the problem and then leads us to that problem through the lens of the gospel. Paul basically tells them (and us) to: Take whatever is broken in your spiritual life and apply the gospel to it because faith in the gospel is the cure, regardless of the sickness. The GOSPEL: The truth that all of us stand hopelessly condemned before God but God in His grace sent His Son to die for our sin and now offers eternal life as a free gift to all who will receive it, humbly, by

faith.

EVERY church has its problems. There can never be a perfect church, in that, every church is made up of imperfect believers. There is a sense that much of what is written to the Corinthian church could be written to any and every church – OURS included. There is always something to disagree over. If it's only whether toilet paper should unroll over or under. Is it possible that people from such diverse backgrounds could actually be united? Any church reaching people has these types of problems. Because when you reach lost sheep, they come in smelling like...well SHEEP. Sometimes they leave sheep poop on the floor. It smells bad. We may step in it. It gets messy, AND... We get to deal with it. BUT... I'll take those problems all day if it means we are reaching people.

Tim Keller said there are **2 types of problems that churches have: 1. LIVING PROBLEMS.** Living problems – the church is reaching unchurched people who are bringing in all their issues. Because they reach across POLITICAL lines, the church has to wade through messy political issues. Because they reach across ETHNIC boundaries, the church has to wade through uncomfortable cultural clashes. Because they reach across FINANCIAL boundaries, the church has to discuss how the poor and the wealthy do life together. And the people you bring in don't always know how to talk or behave. EXAMPLE: I remember a gentleman sharing a testimony on a Wednesday night in Lanham, Maryland. He had come into a real experience with the Lord. He and his family had become part of the church. He shared how the Lord had been good to him all week, and he ended his testimony by saying – “God has been blessing me like Hell!” His heart was right. His verbiage could have been better. After service I told him, “If God has been blessing you like Hell, that's not a good blessing, in that, Hell offers NO blessing.” I told him, “If you have to use the word “Hell,” say something like, “God is blessing the Hell OUT of me ‘cause you don't want any part of Hell.” I'll take LIVING-church problems all day over the second type of problems, which is: **2. DYING PROBLEMS.** In a church with dying problems everyone is from the same political party, so no fights there. They are all of the same ethnicity, so no uncomfortable cultural clashes. Everyone is near the same income level, so they all think much the same about money. The PROBLEM is, a group of people who all look the same, act the same, vote the same is NOT necessarily a church. It would be better defined as a Christian Country Club – a dying one at that. So which church do you want to be a part of? A church with LIVING problems OR... A church with DYING problems. I'll take LIVING problems all day long! (You with me? AMEN!)

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.” This is Paul's defining statement for the first 4 chapters of 1 Corinthians (maybe the whole book). Notice that he invokes the name of the Lord which means that this is as weighty and serious as Paul ever speaks. Of course, Paul speaks with the authority of an apostle. Exactly what kind of divisions were in the Corinthian church? 1. Some were THEOLOGICAL in nature: Some were divided on what to do about a lot of the Old Testament laws. Some wanted to hang onto them. They equated it to holiness. Others wanted to celebrate their freedom and distance themselves from the Jewish law. They were also divided on how to interact with the world. Could they go to places where there were idols and eat food there, OR... Should they keep their distance? 2. Some were PERSONALITY driven. ¹¹*“For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹²What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I follow Paul,’ or ‘I follow Apollos,’ or ‘I follow Cephas [Peter],’ or ‘I follow Christ.’”* Some were like, “I'm a PAUL guy.” Paul was such a theologian, and his letters were awesome. Others were like, “Yeah, Paul is great with theology, but he's boring.” (BTW- Paul acknowledged in 2 Corinthians – *“I'm mighty in my writing but weak in my preaching.”* In Acts 20:9, we read about a man who fell out of a window because he fell asleep while Paul talked on and on... JOKE: You've heard the one about the usher who was seating people when a little old lady came in and asked to be seated in the front row. The usher said, “Oh Ma'am, I would NOT recommend that. Our preacher is SO boring. He will for sure put you to sleep, and if you are in the front row, everyone will see you.” The old lady said, “Do you know who I am?” He said, “No.” She said, “I'm the pastor's mother.” At which point the usher asked, “Do you know

who I am?" She said, "No." And the usher said, "Thank God," and walked away. Perhaps Paul's preaching style was one that only a mother could love. Some people were like "I'm an APOLLOS guy." Apollos was the preacher that followed Paul. He was an excellent speaker, even though theologically sometimes he'd get off and had to be corrected by some other leader. But the man could preach! There was another group that felt that way about PETER (or Cephas). They may have been the legalists. Then there was the group that declared, "I'm a JESUS guy." Nearly every church as someone who says, "I'm not into your theology books or favorite preachers. Just me and MY BIBLE." BTW – Some commentators say this group might have been the most arrogant group, because they assumed they didn't need the church – just them and Jesus. You can do the right thing or be a part of the proper group for the wrong reason or in the wrong way. (SIDE NOTE) These verses help me to understand something else here. There were 4 factions here: Paul, Apollos, Peter & Jesus. Jesus was PERFECT. He never sinned. Never did ANY man teach like Jesus. Yet there were 3 groups that chose others over Jesus! Some things don't make sense and you can't readily explain them.

In reading the text, there's a real reason for the division. Paul precisely states the problem. The real problem wasn't Paul, Apollos, Peter, or Christ. IT WAS EGO. EGO leads to strife and quarreling. It's characteristic, in Romans 1:29, of the old life, before we ever found Christ. In Galatians 5:20, it's the work of the flesh. The problem with the Corinthian believers is that they were a bunch of ego-centered, rather than CHRIST-centered people. The story is told that one of Abraham Lincoln's neighbors saw him lugging his two small sons down the street. Both boys were bawling loudly. The neighbor asked, "What's the matter?" Lincoln answered, "Just what's the matter with the whole world...I've got 3 walnuts, and each wants 2!" Lincoln saw mirrored the selfishness and the strife that plagues the world. Ego. WHAT I WANT.

Are these same divisions at work today? Of course. 1. You've got the BIBLE KNOWLEDGE Guy. They complain that there's not enough meat in the sermon. Sometimes this group can be self-centered. All they want from church is for it to be a classroom that puffs up their heads with theological knowledge. Sometimes there is a sense of pride and self-centeredness at work. Their interest isn't in reaching people. Not much into spiritual growth. 2. Others are like, "No, I'm the EXPERIENCE Guy." If you don't get goosebumps at some point in the sermon, OR... The altars weren't full of weeping people, so it wasn't a spirit-filled sermon. 3. Others are a TAKE CARE OF THE BODY Guy. Church ought to be about discipleship and doing life together. 4. Others are like, "I'm a MISSIONS AND EVANGELISM Guy. Churches should only be measured by how fervently they are getting the gospel out. 5. Others are like "I'm a SOCIAL JUSTICE Guy." I'm all about loving our community. Now, there is truth in all of these, and a gospel-loving church pursues all of them. We try to. I don't think there is anything wrong with being attracted to one of those – having a proclivity toward it – that might be part of your personal gifting. WHAT'S WRONG IS when those preferences are accompanied by a spirit of division, self-righteousness, or separation. A spirit of division would be rather easy at Marlowe. "I am of the Pastor Norm Camp." "I prefer Pastor Bennett." "I'm of Pastor Joe's camp." "I'm part of Pastor Sundy's group." "I'm in the Rimmer crowd." "I love Pastor Smith." If you are really spiritual, you are of the Pastor----I'm not going there. Any fickle people here? I remember when I first came to Marlowe, a particular lady addressed me by saying, "Pastor, I do like YOU, but I LOVE Pastor (she filled in his name). HE is my FAVORITE." I was cool and said that I understood – After all, he had been her pastor for a long time. They had a long-standing relationship. I got it, but why couldn't she have just told me how much she loved that pastor. Why did she feel the need to say she liked me, but LOVED him? I guess she had this need to let me know that I hadn't measured up to her former pastor. A few months passed and her FAVORITE pastor got in trouble and was arrested. After she found out, she asked if I knew what he did. I said, "I did." She asked, "How did you find out?" I told her, "It was in the newspaper, on radio, and TV a month ago." Then she said to me, "I NEVER did like him." That conversation taught me a few things. If someone LOVES you today, know that that might not be the case tomorrow. If someone doesn't love you today, there's still hope. Many people ARE fickle. That is, they are prone to change, especially regarding loyalties or affection. Paul gives us 4 correctives to this spirit of division.

1. UNDERSTAND UNITY (v. 10). *"...be united in the same mind and the same judgment (same conviction). Be*

united how? By magically starting to agree on everything? No. Paul doesn't even say, "Guys, let me come and settle all these disagreements and then you will be unified." No, he says, "Be of the same understanding and the same conviction about THE GOSPEL." A lot of people call for unity in the church but often they don't seem to know what it is. FOR PAUL – Unity is NOT uniformity. It's not where everyone in the church agrees on everything. The New Testament church is a church where Jesus is so large that it makes disagreements on secondary things less important. Unity IS having the same conviction about the gospel, the same understanding about its importance, and then attempting to think about everything else in line with that.

2. Corrective #2: EMBRACE GRACE (v. 13-24). Here's the main point. Let me read several verses. ¹³*"Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?"* ¹⁴*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,* ¹⁵*so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.* ¹⁶*(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)* ¹⁷*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."* ²⁰*"Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?"* ²¹*For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.* ²²*For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom,* ²³*but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles,* ²⁴*but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.* ²⁵*For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men."* Here Paul identifies several things that DO NOT bring salvation: 1. Jesus didn't save the world through PHILOSOPHICAL WISDOM. Salvation wasn't figured out by a bunch of philosophers who put their heads to it. While the educated were pondering life in Athens and Jerusalem, salvation appeared to a bunch of poorly educated shepherds in one of the poorest towns of Israel. 2. Jesus didn't save the world through EARTHLY SUCCESS. That's what the Jews wanted – earthly SIGNS of success that validated the Messiah. The Jews of that day sought after SIGNS. Military might. Financial success. But Jesus wasn't rich. He never commanded an army. He never really had a large following. At his death, he had just over 100 followers and they scattered when he died. 3. Jesus didn't even save the world through MODELING OBEDIENCE TO THE LAW. The ones who best obeyed the law, the Pharisees, were his biggest opponents. It was blue-collar workers, fishermen and carpenters and moral misfits like tax collectors and prostitutes that first believed Jesus. 4. Jesus didn't even save the world through the impartation of BIBLICAL WISDOM. Listen closely to this one because I don't want you to misunderstand. Teaching is important. It is what I strive to do regularly and how we learn the gospel. But it WAS NOT Jesus' wisdom that saved us. It was WHAT JESUS DID that saved us. What was Jesus' most famous teaching? The SERMON ON THE MOUNT. Yet 2 Gospels didn't even record it. I don't know of a single parable told in all 4 Gospels. Only 2 of the Gospels tell of JESUS' BIRTH. Only 2 of the Gospels tell of HIS TEMPTATION. John's Gospel doesn't mention the LAST SUPPER. Neither Matthew nor John mentions the ASCENSION. HOWEVER, ALL 4 GOSPELS record JESUS' BETRAYAL, His TRIAL, the INSCRIPTION ON THE CROSS, the CRUCIFIXION, and the RESURRECTION. So, what does that show us about what the Gospel writers see as essential? It is FAITH IN HIS WORK, not knowledge of His teaching that saves us. That doesn't mean those things aren't important, just that God – did NOT save us by sending down a TEACHER to educate us... Or a POLITICIAN to reform us... Or a LIFE-COACH to help us get it together... Or a MILITARY LEADER to protect us. HE SENT DOWN A SUBSTITUTE TO DIE FOR US – To live the life that we were supposed to live AND... Die the death we were condemned to die. Here Paul declared that we are saved through the foolishness of preaching. My goal in preaching is not to fill your head with enough knowledge that you will be acceptable to God, OR... To give you enough practical wisdom that you will have no more problems in life. MY goal is for you to see the beauty and sufficiency of Jesus Christ in all that HE DID FOR YOU and that you would learn to trust and love Him. You say, "What does that have to do with unity?" Listen – when you embrace this message of GRACE – REALLY EMBRACE IT – the spirit of divisiveness leaves you. Behind divisiveness always lurks a spirit of pride and self-justification. You are attracted to certain things because they make you feel superior to others. BUT we aren't saved by our Biblical knowledge, being zealous for social justice or even by

being successful in ministry. We aren't saved by those things. **We are saved by CHRIST and CHRIST ALONE!** At the end of the day, all my wisdom and Bible knowledge and success and social justice are filthy rags. Or to use Paul's word, *scubala* – DUNG, to God. I'm saved by Christ who became my righteousness and wisdom and success, and I get all of those things in Him. When you embrace that, you'll find that your pride crumbles and the spirit of divisiveness leaves. We sometimes struggle with grace because we want to earn our way to God. We try to come up with something that sets us apart and makes us worthy. Who doesn't like a trophy? Who doesn't like to be told they are the best or coming in first place? Who doesn't like being rewarded for a good job or hard work? BUT... When you come to the place where you recognize that you have no power, no righteousness, no wisdom except what is given in Christ – that takes the spirit of divisiveness right out of you.

3. ENLARGE CHRIST (v. 13a). In verse 13 Paul says, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?... He's asking – Who is your salvation? CHRIST! It's ALL ABOUT HIM! Paul isn't saying that when you become a Christian that your preferences or differences of perspective just go away, just that they become LESS important. If you are dividing over your preferences and differences, that is a certain sign that those secondary things are too large in your heart and your identity in Christ is too small. John 3:30 says, "*He must increase, I must decrease.*" If you ever get the chance, go to a WVU football game, and try to get a seat in the middle of the fan section. (Take me along if you like.) It generally feels like everyone is cheering for Team WVU. If you look around that stadium you would see a host of people who would be divided on a million other topics, but in that stadium for 3 hours or so, they are united around the importance of WVU football. When WVU is doing well, random people are high-fivin' and hugging other random people. That's sort of what the gospel should be like. We should be so overwhelmed with Jesus that other differences are less relevant. When we come to church, our commonality in Jesus outweighs any secondary perspective or preference.

4. WEAN YOURSELF OFF OF CELEBRITY (v. 13b). Throughout these verses Paul keeps asking, "What significance do these earthly leaders have in your spiritual identity? Are you baptized in the name of Paul? Or Apollos? Or Peter? Are you dependent on one of them for your salvation?" I suppose celebrity has always been a part of the Christian church, and I doubt it will go away. (Many church celebrities have fallen, but that hasn't stopped church celebrities.) Larger than life leaders can have a big impact on your spiritual growth. As we have seen today, it was present in the early church. In our social media age, celebrity has taken on new levels. Here's the thing – associating yourself with some celebrity preacher may give you a sense of identity, BUT... Paul says you don't need to be set apart by anyone but Jesus. All the righteousness and power you need is in Him. Sure, there are earthly leaders who may be helpful to you on your earthly journey, and you may gravitate toward some, BUT... You aren't to be dependent upon them. Know that they are just temporary tools in God's hands. I love verse 1 of Psalm 23. How's it start? "*The LORD is my shepherd...*" Who is the Shepherd of your soul? THE LORD! Is it Paul? NO! Is it Apollos? NO! Is it Peter? NO! I trust that JESUS is the shepherd of your soul.

CONCLUSION. George Wood, former General Superintendent of the Assemblies of God, told this story of his childhood. He was 10 years old when his father was pastoring a small church in Oklahoma. There arose in that part of the country a particular movement that placed a strong emphasis on EXTERNAL EXUBERANCE as a mark of the Holy Spirit. That movement swept over the area and divided their church. In those days, in that region of the country, the pastor's salary was determined by the Sunday morning tithes and offerings. Sunday morning's offering belonged to the pastor. Sunday evening's offering belonged to the church. The family knew the church division was serious when the pastor's salary went down to \$7. One night at the altar, as a 10-year-old kid, George saw one of the church deacons confront his father with a clenched fist, demanding that his father resign the church, because he was hindering the power of God from operating. Out of that division God called George into ministry. That division was ultimately dealt with, and that church continues today. I would suppose that some of us here today may have had heartrending experiences, seeing divisions in churches. I hate to think of the many, many times the Father's heart has been broken because of division in His church – fighting among the brethren. I don't think anything ever hurt my mother's heart more than disunity among

her children. Division marked this Corinthian church. Verse 9 of chapter 1 reads: “*God is faithful, by whom YOU WERE CALLED INTO THE FELLOWSHIP of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*” Fellowship is *koinonia*. Here was a church lacking in fellowship and *koinonia*. Know that God has called US to FELLOWSHIP and away from division. HE must increase; I must decrease. If we should ALL give Christ His rightful place in our hearts, in our lives, in our families and our church – division would never be named among us.