

FIGHTING AND FEUDING
1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Oh, the names change, but the story could be retold a thousand times in a hundred different churches.

In 1981, Tim Smith, who had been a member of a church in a Dallas suburb for about five years, noticed that the position of superintendent of Sunday School became available. Tim has been an excellent Sunday School teacher, and he thought he'd be ideal to fill this role – this important role in his church. He went to the pastor and shared his vision, his desire to serve, and his calling toward this position. But to his great disappointment, the pastor and minister of education later chose someone else to serve in that important post.

Tim was so offended that he wasn't offered the job. But he didn't go to the pastor or the minister of education to talk about it. He just started mumbling and grumbling among the flock and the fold. In fact, he began to point out the weaknesses of the decisions of the new Sunday School superintendent. He started attending church and less. Now he was Sunday mornings only, whereas before he had been faithful in all of the services.

Jeff Roberts, another Sunday School teacher, began to notice that Tim was acting strangely. After church one Sunday, he invited Tim out to lunch.

“Is everything okay, Tim? I've noticed that you've been absent a lot lately, and I get the feeling that something is just not right at church.”

“You might say that,” Tim said sarcastically. “I'm fed up with that stupid church and its immature leadership. The Sunday School program stinks and the pastor couldn't preach his way out of a wet paper bag. The people are unloving, and they have their priorities all mixed up. I'm just fed up and not sure I'm going to take any more. I'm thinking about leaving.”

Jeff was shocked. “I can't believe what I'm hearing. Just a few weeks ago you were excited about the church. You used to brag to everybody that it was the greatest church in town. You used to talk about how loving our people are. How your Sunday School class cared for each other. What's happened to change all this?”

“It's not me,” Tim recoiled. “It's the church that's changed. Besides the incompetence of the Sunday School program, let me tell you a few things I'm upset about.”

For an hour, Jeff was amazed as Tim reeled off complaint after complaint. And, to be honest, there was some truth to much of what he said. But it was the caustic, negative spin he put on the facts,

rather than the facts themselves, that was so alarming. In fact, by the end, Jeff began to empathize with Tim's criticisms. It wasn't long until Jeff felt himself impacted by the conversation, and he began to have a few negative attitudes himself. And he eventually resigned from teaching Sunday School as well. (Story adapted and significantly modified from Dale A. Robbins sermon, "Sowing and Reaping The Seeds of Discord")

Congregation, what I've grown to learn through over 30 years of pastoring is that church problems aren't usually theological in nature. They are usually about pride, power, and position. They are most often about someone's bruised ego. They are mostly about spiritual immaturity, to be honest.

Let me compare Tim's situation with another situation. This one I know to be factual.

The First Baptist Church of Hemphill, Texas, was voting on whether to construct a new, state-of-the-art children's building which would stand out in that community as a testimony of the church's love for children and the importance of teaching them the word of God. There was a man there by the name of Paul. The church had its Wednesday evening discussion about the project. Paul spoke against such a lavish building. He thought there were some cheaper ways to accomplish the same goal.

After the discussion where Paul had very kindly, but openly, shared his concerns, the church voted. It was the whole church against Paul. He was the sole voice of dissent when it came to the new building project. At the end of the discussion, Paul walked up to the pastor, my friend Bobby Dagnel, now at the First Baptist Church of Lubbock, and handed him the largest single contribution toward the project he'd just voted against.

"Why Paul," the pastor said, "I thought you were against building the children's building."

"Oh I was," Paul replied. "But what I think doesn't matter anymore. The church has spoken. I'm part of the church, so I'm part of the project. Here's my contribution." No more words and negativity were spoken by Paul as he undergirded that particular ministry of his church.

Tim or Paul. Two individuals. One incredibly spiritually mature. And the other acting like a child left out at recess when the baseball teams are picked.

The Apostle Paul said: "If there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interest, but also for the interest of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on the cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed upon Him a name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those

who are in heaven, and on earth, and under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:1-11)

This morning, we are beginning a series in 1 Corinthians.

When a church fights and feuds, when a church is not unified, when there are power struggles within, the world listens to our message and says, “No thanks. I don’t want to hear any more of that.”

But when the church is together, when the people work together and church leaders see themselves as servants rather than power-brokers or position-seekers, the world hears beautiful music and is drawn inside from the noisy streets to the harmonious and unified sounds of community, of church.

There are Baptists. There are Methodists. There are Episcopalians. There are Presbyterians and Lutherans and Congregationalists. There are Disciples of Christ and Church of Christ. There are Mennonites. Actually, there are many different kinds of Baptists. New denominations spring up. Old denominations split up and form new branches.

When Jesus took the bread in 1 Corinthians 11 and said, “This is my body which is broken for you,” it is hard to believe that even in His wildest dreams he foresaw the tragic and ludicrous brokenness of the church as His body. There is no reason why everyone should be a Christian the same way, and every reason to leave room for differences. But if all the competing factions of Christendom were to give as much of themselves to the high calling and holy hope that unites them as they do now to the relative inconsequentialities that divide them, the church would look more like the kingdom of God for a change and less like an ungodly mess. (Frederick Buechner, “Denominations,” *Whistling in the Dark: An ABC Theologized*, p. 33, 35).

Why is the church so discordant today? Why do we make noise instead of music?

Why was the church so discordant in Paul’s day?

The sad news is that we haven’t learned, we haven’t changed. We do the same things they did. We take sides. We get behind leaders. Leaders fight for position and power. And the church that is in the world today, denominations in the world today, haven’t changed one bit since the first century when Paul took parchment in hand and penned to the people in Corinth. His heart was broken over the fractures in fellowship in Corinth.

We find Paul’s fundamental theme sounded loudly in 1:10.

I appeal to you, brothers and sister, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and the same judgment.

Everything follows this. Everything depends upon their unity.

The word that he uses here for their unification, when he says they must be made complete in verse 10, has the implication that he wants to restore them to a prior condition, of repairing something that has fallen into disarray.

Look at Mark 1:19. The same thing happens in Matthew's gospel. "And going on a little farther, He saw James the son of Zebedee, and John his brother, who were also in the boat mending the nets."

There is the word – "mending" the nets. That word, "mending," is the word used here in 1 Corinthians for calling the people to unity, calling them to completeness. Fractured fishing nets don't catch any fish. But neither do broken churches.

Paul had left them whole. He had left them complete. And now he has learned from Chloe's people, to his dismay, that quarrels are splitting the church. There are factions in the fellowship.

We don't know much about the woman named Chloe. We don't know whether she lived in Corinth or in Ephesus, from where Paul writes. But we can assume that her emissaries had traveled between the two cities on business and had brought Paul news of disturbing developments within the Corinthian Christian community. Chloe's people bring the report that there are *schismata*, from which we derive the English word schism. There are divisions in the church.

These divisions are identifying with various leaders in the Christian community. There is a "Paul group." There is an "Apollos group." There is a "Peter group." And there is a "Christ group." The slogans, "I'm of Paul," or "I'm of Cephas," have probably spontaneously arisen within the vying groups, for Paul himself was unaware of the existence of a party by his own name. Perhaps "those of Paul" were those who had stood by him in the face of opposition. Apollos, as we know from Acts, was a learned and eloquent man who Paul saw as a co-worker and not a competitor. The presence of Peter is less certain, but some feel like he and his wife had traveled through Corinth. And others were even claiming, "I follow Christ."

The truth of the matter is that the parties were probably not very well defined, not very well organized – rather, just part of the undertow of the power play between the people.

In verse 13, Paul asks a stunning question. "Has Christ been divided?"

Has Christ been divided up and parceled out? Is Christ a commodity or possession to be haggled over, so that this one body, this church of Christ in Corinth (and of course the image of the body, the one body, will play prominently in future chapters), has been fragmented into interest groups? Was Paul crucified for you? You weren't baptized in my name, were you?

You see, the church depends entirely upon Jesus' death on the cross. Their little petty rivalries and preferences for different preachers are now seen in their true light; they are absurd. Paul says there is not even a particularly strong tie between the one baptized and the one doing the baptizing. Paul said, "I can't even remember who I've baptized. I have been sent to preach the gospel."

The church in Corinth was a sorry mess. They had gotten factions and fighting down to a fine art. No wonder Paul appealed for agreement and unity. But he had to do it at Galatia and Ephesus and Philippi and Colossae, too. And Peter had some of the same concerns.

But in the end, they had missed their priority of preaching the gospel.

I want to say a few things this morning about fractures in the fellowship.

I. When the fellowship fractures, nobody wins.

People are hurt. People become discouraged, demoralized. Pastors are almost always bruised and broken. Some walk away from the ministry, never to return. There is wreckage there for the community to see. A few people who end up with the keys to the building may think they have come out on top and feel good about the shake-up. But their victory is a shallow one, indeed. It is delusion of the first order, for when the body of Christ is fractured, when the fellowship is broken, there are no winners. So what if Apollus' group comes out on top in Corinth. What have they done? They have distanced themselves from the other three-quarters of the body of Christ in the city of Corinth. They might maneuver their way to picking the preacher and setting the budget, but, in the end, they, too, lose. The whole church loses. The church loses its power, loses influence.

In fact, as soon as the powers of darkness can get a church embroiled in conflict, in power struggles, then, indeed, that church has already been rendered ineffective for the kingdom of God.

There is a cemetery in Montgomery County, Alabama, called the Bethel Cemetery. For decades the cemetery was completely buried beneath dense layers of undergrowth, shrouded by shrubs and concealed by years of inattention. Full of thickets and thistles, people were hardly aware of the cemetery's existence – until the volunteers of another Baptist church stepped in, cleaned up, and removed the overgrowth to find the tombstones still standing, tombstones from the 1800s. You can go today to Montgomery County, to the east side of US Highway 31, and find the sign which says, "Bethel Cemetery 1818."

The cemetery was connected to a church. The story behind the cemetery is the story behind the church. The Bethel Cemetery was part of the Bethel Baptist Church, which was constituted in 1819, the same year that Alabama actually acquired statehood.

Why is the cemetery overgrown? Why is the church building no longer even standing on the property? Why is the whole thing shrouded in shrubbery and covered by camouflage? All that remains of the church is a cemetery, is death – an ironic marker to the church's own death.

Well, it happened in 1837. The Bethel church had a large attendance. It was one of four churches in Montgomery County – kind of like the four parties in Corinth. But in 1837, the church became the focal point of a major split in Baptist life. And the point of conflict was missions. Those who embraced an anti-missions theology voted to exclude the Missionary Baptist brethren. In fact, there is a stone marker which commemorates the church split.

The marker reads, “Bethel Baptist Church, February 13, 1819; Organizers: Elder Electus Thompson, James McLemore, Edward Mosley; Builder: George Shackelford.” And then it says, “Split between Primitive and Missionary 1837.”

The decision at the church conference in 1837 brought an inevitable decline in membership. Membership continued to falter and fail. The 1823 frame building began to fall into disrepair. It was eventually dismantled and removed. That church began a course in 1837 from which it could never escape. (www.pintlalabaptist.com/bethel.cfm)

Nobody wins. The body of Christ is damaged. The fractured fishing nets don't catch any fish, neither for father Zebedee and his sons nor for the people of God.

II. The second thing I want to say about church disharmony is that it often occurs over the smallest things.

In fact, I daresay that genuine theological concerns account for only a small portion of the fractions in fellowship. **The Hartford Institute of Religion Research notes that 51% of congregations have had serious conflict within the last three years. (IOW, Fall 2003).** Over half the churches have had serious conflict within the last three year. At the root of most of those conflicts is not some great theological debate but, rather, a power struggle between immature people. And even when the issues are theological, they are blown way out of proportion. Paul says he wouldn't even let the issue of baptism stand in the way. Rather, he said, he was going to preach the cross of Christ Jesus.

“Stop being fractured in fellowship and focus on the preaching of Christ Jesus.” Paul is saying.

There is a lot of room in the First Baptist Church for you to believe differently than the pastor does. A lot of room. There are some essentials, or fundamentals of the faith that we all must embrace to be in positions of leadership. But beyond that, most things are not worth the fight.

Usually, power struggles are couched in theological terms. Some raise the flag of war, declaring they are fighting for the foundations of the faith. More often than not, at least in Baptist churches, everybody there agrees that Christ is the unique, only begotten Son of God. Everybody there believes He lived a perfect life and died a sacrificial death to pay for our sins. Everybody believes in His bodily, physical resurrection. Everybody believes He is coming again. Everybody accepts the tenets of the preached gospel of the Apostles. Everybody accepts that we ought to live Godly lives, following after His footsteps. Everything else is peripheral.

I saw a picture of the piano bench with my own eyes. It wasn't much to look at, but it split the body of Christ.

III. Church splits are not inevitable.

You might suppose that if you put people and passions and programs and power into one pot that you are going to emerge with a problem. And, quite frankly, often you do. But it doesn't have to be. If all of us would focus on the work of the kingdom of God, the centrality of the cross of Christ

Jesus, and put aside our own power struggles, our own frustrations at work, our own frustrations in our household – if we all would live lives that exuded the fruit of the spirit, that is, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, we would never have a problem.

First Baptist Church of Amarillo has a wonderful history as a people of unity, a people of one voice. Oh, we don't all agree about everything – never have, never will. Don't have to. Don't even need to strive to see eye-to-eye. One of the beautiful things about being a Baptist is that you don't have to agree with any other Baptist about all things. You are free to interpret scripture. You are free to live your life as your conscience dictates within the community setting. That's the wonderful part about being a Baptist.

And while we don't all have to agree, we don't all have to be in unison, we do have to be in unity. We don't have to be in unison, but we do have to be in unity. This church has stood since 1889, well over a century, as a leader in this community to say, "The people of God can work together with a missionary zeal to change the world in the name of Christ." May it always be. Always guard the unity of the church, for it is a priceless treasure. I preach this sermon at the beginning of our 1 Corinthians series not because there is any disharmony, but because there is harmony at First Baptist Church of Amarillo. Realizing the rarity of our unified spirit, we must guard it at all cost.

Jesus said, "Love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

Proverbs 6:16-19

There are six things which the Lord hates,
Yes, seven which are an abomination to Him:
Haughty eyes, a lying tongue,
And hands that shed innocent blood,
A heart that devises wicked plans,
Feet that run rapidly to evil,
A false witness who utters lies,
And one who spreads strife among brother.