

“Killing Competition in Church”

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

I want to talk today about an important topic. What makes for relational breakdown?

We all suffer from this. What's the answer? What's the solution for this?

In his farewell address when he voluntarily relinquished power, which was unprecedented at that time, George Washington pleaded with our nation not to become divided, not to get separated and factional. He talked about the danger of a partisan spirit. This is what he said.

"[A partisan spirit] serves always to distract the public councils and enfeeble the public administration. It agitates the community with ill-founded jealousies and false alarms, kindles the animosity of one part against another, foment occasionally riot and insurrection." What do you think George would say if he could see us today?

These days our country is divided by progressive versus populist, red state versus blue state, left versus right, global versus nationalist). Wouldn't it be great if we could just make everybody who disagrees with us politically move away? No! The correct answer is, "No." That is not the solution.

Where can you find a place where everybody just gets along? There are no factions. There are no divisions. There are no complaints. There is no grumbling. There is no small-mindedness. There are no petty quarrels. There are no egos battling. Thank God for the church, although no church I've ever been a part of, because I bring all of those problems with me.

This topic is huge for everybody in our nation and in our world. We've been studying this quite remarkable book. It's called 1 Corinthians. This is a letter Paul wrote a couple thousand years ago to a church in Corinth. We've seen how much Corinth was like where we live. If you haven't checked it out yet, I'd invite you to go online and listen to the first two messages in this series. Corinth was a lot like us. It was a startup culture rebuilt by Rome generating unprecedented wealth and enormously competitive with lots of

people trying to climb the ladder and status obsessed. Paul brings to it this message of Jesus, all of the wisdom that Jesus brought to earth.

In these words, he lays out the real reason why he's writing to Corinth. The reason is they're actually having a relational meltdown with factions, divisions, quarrels, and so. Here's what he says. ***"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters..."*** He's using family language now. ***"...in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you."***

Then, he describes how the relationship breakdown is happening. ***"What I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.'"***

He comes back to this a little later. ***"You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere humans? For when one says, 'I follow Paul,' and another, 'I follow Apollos,' are you not mere human beings?"*** That is, operating apart from God's power and God's direction. People are dividing the church, for crying out loud, over which teacher they like best.

Paul started the church, and sometime later Apollos comes along, and he's apparently a great, riveting speaker. He's described in the book of Acts by a word that means educated or eloquent or possibly both. Paul, maybe not so much. We don't know what Paul spoke like. It's very interesting that in his second letter to Corinth, Paul writes, ***"For some say, 'His [Paul's] letters are weighty and forceful, but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing.'"***

How do you think Paul feels when he hears that? Paul may have been a boring speaker. One time we read this in Acts. Paul was speaking in an upper room. There were people gathered together. A kid named Eutychus is sitting in a window sill listening,

and the text says, as Paul goes on and on, Eutychus actually falls asleep. That's always a depressing thing to have happen when you're talking. Eutychus falls out the window, lands on the ground several stories below, and dies.

"Paul, your talks aren't killing it; they're killing people!" Paul goes downstairs, picks this dead guy up in his arms, and brings him back to life.

This comparison thing goes on, and some people say, "I prefer Peter." Maybe they could relate to Peter more. Some people say, "I follow Jesus." Of course, that's the churchy thing to say, and it's always the right answer.

The surface problem is factions and divisions, but there is a deeper problem, and this gets to you and to me and why there are factions in this world and how they get healed. I want to take a little look beneath the surface at Corinth. Remember, the gospel, Jesus, and the way of the cross are brand new for Corinth, but comparing and wanting to climb a ladder and wanting to have status and wanting to be in the best group and be on the inside is not new to Corinth. It's not new to us.

Paul is battling a mindset and a cultural practice that involved speakers coming to Corinth that will help us understand what's going on here. In ancient Greece, rhetoric (the ability to command language in order to gain a hearing) was highly valued.

By the time St. Paul lived, the ability to use language had morphed into a kind of traveling celebrity speakers who were known as sophists. That comes from *sophía*, the Greek word for wisdom. Paul uses the term wisdom, he is talking about the "wisdom" or the "eloquence" that these sages or sophists would use to gain status for themselves. They were like solo performers with dazzling verbal skills. These guys were kind of a combination of hip-hop artists, pundits, and rock stars, and they could dazzle people with their verbal skills. They could charm you. They could alarm you. They could make a crowd jump to its feet and cheer them on. They would compete with each other. Corinth had a 14,000-seat theater, so it was a natural place for this.

They were rock stars, and they mastered the art of winning glory, wealth, fame, and honor. One guy, Philostratus, wrote the groupies of another sophist and got so mad at insults from a rival of his they had their slaves beat that rival sophist to death. That's how fierce the rivalry was.

There's another sophist named Licinius who actually got paid 400 silver drachmas (that's more than a year's pay for a Roman soldier) for one single performance. That's how fabulous he was. These rock stars, these sophists, used their speech to get rich.

There would be really wealthy people in Corinth who would become their patrons who would sponsor these guys. Then, these sophists would flatter their patrons and say whatever their patrons wanted to hear. They would get wealth and have leisure and be looked up to. That's where status was.

Paul, on the other hand, intentionally chose to earn his own money making tents like a slave, which is an insult to these wealthy people who want to sponsor him, but he does that so he can be free to speak the gospel with no strings attached and to challenge people who had resources who weren't caring for the poor and so on.

When some Corinthians start this new thing called the church and this man named Paul comes along to speak to them and he has quite a remarkable message, they think, "I know what this is! I know how this deal works. He's one of them." Paul has to say, "No, you don't. You have no idea." He comes and speaks and has this remarkable message, but he does these odd things. He doesn't have a patron. He doesn't get money.

Paul says, "Apollos is not my rival. I'm not in competition with him. He's my partner. He's my brother. Everybody who is helped by him is a win for me." To treat the cross and to treat the church as a vehicle for self-promotion or reputation or self-seeking or the gratification of the ego of anybody is to turn the cross upside down and empty the church of everything it is supposed to offer.

And this leads me to ask you: Can we say in this church it is Jesus and the cross that matter above all else? Can we say in this church we will not have disunity over stupid stuff? That we will not

have disunity over preference for different preachers, or a preference for different styles of music, or preferences for different instruments, or different styles of clothing, or the use or nonuse of different kinds of technology? That we will not have disunity over any individual's pet ideas or pet programs, or furniture, or formal versus informal, or planned versus spontaneous, or young versus old?

Whether you are in the hip category or the hip replacement category, we will find our unity in the person of Jesus and the way of the cross. Can we agree on that as a church? It is so ironic. Jesus came as the Messiah, but the problem was everybody thought, "I know what that is! That's power. That's success. That's the dazzling ability to control." Jesus had to teach everybody, "No, it's the way of humbling, self-sacrificing love." And eventually it killed Him on a cross.

Then, Paul comes to Corinth as an apostle, and everybody says, "I know what that's all about! That's all about power and success and the ability to gain control," and Paul has to reeducate them all in the way of humble, self-sacrificing servant low-status love.

At Corinth... This is just human nature. This is us. They could turn anything, even good things, into a source of division because all of this ego stuff gets involved.

Paul goes on. ***"Is Christ divided?"*** This is why the unity of the church care for each other by living as servants is the signature of the church. ***"Is Christ divided?"*** We are the body of Christ. A body divided cannot live.

Paul asks, ***"Was Paul crucified for you?"*** No, Jesus was. ***"Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you..."*** Then, he goes on this little riff of baptism. ***"...except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.)"***

Why is he getting into this Baptism stuff? In Corinth, followers of these celebrity, rock-star sages would claim a special relationship

with their guy or with their leader, and they would want to have status through that. "He's my special guy." Baptism was being turned into that in Corinth. Church people were starting to use who they got baptized by as a way of saying, "I get some of his status because he's my guy. I'm connected with him. Who did you get baptized by?"

The main thing that happens in baptism, by the way, is I die. My ego dies. Paul writes, "***Don't you all know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death?***" And the life we get is Christ's life. He forgives. He gives you new desires. He gives you heaven to come. And in response – in gratitude – you now live to honor Him. When we do that as Christians – when we all let our selfish ego die, and we all live to thank Jesus and honor Him, then this builds love for one another. This is the secret that our world is so desperately seeking for.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, unity and harmony and community are not a product of being with people who are like us or who have been educated about us. We often think what kills relationships are differences, and if we just had the same ideology or if we all had the same politics or if we all had the same identity or if we all had the same culture or if we all had the same ethnicity or if we could educate people about those differences, that would make everything okay, but you try a little experiment.

Get a whole group of people together who are all in the same political party, all have the same ideology, the same education, the same culture, the same language, the same ethnicity, even the same gender, and it will not be a utopia, because the problem is not differences of opinion. The problem is the sinful human heart. It is the stubborn, self-seeking, me-first ego. It is evil in me and you, to will the bad. That we cannot fix – only Jesus can.

That is why what people need and what relationships need is to be brought to the cross. At the cross I die to my need to get my own way. At the cross I die to the way I sin and damage other people, even people I want to love, and at the cross I come alive to God's

love. Fellowship, relationships, love in the Church always begins with self-giving love.

Every family begins this way. A mom gives nine months of her life, of her body, to make a tiny, little person. God's family begins with self-giving love. **"...God so loved the world that he gave..."**

Jesus said, **"I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself,"** and He said this to show the kind of death He was going to die. He would be lifted up on the cross. What a strange idea! What a strange idea! I'm going to heal this broken, sorry, violent, hate-filled world, not with a new educational movement, not with a new program, not by starting the perfect country with the perfect political system. Instead, Jesus said, "I'm going to die. I'm going to die on a cross and heal fractured humanity." What a strange idea! Who would think that up?

Yet, He was right. Jesus died on a cross, and He gave birth to a community the likes of which not only had never been seen, but nobody had ever thought of before. There had never been anything like the Church of Jesus Christ before – where male and female, Jew and Gentile, Rich and poor, Slave and free, live in a unity of self-sacrificing love. There's not a person for whom Jesus did not die. Who thinks up something like that?

This is what Paul knows and this is why he writes, **"For Christ did not send me to baptize..."** You understand that he means, "He didn't send me to build my own fame, my status, get rich, and have my groupies praise me." No!

Christ sent me **"... to preach the gospel..."** The good news of the availability of life now with God. **"...not with wisdom and eloquence** [in ways that will build me up], **lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."** How in the world can a cross, a means of execution, have power? Because it is the plan, the symbol, the vehicle, the expression of the suffering, self-giving love of God.

How do I save my life? Lose it. How do I get ahead? Go last. How do I become great? Serve. How do I get rich? Give. How do I get even? Forgive. What a strange idea!

Gang, this is where it gets personal. Whatever you do to harm relationships, and whatever you do to hurt people, or harm people, or create divisions, and wherever there is brokenness, bring it to the cross. Maybe I use people. Maybe I flatter people. Maybe I gossip. Maybe I'm selfish. Maybe I get impatient. Maybe I get really angry.

It was kind of funny. Last week, we talked about the power of Christ crucified and I wanted to make available these little crosses so you can each take one as a reminder to live under the cross. Well, that package got lost and so there were no crosses last Sunday. Today, however, you're all invited to take a little cross as you leave. Carry it in your pocket as a reminder that we want to be people of the cross.

Bring all of your relationships to the cross. Bring your relationships at work to the cross. Bring people who have disappointed you and crushed you. Bring your family to the cross.

We're going to be a people of the cross. This week, at home if you don't usually do these, take the low place and sweep the floor, fix a meal, do the wash, or run the errands under the cross.

At work this week, let somebody else shine. Give them the credit. If there is relational heartbreak in your world, and there probably is, bring it to the cross. When you mess up, and you will, remember the greatest power you have in your life is not the power of your IQ, high though it may be, or charm, great as it may be, or persistence, strong as it may be.

The power...the only power...that will heal this world is the power of the cross. Amen.