

St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

"United Around the Cross"

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-18, Acts 18:1-4

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Songs/Hymns: The church's one foundation #479 1-3,5 When I survey the wondrous cross (offertory), Amazing Love (Tomlin)

A Presbyterian was marooned, alone,
on an uncharted island.

He lived there for several years
before a passing ship happened to see his fire one night
and changed course to investigate.

When some of the crew made their way by boat to the island,
they found the man and three huts that he had built.

They asked him, "What are these three huts?"
He answered, "One is where I live,
and one is where I go to church."

"But what about the third hut?", they asked.
"Oh, that one, that's where I *used* to go to church."ⁱ

Most of us have had heard stories of church splits, church divisions.
Some of us have lived through them.

If you look through the long lens of church history
You'll realise that Christianity is marked by all sorts
Of divisions and rifts.

Let me provide you with a brief overview that
I've collated from the Encyclopedia Britannica's entry
On "Church Schisms".

Neil will put up a picture on the screen
Which portrays this visually.

The church has been divided by the ecumenical creeds
(such as the Apostles Creed or Nicene Creed).

Creeds were written to clarify theological points
when many believed the church was wandering off in error.

But schism hasn't just been about theology.
The church has been divided over issues of authority;
Who is really in charge.

In 1054 the bishops of Rome and Constantinople
engaged in a mutual excommunication
because of theological differences
and the refusal of Constantinople
to accept Roman primacy.

The church has also been divided by attempts
at moral and institutional reform.

Some see the Protestant Reformation of the 16th century
as the last of the medieval reform movements.
You may recall that Luther never intended
to start a new institution,

But to reform the old one.

The churches that came out of the Reformation
Have been divided by different understanding of the Lord's Supper:
Transubstantiation, sacramental signs,
real presence, or memorial?

When I suggested to another military chaplain
that we have communion after training,
He said he couldn't—because as a Lutheran
he understands communion different than I do.

The modern church has been divided by different
understanding of human origins
as they relate to science and the Bible,
different understandings of the work of the Holy Spirit,

different understandings of the role of women in leadership,
and different beliefs about human sexuality.ⁱⁱ

Seen through the long lens of church history,
The church has experienced substantive divisions.

And we haven't even talked about local controversies
About the color of the sanctuary carpet,
Or bringing coffee to church.

PAUSE

Today we continue on our journey with the early church
As they bring the Gospel to all nations.

During Paul's second missionary journey
He successfully establishes a church in Corinth
and ends up staying with them for a year and a half.ⁱⁱⁱ

After this, he packs his bags and moves on to Ephesus.
But in Ephesus he hears concerning reports
About the ongoing life of the church in Corinth.

And so, he writes a letter to address these concerns.
The first issue he addresses is a lack of unity.

Contrary to most of our imaginations
(fed by earlier descriptions in the book of Acts)
The early church wasn't always serene and hospitable,
But was often beset by quarreling and strife.

It seems that the Christians at Corinth have been in contact
With a variety of church leaders.
And were arguing about which leader was superior.

"I follow Paul."

"I follow Apollos."

"I follow Peter."

"I follow Christ."

In terms of background, you should know that

“The Greco-Roman people thrived on eloquence
and lionized its practitioners...

[Orators] were the first-century version of our rock stars.”^{iv}

In Corinth people were being competitive about their pastors

And using their proximity to these pastors
to boost their own rank and status.

“My child was baptised by Peter!”

Imagine what being in that church would be like?

People were less focused on the message,
more focused on the messenger,
and more focused on their own status.

“Did you know that Apollos speaking this Sunday?

I just love him. He so bright. So creative. And pretty attractive.
None of that repetitive droning on and
like that bald-headed, boring Paul.

Apollos is going to be a special guest at the party I’m throwing next week.

Are you getting the picture?

“Paul’s problem with the Corinthian Christian’s quarreling...

is that they are acting just like the culture around them:
they are “lionizing” the church’s orators
by dividing up in various “fan clubs.”

The church was becoming less and less about the Gospel.
The church was becoming just another means
For people to seek status and prestige.

So what was Paul's solution?

It is really quite simple.

Paul tells the Corinthians

To stop their bickering:

"I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,
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."

Perfectly united in mind and thought?

Sounds like a pretty tall order.

But Paul doesn't just encourage them to refraining from fighting,
But he encourages them to adapt a positive emphasis
A renewed focus on Christ.

"Was Christ divided?" Paul asks them.

"Were you baptized in the name of Paul?"

Paul contends that their salvation is not based
on the eloquence or the wisdom of their favorite orators
but on the work of Jesus Christ:

“For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing,
but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.”^v

Paul calls the Corinthian Christians to be united.
They are to be united in their focus on the cross.

PAUSE

Last year after General Assembly
(the final decision-making body in our national church)
I returned to St. Andrew’s
with proposed amendments to our doctrine;

Amendments that would bring the LGBTQI community
into full inclusion in our church.

We met down in the Lower Hall to discuss this.
Some of you celebrated this step.
And some of you lamented it.

Because of COVID-19 the 2020 General Assembly has been cancelled.
But at the 2021 General Assembly it will be reported
that the majority of Presbyteries in Canada
have endorsed these changes.

This could be a decision that tears
Apart the Presbyterian Church in Canada.
This could be a decision that causes a schism at St. Andrew’s.

But it could also be a change
that remains subordinate to a sustained focus on the cross.

Don't think that is possible?

Back in March we hosted the 2020 South Kamloops World Day of Prayer.
We worked together with at least seven other church communities
in planning it.

I'm sure that in the group we worshipped with
Even more communities were represented.

We could have talked and argued
about our various differences in doctrine and practice:
different understandings of church authority,
human sexuality,
or the sacraments.

But we decided to focus on what united us.
We put our focus on Jesus
And the healing work that our Lord is doing.

And what a wonderful time we had together.

I was reminded that Jesus Christ, and his death and resurrection,
transcends so many of our modern and historical differences
and that St. Andrew's is part of a bigger family in Kamloops.

PAUSE

The contemporary church, like the historical church
Is marked by various divisions.

There will always be the insubstantial issues that dog our communities.
There will always be substantial disputes
About our theology and practice.

But there is one thing that holds us together,
One thing that we might consider spending more time considering,
That is the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

PAUSE

In the global church there are a few things
That we share together.
One of them is the ecumenical creeds.

“A creed by definition is a summary or statement
of what one believes.

It originates from the Latin credo meaning "I believe".

A creed is an epitome [the essence], not a full definition,
of what is required for orthodoxy.”^{vi}

The Nicene Creed is shared by the Roman Catholic Church,
The Orthodox Church, and the various Reformed Church.

Maybe not surprising,
It also focuses on the death and resurrection of Christ.

Let us recite this creed

Acknowledging what we all hold together
And what will remain at the center
Of the Christian faith.

Nicene Creed

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one Being with the Father; through him all things were made.

For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate; he suffered death and was buried.

On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures; he ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father.

He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins.

We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come. Amen.

ⁱ A revision of Russell McKinney's story in "A Lack of Loyalty" April 11, 2018 russellmckinney.com/2018/04/11/a-lack-of-loyalty/

ⁱⁱ See Matt Stefon, Bernard J. McGinn, et al "Christianity" *Encyclopedia Britannica*

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Christianity/Schism-division-over-substantial-matters>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Acts 18

^{iv} Andre Resner, Jr. "1 Corinthians 1:10-18" *The Lectionary Commentary: Acts and the Epistles* 155

^v 1 Corinthians 1:18 NIV

^{vi} "Ecumenical Creeds" *Wikipedia*