

January 22, 2017

**Mind and Purpose**  
1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Corinth wouldn't be where I would want to plant a church. Located on an isthmus forty miles from Athens, between the Ionian and Aegean Seas, Corinth represented for the Roman empire a gateway between Europe and Asia Minor. It was the city where east met west; where ideas were as fluid as the waters that brought them there. It was also a very young city. Barely a hundred years old by the time Paul arrived on the scene, there was no overarching Corinthian identity to latch onto. And without a culture to define it, the prevailing culture of Corinth reset to the great default of human history: dollars and cents, of which Corinth had plenty. Everything in the city came with a price tag, nothing was free, and nothing was for granted. In Corinth relativity mingled with avarice and created a swirling morass into which the church was slowly sinking. (Sound like anywhere we know?)

Nothing about Corinth made it seem like a smart location for a church plant. And most of those fears were pretty well founded. Paul's first letter to the Corinthians reads like a pastoral nightmare: inequality; immorality; idolatry. If anything could go wrong in a church, it went wrong in Corinth.

But Paul saw something in the Corinthian Church that those of us who are called two thousand years later to preach on the letters he wrote to them so often miss, probably because we tend to skim quickly over the introduction to these letters in a rush to get to the good stuff. I've been talking for three minutes, so some of you are about to tune out, so if you get nothing else out of the message this morning: take this with you – slow down, and listen to what God might be saying to you in your hurry.

**To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours**

Called to be saints. Let that sink in for a moment. Corinthians: called to be saints.

The same Corinthians who openly commit incest are called to be saints; who boast about swindling their neighbors; who openly profit off the misery of others, these are the Corinthians who are called to be saints. Paul has a vision for what the church in Corinth can become, even if they don't see it or believe it for themselves. He sees them capable of so much more than they give themselves credit for, or believe they are capable of themselves. He sees in Corinth a potential that, if I'm honest, I'm not sure I can see. That potential matters because it is what drives everything else in this letter. More than anything, Paul wants the Corinthian Christians to get back to this point: you were called to be saints. Everything else is application.

To get to that potential though, Paul realizes everyone needs to start from the same page.

It's like sitting in a canoe with three other people and having everyone paddle in different direction. The best-case scenario you either overpower or outlast the others. Paul sees the church in Corinth in danger of being washed downstream by the steady flow of a culture telling

them over and over again that nothing really matters. He understands that the church needs to struggle together and swim against the current or get lost as simply one more in a sea of ideas.

The Church only survives if it survives together.

But unity, as Paul unpacks it here, is a more complex idea than we might initially assume. Because unity sounds like it should be easy. My previous church was in a town of 900 people that had eight different churches. Anglican, Lutheran, Catholic, Orthodox, United, Presbyterian, Pentecostal, and another Pentecostal for the Pentecostals who were too Pentecostal for the Pentecostals. This was a town with one bank, one grocery store, and one school. Everyone worked together, and did life together, except on Sunday when everyone went to their own church with their own tribe and worshipped in their own way. But every so often the idea of sharing a worship space would come up in casual conversation around a coffee table – after all, heating all those church buildings was such a waste of resources – and everyone would nod in approval – until it came time to decide which building they would share. Then the conversations would get personal. In short, everyone thinks it's a great idea, as long as we do it my way.

My struggle over this week was about trying to come to terms with what a text like this means for a world like ours. I struggled to come to terms with the fact that the world we inhabit is so much different than the one into which Paul wrote. This isn't Paul's epistle to the Galatians, I griped. We live in a city of more than a million people, where barely half are connected to the Christian faith and that half is divided again over nearly 400 different expressions of Christianity. What unity can be found here?

But what I found this week was that the further I got from the world of Paul and the Corinthians, the more it seemed to actually resemble the world. Like heading west for long enough, you eventually end up east of where you began. Paul saw that divisions were always going to be part of the equation. That not only is it human nature to organize into silos, but in about 11 chapters, Paul is going to remind them that God made us so diverse to showcase his glory. What I came to realize this week was that Paul has a deeper understanding of what unity is in the church. And it was right there in the beginning of this morning's passage - **but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.**

Unity is a choice for the church. And so what Paul spends the rest of his letter extrapolating is what that unity looks like.

A unity of Mind, Paul says I think, is a unity of organization.

The question he anticipates here is basically what does unity *mean*? Because it's can't be organization in the sense of how local churches govern, nor can it be a simple whitewashing of denominational or theological differences. Because each of us understand concepts through metaphor and experience, all of our understandings, all of our beliefs are going to be different if we scratch deep enough. It cannot be belief or doctrine that unites us, at least not on its own,

In fact, if it were, I am more than convinced that the Jesus would have made sure to select as his disciples twelve educated scribes or Pharisees; men who knew the importance of choosing the right word for the right situation – certainly not twelve fishermen who struggled, albeit, boldly – to articulate the faith after the ascension of Jesus. Organization here refers to the way that the church positions itself in the world.

Because the church's whole organization is rooted only in recognizing the centrality of Jesus for everything we do, say and are. The church is not a democratic institution concerned with popularity nor is it a humanistic endeavor concerned with what you think or feel about it. The church is about coming together week after week to recognize the total sovereignty of God over every corner of my life and yours. And the beautiful part of that is because God has made such an intricate tapestry out of all of humanity, the local church isn't a catch-all. Healthy divisions in the church make it that much better as a whole. If all the churches were Mainline, where would be the evangelism? If all the churches were evangelical, where would be the grace? If all the churches were catholic, where would scripture be? And if all the churches were protestant, where would social justice be? As churches organize themselves increasingly around the Lordship of Jesus Christ, the king and head of every church, we find a unity that goes beyond division and diversity. We find ourselves part of a bigger picture – we find, surprisingly, that the more we focus on Christ, the less it becomes about us after all.

That is what Paul means by A Unity of Mind

Similarly, with a Unity of Purpose Paul wants to anticipate the question: What does unity *look like*?

A unity of purpose, he says, is a unity of orientation.

Like a ship on the ocean, guided by fixed points in the sky, the church is defined by its three orientations:

A Mindset of Mission

The Glory of God

Humanities unrelenting pursuit of holiness

We're not here to be any of the hundred other things that the church does, except where those things are directed by one of our orientations.