

A united, witnessing Church

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[0:00] Well, I say again to you, good morning, hoping and praying the temperature continues to rise in here, if nowhere else than in our hearts.! I was really sad to miss last week. I hate when we have to suspend worship, and so I'm delighted to be back here under whatever circumstances.

And I see it as a great victory that you shoveled out of your space, fought the snowcrete, and made it here. We've been in a series in looking at 1 Corinthians, because that's where the lectionary has us, Paul's first letter to the Corinthians.

And there's a number of incredibly relevant themes that I think speak to us in this particular moment as a church in a place like D.C. A lot of similarities between 1st century Corinth and 21st century D.C.

One of the major themes that arises in this letter is the theme of unity. Unity in the church. Those of you who've been Christians for a while, and maybe you've been in other churches, you know the first hand, the pain that division in the church can cause.

If you're newer to the faith, maybe you haven't experienced it personally, but just, you know, sort of fair warning, that kind of thing is fairly common in the church. And if you're here and you're not a Christian, you may be tempted to think, well, this is a matter for the church and this doesn't really apply to me.

[1:24] I would actually beg to differ. Because I would say that unity, or at least the desire for unity, is something that I think most everybody I know longs for in the world. We all long for and idealize living in a world that is not fragmented and divided, where people are, the world is free from division and conflict and war.

Nobody likes that. Some people actually think that religion is the problem. You know, one of the arguments that you'll hear is that if we could just do away with the church, if we could do away with religion, then we would have a lot less division because that's a lot of what causes it.

If we could do away with religion, then we would have a lot of what causes it to do.

We would have a lot of what causes it to do. We would have a lot of what causes it to do. We would have a lot of what causes it to do. So there's a connection between unity in the church, what we're going to be talking about this morning, and unity in the world that everybody longs for.

So the question we're asking is, how can that be? So we're going to look at this passage in 1 Corinthians in three parts. First, the call to unity. Second, the pull toward disunity.

[2:53] And then finally, the power of the cross. Let's pray. Our heavenly father, we thank you for our safety this morning. We thank you for our ability to gather in your name.

We thank you that you're a God who is living and active, that you're able to speak to us through your word. And Lord, that's what we pray for this morning. We pray that you would thaw out frozen hearts and open us up to what you have for us this morning.

And we pray this in your son's holy name. Amen. So first of all, the call to unity. Paul's very unambiguous and he's very strong in his language. 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.

Paul is using very strong language here. He's saying, I want you to do everything in your power to eradicate factions in your church, to eradicate divisions in your church, to eradicate social cliques, insider-outsider groups in your church.

And he's calling this church to come together as one, not just outwardly, cosmetically, but inwardly, in their thoughts, in their desires.

[4 : 14] And he's doing this not out of his own authority or because he would prefer it, but he is saying all of this in the name of Jesus Christ. In other words, he's saying, this is what Jesus wants for you.

Jesus wants you to be unified. Now, why would that be? Because as we said a little while ago, this is God's desire for the human race.

The Bible actually says that one day we will all experience unity. And the word of the Bible for this is the word shalom. And the great Bible scholar Walter Brueggemann says this.

He says, the central vision of world history in the Bible is that all of creation is one. Not just the church, not just the Israelites, not just his people, not just religious people.

The central vision of world history is that all of creation is one. Every creature in community with every other, living in harmony and security toward the joy and well-being of every other creature.

[5 : 19] I heard somebody describe it one time like this. It's the difference between taking a bunch of threads and piling them up on a table. Right? That's not a fabric.

That's just a bunch of threads piled on top of each other. It's the difference between that and actually weaving those threads together so that they become a fabric. In the same way, God's desire for human beings is not just that we're living around each other but disconnected, but rather that we are woven over and under and through one another.

Every person connected to every other person as a great sort of human, social, spiritual fabric. That's where you're going to find warmth. That's where you're going to find strength.

That's where you're going to find unity. That's God's vision for the world. And so this is something that God desires to see first and foremost in the church because the whole purpose of the church is to give the world a preview.

Right? God wants people to look at the church and to see a preview of what he wants to do everywhere. So maybe in your neighborhood, people from different racial or ethnic or cultural backgrounds don't really mingle.

[6 : 29] They kind of everybody keeps to themselves. God is saying when those people look down the road at the church, he wants people to see, wow, there's a community where lots of different kinds of people are interacting.

And they genuinely seem to like each other. And there seems to be real community there. Wouldn't that be nice if we had that in our neighborhood? Right? Maybe in your neighborhood, people from different sides of the political spectrum don't really interact or talk about things.

But God wants people to look down the road at the church and to say, wow, in that community, people believe all different kinds of things about policy. But they seem to be able to work through those differences in respectful ways.

Wouldn't that be nice if we had that? So God is wanting people to look at the church and to see beautiful things. So that as a result of seeing those beautiful things, they would actually find their way to him.

That's God's desire for the church in the world. One of those beautiful things is unity. But, of course, instead of unity, what do people see when they look at most churches? Well, they see the opposite.

[7:34] They see denominations and schism and factions and social cliques. So we have to ask the question of why is that the norm rather than the exception, the pull toward disunity.

Paul goes on to say this. So instead of being a community of shalom, this church has become deeply divided.

People in the church have become loyal followers of certain leaders over other leaders. So he says, some people say, well, I follow Paul. I'm a Paul person. Other people say, well, I follow Apollos.

Other people say, I follow Cephas. And other people say, I'm so spiritual, I don't even need human pastors in my life. I have a direct line to Jesus. And I take my orders from him.

And so there's these different preferences that have caused division. And I want to be clear, the problem isn't just that people have their favorite preacher. You know, I have my favorite preachers.

[8:41] We all have people that we like to listen to. It's not that. It's that their allegiance to certain leaders is causing factions to form. So by saying, I'm a Paul person, what people are really saying is, I'm not an Apollos person.

I'm not a Cephas person. It's a way of saying, I've got the genuine article. Like, I'm a real Christian or I'm a more legitimate Christian because I follow this leader than you are.

Right? Right? So that's what is concerning to Paul. People were beginning to see their group or their tribe as being kind of superior or more genuine or legitimate than the other groups.

And this is causing people to argue and fight with each other. So the point is this. Even in the church, which is supposed to be putting unity on display, we see the potential for division because that's what sin does.

That's sitting in the background of all of this. As Paul is saying, sin is being allowed to wreak havoc on this community. Sin always divides. It divides us from God.

[9:52] It divides us from one another. That's one of the main symptoms of sin. Sin being people living in some kind of rebellion against God in their hearts.

So this is what is concerning to Paul. Now, there are lots of ways that we can apply this. And we've actually, if you've been a part of our church over the last few months, you know, we've addressed the topic of division a number of different ways.

So there's lots of ways that we can apply this to the reality of denominations, to the reality of splits and church splits and factions and cliques. So we could take this in a lot of different directions.

It would apply to all of that. What I would like to do is discuss one specific way we experience this today that is related to technology.

Because I would argue that today, 21st century D.C., not only do people still follow human influencers and celebrity pastors and thought leaders and gurus of various stripes, plenty of that out there.

[10:57] So that's still happening. But I would also argue that most of us are also followers of something far more powerful. That we are all followers of various social media algorithms.

What I mean by that is AI-driven systems that analyze everything we do online, everything we look at, everything we click on, everything we purchase, everything we comment on. And then they act like an invisible DJ for you that you didn't ask for.

They feed you content based on what you personally are most likely to engage with. And I would argue that these, and I'm arguing this, but lots and lots of people are arguing this, and lots of people are studying this now and the impact it's having.

But I would say that these technologies are causing a level of fragmentation in our society that is really unprecedented. And the point is this, unless we're actively pushing against that, we are all going to be living inside highly curated, personalized echo chambers.

Meaning our perception of the world, our perception of the various issues and the problems that society is trying to solve is going to be vastly different than the person to our left or the person to our right.

[12:23] Because we are literally seeing different content that is custom tailored to us as individuals. And this has had an undeniably massive impact on the church.

So imagine a highly engaged Christian. What do I mean by that? Imagine a Christian today who's highly engaged, meaning they go to church every week. So they're at church for two to three hours every week.

And maybe they're also actively part of a small group. So maybe every week, in addition to church, a couple of hours spent with a small group on Wednesday night, right? I would say by most standards, that's a highly, highly engaged Christian.

Great. By most average standards in our country. By contrast, that person on average is spending 49 hours a week online.

Right? So there's no contest there in terms of where time and energy is being invested. Most Christians, I would say, are far less engaged than that.

[13:29] Right? Last year, research came out that says that over a quarter of evangelicals report, these are self-described evangelical Christians, over a quarter of them no longer go to church at all.

So it is rapidly becoming, that label is rapidly becoming a secular political label rather than a religious distinction or a doctrinal distinction. Right? So most Christians are far less engaged than that.

So here's the hard truth that I'm wanting to lay out for us. Most Christians in our country are being discipled primarily by their algorithm.

It's discipleship by algorithm. So it's not just I follow Paul or I follow Apollos or I follow Cephas. Now it's I follow my algorithm.

So in the same church, we can all be sitting together in the same pew. Right? Just go down the pew. Right? The first person in the pew, their algorithm is feeding them a steady diet of ultra right-wing political commentary.

[14:32] The next person over, their TikTok is feeding them a steady stream of Christian deconstruction content. Right? Go down to the next person in the pew, someone else is getting fed a lot of highly leftist progressive ideology.

Go down to the next person, they're diving into doomsday prepping and conspiracy theories. Right? And it just goes on and on and on. Right? And, you know, I don't know what your feed is feeding you.

And I'm not necessarily saying that that's what I'm getting fed. But we're all getting fed something. And here's the thing we need to be aware of. These algorithms are designed, as many of you know, to maximize engagement.

So they're not concerned with nuance. They're not concerned with giving you a balanced perspective. They're not even concerned with what is true or real.

Now that we have more and more and more AI slop, you know, AI-generated images and videos, it's getting harder and harder to tell what's even real and what's not.

[15:36] And quite frankly, the algorithm doesn't care as long as you click, as long as you stay instead of scrolling. And more and more people, I would argue, maybe don't care.

So this is the world that we live in. So on a Sunday morning, people come into church already primed to hear everything through a filter.

A filter that has been created for them, built into their mind and heart by their social media algorithm. Right? So imagine what happens when an average church on an average Sunday morning tries to address complicated, real-world issues.

What happens? Just think of the last few weeks. We have MLK Weekend. We have the March for Life. We have all the horrible stuff going down in Minneapolis. Right? Think about a church trying to engage any one of those issues.

Trying to have a conversation about racial justice. Or the sanctity of human life. Or immigration policy. Right? Think about a church trying to do that.

[16:47] These topics require a lot of patience, a lot of charity of spirit. They require us to be humble about our own opinions. They require us to assume the best about one another, especially when and where we disagree.

But what does the algorithm do? The algorithm means people come into these conversations primed to react in the worst possible way. Operating out of outrage and fear and suspicion.

Mistrust. Mistrust. Right? So every pastor I know will tell you the same thing. Right? It doesn't matter if you say something. It doesn't matter if you don't.

It doesn't matter if you engage the topic or not. It doesn't matter how careful you are. I've spent time online Googling, how do I refer to this issue in a non-political neutral way? Like, what's the word that I use?

So that I can bring up the issue as an example of brokenness. It doesn't matter. Every pastor will tell you there's no right way to engage the issues or to not engage the issues.

[17:52] There's going to be anger and fear and outrage no matter what. This is not to disparage anybody. This is a symptom of the problem. It's a symptom of the kind of division that comes through these echo chambers.

So the point is not just all technology is evil. No, I don't believe that at all. The point is this. Sin divides. The path of least resistance is always going to be toward fragmentation because that's what sin does.

In the 21st century, certain technologies have amplified this. That's the point I'm trying to make. Such as various algorithms. And I would argue that most of us are being formed by them every single day.

And it's causing deep and lasting division in our society. And I believe that we are seeing the impact of this on the church as well. I follow Paul. I follow Paulo. I follow the algorithm.

So the question we need to be asking is how do we counteract this? How do we create lasting unity in a world full of forces that are actively trying to pull us apart?

[19:03] That's the question we need to be wrestling with. And this brings us to the third point. The power of the cross. In response to the divisions in the church, Paul says these three powerful words.

Is Christ divided? Is Christ divided? What's he saying? Christians are spiritually united.

Whether we act like it or not. Whether we feel like it or not. Christians are spiritually united. When you are baptized, you are joined to spiritually become one with the body of Christ.

Which means that all Christians have been baptized into the same body. The body of Christ. And what Paul is saying indirectly is this. If Christ cannot be divided, then neither should his people be divided.

We can't parcel Christ out. We can't say, well, this group has more of Jesus than that group. When you have any of Jesus, you have all of Jesus. So everybody has all of Jesus if you've been baptized into his name.

[20 : 23] So Paul is saying we are all one. So here's the point. Whenever Christians start sorting ourselves into various camps, regardless of how legitimate it may feel, whenever Christians start sorting themselves into camps, that is a denial of our baptism.

It's a denial of our baptism. And it's a sign that something other than Christ has started to creep into the center of that community. Something else has become central.

So this raises the question for Paul and for us. How does Paul restore unity to Corinth? How might he bring unity to a church in 21st century D.C.?

Well, he does it the only way you can. He reminds them of the truth and the power of the gospel. Here's what he says at the end of our passage.

For Christ did not send me to baptize because people are saying, well, I got baptized by Paul. Can you imagine, by the way, I love, I think that there's a little bit more going on than we think when Paul says, you know, I remember baptizing Christmas and this is beyond that, I don't remember who I baptized.

[21 : 33] Because you can imagine somebody being like, I was baptized by Paul, right? You know, remember when Paul was here, he baptized me. And then Paul's like, I don't even remember who I baptized, right? So he's like, God did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.

Not with wisdom and eloquence lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. So what's he doing? He's saying to this divided church, you've got to come back to the foot of the cross.

You've got to come back to the foot of the cross. Now why? Why the foot of the cross? Have you ever seen the movie The Bucket List? If you haven't, it's a great movie.

Maybe next time you're snowed in, you should watch it. But The Bucket List is about two men who have almost nothing in common. Edward is a white billionaire corporate titan and Carter is a black working class mechanic.

And under normal circumstances, in normal everyday life, these two men would probably never even meet, much less would they have anything to do with each other. But by the end of the film, they have become fast friends, best friends.

[22 : 38] So the question is, how do two people who are so radically different become such good friends? Here's the answer. They're both brought into the same hospital room and they are both given the same terminal diagnosis.

And as soon as that happens, all divisions are stripped away. Right? Everything that wants to distinguish them suddenly becomes secondary.

And what that does is it opens a path for them to become genuine, joyful friends. And I would argue that that is just a, it's a good movie, but it's just a glimpse of what happens at the foot of the cross.

At the foot of the cross, we are brought into the same room as it were. And we're all given the same diagnosis. We're all there for the same reason. We all know that our only hope of ever being free from sin and death is to cry out for the mercy of Jesus.

It's the only hope we have. We all have the same condition. And apart from the mercy of Jesus, it is terminal. And so at the foot of the cross, all divisions are stripped away.

[24:01] All illusions of superiority or inferiority sort of evaporate. At the foot of the cross, all pride is extinguished. It's impossible to feel superior over anyone.

All of our differences, while meaningful, become secondary to our shared need for Christ. That becomes the primary thing. But as soon as we start to move away from the foot of the cross, what happens?

As soon as we start to gain distance from that, pride starts to creep in. People start to take sides. People start to identify in smaller camps.

Differences start to push us apart. What Paul is saying is that unity is only possible through the cross. At the foot of the cross.

So what does this mean for us? Let me pull this together. There are spiritual, social, and now technological forces tearing our society apart.

[25:07] And it might be tempting to think that the answer is just to get off all technology. Right? Move to the Irish countryside. Live off the grid.

Maybe for some people that's the answer. I would argue if you're a Christian, that is not an option. It's not an option.

Because with all due respect, secular, non-religious people have absolutely no resources to combat this whatsoever. Nothing.

Nothing. Nothing. Nothing. The world needs the church. Because the church is the only institution that has within its grasp the power to overcome difference, to reconcile people to God and to one another, and to create the conditions that make lasting unity possible.

You're not going to find it anywhere else. Because it's only found through the power of the cross. So if you're part of the church, welcome to the resistance. You're in the right place.

[26:20] So what does it mean to be the resistance in this kind of world? Bigger conversation that we have time for this morning. I know it's cold. I give you three thoughts.

Three thoughts. What does it mean to be the resistance? Number one, the church has to become and has to see itself as a counter-formational community.

As a counter-formational community. The church has to recognize itself as a place where people come to be re-humanized. Where dividing walls of hostility are actively torn down.

And friends, that means that we cannot allow ourselves to ever take sides or to begin to echo certain partisan talking points or certain algorithms.

That we have to be committed, for instance, to being politically purple. There are a lot of churches, actually, that are cashing in on the echo chambers. That are realizing that if we just take sides and if we start spouting off certain partisan talking points, then we're going to grow.

[27:24] And that's true. And I've actually had more than one person suggest that we do that. Because you'll grow. Because it feels good to be in a community where you can be honest about what you think. And you don't have to worry about anybody disagreeing with you.

Where it's really clearly understood in that community who the good guys are and who the bad guys are. That feels good. And yeah, I think that that will bring an uptick to growth in the short term.

I would also argue that it's based on a lie from the pit of hell. And that over the long term, the churches that go down that road are going to fade into irrelevance.

Because they no longer anything, they no longer offer anything. That the world isn't selling on every street corner. They no longer offer anything you need. So we, as a counter-formational community, we have to be committed.

We have to be committed to being the kind of community where we have different people with different thoughts and different opinions who are committed to working through those differences together.

[28 : 28] It also means this, however many hours we are spending online, we need to be spending at least that amount of time on our own spiritual growth as a church community.

So gone are the days of kind of casually engaged Christianity. Gone are the days of dropping in on Christmas and Easter. Right? If we want any chance at pushing against these forces and influences, it requires a very high degree of commitment.

It requires understanding that we need ongoing, weekly, multiple times a week, counter-formation happening. Because you've got to understand, when we gather every Sunday, everything we do is meant to recenter us on the cross and reaffirm our baptismal identity in Christ.

We sing together. We pray together. We confess our faith together. We sit under God's word together. We eat from the same bread. We drink from the same cup. It's all designed to remind us in a fragmenting world, you are spiritually one.

So all of these practices are designed to counteract the forces of sin that pull us apart. And we need that in our lives every week. So first, counter-formational community.

[29 : 47] Number two, and this is related to being a purple church, to being a church that maintains and celebrates its diversity in all of its various forms. We have to commit ourselves to building consensus whenever we can with the people around us.

I want to be clear. Paul is not calling the Corinthians or us to uniformity. Right? So unity is not sameness. Unity is not the absence of disagreement. Unity is shared submission to Jesus.

Unity means kneeling together at the same cross. So in verse 10, when Paul says that we should seek to be united in the same mind and judgment, he's talking about doing the hard work of consensus building.

He's saying because you're spiritually one, you need to be working to find common ground with the Christians around you. You need to be focusing on what you're for rather than what you're against.

You need to be working to understand why people have different opinions than you do and respecting those people. You need to be working to identify your own blind spots and being open to learning something from people here and there.

[30 : 56] You need to do the hard work of consensus building. And then number three, sort of, we did the church and we did relationships. Now we're zooming in on us as individuals. What can you do right now to be part of the resistance?

You can pray. You can pray. One of the tools that has helped me, a lot of people I know and respect, stay focused on the cross is the Jesus prayer.

If you've never heard the Jesus prayer before, it's very simple. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

And if you've never prayed this prayer before, you can start by simply praying it to yourself quietly and attentively, five, ten minutes a day.

Just pray it quietly to yourself. Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner. And see what that does in your heart.

[31 : 59] What I experience when I'm able to do this is I experience I slowly get brought back into the presence of Jesus. I slowly get brought back into that room, back to the foot of the cross.

I slowly am reminded of what is most true of me. That my only hope in this world is the mercy of Jesus. Now some people might object and say, well, why does it sound like we're continually begging God for mercy?

Doesn't he give mercy abundantly? And I would say absolutely. And it's one of my favorite responses to that. It comes from Federica Matthews Green where she says this. She says, God doesn't need us to remind him to be merciful.

He's merciful all the time, even when we don't ask. Here's the point. But unless we make a habit of asking for mercy, we forget that we need it.

Ego builds a cardboard fortress that humility must every day tear down. As soon as ego starts to build that cardboard fortress, that's when the division creeps in.

[33 : 05] And the only way to tear that down is to come to the foot of the cross. That prayer for me and for many people I know has been a tool to make that happen.

So all of these are ways, friends, that we are able to build the kind of community the world desperately needs. It's a way for us to be the resistance in a society that desperately needs it.

And it's a way for us to be a community that puts the heart of God on display. Let's pray. Lord, we thank you for your word.

And we thank you for the blessing of the cross. We thank you for Paul's reminder of its power. And that it makes foolish the wisdom of the wise.

Lord, that you have chosen the weak and foolish things of the world to expose the emptiness of all that seems wise and all that seems powerful. Lord, may we learn what it means to be a community that lives in victory at the foot of the cross.

[34 : 09] May we be a counterculture. And may that be for your glory. That people might come to discover their freedom in you. We pray this in the name of your son, Jesus.

Amen.