

## CONFESS

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

January 26, 2020

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The epistle lesson for the Third Sunday after the Epiphany comes from *Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 1, verses 10 through 18. It is on page 807 of the pew Bible.

This is one of those passages that I think I will always preach on when it comes around in the lectionary. There are a few other texts that are like that, like Luke 2 on Christmas Eve or whatever the Gospel lesson happens to be on Easter Sunday. And there are a few other passages scattered throughout the lectionary. They are these texts where, when I look at the three readings appointed for the day, there isn't any question in my mind which one I should choose. Most of the time it's because that passage is the key text for a certain historical event or a foundational doctrine to our faith. But this text isn't either of those things. Rather, it addresses an issue that plagues the Christian Church today, more than ever, to the extent that it threatens to pull us away from those central events and foundational doctrines of the Christian faith.

Please stand as you are able for God's Holy Word. From 1 Corinthians 1, beginning at verse 10, we read in Jesus' name.

<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. <sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. <sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

<sup>18</sup> For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

*Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.*

You may be seated.

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ.

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Dear saints,

We have divisions. At the local level, within our congregation, we have divisions, and on the global level, among different church bodies, we have divisions. Now this is obviously much easier to see on the global level between different denominations, where different churches who call themselves "Christian" (and most of them truly are) have sharp disagreements about all sorts of doctrines, including the Sacraments, election, the work of the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts, and all sorts of things, even the doctrine of justification. When we look at the Church universal—that's the term we use for all Christians everywhere—when we look at the Church universal, it's easy to see that the Church on earth has divisions. Some say they follow Luther. Some say they

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follow Wesley. Some say they follow Calvin. Someone probably even claims to follow Hobbes. ☺ And, of course, in order to appear more pious, someone else will say, “You follow all those other guys, but we follow Christ.” On the global level, in the Church universal, it’s easy to see that we are divided.

But we also have divisions at the local level, in our own congregation, and this is where we need to look first. We can’t really fix the problems with the world unless we first look at ourselves. Now, I don’t want to paint a bleak picture of our congregation. I think we are a healthy congregation. We have good fellowship. Our Bible studies are small, but usually have very edifying conversation. And I see people caring for one another. I see many great friendships that are based on much more than common interests, like quilting, camping, or hockey. They are based on our union with Christ and a common confession of the faith. But I’m not here just to pat you on the back. These things are good, but we should also do better.

Whenever we talk about having great fellowship, someone might feel left out, thinking, *I don’t experience that*. Anytime there are great friendships, there are also cliques. That’s the natural result of great friendships within any group. The solution, however, is not to sacrifice those great friendships. Instead, part of the responsibility lies on those who are “insiders,” and part of it lies on those who at least feel like “outsiders.” For the insiders, it’s your responsibility to include others. Invite them to join you. And for those who feel like outsiders, sometimes it’s your responsibility to include yourself. As a certified introvert, who sometimes feels excluded, I can tell you that it goes both ways. Sometimes it’s my own fault when I feel excluded. Now, it might be rude to invite yourself along for Sunday dinner, but you don’t need an invitation to any congregational program. Just come. Come to Bible study on Tuesday evening. Come to quilting tomorrow, even if you don’t quilt. Bring some other craft or just drink coffee and tell the ladies how pretty their quilts are. I don’t think they’ll mind.

And, of course, Christian fellowship extends beyond just hanging out. If someone is sick or in need of help, be the person who sends a card or brings a meal or shovels the driveway. And if you’re the one who is sick or in need of help, be the person who tells someone about it, because then you allow another person the privilege of serving.

All these things are good for building fellowship within a congregation, but they are not the most important thing. The most important thing for unity within the Church is doctrine. Now you might be thinking, *You’re just saying that because you like doctrine*. And I do like doctrine! We all should like doctrine! Doctrine is simply the teaching of who God is. Being a Christian and not caring about doctrine is like being married and not caring what color your wife’s middle name is. ☺ Every Christian should want to know as much about God as we can. How can you say you love God if you don’t care to know anything about him? Doctrine is essential to the Christian life. This is true for us as individuals, and it is true for us as a congregation.

This is what we learn from Paul’s instruction to the Corinthians. The Corinthian congregation was kind of messed up. And when I say, “kind of messed up,” I mean that in the understated North Dakota way which really means, “It was a total disaster.” They had some really deep divisions in their body, and it manifested itself in every worship service. Their congregation was absolute chaos. Some of it had to do with sinful behavior on the part of certain members (5:1-6:20), but most of it was doctrinal. That’s why Paul addresses the problem of divisions at the very beginning of the letter, and then he spends most of the rest of the letter teaching doctrine. He’s addressing the various issues where they are divided. He’s writing to settle their divisions.

So his command to them from the very beginning is this: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you,

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but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (1:10). He commands them to agree. This is not the same thing as your mother saying, “Why can’t you kids just get along.” When your mother says that, she wants you to figure out how to coexist and tolerate one another despite your differences. She wants you to put up with your bratty sister and your obnoxious brother, even if they are completely wrong about how long it took the Millennium Falcon to make the Kessel Run (*less than twelve parsecs*). ☺ She wants you to agree to disagree. But Paul does not want the Corinthians to agree to disagree. He wants them to agree to *agree*. That’s why he spends the rest of the letter teaching doctrine. He teaches them what is right, so that they might be united in right belief.

His primary command is this: “I appeal to you, brothers ... that all of you agree.” That’s a little bit of a weak translation. The literal translation is “that all of you say the same thing.” That’s the kind of agreement he’s looking for. He wants them all to “say the same thing.” The best English word we have for this is the word “confess.” It means “to say together.”

There are two ways in which we confess in our worship service. The first is the confession of sin. When you confess your sins to God, you are saying the same thing as God. You are agreeing with his judgment that you are “by nature sinful and unclean,” and that you “have sinned against [him] in thought, word, and deed.” This is God’s judgment of us, and when we confess our sins, we are agreeing with God’s judgment.

The second way we confess is in the confession of faith, and this is more along the lines of what Paul is talking about. Here we confess true doctrine with one another. We say the same thing as the person next to us, the person behind us, and the person in front of us. Therefore, our confession of faith together is a very biblical activity. This is where we literally “say the same thing.”

Occasionally I hear someone say, “Well, the Apostles’ Creed isn’t in the Bible.” And that’s true, but every single word of it is based on Scripture. The same is true for the Nicene Creed. And when we confess the same faith together, word for word, we are doing exactly what Paul commands here. We are literally saying the same thing. And what’s more: we’re not just saying the same thing as the people we can see here, but we are saying the same thing as millions of Christians around the world and throughout the millennia. This is beautiful and pleasing to God.

Paul wants the Corinthians to confess the same faith without any divisions. And this is God’s will for us as well. This is God’s will for the entire Church in heaven and on earth. He wants us all to say the same thing. He wants us to agree on doctrine, and not just on a few fundamentals, but on all of it. Ideally, our agreement would go beyond even the creeds. We should all agree with every word God has spoken. Where God has not spoken, we should keep our ignorant and arrogant mouths shut. But when we get to areas where God has spoken, we should be united in doctrine, with no divisions among us, even in the Church universal.

I realize this sounds absolutely crazy in the relativistic world we live in. There are so many different religions, and so many divisions within those religions. Who’s to say who’s right and who’s wrong? You can’t prove God with science. With history, actually you can as regards the resurrection of Jesus, but the effectiveness of that still depends on a person’s willingness to accept the historical evidence. The great heresy of our generation is that all beliefs are equally valid. You can believe anything you want, and no one can say anything about it, not even God. And this heresy has spread over to the Church. Or, I wonder if it might actually be the other way around, where relativism found its legs in the Church and then spread over to the world. Either way, the relativism that exists within the Church is a great offense to the world. What I mean is, the world looks at the divisions within the Christian Church; they hear us say, “It’s all a matter of

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interpretation,” and they think, *If they can't even agree with each other, why should I even bother?* Our divisions tell the world that even if there is truth in the Scriptures, it can't actually be known. This is a tragic message to send the world. The Church needs to make a united confession, first, for the sake of our own fellowship, but also for the sake of the world so that they might hear clearly what they should believe in order to be saved. Our divisions are a great offense to the world.

And they end up being an offense to us as well. I look at the state of the Church in the world, I look at all the different denominations, I hear Christians everywhere saying *different* things, and, honestly, it makes me feel very pessimistic. It seems virtually impossible that we can make any progress toward unity. But our hope for doctrinal unity stands on one key truth: *God wants to be known*. Remember that whenever you talk doctrine. Remember that whenever you pick up your Bible. *God wants to be known*. And he has revealed himself clearly in the Scriptures. The reason we have so many divisions, even among Christians who subscribe to the authority of Scripture, is the pride of our own hearts. It's not because God's Word is unclear. It's because of our own sinful pride.

In recent Church history—and by “recent” I mean the last five hundred years—in recent Church history our sinful pride has been manifested in the “Take My Bible and Go Home” attitude. You remember when you were a kid on the playground, and some kid would get mad when things didn't go his way, and he'd declare, “I'm taking my ball and going home!” That has happened a lot in theology over the last five hundred years, and it has led to hundreds of different denominations. *If we can't agree, we'll just split. I'll take my Bible and go home*. This is what someone really means when they say, “It's a matter of interpretation. We just interpret this passage differently.” No, it's really not a matter of interpretation. It's a matter of submission to the authority of Scripture. Whenever it looks like a matter of interpretation, it's always a matter of at least one party not being willing to submit to the authority of Scripture. Remember, God wants to be known. He made the Scriptures clear. We need to find the humility to listen to one another. We need to find the humility to let Scripture challenge our interpretation.

And this is hard. It's easier to agree to disagree than it is to agree to agree. It takes work, it takes humility, and it takes patience. The hardest part of the process, at least for me, is listening to other people. If I want someone else to listen to what I have to say, I have to be willing to listen to them. Sometimes you have to pay for the privilege of having the other person listen to you, and you get that by affording them the level of respect you want in return. And sometimes you pay that respect but get nothing in return. Honestly, I feel this way a lot. I know I have plenty of time in sermons to speak, but there's usually very little feedback. I don't know if much of what I say gets past your eardrums. I don't know if you wrestle at all with anything that challenges what you already believed. But in individual conversations you can quickly see if another person is actually giving you the respect of listening. And it often happens that I listen to another person's point of view, but they're not willing to hear mine. I'll interact with their ideas, but they won't interact with mine. I'm telling you this because you can probably relate. This is extremely frustrating. But sometimes it works. Sometimes you afford a person some respect; you listen to their point of view, you honestly consider it, and they can tell that you're considering it, because you interact with it. Instead of just arguing, you ask charitable questions. Then they can see that you actually respect them, and they become more willing to listen to you in return. And you might convince them of the truth, or they might convince you of the truth, or you both might just have to think about it for a while, but we grow in unity and in the knowledge of the Scriptures. When we let our guard down and listen to someone we think is wrong, we're not

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compromising on the Scriptures; we're compromising on our own pride. We need to find the humility to listen to one another, and we need to find the humility to let Scripture challenge our interpretation. It's time to stop taking our Bibles and going home.

The old way of handling disagreements was to have a council. This is how we got our creeds. When the ancient Church had a disagreement, they really had no thought of splitting. They got together and had a contentious debate. Sometimes it included Santa Claus slapping a heretic across the face, ☺ but when all was said and done, they usually had a thoroughly biblical confession and the Church stayed together. For the first 1500 years of the Church there was really only one major split. Since then there have been too many to count. And I realize the irony that the event to open these floodgates was the Lutheran Reformation, which we herald as a good thing. But the underreported aspect of the Lutheran Reformation is that the so-called "Lutherans" didn't want to leave. They were excommunicated from the Roman Catholic Church. The one thing Martin Luther wanted, but never got, was a church council. He might have been naïve, but at least during the early part of his ministry, he believed that if he could have a council, the Church could be reformed without having a split. But once the so-called "Lutherans" were excommunicated, the floodgates were opened for everyone with an opinion to start their own church. This is not a good thing.

And for much of Lutheran history since the Reformation, we've been willing to take our Bibles and go home. But there was a time when Lutherans were not willing to split, and I'm going to tell you this, because it's a hopeful story.

After Martin Luther died in 1546 there started to be some doctrinal disagreements among the theologians who were left. That tends to happen after you lose a strong leader. And these disagreements festered for about thirty years. Finally, in the 1570's the Lutherans decided they needed to settle matters. They didn't want to split. They still believed in the unity of the Church. So they put their best theologians on it (Martin Chemnitz, Jakob Andrea, et al). These guys visited the various universities to talk with other professors. They listened to the disputes. They wrote a document to settle matters. They sent this document to all the universities and listened to feedback. In the end they had a document that settled all the disputes with biblical answers, and the Lutheran Church stayed together and experienced strong unity for quite a long time. And it wasn't a compromising document. It wasn't the sort of thing where we find the bare minimum of what we can agree on. It was a robust confession. It's called the *Formula of Concord*. This is an event from our history that we should be proud of and should emulate. Despite all the splits in Church history, which tend to result in churches moving farther away from biblical teaching, there are a few events where the Church stayed together and moved closer to biblical teaching. This makes me optimistic. When we practice some humility, when we listen to one another, and when we have an expectation that God wants to be known, good things happen. We can say the same thing. We can confess the one true faith together.

I mentioned the *Formula of Concord*, (20-minute mark) which is the last document in the Lutheran Confessions. We have a big book of documents. It's called the *Book of Concord*. "Concord" is a fancy word that means "agreement." The Lutheran Church is the only Protestant denomination with such a big book. And one of the benefits of this book is that it keeps us tethered to the Scriptures. Sometimes when I mention the Lutheran Confessions I am quickly accused of placing our confessions above Scripture. Someone will say, "The Lutheran Confessions aren't Scripture." And that's true; they're not. But the implication of the statement is that they're worthless, and that's not true. Their greatest value is that they keep us tethered to Scripture.

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I'll tell you another story from Church history. This one is more recent. It happened in the 1970's. There is one church body in America that flirted with theological liberalism but came back under the authority of the Scriptures. It often happens that church bodies start to compromise on the authority of the Scriptures, and they never come back. They always end up denying more and more biblical doctrines. But there is one church body in America—and, as far as I know, only one—that flirted with this and came back. It's not us, but it's one of our fellow Lutheran church bodies (*Missouri Synod*). And at least part of the reason they came back is because they subscribed to the *Book of Concord*. People could say, "That's not what we believe," and they could point to a place in the book that tethered them to biblical teaching.

There are several Lutheran church bodies in America, and there's really only one that has abandoned the authority of Scripture (*ELCA*). That one church body also has a weaker subscription to the Lutheran Confessions. They accept the Lutheran confessions "insofar as they agree with Scripture." Now that sounds pious to say that you agree with the Lutheran Confessions "insofar as they agree with Scripture." But it's really a weak statement. Anyone can say it. And this is the one Lutheran church body that has also abandoned Scripture, because it's really easy to just say, "We don't think that's what the Bible actually means." But that's harder to do when you have confessions that bind you to biblical teaching. So there are several Lutheran church bodies that have remained faithful to Scripture, and all of these church bodies have a stronger subscription to our confessions. We say we subscribe to the Lutheran Confessions *because* they agree with Scripture, not *insofar* as they agree with Scripture, but *because* they agree with Scripture. We submit our opinions to the Church's confessions.

Confessions are not Scripture; the creeds are not Scripture. But they keep us tethered to Scripture, and they bind us together. Here's how: they give a voice to other people. Creeds and confessions allow other Christians to keep us in check. In our hyper-individualistic society, especially in America, we think that any random Christian can just take their Bible, go home, and be fine. Sometimes I hear Christians boast, "We don't have any creeds; we just believe the Bible." But let's think about that. What would happen if you gave a Bible to a hundred people with no prior Christian education and asked them to go home and formulate Christian doctrine? We'd get a hundred different systematic theologies. Some would be better than others, but it's likely that none of them would be very good. And the reason is not that God's Word is unclear; it's not. The reason is that we're all sinners filled with pride. On the topic of sin, we would have a hundred documents that condemn the sins other people struggle with, but they wouldn't condemn the sins of the author. And they would all have some weird, unchecked theory about God. But what if we took those hundred people, locked them in a room together, and asked them to produce *one* systematic theology. That one systematic theology would be far better than any of the individual ones, because whenever someone has a crazy theory, it would be checked by the other ninety-nine people in the room. It might not be perfect, but it would be better than any of the hundred individual attempts. Theology is best done in community. It always helps to have other people check our work. I've experienced this. It's been painful at times, but it is always good. This is the same reason that doctors, and scientists, and all sorts of people need to have their articles peer-reviewed before being published in a journal.

In this way, our creeds and confessions keep us tethered to the Scriptures. Our creeds and confessions do not take precedence over Scripture; they take precedence over our own opinions, and this is good. They don't replace Scripture; they replace our individual opinions.

If we are going to have doctrinal unity in the Church, we need to have the humility to listen to one another and to the voices from the past. That's what our creeds and confessions give us.

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When we think we can just take our Bibles, go home, and figure it all out for ourselves, we will not be fine. We will probably fall into some error, and we will most definitely cut ourselves off from the fellowship of the rest of the Church. We need to say the same thing. We need to agree to agree.

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God wants to be known. He wants you to know him. That's why he has given you the Scriptures. That's why he has given you other Christians in this congregation. And that's why people from the past have left their voices for us in creeds and confessions. The end result is that we can say the same thing. We can confess together who God is, what his will is for our lives, and what he has done to save us. God wants to be known, and he especially wants to be known through the cross of Jesus Christ.

I know this sermon has been mostly Law, and I've given you a lot of it. But the purpose of this is to preserve both God's Law and his Gospel in our ears and minds and hearts. When we agree to agree, then you believe me when I tell you that your sins are forgiven for Christ's sake. If Jesus didn't die for our sins, and if he didn't rise again from the dead, doctrinal unity would be irrelevant. That's what this is ultimately about. When we say the same thing, we say the same thing about our salvation.

The clarity of the Scriptures is why this is possible. The cross of Christ is why this is necessary. God has made us one by uniting us together in Jesus Christ. It's time for us to act like this is true. May God send his Holy Spirit to convict us of our sinful pride, work humility in our hearts, and grant us wisdom to accept the truth of the Scriptures so that we might believe and confess the same thing. Amen. And thank you for your patience.

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Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.