



University Christian Church - Austin

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## Has Christ Been Divided?

Third Sunday After the Epiphany, a, Jan. 27, 2008

I Cor. 1:10-18

With the Super Bowl just around the corner, you and I have an opportunity to gaze intently into a human phenomenon that runs deeply. If you have any feelings of partisanship towards either the New York Giants or the New England patriots winning, as you watch the game on Sunday, you'll find yourself cheering for your team and moaning when the opposing team makes yardage or points. Pay attention to your feelings at those moments because in your affiliation, your identification with one team, your partisanship you are experiencing what the Bible calls a party spirit -- not to be confused with the understanding of a party spirit here at the University of Texas, but biblically speaking, a party spirit affirms one group at the expense of another. And that party spirit is everywhere!

- Such as yesterday's South Carolina Democratic primary...

And, yes, even in church life....

11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

12 What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

13 Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Already long before the writings of the New Testament, there were parties in the life of the Christian church and people were lining up on one side or the other -- Paul, -- Peter -- James -- Apollos -- others. There were lots of divisions. And even from that early beginning we have known that there was something deeply wrong about those divisions.

When we in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) hear, "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."... when we hear that call, we ought to stand up and salute, because that is the heart of who we are..

On June 28, 1804, when one of the founders of the movement that became the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Barton Stone, joined several other ministers in dissolving their church's local association, the Springfield Presbytery, he wrote that it was their desire for the presbytery to 'sink into union with the Body of Christ at large'.

Five years later in 1809, in another state and among a different group of reformers, Thomas Campbell issued his famous Declaration and Address. Among its many prominent expressions stressing church unity, one finds Campbell's wholehearted belief that "division among Christians is a horrid evil." Or as they like to put, "denominationalism is sin.:

This drive towards realizing the oneness of the Body of Christ, has become the central tenet of our identity as the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), that for which, above all else, we are known in the ecumenical circles today. It is our clearest calling to and for the universal church of Jesus Christ.

The unity of the church, the oneness of the body of Christ, What does it mean? And what difference does it make today?

There are some who claim it is enough for the various denominations or the various local churches here in Austin- for example- to simply work together in mission; to claim a sort of spiritual unity, that makes any visible union unnecessary. For these persons the hard work of literally trying to visibly reunite the church is unnecessary. They are rather happy with the way things are, or have resigned themselves to believing that is the best we are going to muster. For nearly two solid centuries now, we Disciples have said, no, we can do better than that!

At our Micah 6 worship celebration this past Sunday afternoon, San Williams, the Sr. Minister at University Presbyterian Church was describing the relationship among the clergy of Micah 6. He said something very interesting. He said that the Micah 6 senior ministers often have more in common, face more similar challenges, and have an easier collegiality - even though we are separate denominations: Presbyterian, Methodist, Episcopal, United Church of Christ, Lutheran -- those labels notwithstanding, we share more in common than we do with many other ministers within our individual denominations. Now part of this is due to the fact that we are sharing our common Ministry to the university community, and the common challenges of relating to this downtown Austin community. Part of the commonality is also the fact that our memberships reflect similar interests and concerns.

But I believe there is something much more encompassing going on here as well. If any of the Micah 6 ministers looked over their own denomination as a whole, they would see brokenness in that body. They would see huge divisions between the left and the right, the more liberal and the more conservative members of their church bodies. They would see huge theological differences between those whose reliance on the Scripture in an almost literal fashion contrasts sharply with others within their denominations who cannot with intellectual integrity believe in

some supernatural God. They would see how very different are the needs of their financially richer congregations compared to their poorer ones. They would see enormous contrasts between their congregations where the educational level is high and those where is low.

In fact, let me suggest that the divisions that the body of Christ in the United States is experiencing today have little to do with the denominations anymore. That's one of the reasons why organizations such as Micah 6 can work so easily and well, because the real challenges aren't between denominations anymore. The real challenges are within. The real challenges are within congregations such as our own where God has blessed us sisters and brothers from many Christian backgrounds, thoughtful people who do not simply accept their parents' religious views, but work out their own salvation...sometimes "with fear and trembling,"<sup>1</sup> but in doing so make it their faith, their own faith.

And then, here comes the rub. Those who have worked hard here to forge their faith are not easily going to surrender this point or that. It is too dear. It is too dear, too hard won. So they will likely look for others within the congregation who think like they do, who share similar commitments. These birds of a feather begin to flock together... sometimes to the diminution of those who think differently. And it all feels so natural, this rising of the party spirit.

But when that starts feeling comfortable... when our settled little cliques begin to look down on others... the unenlightened, then, sisters and brothers, then we need to hear Paul's question: "Has Christ been divided?"

The passage closes with...

I Cor. 1:18 For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

What is this foolish looking power of the cross to save?

It is the power of Christ that is reconciling us with God, paving the way for us to be at one again with God. It is the vertical welcome from God.

But the symbol of the cross is so powerful, because as it operates vertically, it also works horizontally. As we accept God's acceptance of us... we will simultaneously be given an enormous capability to reconcile ourselves with others in this world. When we recognize our own brokenness, we can accept another who is broken, too... and bit by bit, and sometimes in magnanimous ways, the power of the cross can move us forward into reconciliation.

Two men gather at the back of a church sanctuary somewhere in the Midwest one Sunday morning after the worship service, with the bread and the juice of the communion service ready to be followed now, by some black coffee, when Tony still reflecting on the morning message, stammers out what has been on his mind.....

“Well, John, you know that I don't believe that Virgin Birth business in the same way that you do. It took me a long time to get to where I am with that now, so, I guess I can get pretty feisty about what I believe...

But I know that it means a lot to you. I'm sorry that I seemed to make fun of your beliefs last week in church school class. It just came out wrong.... Too hard. John, I never meant to disrespect you and I feel bad for the way that I spoke and acted last week. Can you forgive me?”

There is a long pause. John looked at Tony whose head was down, expressing the shame that had brought forth his words. Then after a while, John cleared his throat and responded.

“Tony, I'd be a liar if I told you that what you said last week didn't hurt me. It did. I had decided that listening to you was not spiritually healthy for me... and

not only for me, but also for my kids, they are so impressionable, you know. I had decided to just try avoiding you here at church. And if that didn't work then I'd confront you, I'd take you on. But even as I was saying that myself... Somewhere inside, I guess I knew that Jesus would not honor my cutting you off like that. It just felt wrong.

“And now I remember what I said to Sallie Sunday afternoon. I told her that you really weren't a Christian... that your thinking had strayed so far from any kind of regular Christian thinking that you were something...else. And now, you come and do the Christian thing. You ask me for forgiveness. Yes, I forgive you, Tony. And I pray that you can find in your heart to forgive me, too.”

And in the handshake that followed, somewhere in the Mid-west that day, one part of the body of Jesus Christ was made whole again... a sign of hope... a model....for us all.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> Phil. 2:12 “Therefore, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed me, not only in my presence, but much more now in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”