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Ascension Lutheran Church, Batavia IL  
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## **The Idea of Unity is Foolishness**

1 Corinthians 1:10–18

INI

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

### **1 Corinthians 1:10–18**

- <sup>10</sup> Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.
- <sup>11</sup> For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's *household*, that there are contentions among you.
- <sup>12</sup> Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of 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> lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.
- <sup>16</sup> Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.
- <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.
- <sup>18</sup> 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.

This is the Word of the Lord.

In Jesus name, dear fellow redeemed,

What began with a few Jewish fishermen leaving their nets behind has grown into a multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-denominational movement known most generally as Christianity. Over the course of 21 centuries, "Christianity" has developed into a global movement filled with many voices, opinions, teachings, priorities and practices. There are Catholics, Baptists, Methodists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, Episcopalians; then you have the Restorationist and the Congregationalist; and don't forget the Holiness Churches, Reformed Churches, the Adventist and Anabaptist. From

the very outset, the Christian movement has splintered, divided, and become defined by schisms. Unity? Can there be such a thing? The whole idea seems like foolishness.

Paul pleads with the Corinthians – He pleads that they would have no schisms in their congregation; that they would be of the same mind and the same mindset. And so we are confronted with the question: Is Paul being realistic? Is it really possible for Christians to be perfectly joined together? If so, what will it look like? Today we'll explore this question: How can unity among Christians be achieved?

### **Answer 1 – Unity can be achieved, but only by compromise.**

Some would agree that yes, unity is possible; yes, it is possible for Christians to be of the same mind and mind-set. While some would agree that this unity is possible, what it looks like remains a bit of an open question. We might think that the only way such unity is possible is by means of compromise. We see it all around us in our lives – in politics, in social situations, in marriage. The idea that we could be perfectly joined in all that we teach and confess and believe seems kind of foolish; not realistic. Instead the way for the church to get along is by agreeing to disagree.

But what really happens when churches try to compromise on matters of God's Word?

Just such a situation confronted us not so long ago. A proposal was put forth by the American Lutheran Church – or, as they are known today, the ELCA. In the 1930's, the ALC and the Missouri Synod Lutherans in the midst of doctrinal discussions. They were trying to find a basis for fellowship. The ALC made the following proposition: "We are firmly convinced that it is neither necessary nor possible to agree in all non-fundamental doctrines." What they are saying is this: there remains a certain area of God's Word for which we do not need to speak the same thing. You can have your interpretation, and I'll have mine. They were suggesting that such differences are 'not divisive of Church fellowship.' It seems reasonable. After all, what is the alternative. The alternative is that these two huge church bodies – the Missouri Synod and the ELCA – with their hundreds of thousands of members, should come to the same mindset on all teachings of Scripture. The idea of such a unity seems rather foolish. So they answered the question by saying, yes, the way to reach unity is by means of compromise.

So, fast forward 80 years. Has this compromise brought about more unity or more division? For a time, the Missouri Synod had found a way to share fellowship with the ELCA. They ignored differences and went on sharing ministries and Seminaries. But a time would come when many in the Missouri Synod discovered that the ELCA was

truly of a different mind-set. They discovered that there were differences so fundamental, that they could not agree on whether the Bible contains human errors.

And these divisions in teaching and faith would trickle down. This would trickle down from the seminaries into the congregations over the years to the point where even today the Missouri Synod has found itself unsure of where it really stands. Some prefer the traditional service at 8 am others the contemporary at 10. Some practice open communion and others serve communion only to members. Concerned members find themselves choosing their church based primarily on who the pastor is. Pastors find themselves called to churches based on who the congregation is. Consciences are burdened. And let us not think we are somehow immune. This can happen among us also - each group claiming its own leader – some follow Paul, some Apollos, some Cephas (Aramaic for “Peter”). Some say “I am conservative.” Others say, “I am progressive.” Some say, “at least my pastor still teaches the truth.” In the words of a Presbyterian pastor I once spoke with: “we are staying to fight the good fight.”

But is this the fight we are supposed to be fighting? For the very first thing Paul addresses in his letter are the quarrels. Paul, himself, warns the Corinthians. He goes on in chapter 5 to warn them of what unhealthy toleration can do. He refers to a situation in which sexual immorality was being tolerated and even promoted as an acceptable way of life. So he responds, *Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? Therefore purge out the old leaven, that you may be a new lump.*

God’s Word simply does not speak of any differences of conscience that are “non-fundamental.” Any schism in teaching causes a fundamental schism in the body of Christ. It needs to be corrected and avoided rather than tolerated. So Paul writes in Romans, *Romans 16:17 Now I urge you, brethren, note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them.*

God pleads with us, that we all speak the same thing, and that there be no division among us, but that we be perfectly joined together in the same mind and mind-set.

**Answer 2 – Unity can only be achieved by having the right confession.**

So we return to the question: how can unity among Christians be achieved? Some say: it is not possible. But not only is it possible, Paul pleads that this is the only way for the body of Christ to function. Others agree that yes, it is possible, but that the only way to reach unity is by compromising differences. However, Scripture has shown that this thinking ignores the destructive aspect of false teaching and exposes God’s people to great dangers. There is another answer out there. One which agrees that compromise is

not the way, but instead, unity is achieved by having the right confession. There is a tendency, especially among confessional Lutherans, to think that the title “orthodox” is what creates unity. We look at the ELCA and say, glad we’re not like them. I have the right confessional writings, I belong the right church, I have the right pastor. Yes, we are united.

I recall a time when I was discussing the history of the CLC and our break with the Wisconsin Synod. Someone asked me, “well, don’t the other churches think they are right?” And what do you suppose was my gut reaction? Well – that doesn’t matter; what matter is they are wrong. What matters is I am right. What matters is that we have the right interpretation; we have the right confessional writing; we have the right pastors. We have the Lutheran heritage; we have Luther. But what was I saying? It had become all about us vs. them. I was turning fellowship into something I do, something I have created. I was saying, well at least “I am of Paul” and not of “those people.” Or more accurately, I say, “I am of the CLC.”

Into whose name were we baptized? There is a warning here for us – lest we empty the gospel of its power – as Paul puts it, lest we empty the cross of Christ of its effect. There is a great heed for us, lest we get caught up in what Paul calls, the wisdom of human reasoning; words of wisdom which man teaches. There is a warning for us, lest we think that unity is created by having the best theological arguments and the most accurate interpretation.

If the right written confession, was a means to unity; if me being right and him being wrong is the way to reach the same mind-set, then what has happened to the cross? What has happened to God’s work of grace? Was Paul crucified for you? Into whose name was I baptized?

**Answer 3 – The idea of unity is foolishness; it is achieved by the foolish message of the cross.**

*Again the Spirit pleads: 10 by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.*

So, we are back to the central question: “how can unity be achieved?” Some say it is not possible. Others say it is possible, but only by compromising our confession. Still others say it is possible, not by compromising our confession, but by having the perfect confession. If none of these answers are right, then really, what are we left with? We are left with foolishness.

This whole idea of unity is foolishness. The idea of unity is foolishness, for only a fool would say that unity is possible, but there is nothing we can do to create, achieve, or preserve it. Only a fool would say, Paul pleads for perfect unity; for something which cannot be achieved by compromising confession, and also something which cannot be achieved by having the perfect confession. It is foolish, because there is nothing we can do about it. We are left fools for Christ's sake.

*18 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.*

The Spirit puts an end to our human wisdom. He puts an end to the wisdom of human compromise. He puts an end to the wisdom of human orthodoxy. And he leaves us with nothing ... nothing but the power of the cross.

The disciples needed strong nets. What was it the disciples were doing when they heard that voice from shore? When Jesus approaches them and calls from shore, what were they busy doing? They were mending their nets. Those fishermen knew the importance of strong nets when it came to pulling in a great catch. As they are busy mending their nets, they hear the words: "Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of men." Jesus calls them to an occupation that would require a new kind of mending; He calls them to a new kind of fishing. A fishing for lost souls.

What is interesting is that the word translated "mend" in our Gospel reading is the same word translated "perfectly jointed together" in our text. The disciples were busy "mending their nets." And Paul pleads that we be literally, "mended together in the same mind, and in the same mind-set."

The disciples knew the importance of strong nets. When a mesh was worn or torn, they knew the whole mission was in danger. And how do you suppose we keep the net of Christ's body strong? How might we be "mended together?" Our text calls it "the foolishness of the cross." The idea of unity is indeed foolishness, for it is achieved by the foolish message of the cross.

As Jesus comes to that Galilean shore, Matthew records that He comes preaching this message: "repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This was a new kind of mending. In this call of Jesus, in this call to repentance, God is able to mend what has been torn, to heal what is broken. Only through the message of Christ's crucifixion which has delivered us from the law, which has won our allegiance by God's grace. Through that message of repentance and faith God empties us of a me vs. him attitude

and in its place gives the message of Christ for all of us. Paul pleads by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is the message that joins us to the name of Christ and unites us to His calling, His discipleship, His Word.

The idea is foolishness. It is something foreign to the wisdom of human reasoning. The strength of our nets and the mission we are called to is not through anything we can do; not through the wisdom of human compromise, not the wisdom of human reasoning. Only through God's gracious mending do we, in the CLC, find unity in confession and unity in teaching. This is the design of strong nets. This is the body of Christ at work.

So the answer to this question of unity is really a matter of faith. It is not about me being right and you being wrong. But it is about what we believe and what saves us. We are baptized into the name of Christ and that alone saves us and keeps us united with those who believe. It is a matter of faith and love.

It is by faith that we believe that we are not saved by belonging to the CLC, or any earthly organization for that matter. It is by faith that we believe whether you are of the CLC, the WELS, the LCMS, the ELCA, the RCC, the UCC, or whatever Christian church you belong to, we believe that what saves a person is the message of the cross; baptism into Christ; the proclamation that Christ has died and risen for our salvation; and by faith we are joined to Christ and to all who believe by believing that message. It is a matter of faith.

What began with a few Jewish fishermen leaving their nets behind has grown into a multi-cultural, multi-national, multi-denominational movement known most generally as Christianity. Unity is possible. But it is a unity which only God can give through His Word. We need strong nets. And so it is about mending. When a tear occurs, it cannot be ignored, or left unattended. It is not a quarrel that separate us from other Christian communities. It is not a quarrel which separated us from the Wisconsin Synod in the 1950's. Rather it is love; or at least it should be. It is love knows the devastating effect of compromising the gospel; and it is likewise love which longs for fellowship and prays that these differences be mended.

Unity is not about compromise, nor is not about having the proper confession. It is a matter of faith and the words we confess are an expression of faith. The whole idea might seem like foolishness to many. And it is. But to us, the message of the cross is the power of God and the only means to achieve true unity in teaching, practice, and in Christ.

And so we pray:

**Lord, keep us united, mend all schisms, forgive all sins, as we also forgive those who sin against us. Use the message of your death and resurrection to heal divisions which exist in the visible church, to lead more Christians to a united confession, to teach us to speak the same thing, and to mended us together in the same mindset. In Your Name. Amen.**