

### THIRD SUNDAY AFTER THE EPIPHANY

#### 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

*Speak the same thing, joined in mind and thought.*

“Pastor Johnston, you are doing such a great job.” “Nice sermon, Pastor.” “You really made a difference counseling us, Pastor.” Sometimes I’m amazed I can get my head through my alb; but then St. Paul knocks me down a notch. Christ was crucified for you, not I. You were baptized into Christ, not me. The pastor is unimportant. The words matter: *the same words*.

*“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”* The little pope in each of us dies, or at least should die, because we are not the standard for truth. Something outside of us that has not changed for thousands of years and will not change for thousands more is the standard: the inerrant, infallible, invaluable Word of God.

A choir with disharmonious voices is a step away from hell, while a harmonious choir brings us to the very gates of heaven. Two oxen pulling a cart in different directions will quickly tire and get nowhere, while two oxen going the same direction in agreement with each other can pull an amazing load an unbelievable distance. A team of talented individuals is weaker than a talented team. A church guided by politics has a message that is only as strong as the current majority and the latest vote, and it quickly falls into the factionalism St. Paul condemns. A church gathered around a pastor will scatter at his departure. A church that agrees to disagree on the seemingly little things of Scripture, will inevitably expand the definition of little.

A church may grow and seemingly prosper as it rejects the truth or puts forth contradictory teachings as equally true, but it is, nonetheless, dead in the Lord’s eyes. Paganism, Judaism, and heretical sects vastly outnumbered the early Christians, but did that make the heathen, Pharisee, or heretic right? The Greek word in our text for divisions is *schismata*, or schism. It means to tear or rip something. The one introducing innovative and incorrect teachings does the ripping, and the piece he rips off may indeed be larger than the remaining fabric. The way to heal such a tear is not to sew on filthy patches that do not match the cloth. Rather, the same fabric—the truth of the Word of God—must be used to mend the damage. The unity St. Paul urges is here not a haphazard patchwork of a few select so-called essentials, but an agreement in mind and thought, an agreement literally in one’s understanding and in the application of that understanding.

How many of us often wish God had revealed more in Scripture and have even collected questions to ask Him in heaven, yet are prepared to compromise on the very things He considered important enough to reveal in His Word. Beware of churches that advertise themselves as Bible-believing but then insist there are parts of the Bible that don’t need to be believed. Carrying a Bible to church and back on Sunday sure looks pious and holy, but actually reading it in context, submitting your reason to it, and speaking the same words that you find in it, sometimes to your own detriment, that is commendable. It is not always easy or pleasant, but we are called to wrestle with God like Jacob, to chew on His words and digest them, and it is only in so doing that we will be able to speak the same words and proclaim the same message.

Many pastors can sing like angels, preach like Paul, sell their message like a salesman, smile like a model, prance like a ballerina in the chancel, dress and sling slang like the most rebellious teenager, and cry like a baby in sympathy. Sadly, however, none of that matters. The Christian Church has never been built on pastors, charismatic individuals, the latest, the most popular, or the most impressive. It is built on a message: the message of Jesus Christ.

We as Lutheran Christians are uniquely positioned to get the message right, speaking the same words, and to get the message out, sharing the same words, yet some in our publications lately seem to separating the content of our message from the sharing of it. To use an illustration only the son of a Ford family can appreciate, what would happen if Ford decided to sink all its money into advertising without doing anything to maintain the quality of its product? It might as well change its name to Chevrolet. So also, if we are not careful to preserve the gospel message, we have nothing but hype and empty promises to share with the community.

We do not preach a set of facts, but a person: Jesus Christ. His person cannot be divided or diminished, and neither can His message. I became a Lutheran, because I am convinced from Scripture that Lutherans present the whole Christ—the whole gospel—to the world in Word and Sacrament. May God deal with us ever so severely if at any cost or for any reason we surrender that treasure for the generalities and trifles of emasculated American Protestantism, fixated on the latest guru. Few will receive our same words with seriousness if they are couched in an irreverent, manufactured, or circus-like atmosphere indistinguishable from that of the general culture. We are Christ Lutheran Church, not Kuske, Schroer, Seelow, or Johnston Lutheran Church. Men are prone to error and die, but Christ's Word never errs and endures forever. St. Paul is clear. Preach Christ, not personalities. Preach clearly, not cleverly. Preach with a united confession of the truth, not confessions united in spite of the truth.

Paul writes, *“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.”* Paul is not belittling Baptism. As an evangelist and apostle, he preached more than he baptized. The pastors of the local church and those who traveled with Paul usually did the baptizing. His concern here is not to pit preaching against Baptism, but rather to show the objective power and certainty of them both. The Word is the Word, no matter who preaches it, because it is Christ's Word, and it reveals Christ. Baptism is Baptism, no matter who administers it, because it is Baptism into Christ, the same yesterday, today and forever (Hebrews 12:8) and the One who gives water such cleansing power in connection with His Word. An unhealthy concern with the human agent delivering the Word or administering the Sacraments will only avert our eyes from the divine agent behind these saving gifts, who is also the divine content of them. Only sectarianism and divisions will result.

I am keenly aware of my shortcomings and inadequacies. I have already and will in the future make mistakes. As St. Augustine said, “I will err, but I will not be a heretic,” that is, I will accept correction from God's Word. You all are called to do the same. We are Christ Lutheran Church, and thankfully so. May we always be Christ's, the whole Christ's, for in Him and His resurrection we have forgiveness and life. May we always speak the same words, God's Word, for in them we have Christ. May we always cherish the rare and God-given unity we have in those words, which we confess as we kneel at one altar and receive one Lord who bestows on us one and the same grace. May more learn those same words and, Lord willing, one day join us at that altar. Paint the hallway whatever color you like. Mow the lawn every two weeks or three. Disagree on those things if you must, but never disagree on the gospel, the Christ, and the Word that reveals Him. *“I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.”* Be one in mind and thought. Be one in Christ. Amen.