

"All Ground is Level at the Cross"

(Unity)

I Corinthians 1:18-2:5

Dr. Jerry Nelson

www.soundliving.org

In his book, The Body, Chuck Colson recalls the incident at the Emanuel Baptist Church. (paraphrased) It was the right hook that got him. Pastor Waite might have stood in front of the communion table trading punches with head deacon Ray Brison all morning had not Ray's fist caught (the pastor) on the chin two minutes and 15 seconds into the fight. Pastor Waite went down for the count right there at the altar. Two of the pastor's teeth were loosened and Deacon Ray Bryson's hand was broken in two places.

Nothing in the history of that rather typical New England community on the outskirts of Boston could have prepared them for that Sunday morning donnybrook. The church had been in the community for generations. Following W.W.II it had prided itself on being a defense against the forces of compromise and worldliness in Christianity. And when the Jewish community began to grow and the Baptist population began to sink, they developed a motto that read "God is with US at Emanuel Baptist" with the "US" in bold letters).

After the incident and through a great deal of sin on the part of the pastor and some on the part of the lay leadership, the pastor and the deacons divided into two camps with the deacons calling for the pastor's resignation. Most of the congregation chose sides as well. When the deacon chairman, contrary to the pastors' wishes, walked to the platform to announce a business meeting to terminate the pastor, Pastor Waite wouldn't give him the microphone and proceeded to announce a hymn. At that, Ray the deacon, pulled the microphone cord out of the wall and turned to walk away, but tripped on the cord. When Pastor Waite reached to help him up, Ray thinking he had been tripped, swung and hit the Pastor squarely in the nose. Within an instant a majority of the congregation converged on the communion table and began exchanging punches with members from both sides of the aisle. The organist tried playing "Bless Be the Tie that Binds" to get everyone to stop, but to no avail. The fight ended when the police arrived.

The following Wednesday, the deacons and the pastor were in court sitting in uncomfortable silence when the judge, a prominent Jew came into the room. The judge looked up from the report in front of him and said, "I'm dismissing this case. No charges will be pressed but I'm urging you to work this out in your own church. Your Jesus may allow this sort of thing in His followers but I will not allow fist fights as a regular order of service in churches. The leadership of the church filed out quietly and drove off in their cars bearing the bumper stickers:

"God is with US at Emanuel Baptist." Though physical punches were never again thrown - the verbal punches continued and it was only a very few years before the church folded altogether. Even though the story's true, it's a pretty outrageous incident.

HOW COULD IT COME TO THAT? How could Christian people get themselves in such a condition? Think of it on much smaller and much less dramatic scale. In fact, think of yourself. There's someone in this church, or maybe in another church where you've been, that you have just sort of "written off." You don't doubt they're a Christian it's just that you want nothing to do with them. It seems there isn't much you agree on when it comes to other doctrinal and lifestyle issues. It just kind of makes you angry when they push their views on others in the church - and so you've just sort of written them off. Oh, you haven't punched them but you have distanced yourself from them, as if they didn't exist. And your feeling is you just wish they'd go to some other church. Maybe it's not a doctrinal or lifestyle issue at all - it's just their personality - they bug you and you'd rather not have anything ever again to do with them. And, frankly, if they left the church you'd feel a lot better.

HOW DID IT COME TO THAT? How could Christian people get themselves in that condition? In First Corinthians 1 we are told about a church in Corinth, Greece. As we saw chapter 1 verses 1-9, this is not a church that is Christian in name only, this is a church of real Christians. As we read in verses 10-12, these Christians are dividing into camps - some claim to follow one leader, others following other leaders. In verse 11 we learn that they were quarreling among themselves. There's a spirit of divisiveness among them.

What brought these divisions about? In verse 13 Paul asks rhetorically "Were you baptized into the name of Paul?" He then goes on to point out that he baptized very few. Is it possible that the divisions were around doctrinal issues like baptism. Some claiming their baptism was superior to others because they were baptized by Paul, or Apollos or even Peter? Regardless of what doctrinal issue it was, it appears that these people were rationalizing their divisions based on some apparent doctrinal difference.

Maybe the divisions in the church weren't doctrinally based but were a matter of preference. Apollos is referred to in the Book of Acts as a man with excellent speaking ability. Is it possible that the people lined up behind the man in the church or their history that they preferred in terms of his style of leadership and preaching? They made their preferences known and then disparaged others or defended their own man until they were divided. It isn't just that they thought their preferred leader was different from the others but that he was better, spiritually superior. And of course once they'd said that, their own pride was on the line.

Maybe the divisions in the church were brought about by jealousies. In Chapter 3:3 Paul specifically names that attitude. Was it that one group in the church was

more successful - it was gaining more converts than the others? Was it that some in the church had more money than others? Was it those with less charging those with more with being uppity. Those with more feeling smugly superior based on God's obvious blessing.

Whatever was causing it, the people were dividing into groups. There's no indication that these divisions were yet caused by any fundamental doctrines. There was so much personal spiritual pride involved that these people were willing to separate from one another - to treat each other as if they didn't even belong to the same body of Christ. They may have begrudgingly said the others are Christians but they treated them as if they had no relationship to them.

I remember as a kid the few times I dared to yell at my brother or him at me that we hated each other and wished the other was dead. My mother or father would intervene and not only tell us we couldn't talk like that but would plead with us to not mean that. And it would grieve them as it grieves you parents when your children don't get along. Why? Why? Because we were brothers - we belonged to each other.

After Paul notes the attitudes these Corinthians have toward each other he asks the unthinkable: v 13 "Is Christ divided?" It is as if he says, "Don't you realize that when you separate from each other in that way and with those attitudes it is as if you are pulling the body of Christ apart." "Don't you understand, you are brothers and sisters in the Lord, you belong to each other." Or as he says it in verse 10: "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.

In this chapter and the next the Apostle is going to give several reasons why this attitude of divisiveness, this willingness to separate from other believers is unthinkable and must, in obedience to Christ, be stopped. We will look at just two of the reasons today and revisit this subject next week.

The Apostle has appealed to the people to stop their divisiveness and then, if you will look at verse 17 you will see he launches into a discussion of the Cross. "For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing..." (1 Corinthians 1:17-18a) He actually introduces the idea of the cross in verse 13 when he writes, "Was I, Paul, crucified for you?" Something about the cross makes their willingness to separate from each other unthinkable and certainly unacceptable.

In verse 17 Paul writes, I was sent by Christ to preach the gospel, the good news about the cross, and I didn't use words of human wisdom for fear of emptying the cross of its power and would have given you a wrong understanding of the gospel.

Still on the same subject, in Chapter 2:2 Paul says in essence the same thing: "For I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified." Clearly, Paul is discussing the Cross of Christ. Now I confess this was a difficult connection for me to understand. What has this to do with a spirit of divisiveness among God's people? Someone might think, "Maybe he's changed subjects altogether - and verses 18, and following, don't have anything to do with divisions in the church." It might be tempting to think that way until you read from chapter 3:3-4 "For since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not mere men?" Clearly, Paul is still on the subject of this divisiveness.

So how does it fit? Let's look briefly at the last two sections of chapter 1 and then I'll try to pull it together. In verses 18-25 the Apostle writes that the gospel, the good news about how to have a relationship with God almighty has absolutely nothing to do with human wisdom. If you are a Christian, if you have a relationship with God, it is not because you have a philosophy of life all figured out. In Paul's day, and in this city of Corinth, there were Sophists and Gnostics, and other philosophies. People who thought they had the universe and God, and themselves all figured out - and because they understood all those things they were o.k. with life and with God. In our day there are people who have grabbed hold of some ancient philosophy in new clothes, or have had some out of body experience like others and they put it all together and think they now understand life and death and they are o.k.

If you are a Christian it is not because you have a philosophy of life all figured out. If you are a Christian, if you have a relationship with God, it is not even because you have a Christian doctrinal philosophy all figured out. You aren't a Christian because you understand Christian doctrine - your human understanding, your wisdom, is not the cause of your salvation.

In verse 18 we read, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing." There is not a person who has ever lived, who is alive now, or who ever will live, who would have thought of a cross as the way to save people. In verse 19 God said he would destroy the wisdom of the wise, and frustrate the intelligence of the intelligent. God's way of salvation will make their ways obviously false. And in verse 22 we read the Jews were looking for miraculous signs and the Greeks were looking for wise philosophies. And then the good news about Christ dying for our sins came and it was impossible to the Jews - a cursed, crucified Messiah? – Impossible! And it was foolishness, nonsense, to the Gentiles, to the rest.

But Paul writes in verse 24, what about you Corinthian Christians - what do you know to be true now? Those of you whom God has called into his family, what is this message of a crucified Christ to you? Yes, it is power of God. When God

called you, when God opened your spiritual eyes to see who Jesus is and what he had done on the cross for you, and when he gave you faith to trust in Jesus alone for the forgiveness of your sins and for spiritual life that would never end, what happened? You became a Christian. You were brought into the family of God. You became a brother or a sister to all who are God's children.

And why did that come about? Because you wisely understood a philosophy of life? Because you understood all the fine points of Christian doctrine? Because you got your act together and now were living a holy life? No. It came about because God brought you to the cross - and there you saw your need and there you saw a savior. It was not your wisdom compared to others. It was not because you had your doctrine and lifestyle all sorted out. It was solely because of God's grace through the cross. And now to the point, "How did every other person who is a Christian become one?" By the cross! Absolutely no superiority of theirs compared to others.

We are not brothers and sisters in Christ, we are not one body of believers because some are living more consistently holy lives than others, or because some have a better understanding of the Bible than others. We are brothers and sisters in Christ because we have all come to the same cross with the same empty hands - pleading the mercy and grace of God. All ground is level at the cross!

How can we, who have been bought with the same blood, equally loved by the same God, brought to life by the same Father, called to Christ on the same basis - his choice, and brought into the same forever family, possibly separate from each other based on our superior knowledge of the Bible, our beliefs about certain life-style issues, or our personal sensitivities to certain personalities.

Look at verses 26-29: "Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things—and the things that are not—to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him."

Think about what you were when God called you. Did God call you because you were wise, because you were influential, or because you were of nobility or anything else? In fact if you look at it, God mostly chose a bunch of nobodies by the world's standards. Why? To drive home the point - Your relationship to God did not result in any way from your worthiness.

And now to the point once again. How did every other person who is a Christian become one? By their worthiness or unworthiness? No. Only by the Cross. Or as verse 30 puts it, "It is because of God that you are in Christ Jesus..." All ground is level at the cross.

How then can we who brought nothing to the cross or brought nothing to merit favor with God or each other, possibly now demand from other Christians that they meet our standards in order to be one with us.

There is a great danger lurking in all of us. We are so tempted to assume that our understanding of the Bible and our understanding of the Christian life and how to live, what to do and what not to do, is all somehow part of the Gospel. Unfortunately when another Christian doesn't agree with us we see it as an attack on our faith. Worse yet, if someone doesn't believe exactly as we believe and doesn't live exactly as we live we are offended. We like to think that we are defending the faith. But more likely we are defending our egos. "He doesn't believe what I believe - He thinks I'm wrong". Maybe I am wrong, maybe he's wrong. But he's my brother!

Today we want to separate over whether people are Democrats or Republicans, whether we are pro-life or pro-choice, whether we do or do not drink alcoholic beverages, whether we favor female elders or not, or whether we speak in tongues or don't speak in tongues. And on and on the list goes. We begin to equate Christianity with our system of beliefs, our lifestyle choices and then we defend it. But that's your system of beliefs - not the message of the cross. We are tempted to make non-essentials tests of fellowship. I can only associate with you and love you if you believe as I do.

This is a very uncomfortable message. I'm going to leave you with the discomfort. But don't you easily dismiss it. Don't just say, "Well you have to draw a line somewhere. You can't just have people believing anything." You are right. You have to draw a line somewhere - but draw it where God does - at the cross. Those who have come to the cross are our brothers and sisters in the Lord and we must not we dare not divide Christ by separating from them.