

"ONE SPIRIT"
(Unity)
I Corinthians 2:6-16
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It was a church of about 200 people. They had been a congregation for nearly 100 years. It was a rural Wisconsin community and so some of the families had been in the church for several generations. Great, great-grandparents, great grandparents, grandparents, parents and children were all worshipping together. And many children of one family or another had grown up to marry children of another family. Not everyone was related but certainly everyone knew everybody else. It was also a conservative group of Christians. Historically they had included in their constitution quite a list of things that people could not do if they wanted to be a member of the church.

A number of years ago a pastor was called to serve the congregation who came from a seminary in the area - a seminary that was deeply concerned about the growing liberalism in the country and deeply committed to stopping liberalism's inroads into the churches in the area. Because the 20th Century evangelist Billy Graham would dialog with Roman Catholics and even invite them to participate on his terms in the Crusades he conducted - it was determined that the churches in this area that wanted to remain true to the Bible would not participate with Graham. It was also decided that for the churches to remain doctrinally sound they had to use Sunday School curriculum only from one certain publishing house. So serious were they about these and other issues that a printed statement was published regarding these issues and the churches were required to sign the document.

The pastor met with several of the deacons of the church to find out if they would support him in this call for separation from those who were not true to their way of thinking. Several of deacons didn't think such harsh separatist language and measures were appropriate and so the pastor stopped asking them. Instead he continued to meet with those who were receptive to his ideas. And he also began preaching a series of sermons on the evils of those who were called "inclusivists" - those willing to associate with other Christians who didn't believe in all points as they did.

With little notice and no real idea of the agenda, a meeting of the congregation was called and the pastor and some of the deacons moved and seconded that the church adopt a formal statement of separation from ministries like Billy Graham's. They were asked to make a complete disavowal and condemnation of not just the Graham ministry but others like it which were also "inclusivistic". The Pastor was so convinced he was right that in the meeting he attempted to coerce the people into submission and when they wouldn't yield, he simply got angry. And as the meeting progressed tempers flared. One of the mature saints in the congregation saw what was happening and tried to allow for tempers to cool by calling for a tabling of the motion to a later meeting. At that the pastor and approximately half of the congregation got up, as pre-arranged during

prior private meetings, and walked out. As the left they declared they were starting their own church.

The leaders of the church who remained waited a few days and then personally contacted the pastor and the other leaders and even wrote a letter to all who had left urging them to return and sit together and work it out. But the others would not "compromise" as they termed it. Maybe saddest of all were the families that were split. There were parents going with one group and children with another. Brothers divided on the issue. Long-time friends who had studied the Bible and prayed together for years began not speaking to each other - and not doing so for years. The hurts, the tensions, the anger, the divisions are still not overcome. That was my childhood church. And today, it is two churches - both small, both struggling to some extent and both still living down a reputation in that community.

I recently called my parents who were in that church and are still in the church of the group that did not walk out. I asked them to describe to me what was behind what happened. Yes, there were doctrinal differences but overwhelmingly it was a matter of prejudice and pride. People unwilling to sit down and pray together and talk together long enough, as long as it takes, to come to some kind of agreement or barring that to agree as brothers and sisters in the Lord to live together in harmony in spite of their differences. The church, the body of Christ, the family of God, brothers and sisters in the Lord divided, separated, and became hostile toward each other.

If my introduction sounds similar to my sermon on 1 Corinthians 1:18-2:5, it is because today I am discussing the same issue. And I am doing so because I believe the Apostle Paul in 1 Corinthians 2 does so.

Look with me please at 1 Corinthians 1:10-11, "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. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you." Here's an appeal by God to the Corinthians and to Christians everywhere to live in harmony. Verse 12 informs us some were saying they followed Paul, others saying they followed Apollos, still others saying they followed Cephas (that is Peter) or still others saying probably with pride that they followed Christ. And in vs 13 Paul asks the central question: "Is Christ divided?" And the implied answer is a resounding "No, of course not!"

God, through the Apostle, then gives them and us a series of insights that would keep us from dividing, keep us from separating from each other, that will keep us from, as I said last week, writing other Christians off.

In verses 18-25, as we saw, Paul reminds all these Christians, regardless of what camp they are in, that they are brothers and sisters in Christ - all of them on exactly the same basis - the Cross of Christ. They were not God's children because they had a more developed theological system than others or they had a more conservative lifestyle than

others or anything else - it was that God had brought them to the cross and they realized they had nothing to offer God - they could only plead for his mercy and grace on the basis of Jesus' death on the cross for them. They were not better than any other Christians - because all ground is level at the cross.

Furthermore, in verses 26-28, he drives the point home by reminding them to think about what they were before their conversion to Christianity. "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." Few of them had any reason to boast about their wisdom, their positions of influence or their wealth or nobility - they were the "nobodies" by the world's standards and yet God had called them.

As Paul ends the chapter - he has made the point there is no basis for boasting one over another. If they were Christians it was all by grace. So how could they possibly separate from each other as believers on the basis of some supposed superior doctrinal position or lifestyle? How can we who have been bought with the same blood, equally loved by the same Father, called to Christ on the same basis - his choice - and brought into the same forever family separate from each other. How can we possibly separate from each other based on our superior knowledge of the Bible or our beliefs about certain life-style issues, or our sensitivities about certain personalities." Or as Paul asked it in 1:13, "Is Christ divided?"

Now beginning in 2:6 through the end of the 2nd chapter, God, through Paul, raises another reason why separating from each other in the body of Christ, in the church, is unthinkable and certainly unacceptable to God.

To gain an understanding of what Paul is saying here we need to back up a little and take a run at this passage. Start with me back at 1:17. Paul writes that when he came preaching the gospel to the Corinthians he didn't do it with words of human wisdom because he didn't want them to misunderstand. He wanted them to know that becoming a Christian isn't based on some superior knowledge but is based solely on the power of God through the Cross.

In verse 18 he writes that the message of the cross is the power of God. Salvation is not just understanding certain things to be true. It is the transforming power of God invading a person's life. In the rest of the chapter one the point is made over and over again that salvation does not come from just right information but from the power of God.

He starts chapter two including the same theme: "I didn't come preaching with superior wisdom but with demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on man's wisdom but on God's power." Now if there is anything these Christians should

have heard by this point it is that you don't become a Christian by getting a philosophy of life all figured out, or even by getting all your doctrine lined up just right - you become a Christian when God invades your life with his power. Therefore there is no room for boasting, one Christian claiming to be more right than another, and willing to fight, to separate over it.

Until chapter 2, verse 6, Paul has been putting "wisdom" down pretty hard. For example in 1:19 he wrote, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the intelligence of the intelligent I will frustrate." Is wisdom out of place in Christianity? Is all of Christianity nothing more than subjective power experiences? Is there no objective truth in Christianity?

Beginning at verse 6, chapter 2, Paul writes in essence, "Don't misunderstand, we do speak a message of wisdom. Earlier he had called it the message of the cross. The message of the cross is power but it is not lacking in wisdom. The message of the cross is not anti-intellectualism. The message of the cross has content, knowledge, wisdom. This message of power is also a message of wisdom.

But notice what else he says in verse 6, this message of wisdom is not the wisdom of this age or the wisdom of the rulers of this age who are coming to nothing - who have nothing to offer that will last. Now before going further I think it is important for us to have firmly in mind at least something of the difference between the "message of wisdom" that Paul does preach and the "wisdom of this age" that he condemns. Clearly he is here contrasting two things: worldly wisdom and God's wisdom.

What is this "worldly wisdom?" In Paul's day there were many philosophies competing for people's attention and acceptance. Philosophies that claimed to give life meaning and give people an understanding of life and the universe and existence and death etc. Today we likewise have philosophies that compete for people's attention and acceptance - each claiming to make sense of life. People consult astrologers, hang crystals in their cars, read all kinds of books each claiming to bring order and some measure of control to an otherwise chaotic world. But today I think most people live with a philosophy that is what I call the "man on the street religion." This is the person who talks like a religionist. A mid-1990s Louis Harris poll found that 80% of Americans call themselves Christian. 95% believe in God, almost all believe in prayer, and 90% believe in heaven. But at root the "man on the street" believes that to err is human and to forgive is God's job and all a person must do is the best they can. He might even believe that Jesus came to earth, that he died and that he rose again - but those are symbolic really, symbolic of the ideals of giving and sacrificing for the good of others, but the "man on the street" doesn't believe they fundamentally change anything. You still have to just do the best you can. This is the person who talks like a religionist but lives like a materialist. When you watch what he does instead of listening to what he says you get the distinct impression that he actually believes there is nothing beyond the grave and there are no needs other than material needs. (paraphrase of Barclay on 1 Corinthians, p 28) That's "the man on the street religion", the world's wisdom.

But God's wisdom is radically different. As I've already said, "God's wisdom" is the equivalent of "The message of the cross" of 1:18 or the "gospel" of 1:17. God's wisdom, the message of the cross, is the message of God who died. Put maybe too succinctly, the message of the cross is that there is a Creator God out there who is holy and just and who loves us. And because of who he is he is worthy of our allegiance and obedience. But instead of obeying him, we largely disregard him and his will for our lives. And as a result of our sin against this holy God we are condemned to death, to separation from God forever. BUT GOD knowing our need, and knowing that forgiveness cannot be granted without justice being met - died in our place. God the Son, took our sin upon himself and became a sacrifice for us - offering his life in our place. And because He was and is God, the death of Jesus was an acceptable sacrifice for all our sin - as proven by his resurrection. And He invades the lives of people dead in their sins and opens their blind spiritual eyes to the truth of their need matched by his saving offer of forgiveness and life through his death on the cross. That's the wisdom of God - The God who died for us. Very different from the world's wisdom which is "think your best" or "do your best" or "just ignore it altogether." That's the difference between "the message of God's wisdom" and the "wisdom of this age".

But in verse 7 Paul calls God's wisdom a "secret wisdom" and a wisdom that has been hidden." In Ephesians 1:4 we read that "God chose us in Christ before the creation of the world." But it is obvious that Jesus as that Christ-Messiah, Jesus as God who would forgive his people through his own death was not revealed to people as God until thousands of years after creation. In that sense the message of wisdom, the message of the Cross was hidden for a long time. But while that is true, I don't think that is the point being made here by calling God's wisdom a "secret" or a "hidden" message.

I think the point of it being "secret" or "hidden" is that no human beings, on their own, understood it. Look at 1:8-10: "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory. However, as it is written: "No eye has seen, no ear has heard, no mind has conceived what God has prepared for those who love him"— but God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." First of all he writes that none of the rulers of this age, the smartest, the brightest, the most knowledgeable understood it. That's obvious because if they had truly understood who Jesus was and what He was doing, they never would have been part of crucifying Him.

But more importantly is why they didn't understand. As he writes in verse 9, they didn't understand because they were trying to use human methods to understand spiritual things. Verse 9 is often quoted as if it speaks to the beauty and blessing of heaven to come - "We just can't imagine how good it will be." That happens to be true - we can't imagine it but that is not what this verse is talking about. These Old Testament verses (Isaiah 64:4ff) are quoted to describe why the rulers of this age (and all of us for that matter) don't understand the message of the cross.

There are three ways of learning: The eyes teach us through immediate experience. The ears teach us through information passed on to us. And the mind teaches us

through discoveries and understanding. The verse says that none of these methods of learning can even begin to teach us about spiritual things.

The first part of verse 10 tells us the only way we can understand the message of the cross - God's wisdom - "God has revealed it to us by his Spirit." If you have any understanding of God's wisdom - How did that happen? If you have any understanding of the message of the cross - How did you get that understanding? Were you smarter than others? Did you have a method for discerning spiritual truth that others didn't have? No! If you have come to a saving knowledge of the cross, it is because God's Holy Spirit has revealed it to you. You have no superiority over other Christians. You have no inside track to truth that your brothers and sisters in the Lord don't have.

Verse 11 says, "Who knows the thoughts of a person except that person him or herself?" The answer: No one else does. And then he says, "In the same way no one knows the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God." The Spirit of God is uniquely qualified to know and communicate the thoughts of God.

Then look at verse 12 which restates in a different way what we already saw at the beginning of verse 10, the Spirit who knows the mind of God - that is the Spirit we have. Who has that Spirit? Every Christian.

Verse 13 is, I believe, a summary of everything from verse 6 thru 12: This Gospel, this message of wisdom, this message of the cross, we speak about and believe didn't come to us by human wisdom but it came only by the Spirit. Again, If we have become Christians, if we have come to a saving knowledge of Jesus and his cross-work for us it is only because it has been revealed to us by the Spirit of God. Those Corinthians and we could not have become Christians without Him.

Do you remember back in verses 8 & 9 we saw that people could not understand the hidden secret of God's wisdom because they were attempting to use human methods to discover spiritual things? Here in verse 14 Paul touches on that again: "The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God, for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned." Without the Spirit of God opening his spiritual eyes a person lacks the capability to discern, to appropriately understand the personal significance of Jesus' death on his or her behalf. Such a person doesn't have the spiritual equipment to understand.

But again in contrast (v 15) - The spiritual man - the man or woman who has the Spirit of God is now able to make judgments, to understand, to value rightly these things about the message of the cross.

Then again in verse 16 is a summary of all that has been said: God's ways are inscrutable, beyond understanding by human beings unless God reveals himself to us - by giving us the Spirit - giving us access to the mind of Christ, the mind of God - and that is what he has done.

And what has all this to do with my home church? What has this to do with the way we treat each other as Christians? If the only way anyone can come to a saving- understanding of the cross is by the presence of the Spirit of God in them, if the only way anyone can grow to a greater maturity in understanding the implications of the cross is the Spirit of God in them, then how can I have anything less than great respect for my brother or sister in the Lord in whom the Spirit of God resides? How can I possibly separate from them - Is the Spirit of God divided?

Chapters one and two make it plain that if we are Christians, if you and I are Christians, if you or I and the people with whom we disagree on certain doctrinal or lifestyle or preferential issues are Christians, it is because we came to Christ by the same cross, with nothing to commend any of us to God, and only by the gracious work of the Spirit of God who gave us understanding - and continues to give us spiritual understanding.

On the basis on this biblical text I am going to be so bold as to say what should have happened in my home church years ago and what must happen in our church and in our attitudes today. I believe it starts with agreement on the essence of the good news. We must agree on the basis for judging whether a person is a Christian or not. If a person or a group does not believe that a person is saved by the Cross by grace through faith in Jesus - then we may on the basis of God's word judge they are not Christians. But if they are Christians, then the same Spirit of God dwells in them as dwells in us. Those Christians in Barron, Wisconsin, 10 years ago, were compelled by this passage of Scripture and many others to be willing to pray together and talk together, listening to the Spirit of God in each other until such time as there was agreement or at least until such time as they could agree to disagree without breaking fellowship.

"But," someone might say, "there are some issues on which we can't just agree to disagree." That's right, there are issues on the person and work of Christ on which we must agree or there can be no fellowship because we are not brothers and sisters in Christ.

"No," someone says, "I mean other important issues like the inerrancy of the Bible, the millennium, the rapture, abortion, women elders etc. We can't both be right." That's true but we could both be wrong.

Does that mean I can believe nothing? Is the whole church reduced to the lowest common denominator, the least number of beliefs? No, I believe there can be convictions with humility and not arrogance. Our position and attitude can be "I believe this is what the Word of God is saying and I will do my best to convince you of this way but I will not separate from you if you disagree - because you are my brother or my sister in the Lord - and the same Spirit of God resides in you as in me. And I will remain open to the Spirit of God in you to listen to you and learn from you and love you.

I know that attitude is difficult to carry out but not because of the Spirit of God who resides in us but because of our prejudices and our pride. What Christian have you separated from? Who have you written off? From whom have you divided justifying it by saying to yourself and others, "Well, they just don't believe like we believe?"

Will we repent of such an attitude and such actions?