

Study 2. 1Cor 1:10-2:5

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Big idea: we are called to be united in the gospel, not by our culture

What are some examples of people 'united' in a cause or community? What are the positives and negatives of your examples?

Do you feel united at Barneys? By what? What does this look like?

Observation and interpretation

Paul 'appeals' to the church in Corinth for 'unity'. This is strong and earnest language. His plea is 'that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought' (v.10).

What do you think is going on amongst the Corinthians (vv.11-12)?

This passage has a lot to say about wisdom, and how real wisdom brings unity. Here is how A.W. Tozer and J.I. Packer define wisdom:

"In the Holy Scriptures wisdom, when used of God and good men, always carries a strong moral connotation. It is conceived as being pure, loving, and good.... Wisdom, among other things, is the ability to devise perfect ends and to achieve those ends by the most perfect means. It sees the end from the beginning, so there can be no need to guess or conjecture. Wisdom sees everything in focus, each in proper relation to all, and is thus able to work toward predestined goals with flawless precision."

- A.W. Tozer, *The Knowledge of the Holy*, p. 66.

"Wisdom is the power to see, and the inclination to choose, the best and highest goal, together with the surest means of attaining it. Wisdom is, in fact, the practical side of moral goodness. As such, it is found in its fulness only in God. He alone is naturally and entirely and invariable wise."

- J. I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 80.

One of the problems seems to be that different subcultures within the church have found each found a teacher, with his particular style and emphasis, that resonates with that culture - that appears 'wise'. What is the

problem with trying to find a way of telling the gospel that seems wise to our culture (or to us!)? (1 Cor 1:20-25)

What do we learn about the Corinthian church? (1 Cor 1:26-27) How is it similar/different to Barneys?

How has God chosen the foolish, weak and lowly things, and the things that aren't, to shame the wise, noble and strong things, and the things that are (hint: it has to do with Jesus, not us!)? (1 Cor 1:28-30) How is this encouraging? How is it a warning?

Paul says that instead of the false wisdom of the world, we should go with God's wisdom: Jesus. What does it mean for Jesus to become 'wisdom from God' (v.30)?

What does it mean to boast in the Lord (1:31)? How does it compare to the more usual boasting of our culture?

Application / Implications

Not all unity is good, and not all division is bad.

There is unity that is godly. Jesus prayed for it: "that they may be one as we are one" (John 17:11, 22).

There is unity that is ungodly. The tower-builders of Genesis sought it: "Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth" (Gen 11:4).

There is division that is godly. The one who prayed, "that they may be one" also said, "Do you think I came to bring peace on earth? No, I tell you, but division" (Luke 12:51).

There is division that is ungodly. Paul warned us, "watch out for those who cause divisions" (Rom 16:17).

- John Woodhouse, 'When to unite and when to divide'

Being united in God's wisdom - rather than our culture etc - means we aren't just united in an ideology, but in a person (1 Cor 2:1-4). What difference does this make?

Being united to Christ has some pretty big pastoral implications, both individual and corporate. Rory Shiner describes one individual implication:

Imagine yourself at the airport, about to board a plane. The plane is on its way to sunny Melbourne, and Melbourne is where you want to be. What relationship do you need to have with the plane at this point?

Would it help to be under the plane, to submit yourself to the plane's eminent authority in the whole flying-to-Melbourne thing? Or would it help to be inspired by the plane? To watch it fly off and whisper "One day, I hope to do that too". What about following the plane? You know the plane is going to Melbourne, and so it stands to reason that if you take note of the direction it goes and pursue it then you too will end up there.

Of course, the key relationship you need with the plane is not to be under it, behind it, or inspired by it. You need to be in it. Why? Because, by being in the plane, what happens to the plane will also happen to you. The question "Did you get to Melbourne?" will be part of a larger question: "Did the plane get to Melbourne?" If the answer to the second question is yes, and if you were in the plane, then what happened to the plane will also have happened to you.

I think, at heart, the biblical idea of being in Christ is something like that. According to the New Testament, to be in Christ is to say that, by union with him, whatever is true of him is now true of us. He died, we died. He is raised, we are (and will be) raised. He is vindicated, we are vindicated. He is loved, we are loved. And so on, all because we are in him....

Now, if your mental image of your relationship to God through Christ is that of a lover-relationship, a friendship, or of following God, then the language of 'closer' or 'far away' makes sense. But not if you are united to Christ.

Grasping the nature of our union with Christ challenges our very language of 'getting close to God'. We say, "I want to get closer to God". And union with Christ says: "Really? How close to God do you want to get? How do you intend to pull that off? To which part of the universe do you plan to move to secure this 'closer to God' status?"

If you know yourself to be in Christ, then surely you are now, presently, in all your brokenness, as close to God as it is possible for any person to be— because you are in Christ. And, if you are in Christ, united to Christ, then the answer to the question "How close am I to God?" is subsumed by the larger question "How close is Christ to God?" If Jesus Christ is as close to God as the only Son of the Father, the beloved of God, the object of the affections of the heart of the Father, and if you are in Christ, then the language of getting closer to God needs re-thinking.

- Rory Shiner, *Union with Christ*, pp.13-15

How are not living as if this is true for you?

Being united in Christ, we are united with each other in Christ. How can we prize the 'wisdom' of our world so that it becomes a barrier to this kind of unity?

Are there some ways in which you think we should be united, but aren't?

Are there some ways in which you should be divided from others, but aren't?

What could you do to change this? What would this look like inside the church? What would it look like from outside?

Prayer ideas

Confess areas where you have been a source of disunity

Pray for churches in the local area that share in the unity of the gospel