

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

The Ultimate Team for the Ultimate Team Sport

Third Sunday after the Epiphany (Series A)

January 26, 2020

Lessons for the Day: Isaiah 9:1-4; 1 Corinthians 1:10-18; Matthew 4:12-25

“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:10–18, ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

Next Sunday is what the world now refers to as Super Sunday—the day on which the Super Bowl is played. This sporting event is the most watched football game in North America, although it still pales in comparison to the numbers who watch soccer’s World Cup. If football isn’t your thing, maybe you are still revelling in the victory of our Canadian team at the World Junior Hockey championship. Or maybe you are one of the people that follows all the PGA events that have begun.

There is a vast difference between golf tournaments and the Super Bowl. While there are team events in the golfing world, golf is very much an individual effort, where each and every athlete is vying against everyone else. Football, however is definitely a team sport. While the quarterback or running back may steal the limelight, if the team does not work together, the individuals, no matter how talented they may be, will never be able to emerge victorious over their opponents.

Whether or not we are sports enthusiasts, we can understand and appreciate the value of teamwork. That is what God calls us to in the church. We are His people, gathered together by His grace into the oneness that we share in Christ. God wants His church to work, to live, to share together as a team—or, as Scripture also describes it, as a body that grows and thrives under the Head, who is Jesus Christ. As we come together under the gracious hand of God, we are truly one with Him and one another. We are the ultimate team, brought together by His grace to participate in the ultimate team sport, as we strive against the devil, sin and death itself to share the good news of Jesus Christ with a world lost in the darkness of sin and unbelief.

God calls us together to be the ultimate team, to share in the oneness that only He can work in the hearts and lives of people. In His church, God brings together people of every race, nation and language. He brings together young and old, male and female, educated and unlearned. He brings together people with different cultural views and different experiences and makes them one in Christ. Something wonderful happens when the Holy Spirit is at work in the heart of an individual. It doesn’t matter who you are, where you come from, what your social standing or your family history—when the Spirit of God works faith in the heart, that faith unites us with Christ—and through Christ, we are united with one another. Paul tells us: **“There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all.”** (Ephesians 4:4–6, ESV) It is the One Lord, who gave Himself for us on the cross, and who gives us life through His resurrection; it is the One baptism into the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit; it is the one faith that the Spirit works in our hearts and lives that makes us one in Christ, and one with each other.

It was very tempting, in this pre-Super Bowl week, to use a football team as an illustration of this. But as I read over the text again, I think that a better illustration would come from the winter Olympics, as God calls His church to be a

bobsled team. A bobsled team is composed of four members, who truly have to be working together if they hope to be good at what they do. The first man is the driver, the man responsible for keeping the sled in the best trajectory down the course. At the back of the sled is the brakeman, who needs to know how to cooperate with the driver to keep the sled at the right velocity in the turns. The two other men act as pushers, helping to get the sled started down the hill. It is important that they push together, that they get into the sled as one, that they huddle together as one. Once in the sled, they need to keep their body movements in harmony, to reduce drag caused by wind resistance, and so they can keep their weight balanced as the sled travels downhill and into the sharp bends of the course.

That is what God wants His church to be. In His high-priestly prayer, Jesus prays for the disciples, asking: ***“that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.”*** (John 17:21–23, ESV)

The church is to be the ultimate example of a team, working together for a definite purpose. Our goal is to strengthen and encourage each other in our faith. We are to love one another, care for one, work with one another. But we are called together so that we may make known to the world the gospel of Jesus Christ. We, who are one in Christ, are to work together as one, as we go up against the devil and his evil team, to free lost and dying souls from Satan’s power, as we proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified and risen again. When we are one in the Spirit, one in the Lord, we do great and wonderful things to the glory of our God.

Yet how quickly that oneness that God calls us to in Christ can go missing. Sometimes we don’t see a true ‘team spirit’. That was the case in the church at Corinth. Instead of the unity that should be the hallmark of the church of God, there were open schisms. The word that Paul uses to speak of the divisions refers to rips or tears in a garment. The problem did not seem to be so much one of a doctrinal nature, as it was a personality issue. The differences had to do with attachments to individual leaders, who were played off against each other. It was a bit of a power-struggle. Regardless, the team-spirit was gone and it was the gospel of Jesus Christ that was suffering as a result.

In the movie, *Cool Runnings*, we are told the story of the Jamaican bobsled team. I don’t know how factual it is, but the movie shows what happens when these four individuals try to maintain their individuality at the expense of the team’s unity. Instead of working together to start the sled, they were striving against each other. Instead of riding as one, their heads were bouncing in different directions. Until these four men learned how to behave and work as one, they were unsuccessful. But when they came together as a unit, they were able to do great things.

I doubt that Paul ever had bobsledding in mind when he wrote our text, but his words express the same idea. He sees a church where the members are tearing apart the oneness that God brings us in Christ. They were striving with one another, arguing with one another, opposing one another. They were more concerned with themselves than with the One who had brought them together under His forgiving grace. They even made it sound like a noble pursuit, as they claimed loyalty to the various evangelists and pastors they had known. Paul says: ***What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”*** When we read Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, we see how these divisions had even worse effects than simple disunity. Before long, there were ideas and teachings coming into the Church which were not in keeping with God’s word of truth. Morality suffered. And the devil was having a good laugh, because the divided church was ineffective in getting the gospel out to a lost and dying world. After all, why would anyone want to be part of this team, when the team members themselves were so indifferent to one another?

While walking along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus saw some fishermen, and said to them: ***“Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men.”*** (Matthew 4:19, ESV) Paul reminds the church that this what we need to do. We need to follow our captain, our leader, our Saviour, Jesus Christ. The preachers and teachers don’t matter. The styles don’t matter. What matters is Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for all people on the cross. It is Christ who has opened heaven’s glorious life to us through His resurrection. We are baptized into Christ. We join together and are united in Him as we partake of His body and blood in the Lord’s Supper. Living under Him, we work to be a blessing to one another. Best

of all, we work together to get the Word of life to a world in need of our message. When we stand united, Satan trembles, for the church is at its best when it is one in the Spirit, one in the Lord.

If we are honest, we aren't always the team that God would have us to be. We aren't always in perfect unity with each other. Sometimes our personalities and differences are quite evident. But by the grace of God, we have learned to forgive and to move on together. We still have some training to do, but we, as part of God's church, are part of His dream team. His team is involved in the ultimate team event: the redemption of the whole world through our proclamation of Jesus Christ as Saviour and Lord. The devil will still try to keep us from doing our work, but as we seek God's grace to be *united in the same mind and the same judgment*, we will be able to work together to be all God enables us to be—for our victory, and for the glory of the Lord of the church, who will work to bring others to His glorious light. Amen.