

“Why the Cross?”

I Corinthians 1:10-18 Epiphany 3-A, January 22, 2017

Telephone answering machines are something that most of us are familiar with---but did you know that the first telephone answering machine was actually invented way back in 1935? Unfortunately the cost of manufacturing them back then would have made them far too expensive for the general public to afford. But this would change in the approaching decades; so much so that with the structuring of AT&T in 1984, there were some one million telephone answering machines sold in the United States that year.

Having said this please imagine with me that go you home to telephone a friend of yours later this afternoon. Your friend does not answer the telephone but their answering machine does with this rather unusual message: “Hello, we are in the middle of a family fight right now. Leave your name and telephone number at the beep, and whoever wins will call you back as soon as possible!”

I know this sounds facetious but if there had been telephones and telephone answering machines in ancient Greece then you may have heard just such a message when you dialed-up the Church of God in Corinth!

Unfortunately those Christians had become involved in a knockdown, drag-out tussle. And these divisions were brought to St. Paul’s attention where he was living in Ephesus, not by a telephone call or telephone answering machine but by a group of people who personally traveled some 354 miles to him from Corinth because they were greatly concerned about the welfare of their church family back home.

Paul received this tragic news from: “Chloe’s people” (v. 11).

We can’t really say for sure who Chloe was but many Bible commentators conjecture that she very well could have been one of the founding members of the church at Corinth; a lady who had known the Apostle Paul for a long time, especially since he had founded that new church there in Corinth under the Spirit’s direction! Maybe Chloe’s people were some of her relatives, servants or friends, maybe even some of her Christian business associates. Sometime later Paul wrote a letter to this Christian congregation saying: *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment!*”

Certainly this was no small request on the part of the Apostle Paul but how did these divisions come about in the Corinthian church?

Over the course of time, various Christian teachers had come and met with these early Christians to instruct them in the way of Christ and in the way of Christian living! And many of these Christians, over time, had developed their preferences as to which ones were numbered among their favorite teachers!

Some of these early Christians seemed to love St. Paul the most, never forgetting that he was the one who was their very first pastor, who under the Spirit’s guidance had organized their church and brought many of its initial converts into the Christian faith.

Others gravitated primarily to another teacher; a brilliant and bright-spirited young man named Apollos, who had received an excellent, Ivy League education in Alexandria (Egypt), regarded to be one of the greatest centers of learning in the ancient world! Apollos would have no doubt been very gifted in paving a runway between the Greek philosophies of his day to the Gospel of Jesus Christ; to give it its initial hearing!

Apparently, the Apostle Peter must have also visited the church of God at Corinth occasionally too! In writing this letter Paul refers to Peter by his Aramaic name: “Cephas,” who if you remember correctly—Peter became the primary missionary to the Jewish people; who would have encouraged these saints in Corinth to continue to hold on to their Old Testament liturgical rituals and continue to observe the Old Testament festivals like the “Day of the Atonement,” “The Passover,” and the “Feast Day of Pentecost!”

Yes some were proponents of Paul, others of Apollos, others of Cephas, but fortunately some of these Christians in Corinth kept their primary allegiance to Jesus Christ, the Church’s One Foundation (I Cor. 3:10)! They said, “I follow Christ!”

Paul says that he was grateful that the only two people he had baptized were Crispus and Gaius, if his memory served him correctly; and of course he remembered also baptizing the household of STEPHANAS.

Unfortunately, all sorts of divisions had arisen in the church of Corinth since the Apostle Paul had been there: (1) Division between the rich and poor; Agape Feast and even in their celebrations of the Lord’s Supper; (2) Others claimed to possess a superior “wisdom” or knowledge entitled them, they believed, to be the greatest leaders in the church; (3) Misinterpretation of Grace—leading to moral laxity! (4) Speaking in tongues.

All of these were significant issues—but Paul did not view any of these issues as the primary cause for the great divisions that had unfortunately developing in their Christian congregation! **THE NUMBER ONE REASON FOR ALL OF THE PAIN AND ANAMOSITY, NEEDLESS SPLINTERING AND FACTIONS THAT HAD DEVELOPED IN THE CHURCH OF CORINTH—PAUL CONTENDED—WAS BECAUSE THE CROSS OF JESUS CHRIST HAD NOW—UNFORTUNATELY—BEEN SHOVED INTO THE BACKGROUND!** Paul is contending here that the Cross of Jesus Christ must always remain absolutely central and foremost in the life of the Church!

1. Why the cross? Because to be a Christian is to believe in God.

And not to believe in just any old god, as though all faiths were the same; a belief that some people confess when they say to others: “It doesn’t matter what you believe, so long as you are sincere!”

To be a Christian is to believe in the God whom we have come to know and understand in Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus is the One who came from heaven to reveal his Heavenly Father to us! When you think of it this way, the Gospel becomes a rather beautiful and comforting story, because this man Jesus was himself so caring and gentle, going around teaching and preaching **THE GOOD NEWS OF THE KINGDOM OF GOD** and healing **ALL WHO WERE SICK AND INFIRMED**, and liberating many people who had been taken captive by the devil.

Sooner or later though, somebody is going to ask you: “What happened to Jesus?”

Then you will have to answer them honestly by telling them: He was sentenced to die and he was executed and was only 33 years old when he crucified. He was executed by the Roman government because his religious opponents convinced Pontius Pilate that he posed a gigantic threat to the great PAX ROMANA—THE PEACE OF ROME!

The means of Jesus' execution was not a lethal injection or an electric chair. Rather, he was hanged on a stick, a cross, where he was left to die. It often took some people executed by crucifixion several hours to die; though it may have taken others several days to die! Mercifully, Jesus died within the shorter range of 6 hours, but immensely painful given the fact that he was also bearing in his body the full weight of the whole world's sin!

But no sooner do you and I answer that question for other people: "What became of Jesus?" when they next, without hesitation will walk away! They are not interested in a man who died like that, and they are not interested in any group that centers itself, around, such a despicable event as that!

2. "Why the cross and why can't we just leave that part out?" they ask.

"Why can't we just tell the stories about Jesus' healing and teaching and preaching?" some want to know, and as many people have further attempted to do down throughout the ages—take only what they have come to believe are the best teachings of Jesus, and mix them with what they also believe are some of the best teachings of Mahatma Gandhi, Muhammad and the Buddha and call this a new way of life?

We Christians object not only because we believe there is only One, True and Triune God, but also because that kind of religion is completely void of the cross! Without the cross—no one will ever be properly convicted of their own sin. Apart from the cross, no one will ever come to know the joy of being truly forgiven and declared righteous for Jesus' sake nor will they ever be filled with the joy of the resurrection—remembering that in Christ's resurrection we are filled with a powerful hope of our own future resurrection someday, when he returns again in glory!

Yes, many people today have attempted all kinds of ways to speak about Jesus Christ apart from his cross, like that great number of people in the entertainment industry like Tom Cruise, John Travolta, Kirstie Alley and Kelly Preston in their adherence to Scientology!

The great Christian theologian Reinhold Niebuhr had this to say one day when he was lecturing at Union Theological Seminary in New York City: "Christianity without the cross proclaims a God without wrath bringing men and women without sin into a kingdom without judgment through a Christ without a cross!" In the second chapter of First Corinthians, Paul confesses this same belief again: Paul says: "*When I came to you, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified!*"

Paul paid a dear price for his solemn conviction. When he went to the people of Corinth as a missionary he told them: "*I arrived among you shaking, scared and feeling very weak.*" Paul had just come to these people from Athens, the cultural center of the world—beautiful Athens, Greece, a monument to the nobility of the human mind and spirit! In Athens, sculpture, art, music, poetry, philosophy—all were unsurpassed. Paul stood there on a hill called Mars Hill and preached about Jesus, and his listeners treated him in the worst way a preacher could ever be treated: They laughed at him! Here Paul once again fully came to understand: "*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*" (v. 18)!

ONE OF THE BIGGEST CONCERNS PAUL HAS REGARDING THE CHURCH AT CORINTH IS THAT THE CHURCH THERE WAS DIVIDED UP INTO SEVERAL DIFFERENT FACTIONS—DIVIDED INTO FACTIONS BECAUSE THEY HAD TAKEN THEIR EYES OFF OF CHRIST AND OFF OF HIS CROSS!

I will never forget being a student in high school, college and in seminary, and how much I often enjoyed listening to the commentaries of the great radio personality Paul Harvey on the radio! I'd like to close my sermon today by sharing with you one of his stories...I recently rediscovered on the Internet entitled: "A Sack Full of Sparrows!"

Paul Harvey began that story like this: There was a young boy whose parents had spoiled into a brat, who was one day carrying with him a sack and in that sack, there was a most pitiful kind of stirring! The young boy had captured some tiny birds!

The sound of imprisoned wing-beats slapped hopelessly at the heavy manila walls of that sack. A pitiful chirping, now and then, issued from the little paper prison that he swung at his side. Then he met an old man as he walked along. "What-cha got in that sack?" asked the old man.

"I got a sack full of sparrows!" said the little boy.

"What are you going to do with them?" asked the old man.

"I'm going to take them out of the sack, one by one, and tease them—pull a feather out now and then, and then I'll release them to the cat for dinner!"

"How much would you sell the whole sack for?" asked the old man?

The little boy thought for a moment and decided that he should put a lot of capital on the venture and dicker down if he had to, so he threw out the figure: "I'll take two dollars for the sack!"

"Done," said the man, and he reached into his back pocket, pulled out his billfold and gave the lad two dollars. The lad then promptly handed the old man the sack, just as he had agreed to do, but the old man now held that sack far more kindly than the reckless youngster had done. In a moment he untwisted the coiled paper neck of the bag and pulled it open. In but a little bit, the sky connected brilliantly with the open inside of the bag and the birds were gone! ... And so it happened one day that God met Lucifer, you know, Satan—the devil with a huge bag. Inside the bag were the most hopeless sounds of life struggling to be free—the sounds of young and old alike wailing in pain!

"What have you got in the bag?" asked our Heavenly Father.

"People," smirked Lucifer.

"And what will you do with them?"

"I will torment them one by one and when they are all worn out with trials, I will throw them into hell!"

"And what will you take for all of them?"

"Your only beloved Son!" Lucifer replied.

"Done!" said the Father and he reached down to earth and gave us the gift of his only-begotten Son. And in a happy trade-off, we come to hold the key to the resurrection and the life!

Amen