



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “QUARRELS IN THE CHURCH”

Scripture Lesson: I Corinthians 1:10-18

*This sermon was preached by Rev. James T. Rogers on Sunday, January 22, 2017  
at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.*

Thanks be to God for the lectionary. Given the vastness of Holy Scripture and the options that provides for worship, every time I preach I am thankful that the larger church has appointed several readings for each Sunday. And on the Sunday following the inauguration of our new president and protest marches in the streets, I am especially thankful for the lectionary. As Jill Duffield explains in her *Presbyterian Outlook* weekly email, even when perspectives are varied and emotions are high, the lectionary preaching pastor cannot search the Bible for passages that support his particular perspective.<sup>1</sup> That is really helpful on a day like today. Some of us are celebrating. Others are grieving. But we all have gathered for a Word from the Lord.

You do not need to be told that our country is divided: the presidential campaign announced that loud and clear. Our differences have been highlighted on the national debate stage, in our streets, in our workplaces, on our Facebook walls, and at the dinner tables with our families. Our division has led to angry conversations, hurtful messages, broken relationships, and even acts of violence. I am not sure I have experienced a more divisive time in our country.

Unfortunately the Christian church often reflects the divisive nature of our culture. Comedian Emo Philips highlighted the church's division in a story he first told over thirty years ago. Philips said,

Once I saw this guy on a bridge about to jump. I said, "Don't do it!" He said, "Nobody loves me." I said, "God loves you. Do you believe in God?"

He said, "Yes." I said, "Are you a Christian or a Jew?" He said, "A Christian." I said, "Me, too! Protestant or Catholic?" He said, "Protestant." I said, "Me, too! What franchise?" He said, "Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Baptist or Southern Baptist?" He said, "Northern Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist or Northern Liberal Baptist?"

He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist." I said, "Me, too! Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region, or Northern Conservative Baptist Eastern Region?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region." I said, "Me, too!"

"Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1879, or Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912?" He said, "Northern Conservative Baptist Great Lakes Region Council of 1912." I said, "[Take a swim], heretic!" And I pushed him over.<sup>2</sup>

Reverend Thom Rainer, CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, recently invited church members to share about conflicts in their congregations. Common sources of conflict included the temperature in the sanctuary, the color of carpet, order of worship, and wall color. But there were others that were more unusual. Other sources of church conflict included the appropriate length of the pastor's beard, whether or not to install stall

<sup>1</sup> Jill Duffield, "3rd Sunday after Epiphany," *The Presbyterian Outlook Weekly Lectionary Reflections Email*, January 16, 2017.

<sup>2</sup> Emo Philips, "The best God joke ever - and it's mine!," *The Guardian*

[<https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2005/sep/29/comedy.religion>], January 20, 2017.

dividers in the women's restroom, and whether the church should allow deviled eggs at the church supper. There was even a "forty-five minute heated argument over the type of filing cabinet to purchase [for the church leadership]: black or brown; two, three, or four drawers."<sup>3</sup>

Quarrels in the church are nothing new. Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians is written to a divided congregation that he had started just a few years before. This congregation in many ways reflected the city in which they lived. Many people in the church were poor; few were rich. Scholars believe that differences in wealth and status contributed to some of the conflicts between members of the congregation. And other church writings confirm the struggles faced by this group of believers. The *First Letter of Clement* written about fifty years later from the church in Rome notes that the Corinthians continue to "engage in partisan strife."

We are certainly no stranger to quarrels at First (Scots), many of which were probably caused in part by the diversity of our congregation. Our Christian fellowship includes people of various ages, political affiliations, worship preferences, socioeconomic statuses, and theologies which sometimes make our life together a little messy. Yet we are all brothers and sisters who have been baptized into Christ.

It is to the divided church in Corinth that Paul writes these words: "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose."<sup>4</sup> O Paul, bless his heart. He has such an optimistic view of what the church could be! Can you imagine what Paul thinks of the Christian church today?

During his time in Corinth, Paul had sought to form a congregation that was one in voice, mind, and purpose. Instead the church had formed factions and cliques, reflecting their divisions. So Paul names different leaders in the church, Paul, Apollos, Peter, and Christ, not to say that these are identifiable groups with particular theologies in this small Corinthian church, but instead to point out their division and lack of unity. Paul questions their divisiveness, asking them: "Has Christ been divided?"<sup>5</sup> The answer is no. "Was Paul crucified for you?" That is even more ridiculous. No. "Or were you baptized in the name of Paul." No. Then neither should you be divided.

Now I want to be clear. Paul is calling the church to unity, not uniformity. In his letter to the Romans, Paul acknowledges that there are disputable matters regarding our faith. Later in his letter to the Corinthians he celebrates the diversity of gifts within the Body of Christ and even expects Christians to make different but acceptable moral choices.<sup>6</sup> But even given their diversity, the believers in Corinth should be united in Christ.

Paul's point has certainly not been lost on First (Scots). Last year our congregation completed the Building Bridges process, and as we shared stories of when our church was at its best and our hopes for our future together, something special happened. Nine core values of our congregation emerged and were approved by our session including one entitled "United in Purpose and Respectful of Diversity." This pillar is a reminder that our congregation values our unity in Christ and calls us to be respectful of our differences. I think Paul would approve of this pillar.

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<sup>3</sup> Thom Rainer, "Twenty Five Silly Things Church Members Fight Over," [<http://thomrainer.com/2015/11/twenty-five-silly-things-church-members-fight-over/>], January 20, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:13 (NRSV)

<sup>6</sup> J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," *The New Interpreter's Bible, Vol. 10: Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians*, (Abingdon Press, Nashville: 2002), p. 807.

If you are like me, it is tough to imagine a Christian church where everyone is in agreement and there is no division. If you find that church, please invite me to worship. Actually, please do not invite me to that church, because I do not want to ruin it. I find Paul Sampley's commentary on this passage to be particularly helpful. He explains that the Apostle Paul's "appeal to affirm the same thing and to be of the same outlook is Paul's way of declaring that what unites [the Corinthians] ought to be far more powerful and comprehensive than what pulls them apart."<sup>7</sup> Maybe that is why Paul uses the Greek word *adelphoi*, translated "brothers and sisters" thirty-eight times in his letter to the Corinthians, which is twice as many times as in any of his other letters.<sup>8</sup> He wants the people at Corinth to know that they are brothers and sisters in Christ and part of God's family. Eugene Peterson's contemporary translation entitled *The Message* puts it this way: "You *must* get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common."<sup>9</sup> I think what Paul wants us to understand is that our unity in Christ overcomes the things that divide us.

This unity does not depend on the opinions we have on various issues. Paul tells us that our unity is only found in the death and the resurrection of Christ into which we have been baptized making us brothers and sisters in Christ. Having been clothed with Christ, there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, young or old, republican or democrat, liberal or conservative for all of us are one in Christ Jesus. Our unity is only found in the message of the cross which is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Paul not only calls the church to unity but he also gives us an example to live by later in his letter to the Corinthians. Paul and Apollos, both leaders and preachers in the early church, demonstrate in their ministry with the Corinthians unity and harmony even with their differences. Paul and Apollos were given different tasks in Corinth: Paul planted and Apollos watered. Yet, even with their different roles, Paul acknowledges their common purpose: "For we are God's servants, working together."<sup>10</sup>

Given the divisiveness in our country, I cannot imagine a better time for us to live and proclaim our unity in Christ, to live into the reality that we are brothers and sisters who have been baptized into Christ, to proclaim the cross, Jesus' death and resurrection, which unites all Christians everywhere, to be the light of the world, and to let the light of Christ shine for the world to see. And this is the perfect time because we are right in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, which occurs annually from January 18-25. What began as a week of prayer in a single denomination in 1908 is now celebrated by denominations around the world.

This past weekend I had the opportunity to go to Disney World with twenty-five youth and adults in our church. We attended Faith in 3D, which is a gathering of several thousand people from three different Christian denominations: the Cooperative Baptist Church, the Cumberland Presbyterian Church, and the Presbyterian Church (USA). It was a special weekend! We not only played in the Disney World Parks, but we also gathered together for worship, reflected on the life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and heard God's call to bring about God's kingdom on earth. I was surprised when a leader of the event announced that Faith in 3D is the only national Christian youth gathering planned and led by multiple denominations. That weekend was an embodiment of the fact that our unity in Christ overcomes our denominational differences.

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<sup>7</sup> Sampley, 806.

<sup>8</sup> Sampley, 807.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Corinthians 1:10b (The Message)

<sup>10</sup> 1 Corinthians 3:9 (NRSV)

How is God calling you to live and proclaim our unity in Christ? Maybe God is calling you to pray for other Christian churches in our community who are our coworkers in the gospel like First Baptist, St. Michaels, and Emanuel AME? Maybe God is calling you to greet someone after this service who is thirty years older or younger than you. Maybe God is calling you to pass the peace of Christ across the sanctuary aisle and the political aisle. Maybe God is calling you to share a cup of coffee and conversation in Molly Wier Hall with someone whose theology is a little more conservative or progressive than your own. How is God calling you to live and proclaim our unity in Christ?

A colleague of mine shared with me this week that on the night of the presidential election the mission committee at a local Presbyterian church met and the chair prepared a prayer for the meeting.

In [the chairperson's mind], election night was finally going to be the end of a very divisive, contentious, election season, and finally her candidate was going to win, and put it all to rest. Her prayer was quite slanted, she admitted...she was gloating that her candidate was likely to win, and she wanted all to pray for the future of our nation, after all this divisiveness, to unite and move forward into a hopeful future. After her prayer was done, some of her committee members commented on how "strong" it was. Later that night, [certain her] candidate was going to win, she went to bed. The next morning she awoke at 5 a.m. to find out that her candidate had not won. And she cried. Suddenly it became apparent to her who that prayer was really for. [It was for her.]<sup>11</sup>

The truth is that prayer is for all of us: for the church, for the country...that after all of this divisiveness, we might unite and move forward into God's hopeful future.

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<sup>11</sup> Anonymous, "Prayer Story," personal email, January 20, 2017.