

I BELONG TO CHRIST

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-18
LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH
BY: RYAN DUECK
JANUARY 22, 2017/3RD SUNDAY AFTER EPIPHANY

I want to begin with a question: What kind of a Christian are you?

If someone were to ask you to describe how you understand yourself, your faith, your convictions, your commitments, what would you say? What words would you choose to prefix this word, Christian?

There are no shortage of options, are there?

We could often start with denominational markers. I'm a *Mennonite* Christian. Or United, or Anglican, or Roman Catholic, or Baptist, or Lutheran...

These words locate us theologically, culturally, historically. They identify us on a spectrum of belief and practice that spans thousands of years.

They point to the fact that each one of us encounters Christ and his church through real human beings and real traditions coming out of real times and places.

On Wednesday evening, we hosted an ecumenical service at our church for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, and it was wonderful to worship together from across a wide range of denominational perspectives.

But we are rapidly moving into a post-denominational reality. Increasingly, people move in and out of different denominations throughout their lifetimes.

Mennonites worship at Anglican churches. Evangelicals spend time sampling Catholic and Orthodox traditions. We are increasingly aware of an interested in a wide range of Christian traditions and practices, and far less willing to draw hard and fast lines between them.

I couldn't help but on Wednesday night, as a Roman Catholic priest stood up to read one of the closing prayers, "this probably wouldn't have happened in a Mennonite church fifty years ago.

Or maybe we identify by race or nationality.

I'm a Canadian Christian... or a Kenyan Christian... or a Syrian Christian... or a black Christian or a Japanese Christians or an Indigenous Christian...

More commonly these days, we identify by our approach to social issues or ideological perspectives.

I'm a *conservative* or *traditional* Christian. I am concerned with embodying and protecting historical Christian doctrines and practices.

I'm a *liberal* or *progressive* Christian. I am concerned with the ways in which the good news of Jesus ought to expand and grow and change in an ever-changing world.

I'm an *intellectual* Christian. I encounter Jesus through the deep wells of literature and philosophy and rational theological reflection.

I'm a *mystical* Christian. I encounter Jesus through prayer and worship and an intimate personal connection.

We all have our ways of understanding and living into a particular expression and understanding of the word "Christian."

This was as true in the early church as it is for us today.

Last week we talked about Paul's first words to the Corinthians. Paul reminded the church of who they were apart from anything that they were or were not living up to at the present.

He told them that they had been gifted and graced by God; that they lacked nothing. He told them the deep truth about who they are and who they will be in Christ Jesus.

In today's passage, Paul begins the more painful process of telling them the ways in which they are failing to live up to truth about who they are.

Paul is not speaking to a global church with two thousand years of steps and missteps and to wrestle with in how they self-identify. He is likely speaking to a small church of less than a hundred people. Maybe even a house church.

But Paul is noticing something that we are all familiar with: the temptation of churches and individual Christians is to divide according to personal preferences and allegiances.

I belong to Paul, I belong to Cephas, I belong to Apollos... The Corinthian believers were lining up behind and identifying themselves according to their favourite apostle, their preferred teacher, or the one who happened to baptize them, and they were dividing and quarrelling with one another on this basis.

Quarreling over leadership. Wouldn't that be awful! Thank God we're past that now. 😊

This is a temptation that obviously goes far beyond the church. Two days ago, Donald Trump was sworn in as President of the United States. This event and the long, divisive, nasty campaign that it represented the culmination of, and the uncertain future that it points ahead to, has inflamed tribalistic loyalties in ways that I cannot recall for a very long time.

Human beings are experts at dividing and quarrelling.

But in the church, things are supposed to be different, Paul says. Indeed, he *insists* upon this over and over in Corinthians and in some of his other letters, too.

The believers in Corinth are not suppose to hive off into factions according to their preferences, but to be of the same mind and purpose, as it says in verse 10.

This sounds wildly optimistic. Whether at the local church level or the national church level or the international church level, many of us can't even imagine a church where divisions and quarrelling have ceased.

Whether it's politics or theology or what colour to paint the church sanctuary, Christians are rarely of the same mind and purpose.

Are they?

I don't think Paul is saying that all Christians must always think exactly the same about every issue, or even about every important issue.

The "same mind and purpose" that Paul speaks of isn't a favourite leader or a particular perspective or a preferred position on this or that issue, but an understanding of the centrality of the cross of Christ and a commitment to living out its implications.

Here's how one commentator summarizes it:

Paul may sound like someone who is simply uncomfortable with conflict, but he has his sights on something greater than keeping the peace. **The individual points of division in Corinth are merely a presenting symptom of an underlying problem: the Corinthians do not understand that the cross of Christ was God's way of upending their ways of defining and valuing themselves and one another.**¹

To be of one mind and purpose, then, means that before we say *anything* else about who we are, we understand ourselves through the lens of Jesus Christ and his cross.

I want to be clear about what I'm not saying.

I'm not saying that denominations are unimportant or that our Mennonite identity is insignificant. Our Anabaptist history matters, as do the theological convictions that emerged out of our initial experience and our experience around the world ever since.

I'm not saying that race doesn't matter, that the colour of our skin, that the histories that have shaped us, that the injustices that some of us have endured, the legacies of privilege that others of us have so obviously misused are irrelevant to how our faith is expressed.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3139

I'm not saying that gender doesn't matter, that there aren't patriarchal structures of male domination and the subjugation of women that need to be resisted and overthrown.

I'm not saying that politics don't matter, and that we shouldn't be politically engaged. Jesus said, "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness for they shall be filled." The Greek word that is translated "righteousness" is the same word that is translated "justice." We are to be people who care deeply about the fate of the world, and particularly the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed.

Whether it's politics, race, gender, or any of the other ways we self-identify, each one of these things matters, and matters deeply. Each of these can be important and necessary expressions of our Christian convictions.

But none of them, on their own, represent our ultimate allegiance and the core of our identity.

Each one of these things can easily become a rival and a way of taking over as our primary identity.

Our whiteness or blackness or our liberal-ness or conservative-ness or our Mennonite-ness can easily become our *main* way of understanding ourselves, and Jesus only comes in the back door to provide a bit of spiritual legitimacy and ideological support to these things.

We ignore those parts of Scripture and the Christian tradition that don't fit with our preferred perspective, and we elevate everything that supports it.

We are these other identifiers *first* and Christians *second*. Which is exactly the opposite of how it should be.

The order matters a great deal. Christian—which means, "little Christ"—comes first.

It is not prefixed and constrained by other words like "liberal" or "conservative" or "Canadian" or "American" or "indigenous" or "male" or "female" or "gay" or "straight" or any of the many words we use to make people understand that we're the right kinds of Christian.

All of these amount to more or less elaborate ways of saying, *I belong with Apollos or I belong with Cephas...*

“Christian” comes first.

Christ comes first. We are defined by the one who was crucified for us, the one who died and was raised to life for our salvation, for the forgiveness of sin, for the healing of the world.

We are defined by the baptism that symbolically marks us as those who have been crucified with Christ and raised to new life in imitation of him.

One final comment on how we think about and live into our Christian identity in this time and place.

I understand that it is complicated.

I understand why we might be perhaps reluctant to assert our Christian identity as primary in the public sphere, or in conversations with friends, co-workers, neighbours, family members, because it’s a risky thing to assert Christian identity in a cultural context where this can mean and *does* mean different things to different people.

The word “Christian” is not always a very flattering identifier, to put it bluntly. People hear different things when you say, “I’m a Christian first, and everything else flows out of and is secondary to that identity.”

We have a lot of skeletons in our closet, as Christians. We have a history of mistreatment of “the other,” whether the other is defined by race, or gender, or religion, or sexuality or any of the many ways that human beings have always identified ourselves.

We have much to be proud of, as well, but we must admit that we have a complicated past.

We also have a complicated present. We fail to live up to our calling right now. We give mixed messages to a watching world in all kinds of ways.

We speak loudly when we ought to be silent and are silent when we ought to speak up.

And of course, we fight about when we ought to be silent and when we ought to speak up (and all kinds of other things besides!).

It regularly grieves me to observe the almost unrestrained scorn that Christians pour upon one another in the public square for not lining up behind the right political position or failing to be the “right” kind of Christian with the right kinds of views about the right kinds of issues.

And so given our past and our present, it’s perhaps not always desirable to locate our primary identity as belonging to Christ.

But this is where we *really* need to focus on the second part of the passage, where Paul talks about the “foolishness of the cross.”

We need to take every opportunity to say, “Yes, my primary identity is in Christ and now here’s what I mean by that...”

I don’t mean that I my identity is tied up with a system of belief that cares little for minority groups.

I don’t mean that I line up with a group of people that are really interested in political influence and power and are forever grasping to protect privilege

I don’t mean that I have not interest in justice for those who so often find themselves on the wrong end of the score.

I don’t mean that my own narrow little corner of the Christian world represents the sum total of God’s truth and that I will defend this to my dying breath.

What I *do* mean is that because I have cast my lot with Christ, **my identity is cruciform**. It is “cross-shaped.”

The “foolishness of the cross” is not just an abstract belief to intellectually accept and then get on with business as usual.

It is the pattern of Christian life.

Dying to self. Living for others. Forgiving, as we have been forgiven. Walking courageously and expectantly toward enemies. Standing in solidarity with and amplifying the voice of those who have long been ignored, misrepresented, and mistreated. Being people of grace and truth. Loving our neighbour in costly ways, even when we're not noticed or praised for doing so. Cultivating the virtues of peace, patience, gentleness, kindness self-control, joy, in all the various seasons of life.

This is what it means to belong to Christ.

This is a massive challenge, particularly in our pluralistic times where the options to self-identify have never been more plentiful.

It is a massive challenge in our times where it's never been easier to access the words of gifted and popular leaders who express our views well, where it's never been easier to self-select our media sources and surround ourselves with views that confirm and reinforce our own.

It is a massive challenge in a context where our public discourse is increasingly polarized and inflammatory, inside and outside of the church.

It is a massive challenge in our Mennonite church context where we are struggling to stay together, where it's easy to leave.

It is a massive challenge to refuse to line up behind our preferred leaders or viewpoints or ideologies that can so easily take the place of Christ and his pattern of dying and rising.

It is a massive challenge; and, for that reason, it is desperately necessary.

It is foolish to think that people who think so differently about politics and theology and ethics, people who come from such different ethnic backgrounds and have such different experiences could ever come together in something like a real expression of unity.

It is ridiculous, in fact.

This was as evident to Paul in first century Corinth as it is to us today. He said this way of life was “foolishness” to those who are perishing. It looks impossible and naïve to the world around us.

But it is to this foolishness that we are called.

A community that has been called into being and that is guided and sustained by a God who has loved and given himself for them, a community that is convinced that they are called to the same pattern of self-sacrifice and costly love cannot be one where tribalistic loyalties drown out unity in Christ.

It cannot be one where all of other identities—important as they are, and as much as they contribute to our Christian life and witness—assume the primary place in how we as churches and individuals understand ourselves and interact with our fellow Christians and the world around us.

It just can't.

The church is called to a much higher standard. We *must* point to a different way.

Should we have vigorous dialogue in the body of Christ? Yes, of course. Disagreement at times? Sure. Wrestling together about what it means to be faithful to Jesus in challenging time? Absolutely.

But even the Christian that you have the least in common with on all of these other identity-markers is still someone with whom you share a common connection to Jesus Christ, through baptism, and through a shared conviction that the cross of Christ tells the deepest truth about us and about the world.

So my prayer is that there would be no prefixes to the word “Christian” in how we understand ourselves and in how we live in the world.

My prayer is that before we say anything else about who we are, we would say these four words: “I belong to Christ”.

Amen.



