

1 Corinthians 1:10-12 ESV 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. **11** For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. **12** 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."

- I. When Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he was concerned that divisions and factions had sprung up within the once-united church. They had all heard the same gospel, believed, and followed Christ; and yet they were now splitting off into groups identified by their favorite preachers: Paul, Peter (Cephas), and Apollos. Others, to demonstrate their superior spirituality, said they only followed Christ.
 - A. But Paul chastises them for the divisions that exist where love and unity should be present. Throughout the remainder of his letter he teaches on divorce, lawsuits among believers, proper conduct of the genders in church, the Lord's supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection of the dead among other things,. But through all of this, he emphasizes the need for love and unity within the church.
 1. For Example, the famous "love chapter" (13) is smack in the middle of a long discourse, not about marriage, but the operation of spiritual gifts.
 2. When Paul explores whether it's ok for a Christian to eat meat that has been offered to idols, he says the primary consideration is what would be loving and accommodating to believers who may see things differently.
 - B. When we think about all of this, you have to ask yourself whether Paul's ideal presented in this morning's text is remotely workable. **"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."** In your honest opinion, in the almost 2,000 years since this letter was written, has the church become more or less in agreement?
 1. When Paul ministered, there was one type of church, preaching the same gospel, even though he had to war against false doctrines and teachers in those churches. But in 2000 years, that simple community transformed into a web of between 21,000 and 33,000 distinct Christian denominations in the world! There's so many flavors, it's impossible to get an accurate count!
 2. Add to this untold the thousands of independent churches, and you discover we have wildly different interpretations and opinions on a vast variety of positions in our theology (what we believe about God), our ecclesiology (what we believe about the church) and our polity (how we believe the church is to function and be governed). We cannot say we agree on much!
 - a) This simple fact may discourage you in one of two ways. First, you may care deeply about truth, but you may believe that it's impossible to really know what is right and what is wrong; what is truth and what is error.
 - b) Secondly, you may feel Christianity boils down to a handful of tedious facts for eggheads in seminaries to argue over, but that don't affect you. You may feel it really doesn't make any difference what you believe as long as it's "remotely Christian", and absolve yourself from taking a real stand on any thing at all.

- C. But both of these positions would be unhelpful to you, to the dying, sinful world you live in, and to the church itself. **2 Timothy 2:15 ESV Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the word of truth.** God is calling believers to the effort that study requires. Referring to us as “workers” who should “do our best”.
- II. **2 Timothy 3:16 ESV All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, 17 that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.**
- A. There are several things we should observe in this passage:
1. All Scripture comes directly from God (literally “God-breathed”). That is why if we disregard it as unimportant, unnecessary, irrelevant, or too lofty, we do so at great insult to God, and great detriment to ourselves. Why?
 2. Because this passage also tells us that all scripture is profitable. It can teach us, redirect us, reform us, build us up, and compel us toward holiness.
 3. But this verse also tells us that scripture is profitable, not only with specific benefits, but toward a specific end. “that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.” God has given you everything in his Word so that you can be everything he wants you to be. You are not empty-handed.
- B. So when Paul says we should all agree (even in the face of 33,000 unique denominations!) we should not just blow that off and say, “impossible”! The real question then becomes “how?” How do we agree when we don’t see or interpret the same scriptures in the same way and have competing opinions?
1. Let’s examine what agreement means. I don’t think it means that the international church walks in lock step with each other, tossing aside every distinction. It would be great if we could do that, and one day we surely will!
 2. I really believe most church differences (all though not all) are a feature, and not a bug. Why? Because those differences force us to acknowledge that none of us knows everything perfectly, since we have varying convictions while using the same source material. God alone knows everything.
 - a) Because of this, you and I get the very real opportunity to love people who think differently, behave differently, worship differently, interpret differently and yet remain committed to them as brothers and sisters.
 - b) It also opens the very real possibility for us (if we remain humble and teachable) to learn and appreciate something about God and his church, that we did not previously see clearly, and conforming our lives to it.
- C. But be careful! This doesn’t translate into an “I’m OK. You’re OK. Let’s just all get along” approach to the church or the Bible. There are still false teachers with false doctrines out there that are not on an equal footing with other beliefs. They are heresies that want to seduce and deceive you, and ultimately enslave you.
1. So we must have a mechanism for assessing what we choose to believe and embrace, and what we choose to distance ourselves from. All doctrines and practices are not created equal. Some must be believed, adhered to and even celebrated. Some we don’t understand must be given liberty within the Body of Christ, and others must be shunned and even loudly condemned.

2. For several years, I used to approach this problem by categorizing doctrines and practices as either simply “essential” or “non-essential”.
 - a) Essential doctrines were those that must be agreed upon in order for me to regard another person as a true Christian. Included in this list were things like the Trinity, the Lordship of Christ, the Authority and Truthfulness of Scripture, etc. Repentance, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, etc. were considered essential practices.
 - b) Non-essential doctrines included the operation and purpose of Spiritual Gifts, the timing and scheme of the Lord’s return, etc. As far as practices, I didn’t care how other churches baptized (immersion of sprinkling), or whether they were governed congregationally or by elders, even though I had opinions and convictions about all of this. Differences in these areas were not significant enough for me to divide from other believers.
- D. I saw a problem with this in the last few years, however. If the Bible says, “All Scripture is breathed out by God **and** profitable...”, on what basis does the term “non-essential” apply? The Bible never tells us to be casual about what we believe, yet there are clearly issues on which people have the liberty to disagree.
- III. Thankfully, I was led to an article by guys I trust that equipped me with better terminology. What I called “essential” and “non-essential”, they referred to as 1st, 2nd, and 3rd order issues.
 - A. 1st Order Issues were the ones I had deemed “essential”. They were the universal beliefs that give credibility to one’s profession of faith. They are the “non-negotiables” of Christianity. They are “Apostle’s Creed” issues:
 1. “I believe in God, the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth. I believe in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. He suffered under Pontius Pilate, was crucified, died, and was buried. He descended to the dead. On the third day he rose again. He ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and the life everlasting.”
 2. These are the things which all true Christians have always believed, regardless of denomination, liturgy, or creed. They bind us together in unity.
 - B. 2nd Order Issues are those which define us as a church among other churches. It doesn’t mean that everyone who attends or is a member agrees perfectly on those issues, but that it is the unified conviction of the leadership of a church.
 1. Some churches believe salvation is initiated by a person’s decision. We teach it is of God first to last. Some baptize infants and sprinkle or pour. We baptize those who demonstrate repentance and faith by immersion. Some vote on every issue, we are led by elders who seek input congregationally.
 2. None of those differences make the churches that do things differently somehow less Christian, and it certain doesn’t make them heretics! We have just come to different conclusions and convictions from studying our Bibles.
 - a) I am not saying that none of these things matter. They matter to us, and they matter to them. With the light we have, we’re both being faithful to how we understand God’s Word, and loving those who see differently.

- b) When there is a disagreement, dialogue is helpful, especially when it centers around disputed passages. Next time you meet someone from the Church of Christ, ask them why (from scripture) they do not include instruments in their worship. Ask a Presbyterian why they baptize infants from scripture. Answer their questions as well. Even if you still disagree you may appreciate the conviction from which their perspective is born.
 - C. 3rd Order Issues are those that even people within the same church can disagree on. They are a few that come up from time to time, but the big one seems to always center on Christ's return. Will it be soon, or distant future? When does Jesus come in relation to the millennium? What do all the images in Daniel and Revelation mean? Many Christians shy away from this discussion for one of two reasons: they either believe what they were taught and have always believed; or they find the subject too daunting to take a position.
 - 1. But even 3rd Order Issues like this can't be called "non-essential". The return of Christ represents the culmination of Christ's love story with his bride! Who cares if Cinderella gets to go to the ball if Prince Charming doesn't come looking for her the following morning?
 - a) **Revelation 1:3 ESV** Blessed is the one who *reads aloud the words of this prophecy*, and blessed are *those who hear*, and *who keep what is written in it*, for the time is near.
 - b) But never forget that these things have been shrouded in mystery by God himself, so we must absolutely be gracious and patient with those who come up with vastly different interpretations than we have. We will all understand them perfectly only when they are fulfilled.
 - 2. Even on 3rd Order Issues, it's OK to lovingly, humbly challenge things that you discern are weak Biblically that other people believe. But remember that the 3rd order creates a 2-way street. Can you also receive loving, humble challenges as well as handing it out?
- IV. I think understanding 1st, 2nd, and 3rd order issues helps us to do what Paul said in our text "*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.*" How? Because we begin to realize that our agreement is based on the value of a person (a fellow member of Christ's Body no less!), and not on an opinion or position. It Also keeps us aware that none of us knows everything, and we desperately need each other to thrive.
- V. **Communion: 1 Corinthians 11:23 ESV** For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, **24** and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me." **25** In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." **26** For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.
- VI. **Benediction: Revelation 1:5b-6 ESV** To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood **6** and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.