

“Demonstrable Oneness”
Texts: Psalm 133, Galatians 3:23-29
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As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ.
-Galatians 3:27

Nearly fifty years after his death, the British novelist, literary critic and lay theologian C.S. Lewis remains one of the most popular and oft-quoted Christian writers for preachers across denominational lines. A favorite of those who are new to Christian faith, his *Mere Christianity* is consistently on the top-fifty list of religion and spirituality books on Amazon.com. I can remember many evenings that ended with my sister and I sitting beside our father on the couch, listening intently as he read to us from Lewis' wonderful novel *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*. When, as an undergraduate student, I took a class on C.S. Lewis and his writing, I was most impressed with another of his fictional works. *The Screwtape Letters* chronicles an imaginary pen-pal relationship between Screwtape, a high-level assistant to Satan, and Wormwood, his nephew and a novice demon working on securing his first human soul, or “patient.” Lewis uses the correspondence between Screwtape and Wormwood to offer a stirring critique of the contemporary church. At one point Screwtape writes these instructions to his nephew: “...if your patient can't be kept out of the Church, he ought at least to be violently attached to some party within it. I don't mean on really doctrinal issues; about those, the more lukewarm he is the better...the real fun is working up hatred between those who say 'mass' and those who say 'holy communion' when neither party could possibly state the difference between (the two).”^[1] We might chuckle a bit at this description of the church, and many of us have heard the tragically comic stories of congregations coming apart at the seams over the color of carpet or brand of coffee served at fellowship hour. But we laugh nervously, because we know that there is more truth in this fictional description than we'd like to admit.

Most of you know I love the Apostle Paul. I love the boldness of his faith, the poetry of his words, and especially his uncanny ability to make sense of the Christian faith in a particular context. Paul, like C.S. Lewis, wrote practical theology. He knew that a disembodied gospel with no response to real world questions would never survive the challenges of real world lives. So, Paul's letters are earthy, grounded, and relevant to the concrete, ordinary lives of his churches. Paul did not write abstract theological textbooks. He wrote urgent appeals to churches and people who struggled to hold fast to Christian faith in complex times. And his most well-worn, earthy message is the same one a frustrated father might give two squabbling children (perhaps in the same tone of

voice): “You are a part of the same family. Now act like it.” To the churches of the First Century, Paul demanded demonstrable oneness.

Take for example, the Christian community in Galatia. Paul had founded the church, preached the gospel, perhaps even baptized new believers there. He had attended their fellowship dinners and Christmas pageants—he had watched proudly as this community grew and became united by the faith of Jesus Christ. And then Paul went away.

And that is when the trouble started. After Paul left other Christian teachers had come to Galatia and stirred up division within the community. Evidently, these teachers had proclaimed that the way to become Christian was to follow the Jewish law, just like Jesus did. Therefore, those Christians who had been Jewish were in pretty good shape, whereas those who were Gentiles, probably the vast majority, were in trouble. They lived outside of the law. This message of legalistic requirement made Paul’s blood boil.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul laments that the law has become a dividing force, separating Jewish Christians from Gentile Christians, allowing Jews to claim superiority in God's sight. It is a pastorally dangerous time—how is Paul to convince his congregation that they are free to worship God without the constraints of the law? How can he boldly preach the gospel that he knows to be true and keep his congregation together in a period so marked by division and animosity?

Paul's strategy, his method of communication in such a time as this, is prophetic envisioning. He proclaims a new vision to the Galatians. Believe this good news: Faith has come and we are no longer under the law...no law, no division. No longer can the Galatians be divided into law abiding Jews and disobedient Galatians, for all are children of God *through faith*. This is the vision--oneness, not equality in division but the elimination of divisiveness altogether. Paul does not say that Jews and Greeks are now equal or that women and men now have the same rights--he says that these distinctions no longer exist. These labels have disappeared and only one remains--in Christ. In Christ Jesus you are *all* children of God through faith.

This is a stirring and powerful vision and it is made with characteristic Pauline bravado. There is only one problem--it is experientially untrue. There were no fewer divisions in First Century Galatia than there are in 21st Century Atlanta. The church today is no more united behind the message of Jesus Christ than the one to which Paul sent this letter.

Given these disheartening observations, we might be tempted to say that Paul’s vision is simply idealistic Pollyanna thought that has no bearing on the way we live our lives in the real world. Even if the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitute the decisive invasion of God into human existence, the results are somewhat unimpressive. Far from ending division, the years since Jesus’ life and death have seen a proliferation in divisiveness and our own time continues that trend.

In just two weeks, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) will hold its biennial General Assembly, the national meeting of the denomination. Thousands of Presbyterians will gather in Minneapolis (doesn't that sound exciting!) and we will begin with a powerful service of worship in the Minneapolis Convention Center. We will all pray and sing in unison. We will pass the peace of Jesus Christ. We will hear the word of God proclaimed and we will share the holy bread and cup of communion. And then the meeting will begin. This year's agenda includes a controversial report on the ongoing conflict in the Middle East, items that would further erode our national church structure, conflicting overtures on same-sex marriage and the never-ending battle over who is fit to be ordained. By Monday afternoon Sunday's worship will seem a distant memory as we divide into our camps to deliberate and debate.

Which is true? The unity we feel in worship or the division we experience in debate? Which comes closest to touching the heart of who we are as a community?

I believe that Paul himself was well aware of the counter-intuitive and even factually untrue nature of his statements. But this is precisely the point: Paul has been given a glimpse of the kingdom. In this letter, Paul speaks his vision into existence. Of course the divisions that surround him still exist, but their existence is secondary to the reality of the realm of God that he sees dimly as through darkened glass. And this realm, breaking into the human world, compels Paul to preach and to write. In other words, Paul's is a vision that has the power to produce communities that resist the world's division.

The symbol of baptism figures prominently in this text, as Paul seeks to remind the Galatian Christians of the revolutionary truth that they have heard and in which they stand. Through baptism the Galatians, and Mollie, have been claimed by the new realm—how dare they live as if this revelation had never taken place! Have you ever considered that baptism might just be the most countercultural of all Christian actions? When the church wants to witness to its unity, and to the power of God in the world, we do not use weapons of war or point to vast financial resources. We take an ordinary bowl of water and we have a simple ritual. When we are baptized, we join in the in-breaking kingdom and commit to live as if that kingdom were present among us.

The church at its best exists as a counter-vision to what the world gives us. When Paul speaks of the dissolution of division, it is not metaphor, or even optimism—it is fact. There IS no longer Jew or Gentile. In the church, that division has absolutely disappeared. Paul is not optimistic, he is defiant. The church must not become a mirror of the world around it, with all of its insistence on division and faction.

In a nation obsessed red state/blue state, conservative/liberal distinctions, every political analyst assures us that we are the most polarized we have ever been. These are the facts of life in these United States. There are Jews and Greeks, and everyone needs to

know which one you are. The distinction is clear. What is the Christian community to do in a time such as this?

I believe that we are called to be the church of Jesus Christ, to embody the world-altering, earthshaking truth that in Jesus Christ there is no more division. We must bear witness to the truth of our unity. In our denomination, in our congregation, in our own lives, we have to find ways to testify to the overwhelming power of unity in Christ. The church should be the one place where people can argue intensely (not just *politely*, Southern Christians) about political views, sports rivalries, and even church policies *and then* come into this sacred space and sit down beside your adversary and open the hymnal and pray the prayers and pass the peace of Jesus Christ. How very good and pleasant it is when kindred live together in unity!

Last week, Brad Odom issued a moving invitation to all of us to join a ministry of solidarity to Haiti this fall. At St. Joseph's Home for Boys, where the pilgrimage will take place, the community gathers nightly to worship God and give thanks for the blessings of the day. In the summer of 2001, I was staying at the St. Joseph's guest house, a place that served as a respite for travelers, an orphanage for impoverished boys, a hospital for the elderly, a residence for Catholic nuns in Port-au-Prince, and a bed and breakfast for diplomats visiting Haiti. Each evening, at dusk, all those who were staying at the home were invited to the vesper service. Most of the crowd came rushing in from their various activities and jobs—some came from school, some from the streets, some from important meetings, some from the home for the destitute and dying. And we would light candles and begin a worship service together. And for one hour, our divisions would disappear as the hot Haitian sun descended below the horizon. The powerful and the weak, the sojourner and the comfortable, the weekend tourist and the hungry child, would worship together.

I remember one night especially well because the day had been very difficult. We had been visiting with families in Port-au-Prince all morning and had spent the afternoon at a hospital for infants. The poverty was devastating and the day had been full of tears—the division between my life and the lives of those babies had been made abundantly clear to me. I needed to be at worship that evening. I also remember that evening because our vesper service included the Lord's Supper.

As we passed the bread around and shared the body of Christ, for a moment I truly believed that there was no longer Haitian or American, no housed or homeless, male or female, black, white, brown, able or disabled, gay or straight, wealthy or poor, for we were all one in Christ Jesus. We stood in defiance of the systems and structures that divided us outside of those walls and we remembered our baptisms. Which was truer, the messages given by the places from which we came or the sacred sense of oneness we felt in that circle? Which came closer to the heart of reality? Which was true? I think you know the answer.

[1] C.S. Lewis, *The Screwtape Letters*, HarperCollins, 2001, p. 84.

