

# Spiritual Spell Check

Sermon, January 23, 2011  
Text: I Corinthians 1:10-18

It was back in the dark ages ... the 1970s ... when church bulletins were typed on typewriters without the benefit of "spell check" and then were run off on the ditto, filling the usually sober air of the church office with the scintillating and slightly intoxicating odor of mimeograph fluid. On one particular Sunday morning in the seventies a Presbyterian pastor in New Jersey looked out and saw a knowing smile slowly spreading across the faces of the congregation, as down the rows of the pews people would look at each other, point to the front page of the bulletin, and grin. Something was obviously wrong. The pastor picked up his copy of the bulletin, looked, and eventually saw what was creating such a stir that morning. The "I" and the "T" in the word "UNITED" had been reversed, so the mast head of the bulletin read: "THE UNTIED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH."

Now there's a sermon in there somewhere! Untied ... that is what happens when the "I" is not in the right place. When the "I" is in its proper place, there is unity; when the all important I is misplaced, then things can become untied. *"I, I, I, Me, me, me. My needs, my desires, my wants, my feelings, my self-gratification, my satisfaction are what's central. It has to be the way I want it to be, it has to be my way or no way. I, I, I."* To which I like to respond, "Ei, yi, yi!" That sort of attitude is poison to unity, it can and often does cause a congregation to become undone, conflicted, *untied*. This, apparently, is what was happening in Corinth; things there were coming untied. In this rough and tumble congregation of recent converts from a Type A culture of merchants, mercenaries, international businesspeople and folks from a wide variety of moral (*or, amoral*) and spiritual backgrounds, there were many powerful egos ... and members of the church were not being careful about where they placed the "I" of their life together. Unity was a problem in this congregation; there was continual infighting, quarreling and bickering.

There's a great little story from the Big Book of Jewish Humor: During services at an old synagogue in Eastern Europe, when the Shema prayer was said, half the congregants stood up and half remained sitting. The half that was seated started yelling at those standing to sit down, and the ones standing yelled at the ones sitting to stand up. This went on week after week. The new rabbi, educated as he was in the Law and traditions, didn't know what to do. His congregation suggested he consult one of the original founders of their synagogue, a housebound 98-year-old. The rabbi hoped the elderly man could tell him what the actual temple tradition was, whether it was to stand or sit for this important prayer. So, he went to the nursing home with a representative of each faction of the congregation. The one whose followers stood during Shema said to the old man, "Is the tradition to stand during this prayer?" The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition." Feeling somewhat smug and confident, the one whose followers sat then asked, "So, it is the tradition to sit during Shema?" The old man answered, "No, that is not the tradition." "But," the rabbi said to the old man, "the congregants fight all the time, yelling at each other about whether ... " The old man interrupted, exclaiming, "THAT is the tradition!"

That tradition isn't limited to synagogues; it can be found in many churches (*not here, of course, but in other churches I've heard about!*). The young church in Corinth was in danger of developing and setting a debilitating tradition of fighting among themselves. In verse 2 (*which we read last week*), Paul wrote: "To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ -- their Lord and ours." Now, this Corinthian congregation was quite the crowd to refer to as "sanctified." We read later in the letter they're getting drunk at holy communion (*their cups were a little larger than the ones we use*), they're shouting and bellowing insults at each other in the process, some are gorging themselves on food at the Lord's supper while others went hungry (*their bread shares were a little larger than ours*), and one of these characters, possibly one of their leaders, is intimately involved with his father's wife; he's having an open affair with his stepmother! Again, this is a pretty hard crowd ... a crowd, though, that is in the process of being softened, sanctified, made whole, infected with the good infection of holiness we talked about last week.

Note the second half of that verse: "...called to be holy together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ -- their Lord and ours." We don't find this in any other of Paul's letters. It is as if Paul is intimating this is a letter for *all* the Church everywhere, not just the church in Corinth. Now, in a sense, all the epistles (and the whole Bible for that matter!) are for the whole church, but this one was especially so by Paul's directive ... as if Paul invites all Christians everywhere to look over his shoulder as he addresses pastoral problems in Corinth, possibly inferring that if such problems can be addressed and dealt with in this rough congregation, they can be addressed and dealt with in any congregation.

Why Corinth? Corinth was a large Roman colony in Greece, a critical place where traffic went north and south, east and west; it was an ideal place to write to the whole church. Every ethnic group in the church can be found represented in Corinth; again, if problems can be solved here, they can be solved anywhere. Corinth had a large mixed population of Romans, Greeks, and Jews. It was noted for its wealth and luxury, but it was also noted for the amoral and even vicious habits of the people. It comes as no surprise there's lots of tension and contention

in the Corinthian church. They're divided, they're split; they're untied, not united. They're grumbling at and about each other, and in the first ten verses of his letter to the church in Corinth Paul refers no fewer than six times to "...OUR Lord Jesus Christ." It's as if to say, "C'mon folks, let's not focus on our differences, our former traditions, our preferences; let's focus on, let's talk about, OUR Lord Jesus Christ." Verse 10 -- "I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of **our Lord Jesus Christ**, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united (not untied) in mind and thought. Some from Chloe's household have informed me there are quarrels among you, what I mean is this: One of you says, 'I follow Paul'; another, 'I follow Apollos'; another, 'I follow Cephas'; still another, 'I follow Christ.' "

They were on the verge of schism, on the verge of coming apart. That's what happens when people in the church are not careful where they place the "I" of its life together. It's most likely one main source of the infighting arose from ethnic divisions. One group, the cosmopolitan Roman crowd, apparently likes Paul ... after all, Paul is a Roman citizen; a sophisticated, knowledgeable, traveled man of the world. Another group, probably the native Greeks of Corinth, prefers Apollos. Apollos is a Greek, he is probably skilled in rhetoric, which was a finely tuned art in the Greek culture, so he's more than likely an excellent orator and a spellbinding preacher, he speaks the Greek language and knows Greek customs. Another faction, most likely the Jews, prefers Cephas, which is the Hebrew translation of Peter. Perhaps they're thinking, "Well, those gabby Greeks and those cosmo Romans are Gentiles; they're not like us. We're really more comfortable with those who are steeped in our customs and traditions, one of us, like Cephas." Then yet another group asserts, "Well, WE follow Jesus." These are the hyper-pietists, the ones who aren't too sure whether anyone else in the church, or in the church leadership for that matter, is genuinely Christian, but they know THEY are, because THEY are of Christ. These are the purists who seemed to be saying, "We know we belong to Christ, but we are not all that sure about the rest of you!"

There was probably nobody better suited to draw this diverse group together than the person of Paul ... Paul, the well traveled man of the world, the Roman citizen with appeal to the cosmopolitan crowd; Paul, the master of rhetoric and oratory, philosophical and legal reasoning which appeals to the Greek crowd; Paul, the man whose spirituality, devotion and passion are never in question, which appeals to the "super-spiritual" crowd; and Paul, the "Pharisee of Pharisees," the highly disciplined and trained Rabbi, a man steeped in Old Testament knowledge, culture, tradition and discipline who appeals to the Jewish crowd. Paul was part and parcel of what every faction wanted, so he implored the Corinthian congregation, "Don't follow those other leaders; follow me, I got it all together!" No, that's not what he said ... and as just an aside, anytime you hear any supposed spiritual leader talk in such a manner, drawing accolades and attention and adoration to him/herself by disparaging other leaders, you'd do best to ignore him/her. No, Paul was quick to divert attention from himself; he had no desire to unite them around Paul. Nor did he disparage the other leaders. He knew where to put the "I" to keep the *united* from being *untied*. Paul has the worldly sophistication and the eloquent rhetoric and esoteric philosophy and the Jewish customs and the pietist's piety, but he puts all that aside, choosing only to proclaim the cross of Christ in all things and Jesus' Lordship over all of life. The Corinthians can identify with others if they choose. But in doing so they run the risk of missing the point, of missing the Gospel, and in missing the Gospel they will come untied not only as a congregation, but their lives will become untied, undone, as well. Paul underscores that his identity was not in his qualifications or how many he had baptized nor how many in Corinth thought him super apostle or eloquent preacher. Paul has placed the "I" of his life in the only one worthy of such trust, in Jesus Christ. After all, no leader, no cause, no issue, no theological position was crucified for us. Jesus was.

Be careful where you place the "I". You and I are not one because we always agree (*although we often do*), or because we always like one another (*although we often do*), or because we always find among ourselves a finer fellowship of kindred hearts and minds. We are one because of what God in Christ has done for us. Only He has been crucified for us. Only He has the power to make us His sisters and brothers. Only He has the power to transcend all the differences you and I experience in this room ... differences of race, ethnic heritage, culture, education, income, political convictions, positions on various social issues, you name it. In this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, it is good to be reminded that once we have been joined to Jesus Christ, we are joined not only to Him but to one another, and with everyone who belongs to Him, whether they are liberal or conservative, orthodox or unorthodox, Presbyterian or Roman Catholic or Baptist or whatever the "label" might be

Paul asks somewhat rhetorically: "Is Christ divided?" The unspoken answer is an emphatic "No!" Paul's question is also a word of warning, if not judgment. For in spite of Christ's indivisibility, we, the members of Christ's body, can be all too quick to divide and provoke. When we do that we diminish the church, fracture its ministry and wound our Lord yet again. Granted, there have been, are and will be divisive issues in the church, locally, regionally, nationally, internationally. As potentially divisive issues emerge, let us remember Who it is Who saves us and look to Him for resolution. Salvation bears good fruit in our lives as we remain connected to the One who came to redeem us by dying on a cross. Baptized in His name, you and I have been joined to Him, and all who belong to Him, marked by that cross, and promised that regardless of how right or wrong we might be on particular issues in life, so long as we cling to Him as Lord, making Him the center, we will know not only unity, but we will know life and know it abundantly.