

Rappahannock Christian Church – 1/23/11

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Communion Meditation

If you belong to Rappahannock Christian Church then you belong to a church that is part of what has been called a “movement”. It was once called a “brotherhood,” but we don’t use that term much anymore. Our church is part of what has been called a “Restoration Movement.”

In the early 1800s a number of people came to feel that the church had drifted from its New Testament roots. They banded together to form a movement to return to the Church’s earliest practices and beliefs. That is why we celebrate the Lord’s Supper on the first day of each week.

The exact details about how the New Testament Church celebrated the communion meal are not fully known. It is very likely that our way of celebrating is not quite the same. But what is far more important is that we remain obedient to the command of Christ when He said, “Whenever you do this, do it in remembrance of me.” When we come to this Table we remember Him and the work He has completed for us. I’ll read to you about it from the words of the Apostle Paul.

1 Corinthians 11:23-26 – The Lord Jesus, on the night he was betrayed, took bread, 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.” In the same way, after supper he took the cup, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me.” For whenever you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

Is Christ Divided?

This morning’s Scripture is taken from the first chapter of 1 Corinthians. Now, for the next few weeks (before Lent) I’ll be following the lectionary in preparing our Sunday morning messages. Just for your information, let me tell you that the Common Lectionary contains 4 passages of Scripture for each week. What we are “supposed” to do is to find a way to use each of the four passages somewhere in the Sunday worship service. There is an Old Testament reading, one from the Psalms, one from one of the four Gospels, and another New Testament reading, perhaps from Acts or one of the Epistles. We don’t have that many readings in our service, but I will be preaching on one of the four lectionary passages each week. Here is the New Testament reading designated for this week.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17 – I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that 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.”

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so

no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

I think I can say with some authority that, while they may have become fewer, regional differences remain amongst Americans. Having moved here from New England, I can tell you that there certainly are some different ways in the South from in the North. For instance, while it's better now, but I admit that when I first came here I had some difficulty understanding some of you. It takes time to develop an ear for dialect. Some of our differences are dietary. Now this is a difference I've really come to love! I've learned to very much enjoy the things you-all eat. (SEE? I just said "you-all!") There are political and social differences, as well. You have certain rules, mores, that are accepted as "proper" or polite behavior for children, for example, that were just plain different from the way I was raised. Even right here in Essex County, I would bet that there are differences of opinion about acceptable behavior between people who are over 70 compared with those who are under 40. Don't you think so?

What about in the Church? Should we expect to have differences as well? What should we do with our differences? What is proper and expected? How strictly are we to adhere to New Testament norms?

Now, as a Bible scholar, I must tell you that I don't think all that is described in the Early Church was supposed to be normative for the church in all places and at all times. This is especially true of some of the strange things that happen in the book of Acts. However that may be, it certainly must be clear that there are differences between what we do at Rappahannock Christian Church in 2011 and what the Church of the 1st century did. Not everything we do has its precedent in the Bible, either. Look! Where in the New Testament do we find:

- Church buildings with grounds to maintain?
- Paid professional clergy?
- Sunday School?
- Organs & choir robes?
- Worship at 11AM on Sunday?

There are just so many things that we do because we've found them to be useful and effective, not because we are commanded to do them in the New Testament.

The Early Church met in each other's homes. Did you know that? And, whenever they met, they ate a whole meal together. Everyone brought something to contribute, like pot luck. They devoted themselves to prayer, Scripture and the Apostles' teaching. Some of these are our practice, too. Some aren't.

So I ask you, what's wrong with this building? Why should we not gather to worship in this beautiful sanctuary? Is there something wrong with Sunday school, or having a minister? No, there's nothing wrong with these things. We just need to realize that they're our traditions. They're not in The Book. Today we have to decide what Early Church practices are commanded, as well as which will be useful and effective for us.

Now, the forbearers of this movement, particularly Thomas and Alexander Campbell, in the late 1820s, saw a lot of rules and traditions being practiced in the churches of that time that were NOT okay and good and effective, but were harmful. They were detrimental to healthy church life and spiritual growth! As they observed all this, they cringed, and they began a “reformation” to right these contradictions and the downright disobedience that was going on. The churches, they said, were following the rules of men to the detriment of the Family of God, and this was not acceptable.

One of the things that disturbed them the most was a severe spirit of disunity between Christians of different stripes. The Lutherans would speak badly of the Methodists, and the Methodists spoke poorly of the Baptists and so on.

This is exactly the same kind of thing that Paul is talking about in our Scripture today. In Paul’s day there were all kinds of cliques. There were male and female, Jews and Gentiles, slaves and free men. Paul says this kind of division has no place in the Church. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus,” he says. (Gal. 3:28)

In our text he says that some folks are claiming to follow Apollos, some follow Paul, some Cephas (that is, Peter), and some say *they* follow Jesus. They’re all arguing! Such disunity!

This really upsets the Apostle. It makes me sad to hear what the Apostle has to say to them. I know that as a pastor, baptizing a person is one of the most enjoyable and satisfying aspects of ministry. Surely Paul would have loved to have baptized everyone. But here we have him saying that he is glad he did not baptize many of them, because at least they can’t fight over who was baptized by him. How awful and how sad!

The Body of Christ, Paul says, is one unit. It’s diverse – yes -- and it needs all of its many parts. I’m sure you all know what Paul said about how the body needs the hand and the foot, and the eye can’t say it’s better than some other part (1 Cor. 12).

Now in the Campbells’ day, it was the common practice for preachers to get up into the pulpit and to deride, criticize and condemn other Christians, other churches, their ministers, their ministries. That was the sermon. The Campbells were sickened by this. They said, “Why are you doing this? How can we demonstrate to the world that Christ is one if we’re at each other’s throats all the time? How can we prove to the world that Christians are truly different from all those critical, unhappy, petty people in the world? We follow Paul in saying that Christ is not divided? The Spirit really does control us? Well, prove it!” This was an error that the Campbells saw, and they tried to admonish the Church to set it right.

Folks, let me tell you something that may sound contradictory. But hear me out! Here it is -- are you ready? → Christians cannot achieve the unity of the Church! Why do I say this? Because the Church is *already* one! Christ is *not* divided! God is *not* depending on

you or me to unify His Church. *Christ's body is already one!* Our task, instead, is to *manifest more fully* that unity which is ours in Christ. I fear that we don't do this very well.

The good news is that we have lots of opportunities to prove to the world that the Church is one body. How about Operation Inasmuch? How about the community Thanksgiving service and the upcoming community Lenten services? How about our interest in, and support of our sister churches in the district and the Region of Virginia, and of our General Church?

When we have the opportunity, let us lead the way in our community! Let Rappahannock Christian Church be the church that builds bridges of cooperation and fellowship among its fellow Christians. Maybe in this way there are some people who will find Christ as their Savior, or find a good Christian church where they can worship and be active in ministry. This is the kind of community that Christ has called us to be, and it's one you *WANT* to belong to!

Benediction

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. – Ephesians 3:20-21