

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

1 – 8 June, 2014

Has Christ been divided?

*1 Cor (1:1-17)*



## Introduction to the Theme

Canadians live in a country that is marked by diversity in language, culture and even climate, and we also embody diversity in our expressions of Christian faith. Living with this diversity, but being faithful to Christ's desire for the unity of his disciples, has led us to a reflection on Paul's provocative question in 1 Corinthians: "Has Christ been Divided?" In faith we respond, "No!" yet our church communities continue to embody scandalous divisions. 1 Corinthians also points us to a way in which we can value and receive the gifts of others even now in the midst of our divisions, and this certainly offers encouragement to us in our work for unity.

In the Scripture passage chosen for our reflection this year, Paul begins his first letter to the Corinthians with a powerful opening. Like an overture to an opera or the opening movement to a symphony, this passage touches on themes that prepare us for what is to come in his two letters to the community of Corinth. There are three movements in the featured text. All three lay a solid but challenging foundation for our reflections as Christians living and working together in churches and society today.

In the first movement (1:1-3), Paul, along with Sosthenes – as a small but authentic community of two – addresses another larger and very active community, the Corinthian Christians. He addresses the Corinthians as the "church of God," not just as a local chapter, but as a full expression of the church in their part of the world. Paul reminds them that they are a "called" people: "called to be saints," not isolated and on their own, but "together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours." This last expression could also be translated as "both in their place and in ours." So, they are authentically God's church but very much connected to everyone else who calls on the Lord, in both their confession and their place. Then Paul, as in all his letters, extends his usual and powerful greeting of God's grace and peace. In Paul's language, "grace" indicates God's goodness and gifts to us in Christ, and is meant to draw out our gratitude to God and our graciousness to others. His "peace" for us in all its fullness and mutuality is communion (koinonia) in God.

While Paul is about to call the Corinthian community to task, he begins the next movement in our text (1:4-9) by giving thanks for "the grace of God that has been given in Christ Jesus" to the Corinthians. This is not just a formality, but a genuine rejoicing in the gifts God has

bestowed on this community. He proceeds to build them up: “for in every way you have been enriched in him..., so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift.” They are assured that they will be strengthened to the end, and that “God is faithful.” God calls us into the fellowship (koinonia) of his Son with all its social and spiritual implications for our churches and peoples.

As Canadian Christians, we are mindful that we have not always been ready to rejoice in the gifts of God present in other Christian communities. Reading Paul’s text in an ecumenical spirit, we become more conscious of being invited to rejoice sincerely in how God has blessed other Christians and other peoples. Those who first brought the Christian faith to Canada were often dismissive of the gifts and insights of the indigenous peoples, and failed to see the blessings God bestowed through them.

We have much to be grateful for in the diversity of peoples and expressions of faith in our country. Although our history has many examples of how we have not lived in mutual respect for and support of each other, we know that our country was built upon cooperation and seeking ways for peace at home and in the world. Our enjoyment of the blessings of the natural world as God-given gifts is too often taken for granted, and we struggle to balance prosperity and the stewardship of these physical blessings. We also struggle to enact the values we all say we hold as Canadians. As Christians and as churches, we feel called to a receptive gratitude towards the gifts of the other, and to embody thankfulness and caring for the whole country and the world.

In the third movement (1:10-17), Paul addresses hard words to the Corinthians because of the ways they have distorted the Christian gospel and broken the unity of the community: “I belong to Paul, I belong to Apollos, I belong to Cephas.” Even those who claimed Christ as their leader were not applauded by Paul, for they used the name of Christ to separate themselves from others in the Christian community. We cannot invoke Christ’s name to build walls around us, because Christ’s desire was fellowship and unity, not division. “Has Christ been divided?” Paul does not object to forming communities around strong leadership, but asks the community to find its fundamental identity in Christ: “Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” Chloe’s people have seen this development among them and have brought it to light.

Into this state of division comes Paul’s appeal to “be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” He exhorts his readers and those in Corinth “to be in agreement.” Does Paul think they should all worship and do things in the same way? We think not. These verses are not a call to leave aside the leadership of Paul, Apollos or Cephas. Rooted in Christ, we are called to give thanks for the gifts of God that others outside our group bring to the common mission of the church. Honouring the gifts of others draws us closer in faith and mission, and leads us towards that unity for which Christ prayed, with respect for authentic diversity in worship and life.

Paul highlights two central elements of Christian discipleship in which we are fundamentally bound to Christ: baptism and the cross of Christ. We were not baptized into Paul and he was not crucified for us: our unity is in Christ and our life and salvation come

from him. Nonetheless, we all participate in one group or another, and our local churches nurture us in faith and help us to walk as disciples of Jesus. The objective, both for Paul and for us, is not only our sense of belonging to a particular church. Rather, our purpose is the proclamation of the good news, the very gospel to which we have responded in faith and joy. Now we must share this message with the world. Paul's conclusion challenges us to ask ourselves if we have good news in Christ for each other, or if we carry division even in the name of Christ, thus, in Paul's words, emptying the cross of its power.

As Canadian Christians, we have a strong history of cooperation and mutual support. Our history includes examples of common efforts, shared ministries and even the union of several churches. Where organic unity of churches has not been possible, we have often achieved common agreements and shared ministries that witness to our growing unity in Christ. Our churches have acted together on issues related to poverty and social justice, and together many of our churches are beginning to take responsibility for our un-Christ-like attitudes towards indigenous peoples in our country. And yet, despite these encouraging movements towards the unity that Christ desires for us, the divisions and disunity that distort our proclamation of the gospel persist.

We also hear of Chloe's people. It is under Chloe's leadership that this group identifies and names the conflicts and divisions in the Corinthian church. We continue to need such witnesses, as giving voice to their concerns can draw us closer to Paul's vision of a community with "the same purpose and mind in Christ." When we consider God's many blessings and gifts in our country and peoples, we begin to recognize that we must treat one another, and our land, with dignity and respect. This recognition calls us to confession and repentance and to seek new and sustainable ways of living on the earth. It raises our consciousness about how God has blessed us and reminds us that no one group can decide how to use the country's resources without hearing and including the voices of our fellow Canadians.

Questions :

1. Where do you see God's grace and peace in your local church, in your larger community and in your country? How can you move beyond a preoccupation with your immediate community and attend to the global community?
2. What do you give thanks for in your church, community and country? How have you experienced the spiritual and/ or material gifts of God among other Christians or others in your community?
3. How will you and your church discern "the same purpose and mind in Christ" with other churches? How can your appreciation and experience of different churches' worship bear fruit in efforts towards visible Christian unity? What common mission can you share with other Christians to help make the world a better place?