

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Acts 2:41-47, 1 Corinthians 1:10-17
“Church: Ideal And Real”

September 20, 2015
(17th Sunday After Pentecost)

Pastor Phil Thraikill
Main Street UMC
211 North Main St., Greenwood, SC 29646
Church Office: 864-229-7551
Church Website: www.msumc1.org

“Following Christ From City Center!”

ACTS 2:41-47, 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

"CHURCH: THE IDEAL AND THE REAL"

What Life In The Spirit Looks Like At Ground Level

14 MARKS I' 2:21-47 THE NEW COMMUNITY THE HOLY SPIRIT CREATED. 1st Summary, 1:12-14

Preaching (1) Evangelism + New Community = Foundation Story

Evangelism (2) A. v.41 Church Growth Described: A Great Influx. Cultural Aspirations Fulfilled, Utopia Realized

Baptism (3)

41 An those who received his (i.e. Peter's) word were baptized, *Logos, Large Temple Mikveh (Baths) + Other Pools*
and there were added that day about three thousand souls. *Pentecost Leads To Evangelistic Harvest*

Teaching (4) B. v.42 Three Marks Of The Community: Internal Perspective. *Koinonia = possessions*

Fellowship (5) Formal And Informal Together, Ideal Community

42 1) And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, *4:2, 18, 1:1-11; 6:1-6, Solidarity*

Communion (6) 2) to the breaking of bread, *20:7, Lk. 24:35 (Emmaus), The Eucharist/ Lord's Supper*

Prayers (7) 3) and *the* prayers. *Jewish Temple/ Daily Prayers*
Teaching + Practices = Church

C. v.43 The Miracle Of God's Power.

43 And fear (awe) came upon every soul; *Demonstrate Prophetic Spirit (2:19, 22)*
Fear (8) and many signs and wonders were done through the apostles. *2:19b,1:1 began to do //3:1-11*

Miracles (9)

C' vv.44-45 The Miracle Of Their Generosity. *Topos Of Friendship*

44 And all who believed were together and had "all things in common;" *//3:6, Proverb*
Generosity (10) and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. *Lk. 6:30-36*

B' vv.46-47a Three Marks Of The Community: External Perspective.

Worship (11) 46 3') And day by day attending the temple together, *//3:1-2, Jewish Temple Prayers*

Small Groups (12) 2') and breaking bread in their homes, *The Eucharist/ Lord's Supper*
they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, *Joy In Lord's Presence*

47 Praise/Favor (13) 1') praising God and having favor with all the people. *Worship And Witness*

A' v.47b Church Growth Described: A Steady Flow. *Added by the Lord = Fitted/Joined*

New Believers (14) *The Quality Of Their Common Life Drew People*

47 And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. *Acts 2:21, 40*

The United Methodist Vows Of Church Membership (U. M. Hymnal: 34, 38)

(*Italicized* phrases added at the 2008 General Conference: Less institutional, more external witness)

1 Vow Of Christian Loyalty, Growth, Witness, & Service In The World

According to the grace given to you, *The Immense Resources Of A Healed Relationship With God*
a will you remain faithful members of Christ's holy Church *Vitally Connected Where You Are*
b and serve as Christ's representatives in the world? **I will.** *Your External Role As A Public Ambassador*

2 Vows Of Denominational /Local Church Loyalty And Participation 3 Levels: Universal, Denominational, Local

As members of Christ's universal church, *The Larger Christian Family*
a will you be loyal *to Christ through* The United Methodist Church, *Our Limited Historical Form Of The Church*
b and do all in your power to strengthen its ministries? **I will.** *Work For Its Faithfulness And Thriving*

As members of Main Street United Methodist Church, *Local And Specific: Main Street UMC*
will you faithfully participate in our ministries *Find A Place To Serve And Work*
1 by your prayers (1), *Sunday, During The Week, Daily*
2 your presence (2), *Showing Up*
3 your gifts (3), *Money, Time, Skills, Gifts Of The Holy Spirit*
4 your service (4), *A Servant's Heart And Posture*
5 *and your witness* (5)? **I will.** *Will You Speak Of Your Faith In Christ And Your Love Of His Church?*

IA: I CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

A. 1:10-13 APPEAL FOR UNITY/CONCORD, A RIGHT UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERS.

Body Of Letter Begins In v.10, Section 1:11-4:21

1) v.10 Appeal Formula: Three Aspects Of Unity. *Propositio* = Thesis/Advice Statement, 1:10

Request Formula + Reason//Phil. 9-10, 1Pt. 5:12, Heb. 13:22, Acts 15:31

10 I appeal to you, brethren (*and sisterern!*), **Fatherly Direct Address, Solemn Appeal To Jesus' Authority**
by the of our Lord Jesus , **Church Must Maintain The Gift Of Unity (8)**

Factions, Disunity Encumbers Mission, 3-Fold Statement

a) that *all* of you agree (lit. *say the same thing*), (Positive) **One Confession, Peace**

b) and that there be no among you, (Negative) //11:18

a') but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. (Positive) //Phil. 2:5

Unity Is Not Uniformity, Basis Of Appeal In v.11ff.

Paul Uses Persuasion, Not Raw Power

2) v.11 General Report To Paul In Ephesus: Quarreling In The Family.

Paul Informs Them Of His Sources, Letter In 16:17

11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people **11:18, Credible Witness, Leader Of A House Church?**

that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. **Direct Address, Vice In Rom. 1:29, 13:13, Gal. 5:20**

Narratio (Facts of the case, Precedes argument), 1:11-17

Issue = Rivalries, Parties Over Zeal For Oratory = Ancient Sport

2') v.12 Specific Report: Cliques Around Various Leaders: Immaturity, Repeated I.

Act As Individuals- Not Group, Personality Cult, Slogans, Name-Droppers

12 What I mean is that each one of you says, **Overvalue Human Leaders As Celebrities, Zealots:**

"I belong to Paul," or **15:9, He Was Not Complimented, Founding Apostle: Our Pastor!**

"I belong to Apollos," or **3:6, 16:12, Acts 18:24-28, Eloquent Alexandrian Apostle: The Hottest Preacher!**

"I belong to Cephas," or **9:5, 15:5, Gal. 1:18, 2:1, Jews, Original Apostle: Follower Of Jesus!**

They Think Who They Identify With Gives Them Status As Individuals

"I belong to Christ." **Undervalue Human Leaders: Super-spiritual, Only The Risen Christ!**

3:5ff, 4:6, Taking Sides, Inflated With Pride, No We

1') v.13 Three Sharp Rhetorical Questions Expecting Negative Answers.

Their Position Is Absurd! Childish, 12:12, 29ff.

13 a) Is divided (*memeristai*: cut up and parceled out)? No! **Christ Is Not A Party!**

b) Was Paul crucified for you? No! **Redemption In Christ Alone**

c) Or were you baptized in the of Paul? No! **They Made Much Of This**

May Have Had A Magical View Of Baptism

B. 1:14-2:5 THE CROSS AND HUMAN WISDOM.

Questions Of v.13 Answered In 1:14-4:7

1) vv.14-16 Paul Gives Thanks (Ironically) For What He Did Not Do.

Thanksgiving Answers v.13c

14 I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; **Crispus(Acts 18:8), Gaius(Acts 18:7, Rom. 16:23)**

15 lest anyone should say that you were baptized in my name. **The Misunderstood The Sacrament**

Baptism Is A Boundary Marker, Transition Into Christ's Body

16 (I did baptize also the house [*oikos*, household] of Stephanus. **16:15-17, Afterthought For Accuracy's Sake**

Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) **Oikos = Father, Family, Slaves**

Sacraments Depend On Gospel Content, Are Not Magical

17 For Christ did not send me to baptize **Hyperbole For Effective Contrast**

but to preach the gospel, **Preaching Christ Is Prior To And The Basis Of Baptism**

and not with eloquent wisdom, **Sophia, Takes A Shot At Mere Rhetoric, Apollos' Florid Style?**

lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. **Paul Avoided Sophistic Style Rhetoric In His Preaching**

Paul Not Focus On Form Or Style But Content = Christ Crucified

CHURCH: IDEAL AND REAL

*“And fear came upon every soul;
and many signs and wonders were done through the apostles.”*

What if reverence and power were again restored?

A C T S 2 : 4 4

In a *New York Times* magazine article, Hal Niedzviecki (let’s call him *Hal N.* for those of us who can’t pronounce Polish names) reflected on social media. Soon after starting a Facebook account, Hal accumulated about 700 on-line *friends*. In his own words, he was "absurdly proud of how many cyberpals, connections, acquaintances, and even strangers I'd managed to sign up." But due to a 2-year-old at home, his workaholic irritability and love of being left alone, Hal had fewer in-the-flesh friends to hang out with than ever before, so he decided to have a Facebook party to push his virtuals into actual friends. He invited all 700 to a local bar for a party. People could respond three ways: Attending, Maybe Attending, Not Attending. Fifteen said Yes, sixty Maybe; he guessed twenty would show. He writes:

"On the evening in question, I took a shower, shaved, splashed on my tingly man perfume. I put on new pants and a favorite shirt. Brimming with optimism, I headed over to the neighborhood watering hole and waited. And waited. And waited. Eventually, one person showed up."

And the one woman who showed up to meet Hal, he didn't know her. She was a friend of a Facebook friend. They made small talk; then she left. Hal waited till midnight; no one else showed. So, he ordered a beer and sulked. His article ended with these words: "Seven hundred friends, and I was drinking alone."¹

Another observer, William Deresiewicz (let’s call him Bill W.), speaks of *faux-*

¹ Hal Niedzviecki, "Facebook in a Crowd," *The New York Times* (10-26-08)

friendships and writes:

“There they are, my friends, all in the same place. Except, of course, they're not in the same place, or, rather, they're not my friends. They're a [superficial likeness or semblance] of my friends— little dehydrated packets of images and information, no more my friends than a set of baseball cards is the New York Mets.... Friendship is devolving, in other words, from a relationship to a feeling— from something people share to something each of us hugs privately to ourselves in the loneliness of our electronic caves.”²

I think my Polish friends *Hal N.* and *Bill W.* are onto something. The explosion and obsession of Facebook is a witness to our human craving for connections, and also evidence of how quickly we are satisfied with superficiality, and the church— when at its best, or at least healthy— is all about connections with God and other people, but it is also the enemy of superficiality. The church is designed as a place to go deep with God and deep with people on a shared journey of following Jesus under the influence of his Spirit.

On Facebook you get to choose and delete members of your virtual friendship community, but in the natural family and in the church— both of which are God’s creations— you don’t get that option. You’re thrown together without a choice, and then you have to *work it out* with the help that comes from above and beside you. Which is why, in a high-tech world, the church must always remain high-touch and face-to-face and life-to-life and, ultimately heart-to-heart with lots of small groups— the early Methodists call them *Class Meetings*— where people get connected on both axes: vertically with God, horizontally with each another.³

Sometimes people send me these long, involved emails or Facebook posts about the complicated issues in their lives, some of them quite explicit and detailed— sometimes enough to make me blush— and after a paragraph or two I send back a brief reply that goes like this:

² William Deresiewicz, "Faux Friendship," *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (12-6-09).

³ On the possible recovery of the class meeting for Wesleyan discipleship, see Kevin M. Watson, *The Class Meeting* (Wilmore, KY: Seedbed, 2014).

“Nothing this important can be dealt with on-line. This requires a face-to-face conversation so I can both listen and pray with you. God did not send an e-mail or text. He put on flesh in Jesus. I’ll be waiting on your call. You can come to me, or I will come to you. It’s what pastors do. Signed: Pastor Phil, not yet on a video screen at a distance!”

On Friday afternoon I fell into a conversation with a friend who cleans your parsonage every two weeks. Since I’m married to a seventy-hour-a-week school teacher, it’s the best money I spend, after my tithe of course! You should see Lori smile when she comes home to a clean house with fresh sheets on the bed. You’d think she had a vision of the Virgin Mary!

When I asked Mrs. Spotless where she went to church– which is perhaps my most often asked question– she gave me a list of why she’d left this church and then that one and then the next one, and it was not just for minor stuff. A major scandal over a deacon who had an affair, then the same thing with a youth pastor in another church, and then a long tale of how the self-righteous members rejected them both and were just mean and ugly about it.

I looked at her, “Josephine (not her real name), are you telling me you are sitting in judgment on the judgmental; I don’t think there’s any high ground there!” She grinned, and when I counseled her, “Now if you find a perfect church, please don’t join it because you’ll ruin it,” she laughed out loud. I then said one more thing, “Are you telling me that within ten miles of where you live there’s not a church good enough for your elevated soul and righteous judgments?” She didn’t smile this time! It stung a little bit. She said, “I really need to go back, don’t I?” and I nodded.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

The Ideal: Acts 2:41-47

But there was a time, even if only for a short time, when the church was very nearly perfect. Unity, power, healings, truth, generosity, fellowship, conversions every day, all coupled with a keen reverence and respect for the God who was at work in their midst. It’s found in Acts 2:41-47 as the first of Luke’s summaries of what life was like

Acts 2:41-47, 1 Cor. 1:10-17 7

in the early Jerusalem church.⁴ It's carefully composed as you can see from the Scripture Sheet with the miracles of divine power and human generosity at the center and growth reports at the beginning and end.

Here we learn that the early Jewish followers of Jesus continued to gather in the temple for the cycles of prayer but also to meet in homes for fellowship meals where love of one another and the sense of the risen Lord's presence were mingled with joy and gladness. They even— at it point— had a great reputation in the larger community, as Luke notes in verse 47, “praising God and having favor with all the people.”

The apostles were teaching the new faith to new converts in the temple courts and in homes, baptisms in the pools around the temple were numerous, and there was this sense that the highest of human hopes for what it meant to live together in harmony were being fulfilled. The church was God's showcase for a new social reality; they were a window into the kingdom of God.

My analysis is that in these seven verses are found fourteen marks or signs of a healthy church, and it was all a byproduct of the fact that they were under the influence of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit to whom they had now been fully introduced. The two levels of creation, the upstairs and the downstairs, heaven and earth, were in harmony. This is— I believe— Luke's intent, to give us the ideal so we can ask in every new situation, “What if God did it again, and what if he did it here?”

It had been less than two months since the horror of Jesus' crucifixion had been reversed by the surprise and glory of his resurrection, followed as it was by forty days of him popping in and out of their presence in a series of resurrection appearances in which he continued to teach them about his kingdom.⁵ When these ended at his ascension, there was a interim waiting period of ten days till the festival of Pentecost fifty days after Passover, and that ten days was spent in prayer, seventy of them sequestered in an upper room, including now the brothers and sisters and mother of Jesus.⁶

⁴ For a good treatment, see Charles Talbert, *Acts* (New York, NY: Crossroad, 1997), 50; also J. Bradley Chance, *Acts* (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2007), 80-85.

⁵ Acts 1:1-5.

⁶ Acts 1:12-26.

Jesus' human family and spiritual friends of three years were now one in anticipation his promise of the Holy Spirit coming upon them was soon to be fulfilled. And so they waited and they talked and they reminisced and they rethought the Old Testament promises and they prayed till on day ten the fire and wind of heaven fell upon them. They were all filled with the flames of the Holy Spirit and manifested this by speaking and preaching in languages they'd never learned which were downloaded in an instant as they listened to themselves praising the Father's work through the Son in the power of the Spirit.⁷ It was God's way of getting the message out to all the nationalities assembled in Jerusalem at one time. This Jesus' stuff is for the whole world.

So the surprise of Jesus' resurrection was followed by the ecstasies of Pentecost when God the Spirit came to live permanently within each of them. They were literally immersed in the love and light and power of the Triune God so that the life of God within each now bound them together as one people.

And just what did the history of Jesus as lit up by the fire of the Spirit produce? It produced a new kind of community, a church, a concrete, visible, social reality, a new tribe of people who were linked by an experience of the risen Jesus and his lively Spirit. God had literally glued them together around Jesus, and the force of divine love was everywhere. Fresh and new and alive and powerful. God had landed in Jerusalem, and ground zero was this group of a hundred and twenty Jewish souls, all of whom had known Jesus in the flesh, as family or followers. God was up to something, and the One they walked with was now leading them from above through his alter ego the Holy Spirit. Same Jesus, but a new arrangement: he was now extending himself through them.

They knew his story after three years together; now they were caught up in his life. The One who was outside had now come inside, and this new thing called church was what it looked like. God had long been after a people, and here was Version 2.0: Jews who already knew the God of Israel discovering that the Father had a Son who came in Jesus to give himself for us and to put his Spirit within us. I was a fountain of divine revelation that kept bubbling in their midst. They now read the scrolls of Scripture in a fresh light.

Something happened in this country in the late sixties through the mid-

⁷ Acts 2:1-21.

seventies. It's known as *The Jesus Movement*, and it was God's response to some of the deeper hungers of the counter-cultural sixties.⁸ It was seven months after attending one of the large Campus Crusade rallies in Atlanta with Josh McDowell in December of '71 that I came back to Christ as a new disciple, and for a KA that was quite a sudden reformation of priorities! From Old South to the old, old story of Jesus and his love was a revolution if ever there was one. Vices fell away like scales, and I had to get adjusted to a new world view. I was forgiven and free. I was not running my life any longer because I had a new boss: the man from Nazareth.

When I went back to Wake Forest two months later I was welcomed and soon enfolded into a campus fellowship that saved my life. They loved me when I was a jerk and helped me find my way around the Bible. They helped me understand and begin to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and the amazing gifts I'd experienced.

I remember once waking up at 1:00am in the morning and having this strange sense I should get out of bed and go to someone's room, and when I got there the same message had come to others who wandered in, so we found ourselves meeting in the middle of the night in a God-called gathering to pray for our campus. We met in the Chapel on Sunday nights to sing *Pass It On* and *Lord of the Dance* and some of the new music coming from the West Coast. One had a testimony, another a lesson, another a vision for a new ministry; there was love all around and lots of singing.

And when I go back to Wake— as I do from time to time— I always go back to that little chapel to weep and remember and pray, “Lord, do it again! We need a new *Jesus Movement*, not something we planned but something you sent,” something that will answer the ache that lives in the heart of this generation, our children and grandchildren. I went back as a new believer and discovered the strength that comes from having brothers and sisters in Christ.

The reason I tell you these memoirs is that what happened to me those last three years of college were as close as I've ever come to getting a glimpse of what it must have been like in Jerusalem. It marked me at the heart level. Yes, it was two thousand years later. Yes, none of us were apostles. Yes, it was a hothouse college

⁸ For a brilliant review of this tumultuous era and the forces that shaped it and us, see David Brooks, *The Paradise Suite: Bobos in Paradise* and *On Paradise Drive* (New York, NY: Simon and Schuster, 2011).

campus of immature young people finding their way back into the faith of their fathers and mothers, but it was real and shook us all. Jesus won our hearts, and when I think back it's amazing how many pastors came out of that visitation across the nation. We went off to seminaries to get our academic credentials, then into the trenches of churches across the land for nearly four decades now. Men and women just like me, and now we're all in our early sixties and wondering when the next wave is coming because the wave we experienced had long since receded. And in some sense I've been searching for this fresh reality ever since, a people who are alive to God and hungry for more, foolish enough to believe Jesus reigns over them and that there's important work to do if we can only stay in alignment with the Spirit. I want to be around when the next wave rises and crashes across our shores. I'm tired of paddling and waiting; I want a rising wave under my board.

There is something absolutely intoxicating and unforgettable about your first love, even if it's not the same as the true love you eventually married. It was by God's intention that those first Jesus followers had such an intense experience of the divine life, call it *a divine romance* if you will. It was to bond them to Jesus and one another with a glue strong enough to stand the pulling and the pressures to which they would soon be subject. The ideal church did not continue as they wished. Soon enough there were internal problems with greedy lying leaders,⁹ and ethic complaints between widows who spoke Aramaic and those whose native tongue was Greek.¹⁰ And then came the pains of persecution and the first scattering of the church beyond Jerusalem along with the first martyr Stephen.¹¹

The honeymoon was now officially over. There would be periodic restorations of the dream along the way; we call them *revivals* or *awakenings* or *renewals* or even *reformations* when the winds of the Spirit once again blew new life into discouraged saints and stirred up the gifts of power and revelation.

To read the early history of our own renewal movement, which is what Wesleyan Methodism was within the 18th century Church of England, is to have a window into one of those restorations. But however long the intensity lasts, and

⁹ Acts 5:1-11.

¹⁰ Acts 6:1-7.

¹¹ Acts 6:8-8:3.

Acts 2:41-47, 1 Cor. 1:10-17 11

sometimes it can last years- even decades– if saturated in prayer and nurtured by unified leadership, it eventually fades under the incessant pressures of the culture and the intransigence of sin and ignorance within us all, including the leaders of revival. A few decades later historians sift through the evidence to write accounts of what happened and why.¹²

The Real: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

The ideal was seen in Jerusalem in the first years after the resurrection of Jesus and the giving of the Holy Spirit, but most of our life is not lived there; it's lived in ordinary churches where bickering is often more evident than heavenly tongues of fire. So it was that twenty-five years later across the Mediterranean in Greece we find a frustrated Apostle Paul writing the letter now known as *First Corinthians* to a bunch of converted Jews and Gentiles who were bickering over who they wanted as senior pastor.

Word has come to Paul across the Aegean Sea in Ephesus that the church he founded and invested in for eighteen months was dividing up over which Christian leader they like best. So severe had the dispute become that a woman named Chloe— apparently a leader of some stature— took matters into her own hands and sent envoys at her expense across the sea to appeal to Paul, as he references in verse 11, “For it has been reported to me *by Chloe’s people* that there is quarreling among you, my brethren.”

The church in Corinth has become a cult of personality, and it may be rooted in the false idea that I belong to the leader who baptized me or— in our times— the one who did my wedding or buried my mother or had children the same age as mine or who was just cool, the one of I feel closest to. Thus their slogans became “I belong to Paul who founded our church,” or “I belong to Apollos the eloquent speaker from the University of Alexandria ” or “I belong to Cephas— meaning Peter- who actually knew Jesus in the flesh.” And then there were the super-spirituals who had no need whatever of everyday leaders, “I,” the must have said in a spiritual tone, “belong to Christ alone.”

Apparently the whole church was involved and choosing up sides. Things

¹² For a new history, see Larry Eskridge, *God’s Forever Family: The Jesus People Movement In America* (Oxford, England: OUP, 2013).

were getting ugly, and Chloe was frightened enough to alert Paul for help which soon came in the form of a dictated letter hand carried to Corinth to be read in the various house churches since there was no central gathering place, no buildings like the one. In those days we were a *living room religion*. Pagans had temples, and Jews synagogues, but the church was architecturally invisible because we met in homes and their courtyards on Sunday evenings after the first work day of the Roman week. We were known then not by the edifices we built but by the quality of people our assemblies produced, and at Corinth the quality was awful!

In that world it was customary for people to side with their favorite philosopher or teacher because in that day philosophy was not an egghead highbrow pursuit but as competitive and partisan— and even sometimes as violent— as college football is in ours. “I am of Clemson” or “I am of Carolina.” “I am of Plato,” or “I am of Pythagorus.” To choose a single hero was a cultural pattern imported by new Gentile converts into the church, and it was tearing the fledgling congregation to pieces. Their error was in not understanding the complementary role of the various apostolic teachers who crossed their path. Sure they have different styles and different strengths, but they represent the One who sent them and to which they all belong, and that’s the Lord Jesus.

No one could replace Paul, their spiritual father who founded the church; the gift of Apollos was as a powerful orator to defend the faith against attack; Peter was full of stories about his years with Jesus and the events of the early Jerusalem Church, a pipeline into living memory. The one who now ruled them from the Father’s right hand was Peter’s personal friend. How’s that for insider information! But they were complementary, not competitive. Enjoy them all, receive them all, says Paul; all are gifts from the Lord who has many spokesmen because it takes many perspectives to fill out the full portrait of Jesus.

If it takes four written gospels to guard the fullness of Jesus’ person,¹³ then how many more teachers like Pastor Paul and Pastor Phil does it take to teach about him over time, and all are loyal to the same sources and to the same Triune faith. This is the same reason it takes all the churches— from Roman Catholic to Pentecostal— to flesh out the meaning and power of what God has done for us in Jesus Christ. I am not nearly as concerned about denominations as some. As long as they remain

¹³ See Martin Hengel, *The Four Gospels And The One Gospel Of Jesus Christ* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity International, 2000).

orthodox in doctrine and in ethics— and the current status of some of our old Protestant friends is now highly questionable— they are needed. And even those who are outside the boundaries are needed, but for a different reason; they demonstrate a dead end we do not want to join.¹⁴

I frankly now have more in common with orthodox Roman Catholics who hold to the Scriptures and the Nicene Creed and the church’s distinct and humane sexual ethic than with many fellow clergy in ours and neighboring Protestant denominations who have departed from these standards for something a bit more progressive and in line with emerging cultural winds to which they have set their sails. The only ecumenism that has a future is that which is gathered around the classic markers of the faith and that avoids the false claims of new revelation.

So to bring them back to sanity Paul asked three questions, each of which expects a firm No for an answer: “Is Christ divided?” No. “Was Paul crucified for you?” No. “Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” No. “So why your misplaced loyalties?”

In their world each teacher shouted from a different street corner and represented a different philosophy, but in the church all the teachers represent the same philosophy, the same Teacher, Jesus the Jewish Messiah and Lord of the world. Paul then goes into a riff which demonstrates the fundamental error. They apparently saw their baptism as an identification of loyalty with a particular apostle and not as a union with an invisible Jesus Christ. Who baptizes you simply does not matter, no matter how much family sentimentality is invoked; it is not who baptized you but into whose name you were baptized, and in the Christian tradition that one name is the threefold Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

One sure way to diagnose Christian immaturity is when you hear people talking more about their pastors— positive or negative— than about the Lord, more about their favorite TV preacher than about the Lord, more about what they heard some preacher say on Christian radio than what they are reading in Scripture. When it’s all about personality and opinions, the speakers are immature. Now it’s OK to be immature

¹⁴ For a fine treatment of this line of thinking (i.e. how error is used to refine truth), see Alister McGrath, *Heresy: A History of Defending the Truth* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2009), esp. Chapter 8, “Cultural and Intellectual Motivations for Heresy,” 175-196.

because we all start there, but not OK to stay there. And so the question is, Why are so few of our people grown ups? Are we still as personality driven as our brothers and sister in Corinth? I think so. How often I run into people, who when I asked why they left the church, reply, “I didn’t like the new preacher.”

So there you have it. The big picture from one extreme to the other. An ideal church in Jerusalem that’s almost too good to be true, and twenty-five years later a church in Corinth that resembles some of our own, more influenced by the culture than shaping it. But to set it up as a contrast between *ideal* and *real* is an error of the first order because both are real, just different; both are featured in the same New Testament, and both belong to the same Lord. Finally, we belong to Jesus.

It is good Pope Francis is coming to our country this week. He will no doubt prick our conscience and cause a stir. That he has agreed to speak to our Congress is a gift of God’s grace to us all. His country– the Vatican- is tiny, but his influence as a moral and spiritual leader is great. He occupies a bishopric that goes all the way back to St. Peter himself, and when he speaks on such momentous occasions all Christians should pray and listen. Some of the very best theologians and philosophers in the world have had a voice in his remarks so that every word carries major freight.

Perhaps he will have something to say about the ugly Planned Parenthood videos and what they say about our corrupt and self-indulgent national character. That candidate Carly Fiorina spoke in the convicting tone of an Old Testament prophet during last week’s Republican debate was more than a political gambit. Her’s was a voice of conscience that echoed God’s own heart, and if it did not make you tremble, I’m worried. The last time the Lord sent Mother Theresa to give us a word about this matter, and we did not change. But now Pope Francis before our Congress. The ante is surely going up, and we are being weighed in the balances!

Friends, there is simply no way to follow Jesus as he wishes to be followed without a deep and abiding immersion in his people the church. We are not to be confused with the Lord himself, but we the church– faulty as we remain to the end– are his living extensions, and it is together in truth and in love and in discipline and in hope that we must represent him and welcome his power and correction.

I love the church. She is my spiritual mother, and to her service I have given thirty-eight years of my adult life. Is she perfect in all her ways? No, but one day she

Acts 2:41-47, 1 Cor. 1:10-17 15

will be. So if you are too good for his people, you are too good for Jesus, and you will have to find some other way to be saved, but there is none.

The last vow that is asked of the baptized is this one, and it is unavoidably local. It lists five marks of the faithful, and I will take one a week for the next five weeks.

“As members of Main Street United Methodist Church,
(whose address is 211 North Main in Greenwood, SC, 29646,
you know, the big red brick church with the bell tower on the side)
will you faithfully participate in our ministries

- 1 by your prayers,
- 2 your presence,
- 3 your gifts,
- 4 your service,
- 5 and your witness?

to which the faithful soul answers, “**I will.**”¹⁵

Did you mean it?

¹⁵ *U.M. Hymnal*: 38.
