

“And So I’ll Cherish That Old Couch.”

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

"It all started long before I came," said the Reverend Jason Kirk. Kirk is the fictional pastor of the Clyde's Corner Church in a parable by Thomas H. Troeger. The founder of Clyde's Corner, Cedric Clyde was a successful farmer at the turn of the century. To show his thanks to God, he paid for the building of the local church. Just before Cedric died, he donated to the church a lot of furniture for the parlor and one item for the raised chancel behind the pulpit: "a giant red horsehair couch whose rich color Cedric fancied would brighten the front of the church." The huge couch featured massive curved arms and dark mahogany legs, each carved like the claw of a lion. Time passed, and that couch became the subject of a bitter debate between members of the Clyde family who wanted to keep the couch where it was and newer members who thought the couch did not belong in the sanctuary. This debate sparked tension between the established members and the newer families who had moved to the country to get their children away from the drugs that were spreading into their suburban neighborhoods.

The new families had bought up foreclosed farms and built beautiful homes in the hills. They were accustomed to fine furnishings, and they detested what they had dubbed "the Victorian Leviathan" that dominated what otherwise was a plain but handsome church.

The Clyde family viewed the couch in a different light. Their farms had fallen on hard times in recent years. They looked at the couch each Sunday and fondly remembered that their great-grandfather Cedric had founded the church. Although their tractors were rusting in the front yard, at least the preacher sat on Cedric's couch.

"Every sentence I put in the air," Rev. Kirk said of his sermons, "I see them all weighing whether it is ammunition for their side or the other side. Here I am preaching about the love of God, and everything I say is filtered through a single question: Is the pastor in favor of the red horsehair couch, or is the pastor against the red horsehair couch?" Everyone knew that the church could not continue that way. The red couch was dividing the church.

The Apostle Paul knew about such divisions. From a careful reading of his letters, we discover that Paul's major concern was unity within the church. When Paul entered Corinth it was the first time the Christian gospel was preached there. After winning

some converts, Paul began a church which met in people's homes. It is believed that Paul remained in Corinth for over a year. During his time with the Corinthians, he tried to teach them everything he knew about Jesus and the gospel message. The people did not have a written gospel or New Testament to read, so they had to depend on Paul for all their information. While Paul was in Corinth, the church thrived. The time came for Paul to travel to another city and begin the process all over again, of first winning converts, then starting a church.

After Paul left, the people began experiencing some problems. The newly founded church turned to Paul for help. Paul was very sensitive to the people and the issues that threatened to divide them. Paul first tried to build the people up, complimenting them for what they were doing well. Then he gently admonished them about the quarreling that was causing division within this new church family.

When any church begins focusing on something or someone other than Jesus Christ, it is in grave danger. This was what was happening in Corinth. Paul wrote, "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you." People within the church began forming groups or cliques. And these cliques were very destructive to the unity of the Corinthian church. At first these groups seemed harmless, but as time went on it became evident that these groups were tearing the church apart. Feelings were being hurt.

Paul wrote to the Corinthians to encourage them to focus once again on Christ. Often what threatens the church is the seemingly small, insignificant, things. Bickering within the church often centers on issues like what color to paint the fellowship hall, or how many parking spaces should be reserved, or if the youth group can be ushers one month. The word Paul uses, "quarrel," suggests that these were simply differences of opinion or jealousy, or bickering, and not major doctrinal schisms. They were not arguing about the nature of Christ but about little things. Often it is these seemingly small disagreements that threaten the very existence of the body of Christ.

Humorist Lewis Grizzard recalls a dispute in a church in his home town of Moreland, Georgia. A church decided to install chimes that would play hymns over the loudspeaker for the townspeople to enjoy at suppertime. One of the members happened to be a turkey farmer, and he claimed the chimes bothered his turkeys during their evening meal, and they weren't eating and getting fat so he could sell them at the market.

Ugliness ensued. The turkey farmer began shooting at the loudspeaker on the church steeple in order to silence the chimes. Other members of the church, meanwhile, crept into the turkey pens at night, carrying hatchets, which spooked the birds, giving them yet another reason not to eat. "Only after the church steeple had been riddled with

bullet holes and most of the turkey farmer's flock had suffered complete nervous breakdowns was the matter settled," Grizzard writes. A solution was reached. The church agreed to play the chimes at an hour that would not interfere with the turkeys' eating habits, and the turkey farmer called off his artillery.

When we as the church lose our focus, we are in grave danger. Often what is most destructive to our churches are not major issues but people disagreeing about the old red couch, or whether or not to put cushions on the pews. Paul was sensitive to the people and their problems. Paul appealed to the believers, "...by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Paul wanted the Corinthians to focus once again on Jesus Christ.

Paul also wanted the Corinthians to understand that everyone has something positive to contribute to Christ's work. After Paul left Corinth, Apollos arrived and began teaching the people. It is believed that Apollos was a traveling merchant from Alexandria who was a deeply committed Christian. Apollos was a very persuasive speaker. The Corinthians were impressed with his "eloquent wisdom." They were so taken with Apollos that they began to lose their focus. They formed cliques, saying, "I belong to Apollos." Other groups formed. They said, "I belong to Paul." Others said, "I belong to Cephas," and still others said, "I belong to Christ." Problems arose as a result. Paul responded to the report by asking them, "Has Christ been divided?" Of course not. They were followers of Christ and not followers of Paul, or Apollos, or Peter. They were no longer focusing on Christ but on his messengers.

Christians today still do that very thing: Some will say: I belong to Billy Graham. Or, I belong to D. James Kennedy. Or, I belong to John Baumann. I belong to Ray Coombs. I belong to Judine Duerwachter. I belong to David Mercer. I belong to Joel Osteen. I belong to Robert Schuller. That is the wrong focus! You belong to Christ. Period. We don't worship ministers, we worship God. Ministers are people, but we are ONLY people. Ministers come and go. Jesus Christ on the other hand, as scripture tells us, "is the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). Worshipping a minister is a lot like worshipping a big red couch that has been sitting up in the chancel for too many years.

Everyone has something different and something positive to contribute to the church's life, whether they have a seminary degree or not. Paul understood this when he wrote to the Corinthians, "For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel." There are many gifts, and many messengers but only one Lord and Savior.

The important thing is that only a united church can do great things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. If people in the church can't get along with one another, how can we expect people in the community and people in the world to get along?

Disagreements in the church send a negative message to the community, including people who might be considering joining the church. "Why would I want to be a part of that church?" someone might think. "All they do is fight with one another all the time. I would be better off staying home on Sunday morning." United with one focus there is no stopping the church of Jesus Christ. Together we in the church can accomplish great things; divided the church will not accomplish much of anything.

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Now, back to our story about the old red couch: The church at Clyde's Corner that was quarreling about whether or not the old red horsehair couch should remain in the sanctuary was able to solve their problem with Christ-like love. Reverend Jason Kirk, writing to one of his colleagues, says, "I got everyone in the congregation to agree that we needed to refurnish the church parlor." He pointed out that Cedric's couch was coming unglued and the veneers were splitting because of the extreme changes of temperature in the sanctuary. "I thought we could have the couch repaired and then placed in the parlor," Jason Kirk wrote, "which we keep at room temperature all week because some group or committee meets there nearly every day."

The church at Clyde's Corner came together. All of Cedric's relatives agreed to Reverend Kirk's plan, and the new people donated money for the entire project, including the cost of framing a portrait of Cedric Clyde to hang over his couch.

When all the redecorating was completed, the congregation gathered one Sunday for the dedication. Reverend Kirk led them in a prayer, and Florence Clyde, the oldest living member of the Clyde family, unveiled the plaque. Then they proceeded to the sanctuary and gathered up front to dedicate the new furnishings in the chancel. "We had hung a large cross on the wall behind the pulpit," Jason Kirk wrote. "I preached a

sermon on the cross that day, which was well received by everyone. When we took the old couch out of the chancel we drove the bad feelings out, and the cross brought a new spirit in."

The church at Clyde's Corner had recovered its focus. Everyone's contribution was valued. Now it could concentrate on its ministry and mission. Now maybe it could be the undivided body of Christ! Amen.

Illustrations borrowed from King Duncan