

“One Word Among Many”

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In 1950 George Smathers ran against Claude Pepper in the Florida Democratic primary for the United States Senate. Pepper, who would later become one of Florida’s most beloved political figures, was running neck and neck with Smathers. As the primary vote drew closer, the tactics in the race became dirtier as both candidates engaged in extensive smear campaigns. Just before the election Smathers gave a brief speech to Democratic voters which quickly circulated among Florida party leaders. According to legend, this is what Smathers said: “Are you aware that Claude Pepper is known all over Washington as a shameless extrovert? Not only that, but this man is reliably reported to practice nepotism with his sister-in-law, and he has a sister who is known to be a thespian in New York City. Worst of all, it is an established fact that Mr. Pepper , before his marriage, habitually practiced celibacy.”

Knowing the meaning of those words, we know that George Smathers was saying nothing at all about Claude Pepper, but if you did not know the definition of “extrovert”, “nepotism”, “thespian” and “celibacy”, and you imagined the definition of those words from the context of the sentences, the worst politician would look like a girl scout compared to Claude Pepper.

The power of words to release strong emotions must never be underestimated. Names have the same power. Take any group of average Americans, put them in a

room together, and say the name, “Trump”. What kind of response do you think you will get? More than likely, it will be both strong and divisive . The same is true for other famous, or notorious names: Putin, Assange, Kim Jong-Il, the Kennedys - the power in these names is not in who these people are, but in what they represent- things that we either absolutely reject or totally embrace.

In the church of Corinth during the time of Paul, the members of the church were having the same problem that we have in our modern and literate culture. Words had become weapons, and names had come to mean more than just the person being identified. Do you remember the name of your favorite teacher? We do this because our teachers are important to us. We develop emotional attachments to them. They influence and shape our lives, and in the case of our best teachers, we never forget them. I can’t remember everything about Miss Cline in first grade, but I know that name means to me.

The Christians in the church of Corinth have been blessed with three powerful teachers in their lives, teachers who not only have shared with the church their witness to the gospel of Jesus Christ, but teachers who have done wonderful things in the life of the Corinthian congregation.

Paul we know quite well; and the name “Cephas” is another name for the Apostle Peter. Peter and Paul were the two dominant figures in the early Christian church. They both preached the gospel with great power. They established churches, and they created and ordained Christian leaders. But like all people, Peter and Paul did

not see eye to eye on everything.

Peter had a heart for the Jews who had embraced Jesus Christ as their Messiah. At times Peter expressed discomfort with the number of Gentiles who were entering the fledgling church. He welcomed the Gentiles, but struggled with the pressure that his fellow Jewish Christians put on him to establish dietary and circumcision laws upon those Gentiles who were joining the church.

On the other hand, Paul was absolutely convinced that the church should have an open door for anyone who walked in, without any legalistic requirements beyond the teachings of Jesus. At times in the life of the early church, Paul and Peter clashed openly over the Jewish/Gentile controversy, a controversy which threatened to seriously disrupt the early Christian churches. The church of Corinth was under the same threat of division, but there was a third complicating factor in the Corinthian situation.

In our scripture lesson Paul mentioned another individual, a church leader, by the name of Apollos. We know little about Apollos except for the fact that, when he first entered the church, Apollos spoke eloquently about his belief in Jesus Christ, but practiced baptism in the name of John the Baptist. First Corinthians also indicates that Apollos understood the Hebrew scriptures allegorically, which may imply that he had Gnostic leanings. Gnostic Christians embraced mysticism and believed that they had been given secret knowledge by Christ to share with the Christian church.

As a result, in Corinth we see one church under the influence of three names that represent three different approaches to believing and worshipping Jesus, and it is clear that these three names have become a source of division in the church: “It has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Cephas.’ Paul adds a fourth name to this list representing a fourth faction in the Corinthian church, and in hearing this fourth name we can deduce this faction’s opinion: ‘or I belong to Christ.’”

Whenever divisions break out among a group, there is almost always a claim of ultimate truth. In Corinth there was a fourth group of Christians that claimed they had arrived at the ultimate truth, and invoked the name of Jesus as a sign of their rightness. Does that sound familiar? (Playing the Jesus Card) But Paul acknowledges that the name of Christ can be just as divisive as the names Peter, Paul, or Apollos, when that name is separated from Christ’s spiritual identity.

The spiritual identity of Christ is echoed in the opening passages from the gospel of John: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” According to John, in the beginning there were not words, the language that humans use to communicate, but the “Word” (logos), with a capital “W”. It is this Christ of the Word to whom Paul appeals as a source of unity for his sisters and brothers of the Corinthian church: “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? For Christ did not

send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.”

Think about this - Christ spoke very few words from the cross, certainly fewer than he spoke in any other time of his life, but the message of the cross was his greatest sermon, and the cross is God’s sermon to us. The Christians in the church of Corinth are fighting over who is right, over which leader has the truth, but under the judgement of the one true Word, all of us have fallen short of the glory of God. If we are united in our sinfulness, we are also united by God’s grace. This is what Paul wants the Corinthians to understand. One of my favorite Presbyterian authors, Anne Lamott, writes, “I do not understand the mystery of grace -- only that it meets us where we are and does not leave us where it found us.”

“In the beginning was the Word.” Our words divide, but the Word unites. In making our choices, let us never forget first Christ’s love; in making our judgments, let us never forget first Christ’s forgiveness; in taking our stands, let us never forget that there is something greater than the issue of the day or the controversy of the month, or the conflict of the year. There is one word among many. The Word is greater. The Word is eternal. And the Word unites us all even in love, even if we are extroverts, nepotists, thespians, or even, celibates.

Amen