

# LifeWay Explore the Bible Series for June 6: Four ways to promote church unity

May 25, 2010

The last physical fight my younger sister and I got into was over chocolate cake.

Not just any chocolate cake, mind you. No, it was my grandmother's homemade chocolate cake. It had two layers of moist chocolate cake, separated with a layer of chocolate pudding, and it was all topped with a thick coating of milk chocolate icing.

I was a senior in high school, and my sister was 15. I was innocently sitting on the couch, when I saw my sister go into the kitchen and emerge with the yellow plastic bowl, which contained the last piece of cake.

I said to her, "I have not had any cake yet; I was saving that last piece for later." My sister being the eternal antagonist which is an art form for younger siblings said, "This cake" and held up the bowl mischievously. "Yes, I was saving it for later," I said. My sister, of course, replied that she wanted the cake.

We went back and forth for a few moments, with me arguing that I deserved the cake since I had not yet had a piece, and with her arguing some version of finders keepers. Finally, my sister looked at me, held up the bowl and said, "You want this cake" and then, she proceeded to furiously shake the bowl up and down, obliterating the last piece of my grandmother's tantalizing chocolate cake. Then, it was on. I was up, leaping over the couch, with arms outstretched and pouncing on my sister.

We all know that sometimes when Christians fight, it is over the chocolate cake. Nonessentials, like the color of the carpet in the sanctuary, or what to do when the church is given a large financial gift. Other times, when Christians fight, it is over serious issues, like whether or not to dismiss a pastor who has an affair, or whether individuals can join the church if they have been baptized by sprinkling, instead of immersion.

Divisions over either essential or nonessential issues can make it hard for a community of believers to actually be community. This lesson is about the divisions occurring in the church at Corinth. The emphasis is on the importance of unity within a church. Through this lesson adults will be encouraged to promote unity within their church.

In the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, we learn why Paul wrote this letter. The Corinthians were called to be in fellowship with one another through Christ, but instead, they divided up the body into cliques. At least four cliques had emerged, some of them claiming allegiance to Paul, some to Apollo, some to Cephas or Peter and others claim allegiance to Christ alone.

Claiming loyalty to Christ seems innocent enough. Yet, N. T. Wright notes that claiming allegiance solely to Christ also can be a power play. While everyone else is following this person or that person, this fraction can assert they simply are following Christ. Then, they can claim to speak on his behalf. They can declare, "We've heard your opinions; now let me tell you what our Lord thinks about it all."

The Apostle Paul told them that instead of all the fighting and division, they should be "perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

When I read this, I cannot help but chuckle a little. It reminds me of the old joke: Where you have two Baptists, you have three opinions. I appreciate that Paul does not try to whitewash the church's problems, but it still is

hard to swallow the fact that the church faced such deep divisions so early in its formation. Yet, we know all too well that you do not have to attend church long to discover that it is a fallible community.

How is it possible for a group of people to be of the same mind and opinion? Frankly, it is not. Humans do not have the power within them to live in unity. We allow too many of our sinful vices to get in the way, like our ego, our selfish ambition, our longing for power. In our own strength, unity is impossible. But as Paul indicates in the next section, Christians can be unified through Christ, if we keep the power of the cross of Christ firmly before us.

When Paul showed up in a city talking about Jesus Christ being crucified by the Romans, being raised from the dead and then, setting up a new kingdom, and calling followers to himself, it seemed like foolishness to the people. So, Paul had to let the cross do its own work. He preached, then, the power of the Holy Spirit took it from there.

It is the same with unity in the church. It seems impossible that a church of 700-800 people can be united in mind and opinion. But through the power of Christ, God can accomplish salvation for humanity, the defeat of the evil one and even the transformation of human lives. People can learn to love each other, sacrifice for each other and get along.

Eugene Peterson has observed that “the church is composed of equal parts mystery and mess.” Surely, it is the mystery of Christ that holds this messy body of believers called the church together. I wish Paul further explained exactly how believers are to get along with each, but at this point he does not. Instead, he tells us to trust in the foolishness of God’s wisdom.

Maybe this means admitting that much of what we disagree about is chocolate cake, silly divisions that hurt the church needlessly. Over time, these silly divisions can cause as much damage as a serious theological

breach. The next time your church disagrees over chocolate cake, remember Paul's call to unity.