

The Air We Breathe

Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (Romans 12:2 ESV)

You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet. (Matthew 5:13 ESV)

Tribalism

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1 Corinthians 3:1-9

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Introduction:

Good morning! Please turn with me in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 3.

We are in week two of a new summer series in which we will be addressing some of the subtle-yet-sinful thought patterns that can slip into the church without even being noticed. Think of these as the *carbon monoxide* sins. They're almost untraceable. But they're deadly.

Brothers and sisters, whether we like it or not, we spend A LOT of time immersed in the world, and sometimes the world conforms our thinking in ways that we don't even recognize. And, to be clear, I'm not suggesting that the solution is to isolate ourselves. In fact, when Jesus prayed for us in his high priestly prayer, he specifically clarified:

I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. (John 17:15 ESV)

So we're not called to hide! We're called to be salt! Light! A city on a hill! Jesus prayed: "Don't take them out! But keep them from the evil one." He went on to specify *how* we would be kept when he prayed:

Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. (John 17:17 ESV)

So, we're not going to hide. But we ARE going to return to the word of God again and again so that we can be kept in the faith while we live and minister in the world.

That's what we're doing this morning. And we're going to shine the light of His Word specifically on the subtle-yet-dangerous sin of tribalism.

Tribalism refers to the "us and them" mentality that fuels so much of the rage in our culture. We see it most obviously in politics. We don't talk *to* each other anymore. We talk *at* each other. Because it's not about the *issues* anymore. It's about *identity*. Are you conservative or are you liberal? Are you *us*? Or are you *them*?

Tribalism is one of the biggest reasons why social media is so toxic. Instead of having real discussions with people, we wage war with *opponents*. You're no longer my friend Bobby from high school – now you're an *antivaxxer*! You're no longer my old co-worker Steve – now you're a *socialist*!

We slap labels onto people and lump them into camps. Then we fight! That's tribalism, and it's the air we breathe.

In our passage this morning, we are reminded that long before social media or Canadian politics, this sin of tribalism existed, and it even crept into the church. Look with me to 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. Hear now God's holy, inspired, inerrant, living and active word to us today.

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹ For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:1-9 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

In our passage this morning, we find an example of what it looks like when the sin of tribalism makes its way into the church.

The Corinthian Christians had divided into camps. “I follow Paul!” “Well, I follow Apollos!” And, if we’re not careful, this same mentality can creep into our own churches. If we’re not careful, we might even find a spirit of rivalry stirring up in our hearts. For example, I’m sure that we were all excited when I announced that Cornerstone’s VBS served ___ kids and saw ___ professions of faith. As we should be! Yet, I wonder if any of us found ourselves – way back in the deep, dark recesses of our hearts – comparing that report to our own VBS report from last Sunday? That competition – that little push towards *us* and *them* thinking – that over-allegiance to a particular earthly leader or particular congregation – is an example of the subtle and dangerous effects of this sin. What happens if those little thoughts are indulged? What happens when tribalism creeps into the church? We catch a glimpse of what can happen in our passage today.

What Happens When Tribalism Creeps Into The Church?

The first thing we learn in this passage is that, when tribalism creeps into the church:

1. Our spiritual immaturity is exposed for all to see

We see this in verses 1-4:

But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³ for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴ For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? (1 Corinthians 3:1-4 ESV)

In the denBok house we are currently trying to nail down the “ABC’s” with Noelle. We are not at all surprised when she mixes up s and x or when lmnop merge together to form one massive letter. She’s young. She’s immature. She’s not supposed to know those things yet.

Well, the same is true spiritually. In this room, there are some brand new believers who are still learning their spiritual “ABC’s”. Praise God for that! Similarly, Paul notes here that the Corinthians were in that place the last time he was with them. They were “spiritual infants” and he taught them and treated them and measured his expectations of them accordingly.

But eventually, Noelle needs to nail down that alphabet. Eventually, we learn the basics and develop a hunger for deeper things. Growth is RIGHT. Growth is EXPECTED.

But this church in Corinth failed to grow. They failed to graduate out of their spiritual infancy. Paul wrote this letter FIVE YEARS after his initial time with the church. To his dismay – though five years had passed – the church was just as immature as when he had left. And this immaturity was on full display in their competitive tribalism. Look again at verses 3-4:

For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human? (1 Corinthians 3:3b-4 ESV)

“How could this be?” Paul asks. “You are jealous and fighting amongst yourselves about who’s pastor is more impressive? Are you joking?! You’re behaving like spiritual toddlers! You look and sound just like the world!”

You see, when we start fighting and dividing people notice. It is a public display of worldliness and immaturity. The city notices. The neighbours notice. Our kids notice.

When tribalism creeps into the church, our spiritual immaturity is exposed for all to see. That’s the first lesson we learn from this example. Second, when tribalism creeps into the church:

2. Human leaders are given far too much credit

We see this in verses 5-7:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither he

who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:5-7 ESV)

These Corinthians had become far too attached to human leaders and it was causing massive problems in the church. There was a “Paul group”. There was an “Apollos group”. We learn in chapter 1 that there was a “Cephas group”. The whole thing was so ridiculous – so embarrassing – that Paul could hardly believe it! In chapter 1, he writes:

Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Corinthians 1:13b ESV)

In other words, “Are you KIDDING me!? I’M JUST THE MESSENGER! I’m just a SERVANT THROUGH WHOM YOU BELIEVED! And so is Apollos! And so is Peter! Why are you fighting over your allegiances to us when all of us are pointing you to HIM!”

I planted, Apollos watered, but **God gave the growth.** (1 Corinthians 3:6 ESV)

GOD DID THIS! God builds the church! Not Paul. Not Apollos. Not Pastor Levi. Not Pastor Dave over at Emmanuel or Pastor Paul at Cornerstone. Not John Piper or John MacArthur. GOD is building His church and we are all simply His servants. So, Paul goes on to say:

So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:7 ESV)

I want to be careful to point out here that Paul is clearly using *hyperbole*. He’s not suggesting that spiritual leaders don’t have *any* value or that they should be despised – in Ephesians 4 he refers to spiritual leaders as a gift from God to the church. So, he’s not saying that leaders are literally *nothing*.

But he IS saying that we need to stop giving *credit* to men for the things that only God can do. And we need to stop giving the kind of *allegiance* to men that only God deserves. As one commentator explains:

Ministers do have value. But when respect or fondness leads to an exclusive loyalty, and when this causes division or detracts from a proper theocentric or christocentric

orientation, Paul wishes to point out that *only God, who makes things grow*, is worthy of our undivided gratitude and adoration.¹

It feels awkward to even say this but given the passage before us I'm just going to go for it: Please don't build unhealthy attachments to me. Please don't ever believe the lie that this church needs me. Please don't ever say the words "I go to Levi's church." No, you don't. This church belongs to Jesus just like every other church. I am wonderfully replaceable just like every other pastor. We are all – along with Paul and Apollos:

Servants through whom you believed (1 Corinthians 3:5b ESV)

Nothing more. Nothing less. Tribalism loses sight of that. Tribalism gives far too much credit to human leaders.

Third, and finally, when tribalism creeps into the church:

3. Christian unity is obscured and opposed

I use the word "obscured" because the true church IS united under Christ – whether we obscure that reality or not. Tribalism merely *pretends* that there is an "us" and a "them" in the Church. But that couldn't be further from the truth! Look again at verses 8-9:

He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor. ⁹For we are God's fellow workers. You are God's field, God's building. (1 Corinthians 3:8-9 ESV)

Paul is reminding us here that – no matter which Christian leader or Christian denomination we follow – we are ON THE SAME TEAM! We are ONE! Not only were these Corinthians being immature and worldly – not only were they giving far too much credit to human leaders – but in doing all this they were actually *dividing* and therefore *damaging* the church that their beloved leaders were giving their lives to build!

¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter To The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 147.

That's what tribalism does. It opposes the bride of Christ!

Now, I suspect that someone in the room is probably asking by now: "Well than why do we have so many different churches in this city? If the Church is one and if tribalism is bad, then why wouldn't we bring all these denominations together to worship under one big roof?"

That's a good question. I'll give a brief answer here, but I would be more than happy to have coffee with you in the weeks to come if you want to dig deeper.

Later on in this letter, Paul will use the analogy of a human body to describe the church and, after pointing out the fact that a body is made up of a variety of unique and distinct members, he will conclude:

As it is, there are many parts, **yet one body**. (1 Corinthians 12:20 ESV)

The church IS diverse. But that diversity doesn't destroy our unity. In theory, it ought to make our unity more compelling and beautiful to the watching world.

So, are there differences between our denominations? Yes. Until Christ returns, we see through a glass dimly. We have different understandings of baptism, and of church leadership, and of the gifts of the Spirit, to name but a few. Those differences don't break our unity in Christ, but they do create a need for us to gather with other likeminded believers so that we can worship according to what we see in the Bible. Provided that we recognize one another as brothers and sisters in Christ, that is not tribalism.

However – and here's where we need to be very careful – it IS tribalism when one congregation believes the lie that they have a monopoly on the truth. It IS tribalism when we are as reverently devoted to our theological camp as we are to Christ. Listen: Before you are reformed – before you are complementarian – before you are baptistic – before you are Calvinistic – you are a Christian. And your not-so-reformed, egalitarian, Pentecostal, Arminian brother is a Christian too. As Matthew Henry writes:

All the faithful ministers of Christ are one in the great business and intention of their ministry. They may have differences of sentiment in minor things; they may have their debates and contests; but they heartily concur in the great design of honouring God and saving souls, by promoting true Christianity in the world.²

Yes, and amen! When tribalism creeps into the church, Christian unity is obscured and opposed.

Competition, and rivalry, and “us and them” permeates every part of our lives in the outside world. But it has no place in the church. It has no place in the household of God.

But, before we conclude, now that we have identified this subtle sin I would like to propose a way forward. How can we safeguard our hearts and our church against the sin of tribalism?

How Can We Safeguard Our Church Against The Sin Of Tribalism?

First, in light of what we have read in our passage this morning, we need to:

1. Settle for nothing less than servant leadership

We do leadership differently in the church. At least, we’re supposed to. Jesus taught us:

You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ⁴³ **But it shall not be so among you.** But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, ⁴⁴ and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. ⁴⁵ For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42b-45 ESV)

Paul has clearly been shaped by Jesus’ example because, after rebuking the church for idolizing their leaders he asks:

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? **Servants through whom you believed** (1 Corinthians 3:5a ESV)

Christian leaders are SERVANTS. That is how we do leadership in the household of God.

² Matthew Henry, *Matthew Henry’s Commentary On The Whole Bible* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2008), 1799.

But what happens when Christian leaders DON'T shut down the idolization?

Sadly, we have all too many examples.

We see it most obviously in the multi-million-dollar mansions and the private jets of the prosperity gospel celebrities. But it is also all too common in the little, country churches where the pastor allows his congregation to believe that they would be lost without him. D. A. Carson warns:

Leaders should refrain from presenting themselves as if they have the corner on the truth, or all the gifts, or exclusive authority or insight.³

Don't settle for leaders who are looking for earthly praise and prominence. Don't settle for leaders who are fixated on power or platform. Don't settle for leaders who take the credit for victories that God has won. Don't settle for anything less than servant leaders who say along with Paul:

I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:6-7 ESV)

Second, if we want to safeguard the church against the sin of tribalism then we need to:

2. Set a gospel-high-bar for division

Listen: I don't want you to walk away today thinking that there is never a right reason for division. Some "churches" really aren't members of the household of God. Some "Christians" really are deceived. In this same letter, Paul calls on the church to put a man out of their congregation who was calling himself a Christian but who was living in sin. In chapter 5, we read:

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife. ² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? **Let him who has done this be removed from among you.** (1 Corinthians 5:1-2 ESV)

³ D. A. Carson as quoted in Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter To The Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010), 149.

So, while Paul *rebuked* the church for quarreling and dividing over their preferred leaders, he then *required* those same Christians to divide over this unrepentant sinner. Meaning: There IS a time to divide. But that division should only happen when the *gospel itself* is at stake. That's the bar.

Tribalism, on the contrary, is always calling on us to lower that bar. Tribalism has us looking with suspicion at the Pentecostals and questioning their salvation. Tribalism has us writing off the church down the road as apostate because they called a female minister. Tribalism leads us to narrow the boundaries of Christendom in such a way that everyone else is out unless they think exactly like me.

Brothers and sisters, if we want to safeguard our hearts against tribalism, then we need to raise the bar for division to the appropriate height.

If a church is encouraging people to continue in their sin they are OUTSIDE. That meets the gospel-high-bar.

If a church is denying the divinity of Christ or the doctrine of the Trinity, they are OUTSIDE.

If a church is teaching that there is any other way to God than grace alone, through faith alone in Christ alone, they are OUTSIDE.

If a church is denying the authority and sufficiency of the Word of God, they are OUTSIDE.

Those are appropriate, gospel-high-bars of division. Those churches are not "us." But, under that bar, there is room for us to pray with and for the Anglicans, and to partake in a joint worship service with the Presbyterians, and to fund a local benevolence program with the Pentecostals and the Lutherans. There is one Church, and Redeemer is simply one distinct expression of what God is doing in the world.

And that leads to our third and final point. If we want to safeguard against the subtle sin of tribalism, then we need to:

3. Celebrate every gospel victory

The Apostle Paul set a great example in this. Later in his life, while he was in prison, he received a report about how teachers who had slandered him were gaining more and more followers in the city. Here's how he responded:

Some indeed preach Christ from envy and rivalry, but others from good will. ¹⁶ The latter do it out of love, knowing that I am put here for the defense of the gospel. ¹⁷ The former proclaim Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely but thinking to afflict me in my imprisonment. ¹⁸ **What then? Only that in every way, whether in pretense or in truth, Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice.** (Philippians 1:15-18 ESV)

“Maybe their motives are all wrong,” Paul says. “But, if Christ is being proclaimed then in that I can rejoice.” Paul understood that we can't see the heart. We can't discern the motive. All of that will come out in the wash one day, but for now we can give thanks that the name of Jesus is being held high. That disposition is a beautiful safeguard against tribalism. I want our church to become a church that rejoices and celebrates in every gospel victory.

If I could return to our opening illustration, praise God that ___ kids put their faith in Jesus at Cornerstone's VBS this week! It is good for us to celebrate that! It reminds us that we are not team RCC – we are team Jesus!

On one of my weeks off a few months ago, I attended a service at Connexus Orillia. Their service was entirely different from the way that we would do things, but I am happy to report that two women went through the waters of baptism that day. Praise God!! On another week off I recently attended Emmanuel Orillia and they shared a report about their “Love the City” program where they served their neighbours in Jesus' name. It was a great success. Praise God! Cornerstone planted a satellite campus in Coldwater a few months ago and for the month of June they averaged 60 attendees! Praise God!!

Praise God for the work He's doing at Orillia Christian Church! Praise God for Simcoside! Praise God for Calvary Pentecostal! Praise God for Hillside Bible Chapel! Praise God for Jubilee Celebration Centre! Praise God for Covenant Reformed Church! Praise God for the Orillia Gospel Hall!

To be clear, the churches on that list are all VERY different. We disagree with a number of them over some significant theological issues – and they disagree with us! I’m not suggesting that we need to pretend that those differences don’t exist. But I AM suggesting that we need to recognize them as our brothers and sisters, and we need to celebrate the gospel victories that God is working in and through them.

I pray that the “us and them” tribalism that our culture is steeped in would have no place in our congregation. Jesus prayed for that too. We quoted Jesus’ high priestly prayer as we began, and it only seems fitting to return to it as we close. Jesus prayed for us and asked:

that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, **so that the world may believe that you have sent me.** (John 17:21 ESV)

Jesus prayed that the same unity that he enjoyed with his Father would be displayed in and through the church. He prayed that we might be one **SO THAT THE WORLD MAY BELIEVE**. Tribalism has no place in the church that Jesus prayed for. It has no place in the church that Jesus died for. Let’s join him now in asking for God’s help to keep this sin outside of the doors of our church and outside of the doors of our hearts.