

2 Corinthians 13:11-13 “Agree With One Another?!”

I didn't grow up in the church. Some people say that's a good thing because I didn't inherit my faith so I didn't get bogged down in some of the cultural baggage that can be associated with the church. Some people say it's a bad thing because ... well ... I had to learn about church culture the hard way. How was I supposed to know that communion wasn't a mid-service snack to get you through the sermon? How was I to know that you weren't supposed to just raise your hand in Sunday School class and ask questions about how the earth got populated by a man and a woman who had two sons and one of them was killed by the other and ... so ... where did Mrs. Cain come from? I didn't know these things because most of the other kids in Sunday School class had been in the church since the cradle. They're over there going, “Shhh! Don't go there! Don't ask questions!” See they already knew what to do and what not to do. They knew what to say and what not to say and to whom. Me? I was the oddball. I was the one there for the cookies! Well, the cookies and the cool stories like David and Goliath, Samson and Delilah, Moses and Pharaoh, Daniel and the Lion's Den, Jesus and the Disciples. So after a few stops and starts over the years, I finally said, “Yes” to following God by walking with Jesus.

But then something happened. We had to really dig into our Bibles and learn about how to live this new life of faith. We learned about what is required to walk with Jesus. Some of it was great and made perfect sense. Treat others as you would like to be treated. Look after those who are less fortunate. Find joy even when you're under pressure and other people are being jerks. Not easy for sure, but doable. Then there were the other things that made us stop and say, “Do what?” That's what we're going to be doing for the rest of June. We're going to take a look at some of the more challenging requirements that the writers of the New Testament set before the church.

The one I have for us today doesn't sound too crazy. I'm just warming you up for some of the doozies I have for you on the 18th and 25th. Then

I'm taking off for three weeks to let you just kind of chew on them. Bill Such, Katy, and Joe can work with you while I'm gone. Anyway, I say this one doesn't sound too crazy ... that is until you really *think* about it. This is Paul writing a letter to the church in Corinth and he's telling them to put things in order, listen to his appeal and *agree with one another*. Then he says, "Live in peace and the God of love and peace will be with you," but by the time you get to the part about peace, those four words start working on you: "Agree with one another." That's even more distracting than, "Greet one another with a holy kiss," because we know that's a thing in some cultures and families. But, "Agree with one another?" This goes back to where we started when I said I had to learn about church culture the hard way. If there's a lesson that I learned in the formative years of my journey of faith it's that no one, especially in church, agrees with each other. "Oh, you're exaggerating Jesse, there are plenty of things we agree on." Really? Like what kind of coffee we should serve **at** fellowship time and whether we use Styrofoam cups or insulated paper cups? Like what color should the carpet in the sanctuary be? Like what sort of trees we should plant or what sort of towel dispensers we should have in the bathrooms? The day and time we should have a Bible study or a class? And what book should we study? What is our top priority as far as mission and outreach goes? "Well, sure but those are things that you expect to come up. We work things out. The show goes on." Without hurt feelings? "Well, you know what they say: You can please some of the people some of the time and all of the people some of the time, but you can't please all of the people all of the time. Besides, I think Paul's talking about the big-picture things." Like? "Well, you know ... like the great confession – *We believe that Jesus is the Christ, the son of the living God.*" So you're telling me when you say this, it's exactly what George is thinking when he says it?

See, this is where it starts to get complicated. "Yeah, well that seems to be your gift Jesse ... making things complicated." No, I just want you to think. If we're going to walk this journey of faith together, I want you to appreciate what God expects from us. After all, we call this collection

of books “God’s Word,” and the words on this page say, “Agree with one another.”

Here’s the first rule of approaching the Bible, especially if you’re dealing with a passage like this that’s only three verses long: Always look at the context in which it was written. Approach it like a journalist. If you can discover the “who, what, when, where and why” you’ll have a better understanding of the passage in front of you. This book is a letter Paul wrote to a church in Greece. Now Paul referred to himself as an apostle, which was a term used to describe one of the 12 closest followers of Jesus. And yet, Paul never walked with Jesus during his earthly ministry. Paul did not know the pre-Easter Jesus! But, God singled Paul out and chose him to be someone who had just as much authority as one of the apostles who *did* walk with Jesus. So you can imagine the struggles he had convincing folks that he was on par with Peter, James, John, Matthew, Thomas and the other more “celebrity” apostles. This is a guy who had to *work* at claiming his authority. He had to convince people that he had a legitimate, dramatic encounter with the Risen Christ. And he did a great job too. A lot of folks decided to follow Jesus because of Paul’s teaching and witness. As a result of Paul’s work, a lot of churches popped up in and around Rome and Asia Minor. But they were churches. And churches have ... issues. Why? Because they’re made up of people. And people have issues. People don’t always get along with each other because they don’t always AGREE. To complicate matters, the reason why Paul wrote this letter was that folks in this church weren’t happy with him. They thought he was vague in his teachings and that he kept waffling on issues which confused the heck out of people. Then to top it all off, Paul had a falling out with someone ^{in the club} and it hurt his feelings. Lots of drama here ... the church in the first century was not much different than the 21st century! See, we preachers *love* this book because when we’re feeling sorry for ourselves and having a tough time with folks in the church, we can say, “Hey ... it happened to Paul!”

Anyway, Paul apparently wrote the church a “severe” letter after this big spat but later regretted it. Think about that for a moment. Have you ever written an angry e-mail and you hit “send,” and the second after you did, you thought, “Ohhhh, I shouldn’t have hit ‘send.’” So think about what went into writing a letter back in those days. It was hard enough to just gather the materials you needed to write a letter. You needed parchment, ink, some kind of stylus. Maybe you even had to hire a scribe. Then by the time you wrote it and sealed it and turned it over to a delivery person to send, you’d think that would be plenty of time to cool down and have second thoughts about sending it. But if you’ve gone to all that trouble, right? But he sent it anyway. And you know what’s so disappointing? We don’t have a copy of this nasty letter, and if we did, I think it would be a pretty exciting read! So *this* letter that we *do* have is all about his response to other people’s words and feelings. Which, for us, really makes it hard to follow what Paul is trying to say.

So in this letter, Paul apologizes for the nasty letter, then he attempts to make a case for *why* he said the things he said in the first place and clarifies his original intent. Then he re-establishes himself as leader and founder of the church and promises that he isn’t going to let his own baggage affect the way he leads the church. He will do better at leading with Christ’s authority. He tells them that he hopes this letter will help smooth the waters for the next visit he makes to the church and that he’s looking forward to a happy reunion. Then he wraps the letter up, and that’s where we are this morning. So these are Paul’s parting words to this church that he’s struggled to lead and stay connected with. Pull yourselves together. Listen to my words and hear the appeal I’m making. And ... *agree with one another*. You’re kidding, right?

See, understanding all the drama that’s been going on in this church shines a completely different light on this passage doesn’t it? It would be one thing if Paul closed his letter like this when things were great between them, but after a truck load of drama like this? “Hey! Y’all agree with one another. Hugs and kisses!” (Literally!) Who the heck

does this presumptuous ass ... umptuous person think he is? I tell you who he is. He's someone who loves the church. He's someone who loves *this* church. And he loves them because he knows they are the Body of Christ on this earth. In fact, Paul is the one that came up with this "Body of Christ" image in the first place. He wants to be reconciled. Not because it's all about him, but because Jesus calls us to be reconciled to one another. Jesus calls the church to be one. According to John's gospel, Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane on the night he was arrested and eventually put to death was, **"That they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."**

Does Paul really think that the church can agree with each other on everything? I doubt it. Paul knows people. And people have issues. But more importantly Paul knows himself. And he has issues. He knows that it's not possible for people to agree 100% on *anything*. But it's something to shoot for. It's what Jesus desired. One of the things that I appreciate most about this church is this little phrase on the front of our bulletins. If I understand correctly, we can thank Lois Pew for introducing this motto: Agree to differ, resolve to love, unite to serve. Even though one could argue that even this isn't something we can truly agree on, I like the idea of "agreeing to differ." I'd like to think that this is something that Paul would like too. I think it has gotten us through a lot in the life of our church. We aren't going to see eye to eye on a lot of things. But we can work towards resolving to love others and unite to serve Christ. And it is to Christ that we give all glory and honor. Amen.