

Life Group Questions

Sep 22nd, 2024

A Divided Church is a Broken Church – Pastor Vinh Doan – [1 Corinthians 1:10-17](#)

Note from Pastor Jonathan

Hey Life Groups!

I hope you're settling into the new sermon series. It's a huge shift from the storytelling style of Genesis. I've heard a lot of people share how Joseph's story helped them trust God through the difficulties they're facing. I'm sure God will also speak to our congregation through Paul's letter as well.

I have two announcements:

Bridge Groups. We'll be meeting on Tuesday evenings from 7:00 to 8:30 at the Chapel. The first gathering will be on October 1. There will be no meeting on October 8 due to the Prayer Summit, but we'll resume on October 15. If you have any potential leaders who want to develop their gifts or people gifted in leading discussions, please let me know!

As our ministry season begins, pray for our Life Groups, that God would use us to make disciples of Jesus who make disciples so that more and more will know Jesus Christ personally and carry on His mission. And pray for me to have wisdom, because we have many initiatives we're trying to roll out.

WSBM Discount for Leaders. I received word that Life Group Leaders will get a 50% discount on all WSBM courses. I am so thankful because this will help be a blessing for our ministry. If you're a leader and want the discount code to sign up for a class, email me (jhsieh@willingdon.org).

OPENING QUESTIONS (Pick Any Questions You Like)

1. Who has made a significant positive impact on your life and why?

Who comes to mind? They may be a parent who demonstrated what it means to tirelessly serve others, a teacher who inspired your love of reading, or someone in the church who taught you the value of prayer. Hopefully, someone comes to mind. If you have more than one example, pick whichever may resonate with the group or is unique.

Looking back, I especially appreciate two men from my church in Atlanta, Georgia. I've already shared about Mr. Lam in previous notes. The other is Pastor Eric.

I had served under other pastors as a volunteer, intern, and minister. We only discussed ministry activities. They never shared about their spiritual lives, what God was teaching them, or how I could mature. In my mind, that was what pastoring was all about. Work to have bigger, better events that draw in more people.

As a result, I evaluated my ministry on how much I accomplished. My relationship with volunteers was shallow, either hanging out or getting them to accomplish my plans. There wasn't much spiritual depth.

But when Pastor Eric joined the church, he would take me to the Jimmy Johns down the street. He'd share his struggles and what he was wrestling with. He'd ask me how I was doing and share how God cared more about my relationship with Him than how much I accomplished. He cared about how I was doing.

Honestly, it would take several more years for God to undo those unhealthy ideas, but He used Pastor Eric to plant those seeds.

2. Where did you put your identity while growing up?

We've all made something our identity. What was yours?

Clothing. Some of us may have made dress/style our identity. The term is aesthetic. Maybe you were a jock, rocking athleticwear or sports jerseys. Maybe you were countercultural, trying to look edgy and different by dressing hippy, goth, or punk. Or you wanted to fit in with the popular kids, so you wore name brands with easily identifiable logos like Kirkland Signature. I've shared my cringe-worthy trench coat phase before.

Language/Culture. Many of us have struggled to fit into one culture, so we attached ourselves to a culture that fit. If you're an immigrant or a child of immigrants, you know the struggle. Growing up in Florida as a son of Taiwanese immigrants, I felt Asian among my Caucasian friends because I looked different, ate different food, and didn't grow up learning American culture from my parents. But among Chinese speakers, I felt American,

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

¹¹ For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. ¹² What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

because my Chinese was non-existent and I got laughed at when I tried speaking Chinese. So I felt often felt “other”.

Strengths. Maybe you were known as the smart kid, getting all straight A’s, and were a future engineering surgeon lawyer. Or the sports kid, the one prophesied to dethrone Gretzky to become the Greatest One. The artsy one with paint stains all over their clothes, always carrying a sketchbook, staring at everything with head cocked to one side. The musical one who knows every song sung on Broadway and harmonizes Happy Birthday.

LET'S DIG IN (Pick Any Questions You Like)

3. What do you think led to divisions in the Corinthian church?

Quarrels. People in the church are divided along who they follow. We see this is happening because Paul hears about quarreling (v. 11). The Greek word is ἔρις (eris), meaning “strife, discord, contention” (BDAG). It’s normal to have disagreements and differ in opinion, but this is heated. The verb form ἐρίζω (erizo) means “to express differences of opinion, with at least some measure of antagonism or hostility—‘to argue, quarrel, dispute.’” (Louew-Nida). Imagine attending a worship service that breaks out into a shouting match.

You can’t expect everyone to get along, but quarreling is *not* acceptable. It’s a serious issue! Jesus says factions lead to self-destruction (Mark 3:24-25). Paul mentions quarreling several times in his letters, listing it alongside murder, idolatry, witchcraft, and heresy (Romans 1:29, Galatians 5:20). This isn’t fun like Team Edward or Team Jacob. (Is that still a thing?)

I used to attend a church when I was in university. Sometime after I left, the senior pastor retired and another long-time pastor wanted to be the new senior pastor. He and the board fought so badly that the church took a restraining order against him.

Several years ago, I was told of a church that had such beef with one of its pastors that he had to be escorted by police to his car after preaching every Sunday. Someone suggested I apply to that church. I did not.

How could they function as a church?

Factions. The factions Paul mentions are Teams Paul, Apollos, Cephas, and Christ. We don’t know what made people pick these sides, but we can guess. Note here that Paul never denigrates any of these leaders. It’s not an issue of good leaders and bad ones. His problem is an unhealthy attachment.

Paul started the church (Acts 18:1-11). The charter members were drawn to Paul and how he did things, so they probably wanted to keep things that way. They were lost, worshipping all sorts of idols and destined for God’s wrath for their sins. Then one day they heard this guy named Paul share the Good News about Jesus and everything changed. They began to worship the true God, had their sins forgiven, received eternal life, and so on. Paul held a special place in their hearts. And Paul’s way was the only way they were familiar with.

Many churches get attached to the founders and try to keep things exactly how it’s always been. Willingdon Church was predominantly German. Just look at the names of early leaders: Thiessen, Braun, Redekop, and Letkeman (<https://willingdon.org/about/history/>). Praise God they saw the community change and welcomed people who didn’t look, speak, or act German to be part of the family.

Apollos was a leader of the Corinthian church after Paul left (1 Corinthians 3:6). He was a great speaker (Acts 18:24). The word used to describe him is λόγιος (logios), meaning “eloquent” or “learned, cultured” (BDAG). Ancient Greek culture loved great speakers with great speaking skills. They’d love TED Talks. (This Onion parody perfectly encapsulates the TED Talk style: https://youtu.be/tom6_ceTu9s.) Paul likely contrasts himself with Apollos when he tells the Corinthians he didn’t preach “with words of eloquent wisdom” (v. 17).

Today’s equivalent would be joining a church mainly because of strong preaching. Preaching becomes a disproportionate priority. Many churches failed because the preaching pastor had amazing oratory skills, but lacked humility or character. Many also closed because they were into listening to content but not being

convicted of their own sins. Or preaching was such a priority that worship arts, discipling children, or evangelism were nonexistent. Christian worship became academic.

Cephas was a name given to Peter by Jesus (John 1:42). We don't know how Peter fits since we don't have any evidence that he visited. Maybe because he was one of Jesus' inner circle and had a few unique experiences with Jesus, they thought he was a special apostle. These people followed Cephas over people they've met.

I see the same thing when people say their pastor is a famous pastor they watch videos of online. It's great to learn from other pastors, but John Piper, Tim Keller, or Charles Spurgeon don't know you and can't care for you.

Christ refers to Jesus. This could be a good thing since Christians follow Jesus. Some scholars think this group could be people who think they're super spiritual and have a special bond with Jesus. Many in the Corinthian church thought they were more important than others.

Some people say they only submit to Jesus therefore they won't listen to the correction or guidance of a pastor, elder, teacher, or others in the church. We should study God's Word and test everything, but God tells us to submit to our leaders (Hebrews 13:17). Often these people end up inventing their own idea of Christianity.

4. What kinds of divisions do you see in our church?

Divisions and quarrels don't always have to be hostile or deliberate. In a church as big as ours, there's no way we can be in close relationships with everyone. At best, drift happens. If it continues unchecked, it can lead to rifts. Here are some potential divisions in Willingdon Church.

Age, Life Stage, Language, Socioeconomic Peers. We naturally spend time with people like us. It's unlikely for a six-year-old to attend New Horizons (55+). (But if they did, I'm sure they'd get plenty of love.) And it would be hard for a Russian speaker to participate in a Korean fellowship. I've had several people ask me if there are Life Groups made for "successful" professionals like themselves. But if we only spend time with our peers, the other 3,000 people at Willingdon will remain strangers.

As a toddler father, I'm often in our nursery so I'm familiar with many of our nursery volunteers and families with young children. I serve our adult Life Group ministry so I know a lot of adults. I admit I haven't gotten to know our elementary students or youth and their families.

TRY THIS: As an exercise this Sunday, be mindful of who you hug, shake hands with, or dap up!

Do they all remember Woodward's Food Floor (https://youtu.be/0PP_IF1L-rc?si=9J5neplrgQZhTNxC) and Expo '86 (<https://youtu.be/iY4G5qPtp-g>)? Do they all have a broccoli cut (<https://www.gq.com/story/gen-z-bussin-haircut-broccoli-perm>) and say lit, highkey, and lowkey when not talking about photography (<https://youtu.be/T16ExXCzlc0>)? Do they all speak the same language or live in the same neighborhood or work the same type of job?

Are these commonalities boundaries?

Ministry Focus. We have lots of ministries serving God, making an impact for His kingdom. We're ministering to our next gen by teaching our children and equipping parents in the Kids and Student Ministries. We're partnering to serve refugees (Journey Home Community and House of Omeed) and others in need (Food Drive, Potter's Place Mission, Society to End Homelessness) through Local Outreach. We're equipping people to spread the Gospel overseas through missions (<https://willingdon.org/global/short-term-missions>). We're teaching people to handle God's Word through our Willingdon School of the Bible and Ministry classes (<https://willingdon.org/wsbm>). We have care ministries walking people through trauma, hurt, and sins (<https://willingdon.org/support-groups>). We

have International Language Ministries reaching out to immigrants speaking nine different languages (<https://willingdon.org/ilm>). And there's still more!

Sometimes this can lead to conflict. God has been abundantly gracious, but we have a limited budget, so we can't fully fund every ministry, project, or initiative (<https://willingdon.org/annual-report/>). Our volunteers can't serve everywhere. I know our booking team works hard to accommodate our many ministries who want to use our building.

If we're not careful, we may fight for resources and people. "That ministry has an event at the same time as ours, so we'll lose people!" "Our ministry could have more money if that ministry cut back! We use that money better." "What they're doing isn't as important as what we do. Why do they get more attention?" "How come they get a classroom but we don't?" These are all real questions that churches struggle with.

If you're involved in a ministry or two, do you ever see other ministries as competition?

Stereotyping. It's easy to apply tropes and labels. But often these ideas are oversimplified, ignoring nuance and areas of agreement.

For example, we have many different cultures at Willingdon that are unfamiliar to us. So we assume.

We may think, "Oh, that group is so noisy!" But we don't realize they're so loud because they're so happy to be together. Coming together is a celebration. Or we think, "Oh, that group never speaks their mind! It's so hard to talk to them." But we don't realize they're trying really hard to be kind and don't want to hurt any feelings.

I've been hearing people use the word woke a lot. "This show has gone woke." "That politician is woke." But I haven't heard anyone define what "woke" is. Using that term comes off as dismissive.

But as I hear "woke" voices, I hear a lot that Christians should get behind. For example, I believe that there are God-given sex/gender distinctions, so I believe gender fluidity and transitioning are not God-honoring. But I agree that many traditional sex/gender ideas should be demolished. Not all masculinity is toxic, but many ideas of what's masculine are. Jacob (stay-at-home mama's boy), David (publicly weepy harp player writing poetry), and Jesus (openly expresses His love for the guys around Him and doesn't fight back) do a lot of what we would call feminine. Deborah (leader of the people), Ruth (physically strong), and Elizabeth (barren) do the same for women.

Instead of dismissing the "woke", let's cooperate when possible. We can see how we may be wrong in some areas and understand why we stand where we stand in others. It also allows us to learn how we can love and bring the Gospel of Jesus to people who believe differently from us.

5. How does Paul address divisions?

I could spend pages fleshing all this out, but I am merciful and will spare you and make it quick.

Family. In Greek, the plural masculine can be all male or a mix of male and female, just like in French (frères), Portuguese (irmãos), and Spanish (hermanos). "Hey brothers and sisters. We're family! Why are we fighting?" Church is like an Olive Garden (<https://youtu.be/G25rbRsKWpE&t=12>).

When we believe in Jesus, we become God's children (John 1:12). We all share the same Heavenly Father. This relationship supersedes our earthly family (Matthew 12:46-50).

Our. He's *our* Lord Jesus Christ. There may be different human leaders, but all these guys are under the same leader. Jesus is Paul's Lord, Apollos' Lord, Cephas' Lord, and their Lord.

At work, you may work for a different branch or department from others, but you're not competing with them because you work for the same company.

Name. Jesus' reputation takes a hit when the church is divided. Jesus' name isn't being spread across Corinth. If anything, non-Christians just see a bunch of people who can't get along. "This Jesus guy can't keep his team on the same page. What type of leader is that?" Or they may think Jesus is just another human leader, like Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or any other religious leader in Corinth.

God cares about His reputation (Ezekiel 39:25) and wants the church to make Jesus' name look good (2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).

Lord. In Canada, we can often choose who has authority over us. Don't like your teacher or professor? Change your class. Don't like your boss? Quit or move to another team. Don't like your premier or prime minister? Vote them out.

But Jesus isn't optional. To be a Christian means confessing Jesus is Lord (Romans 10:9). If we believe that Jesus is fully God and King of Kings and Creator, we have no choice but to declare our allegiance to Him. There are no other kings or gods we can turn to that are on His level. We can't ask for Jesus' supervisor, because He's the CEO and owner. Every knee will bow and every person will confess that Jesus is Lord, whether they like it or not (Philippians 2:9-11).

Jesus wants unity in His church (John 17:20-23) and love (John 13:34-35). Will they obey?

Jesus Christ. When Paul was in Acts, his passion was to tell people that Jesus is the Christ (Acts 18:5). Christ isn't Jesus' name, but the Greek version of the Hebrew word for Messiah. Long story short, Christ and Messiah refer to someone picked by God for a special task, such as a priest or king. God's people were waiting for *the* special guy to save them. Jesus is that guy.

As the Corinthians remember Jesus, they will think of how they were sinners deserving God's wrath (1 Corinthians 6:9-11). But God still loved them and sent Jesus (John 3:16). Jesus perfectly followed the law and fulfilled all the prophecies about the Messiah (Matthew 5:17). Jesus died on the cross, taking on their criminal record and replacing it with His clean record. He took the punishment for their sins and gave them the rewards for His perfect life.

So Paul asks the Corinthians, who else did that? Did Paul die on the cross for the Corinthian church (v. 13)? No! Only Jesus did! No other human leader can compare.

Baptized. Paul reminds them that they didn't get baptized in Paul's name. Baptism is publicly declaring allegiance to God (Matthew 28:19). Their old life is buried so they can live a new life for Him (Romans 6:4).

Sadly, baptism isn't often taken as seriously in our Western churches. Ironically, other religions recognize the importance. I've met and heard of people who grew up in a Muslim or Buddhist background. Their families were totally cool with them attending a church, participating in Bible studies, and doing Christian stuff. But they drew the line at baptism. Once they got baptized, they were excommunicated from the community or punished.

6. How can we create unity within our church?

Paul appeals (“urge”, NET) to the Corinthian believers to “all agree”. The original Greek expression is literally “all speak the same thing”. He’s hoping the church can all be on the same page and say the same thing. When someone asks them who they follow, they won’t say Paul, Apollos, or another guy. They’ll say Jesus.

We have many leaders in our church. Although we may be drawn towards or serve with certain leaders, our allegiance isn’t with them. Our allegiance is with Jesus.

Here are a few steps we can take to be on the same page.

Know the Mission. Do you know why Willingdon Church exists? We can’t be united if we don’t know why we’re here. We exist to know Jesus Christ personally and carry on His ministry and we do that by making disciples of Jesus that make disciples (<https://willingdon.org/about>).

No matter what ministry we’re involved in, we all love Jesus and want His ministry to happen. Missions, parking, worship arts, Discovery, and so on. We *all* want the same thing.

We need to make sure the goal in our own lives and Life Groups is to know Jesus Christ personally and carry on His ministry. If we’re all on the same page, it’ll save us from an us versus them mentality.

And because we’re all on the same page, we’ll see other ministries, Life Groups, and even churches as making disciples of Jesus that make disciples in different ways. Even if their ministry affects our own, we can still be happy that Jesus’ mission is moving forward and disciples are being made!

As an example, we have a Leadership Summit coming up on September 28 with breakout sessions. I think it’ll be worthwhile with beneficial table discussions among the leaders, so I want all the Life Group Leaders to join! But I know many are involved in other ministries so they have to choose. Attend my training session or another one.

I could try to convince them “If you attend another training, I won’t be angry ... Just disappointed.”

But that’s not true! All of our other ministries make disciples, just differently. As long as they’re being equipped to carry on our Lord Jesus’ ministry, I can still celebrate.

If you feel rivalry or separation coming on, make sure you’re pursuing Jesus’ mission.

Get Out of Your Comfort Zone. Spend time with people who are outside of your regular community. If you’re young and having lunch in the café, sit at a table with someone who’s ... uh ... matured like a fine cheese. Unless you speak 9 different languages, stop by an international language group you’re unfamiliar with. Say hello to the people sitting around you in the sanctuary (*before* or *after* the service). Volunteer in a ministry that gets you interacting with others, like Here to Help, Welcome Center, Café, Parking, or Connect (<https://willingdon.org/volunteer>). There are so many opportunities!

Reconcile. If you’ve had rivalries with others, the first relationship that needs mending is with God. By your actions, you’ve caused division in the church. But praise God that He is merciful! I’ve committed the same sin by pitting my ministry against others. If God’s convicted you of this sin, confess it to Him (1 John 1:9). If you’ve done this as a group, confess as a group. Hold your head up high, because He’s forgiven you and does not condemn you (Romans 8:1).

Then pray for God’s help to mend any broken relationships. God loves repairing relationships and wants you to reconcile (2 Corinthians 5:18). Asking for forgiveness can be hard, so ask God to help you.