

Part 2: The Hokey Pokey

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You put your left hand in. You put your left hand out. You put your left hand in, and you shake it all about. You do the hokeypokey and you turn yourself around. That's what it's all about.

We all know the song. It is part of us. Second nature. Yet how many of you believe that the hokey pokey is what it's all about?

Can you imagine what your life would look like if the hokey pokey were what it's all about? Imagine applying for a loan and when the banker asks for your proof of income you say, "Don't worry about it, I know what it's all about."

Or when your boss asks you if you could handle the workload that week and you stand up and start proving to him that you do know that if you put your left hand in, and your left hand out, and your left hand back in that you know what it's all about?

It's a fun song. It's endearing, and we like to teach it to our kids and pull it out when it's appropriate. But beyond that, no reasonable adult actually lives as if the hokey pokey is what it's all about. To do that would be to live, and to look, like an absolute fool.

Last week we began a series looking at Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, and the title of our sermon today is, "The Hokey Pokey."

Here's why: The hokey pokey is not the gospel, but the gospel really is what it is all about. But to live as if the gospel really is that important will mean getting comfortable with looking like you're doing the hokey pokey to the watching world.

Our big idea this morning is simple: **The Christian life is all about the gospel.**

They will see you as foolish, you might be prone to back off of it, but the gospel really is the life of the Christian, the center of the church, and the very wisdom, power and pleasure of God.

The church in Corinth, and our modern church today, can often find ourselves playing hokey pokey with the gospel. We put it out there when it's appropriate, we take it back when it's not. But the gospel is not a limerick we learn and move on from. In the gospel, God plays for keeps and that is for our good and our joy.

To reform and remind us, Paul will show us the centrality of the cross in three ways: #1 **Christian unity is all about the gospel (1 Cor. 1:10-11)**, #2 **The Church is all About the Gospel (1 Cor. 1:12-17)**, and #3 **God is All About the Gospel (1 Cor. 1:18-25)**.

Now, it's important to remember that while God wrote the Bible through the Holy Spirit, he did so through men who were writing to real people in real situations. The church in Corinth had written Paul a list of, what they thought, were the most important questions.

But Paul won't address any of their urgent questions till halfway through the book because Paul has heard of issues far more concerning to the church. This report came to Paul through associates of a Christian woman named Chloe.

We don't know much about her, but Paul and the Corinthian church do. She was probably a business woman who split time between Ephesus (where Paul is) and Corinth. It would also appear that some of her people, probably her employees, were believers and while in Corinth on business they attended church with the Corinthians.

Remember, the Corinthian church thinks that they are doing fine because they feel at home in Corinth. They are respectable members of the community. The church looks like, lives like, and is like the culture of the day with a little Jesus sprinkled in for a touch. Yet, while the church feels at home in Corinth, these Christian visitors did not feel at home in the church. It was to them a foreign place. The church had unity with Corinth but lacked unity in Christ.

One 17th Century pastor (**John Flavel**) once said, **"Believers and unbelievers may have a political or a civil union, but there is no spiritual unity except from what flows from joint membership in Christ."**

To be at peace with the world, but at odds with one another in the church was a big problem. This is Paul's starting point in his letter and our first point today: **Christian Unity is all about the Gospel.**

1 Corinthians 1:10-11, "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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers."

It is a good thing to have Christian friends. Christian friends bring fresh eyes fueled by the Holy Spirit who often pick up on things that we ourselves are blind to. And when Paul hears this, he's concerned, but he's not hopeless.

When our hearts are sick with sin, we isolate ourselves, we break unity and believe the lies of Satan: "No one understands what I'm going through. You don't know what it's like." But to counter the isolating, self-exalting lies of sin, Paul reminds them of the unity they have in Christ: "I appeal to you brothers by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

They were mistaken, but they weren't forsaken. Despite their errors, they were still brothers with Paul and with one another because of Jesus' perfect work on the cross. To be in Christ, is to be in the community of Christ—and it's the miracle of our union with Christ that enables a supernatural community with one another in the church.

The Corinthian culture, like our own culture today, loved unity. They took pride in being an open and tolerating community. Peace at whatever cost—even if it means you have to change your beliefs.

But that's not the unity Paul presents. Paul presents Christian unity as being foundationally in Christ. For Paul, agreement in faith is not apathy in faith. It's all too common to hear people say: "Doctrine divides." But Paul says the opposite: "Doctrine unites!"

He didn't say, "Just get along and have an open mind." He said, "Be united in the same mind and the same judgment." Later on in this letter Paul says that with some things it is ok for believers to have different beliefs in matters of conscience. Well-meaning believers might disagree as to what obedience to Jesus looks like in regard to their own conscience. But personal conscience always follows divine clarity.

Agreement on Jesus and his gospel is the unity that holds together our diversity. It is the stable joint around which the full range of Christian holiness pivots in healthy fellowship.

To be a church is first and foremost to agree on Jesus. If the church agrees on Jesus, there can be unity and fellowship even if there is disagreement on finer details of morality, politics, schooling choice, or entertainment. But if there is no agreement on Jesus, there is no church. John Flavel once said that a church united on anything but Jesus is more of a conspiracy theory than it is a Christian community.

Our church membership isn't based on looking like a Missoulian, or reading the puritans, or being married, or having kids, or being fast, or eating healthy. Those are worldly centers of unity. Our unity is based on agreement in Jesus Christ and that agreement shows up in three primary places. We can call those three the life, the labor, and the location of the believer.

First, the life of a believer is agreement on the gospel. Paul warns in Galatians that there will be false gospels, but a true church agrees on the biblical gospel as the "die for" boundary of the church: Jesus saves by grace through faith.

Second, the labor of a believer is agreement on what it means to be a Christian: Having new life through the Holy Spirit the believer follows Jesus in ongoing obedience, repentance and service.

And third, the location of a believer is an agreement with a local body of believers who together believe the saving gospel of Jesus, and labor together as a church through the Holy Spirit, for the glory of God and the salvation of the lost.

When a church agrees on those three things, something amazing happens. We begin to display a supernatural unity to a world that is desperate for true belonging and community. They see a diverse group of people united in love, worship, care, service and mission. There will be bumps and bruises, but this center holds. It's what our unity is all about.

This unity of agreement shapes our understanding of ministry in the church. This is our second point: **The Christian Church is all about the gospel.** The gospel not only unites the Christians in the church—it is the very life and mission of the church.

Paul clarifies the present disunity, **1 Corinthians 1:12-17**, "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.' Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also

the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 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.”

Charles Spurgeon once said that, “The proper study of the Christian is Christ. Next to that subject is the church.” Why is this so important? Because while we know to look to Christ to see the gospel, we’ve been trained—just as Corinth had been—to look to the church to provide us something outside of the gospel.

The consumerism of Corinth was just as strong as ours today. While we want to grow in Christ, it’s often more important that we grow in Christ only on our schedule, in the way we like to grow, in the areas that are easy to grow in, and only when it doesn’t conflict with our growth in work, school, fitness or socializing. Instead of grounding our church in the priority of God we can build them around the preferences of the world.

That’s what Corinth had done as they split into Paul people, Apollos people, Peter people and Jesus people. They had found comfort zones and those had begun to shape the church.

To understand why and how this happened, Paul makes reference to his own ministry in Corinth. He reminds them of how they were first saved, when he first preached to them. As Paul preached Luke tells us in Acts that he was **Acts 18:5**, “occupied with the word, testifying to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus.” How did Corinth respond? Luke tells us, **Acts 18:6**, “they opposed him and reviled him.”

Yet as Paul continued preaching, people kept believing, and opposition kept rising. So much so that God appeared to Paul in a dream and said, **Acts 18:9**, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent.” If you want an idea of how hostile Corinth was to the Christians, consider this: The Corinthians dragged out and beat the Jewish ruler of the synagogue—and he wasn’t even Christian! His only crime was being guilty by association with the Christians.

By the time Paul left Corinth after 18 months the church had learned how to faithfully follow Jesus amidst a difficult, dangerous and opposing culture. But now, the church has figured out how to solve that tension. There’s no more riots. There’s peace and fellowship with Corinth. What happened?

The Corinthian church didn’t deny Jesus—they didn’t stop singing the hokey pokey—they just downplayed Jesus—they didn’t want it to appear that Jesus was what it was all about.

Similar to today, the culture of Corinth was one of popularity and prestige. You were, to a large extent, who you followed. Corinth gathered influential people from economic and spiritual movements and to belong in Corinth was to tie yourself to one of those leaders. That’s how you belonged.

Tying their identity to a homeless Jewish teacher who managed only a few followers and was quickly murdered on a tree as a fraud after only a couple years was hardly the standard of influence in the day. So without denying Jesus, they downplayed him. They covered up the insecurities they had with Jesus with the worldly prestige of Corinth.

I'm a Paul person. Remember that brave guy, that's who I follow. Remember Apollos, the brilliant speaker and apologist, I'm an Apollos guy. Peter, that Jewish figurehead and rock of the church, I'm a Peter guy. Remember Jesus, that good moral teacher and leader, I'm a Jesus guy.

In order to rob Corinth of their persecuting power, the church gutted the gospel of its power. They swapped out identity with the cross with the preferences of the culture.

It's so subtle, it's so strong, and it's so dangerous. How dangerous? Paul asks a question which in Greek assumes a "Yes" answer: "Is Christ divided?" While we would scream, "No!" His grammar assumes that he is.

The church has so separated Christ from the center that it has divided up Christ himself. And it's dividing the body. Paul, Apollos, Peter, Jesus—one of them was the Christ, all of them preached the same gospel of salvation in Christ. The division isn't based on doctrine. The division is based on distraction. The church was gathering itself around markers that identify them with the world's priorities and not the priorities of God.

Paul ironically says, "I don't even remember who I baptized," not to downplay baptism but to show that baptism on its own, preaching on its own, is nothing. Salvation in Christ by faith in the cross is everything—it is the very power of God.

Paul ironically says, "I don't even remember who I baptized," not to downplay baptism but instead to show that who preached to you, and who baptized you means absolutely nothing. It is the person who was preached to you, and the person into whom you were baptized that means everything.

The cross converts the Christian, gathers the church, and empowers its ministry. Is that what draws you to a church? Is that what you expect a church to keep you with?

It's easy to talk about and assess churches based on worldly benchmarks. Good churches have programs—but their power is not their program—their power is the gospel. Good churches have good music—but their appeal is not in the melody but in their message. Good churches have good preachers—but their persuasion is not in their verbal skills but in the power of the Holy Spirit and faithfulness to preach God's word to God's people.

Lots of things might attract us to a church, but the message of Christ crucified is the power, identity, purpose and preoccupation of the church.

The Christian unity is all about the gospel, the church is all about the gospel because God is all about the gospel.

Here is our third point this morning: **God is All About the Gospel.**

What does that mean? Paul is going to show it to us in three ways.

First, ***The Gospel is the Power of God.***

You've probably noticed that I am using the cross and the gospel as if they are the same thing. And they are. The cross is the gospel. What did Jesus do on the cross? He died. Why did he die—because we were sinful.

That's the message of the gospel to the world: A holy and perfect Father sent his son to be a murdered and poorly received savior in order to save you who are a miserable sinner.

To our human ears, this seems to affirm the worst about what we'd think about a God and the worst about what we think about ourselves. Paul affirms this when he says this: **1 Corinthians 1:18**, "For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing."

In our own day the cross has been flattened to a non-offensive fashion symbol. But in Paul's day, the reality of the cross itself was a scandal. The word itself spoke of weakness and the Corinthian people hated being weak. Their identity was in social advancement, that's how you make it in life. The cross speaks of one who was the lowest and most vile, a bottom feeder who deserved no respect or notice. So vile was the cross that it was considered a curse word across the Roman world.

I imagine Corinth had a particularly repulsive understanding of the cross. When it was resettled, it was given as a gift to the veterans of Caesar's Legionary army. These men would have seen hundreds of crucifixions. They would have known the vile men sentenced to crucifixion. They knew their wretched deed and they saw their weak and miserable end on the cross. It was a shame and a suffering deserved by those who died on them.

I think in many ways these pagan generals have a more accurate view of the cross than many modern Christians. Because while the cross is no longer culturally offensive, we assume that Jesus is culturally comfortable. But just as the cross stood as a rejection of everything man held dear—so too does Jesus.

You want to gain your life, lose it. You want to be satisfied, deny yourself. You want to achieve something, realize that apart from God you can't achieve anything. You want to feel good about yourself, acknowledge that you really are a sinful person who deserves God's just judgement.

That is the message of the gospel and to all who are perishing to hear that is to hear the ramblings of a moron. That is the word Paul uses. The cross is *moria*. The word from which we get the modern word moron is found five times in these final verses. Here's how Paul describes it. In verse 18, the cross is moronic, in verse 22 the message of Christian preaching is moronic, in verse 23 Christ our crucified Lord is a moron to the Gentiles, and in verse 25 the gospel is called God's moronicism.

As I prepared this sermon I wrestled writing those words. Why? Because while it is foolishness to those who are perishing, to those who are being saved it is the very power of God.

In other words the difference between seeing the cross as moronic and the cross as majestic is seeing the cross as mine. For the Christian, it is *my* cross. Until we see our sin, until we see our inability to save ourselves, until we see the power of God in the gospel of Jesus Christ it will be the offensive and foul hope of a moron.

But to see it that way now exposes not God's foolishness but your own. That might offend you. You wouldn't be the first. You might think you're already someone, that your life is good, that you don't

need anything but nudge in the right direction. But Paul here quotes from Isaiah 29:14, when God says of arrogant and comfortable Jerusalem: **1 Corinthians 1:19**, “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”

Your comfortable standing in this world has no power to save you. It will not save you from your sin. God himself will thwart your self-deceived foolishness. And God’s power to judge will fall upon you.

But the gospel is not only God’s power—it is also his pleasure. This is the second way in which God is all about the gospel: ***The Gospel is the Pleasure of God.***

It is his pleasure that you might see your sin while you can still see his grace. The displeasurable news of sin is swept up in God’s pleasure to save sinners.

1 Corinthians 1:20-21, “Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe.”

God calls for a lineup. He says, send out all the things the world places power and redemption in. But know that none of those things will save. They are attractive because the world desires them. And yet God desires to save the world not through their empty desires, but through his desire. God’s pleasure to save is seen in the message of the gospel preached by men and received by those who the world sees as foolish.

The world will be displeased at your salvation. It is a dissenting stance of revolution that turns away from the world’s false hopes. But God is pleased to save you and he is pleased to save you without help from the world, without borrowing the world’s might so that we might not, as Paul says, empty the cross of its power.

It’s the pleasure of God to show the power of God in the gospel so that we might rejoice at the wisdom of God. God is all about the gospel because ***The Gospel is the wisdom of God.***

Our lives, saved by God’s grace, and conformed to this cross shaped life—reflect the wisdom of God to a world who has it all wrong. Paul says this: **1 Corinthians 1:22-25**, “For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.”

Listen, if you are looking for God to give you a sign in the sky—you won’t get it. If you’re looking for God to show you what you need on a billboard you can’t see it. If you’re looking to find some aspect of the Christian message which seems finally credible to humanistic sensibilities—you might find it because the Bible is credibly verifiable in its content. But unless you believe the incredible claims of the gospel—that is the message of Jesus Christ crucified—you will never know what it is all about.

You must receive what sinful eyes see as foolish with a heart which sees it as the wisdom, power, and pleasure of God. This is not just the way in, it is our life while we are in it, and it is our way out. This is what we will enjoy and treasure for all eternity.

Jesus is crucified and that isn't changing in this age. He is risen, he is ascended, he is ruling but as the hymn says, "but through the eyes of sinful men thy glory cannot see." He will look foolish to the world. You can't change that. But does he look foolish to you?

Do you feel the need to build around him? This is what it's all about. In this moment, it is what the Christian life is all about. It is embracing the power, pleasure and wisdom of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. It is about finding all of God's power there and there alone. It is belonging to him and to his church in a time where belonging with the world will always be strained at best.

This is our story, this is our song, this is what it is all about.