

“Soft Savior”

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. 11 My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. 12 What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? 14 I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. 16 (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

At one time or another I have heard our country described as rich and poor, urban and rural, conservative and liberal, Democrat and Republican, gay and straight. Has anyone heard our country contrasted as Hard and Soft? [NOTE 1]

A political analyst named Michael Barone no relation to Ray Barone from the sitcom “Everybody Loves Raymond,” has written a book called *Hard America, Soft America*, and in it he describes a division in our country between those who are hard and those who are soft. Barone believes that Hard America is marked by competition and accountability, Soft America is defined by government regulation and social safety nets.

I think it is pretty safe to say that I tend to fall on the “Hard America” side of things. An example of Soft America? Our public school system in general, not so much Plainwell or Delton specifically, but our public school system in general is filled with progressive values, including a desire to promote the self-esteem of it’s students above all. Playground games that seem to be too competitive and cruel such as the terrible dodge ball, are banned in Soft America. In Soft America the trophy for the champions is the same size as the trophy for participation. Everyone is a winner and there are no losers.

Hard America, on the other hand, is not afraid of competition. Private companies fire people when profits plunge, and the military puts its people through intense physical training along with exercises using live fire. There’s nothing warm and fuzzy about Hard America and there is very little coddling.

Hard vs Soft. Competition vs. coddling. It’s one way to view a divided and polarized America. Let me be clear, with rare exclusions no one is all the way Hard or all the way soft. Most of us have leanings. Some people are fine with people getting arrested for spanking their kids in public and others think it is completely ridiculous.

But some people that fall on one side in one issue often fall on the other side on a different issue. [NOTE 2]

Hard vs. Soft could also describe the church in Corinth when Paul went to visit it, and later wrote his first letter to it. The early Christian church certainly had its share of divisions, nowhere more clearly than in Corinth, where the apostle Paul had to plead with the Christians to settle their differences. “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,” he wrote in his letter, “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose” (verse 10).

The first thing to notice is that Paul doesn’t write, “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, to work real hard at and pull yourselves up by your own bootstraps!” Paul writes, “**by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ!**” IN CHRIST ...be in agreement, let there be no divisions and may you be united in the same mind and same purpose. I’m telling you right now, without Jesus Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit ... there is no “perfectly united in mind and thought.” Only IN CHRIST by the power of the Holy Spirit is this even thinkable!! [NOTE 3]

The Corinthian church was a shattered Greek urn, lying in pieces on a cold stone floor. Some of the members were swayed by brilliant rhetoric, others were influenced by knowledge, others were impressed by spiritual gifts, and still others attached importance to wealth and social status. Without Christ these people never come together in one mind and purpose. Are you kidding me? They don’t even share the same space for very long without an argument breaking out. It’s like the old saying I was at a fight when a hockey game broke out. There was sexual immorality in the church—a man living with his father’s wife—in a sexual way and this behavior was being tolerated by some. There were abuses at the Lord’s Supper, with the rich arriving early and enjoying the very best food and drink, while the poor arrived later and had only the leftovers to consume. With apologies to those of you who love bread crust it was like people arriving early and eating all the soft, warm, meat of the loaf of bread and leaving the crust for those that had less money.

In the face of these fractures, Paul calls for the Corinthian Christians to be “perfectly united in mind and thought”. Unity was a problem then, and it’s a problem now. There’s a huge division between the Hard Faith people and the Soft Faith people. In Life Group Thursday Glenn Minto lamented the divisions within the Church, among Christ-followers. We are not a good example or model to follow if we are constantly being divisive and finding ways to be offended! I challenge each of you to work toward being un-offendable!!

One of the keys is to learn to listen instead of talking all the time. We need to listen to others and I suppose men (in general) have to work harder at being good listeners than women do. A man is driving up a steep, narrow mountain road. A woman is driving DOWN the same road. As they pass each other, the woman leans out of the window and yells, “PIG!!”

The man immediately leans out of his window and replies, “Witch!!” they each continue on their way and as the man rounds the next corner, he crashes into a pig in the middle of the road. If men would only listen. (LOL)

The Hard faith people place an emphasis on the obligations of religious life, and they appreciate moral clarity—their scriptural foundation is a covenant with God, an agreement defined by righteous living. If your faith is hard, you are focused on knowing God’s truth, keeping the Ten Commandments, and living a disciplined life in a community of faith. I read that and say to myself, “that’s me.”

The Soft Faith people see religion as a liberation movement. They tend to stress God’s love for the oppressed of the earth, and they trace their spiritual roots to the exodus, when God brought the Israelites out of captivity in Egypt. If your faith is soft, you are focused on experiencing God’s grace, keeping the commandments of Jesus to love God and neighbor, and living a life that is open and receptive to new understandings. At first read, I say to myself, “that’s me.” [NOTE 4]

But it is in the putting things into practice, the practice of one’s faith that the differences come out for me. It’s in the extremes of either one that I find myself being at odds with either or both.

Hard Faith is all about obligation, clarity, covenant, truth and discipline. Soft Faith is committed to liberation, charity, exodus, grace, and openness. We ARE NOT talking about right and wrong here, good and bad, because both sides are important, yea even necessary, to the church. Both have deep roots in the Bible and tradition and both are NECESSARY for a fully formed faith. But both Hard and Soft perspectives create a very tricky tension—they exert a kind of magnetic pull as they draw people of faith in opposite directions.

We get in trouble and we **fail** to accurately reflect the Bible if we concentrate on obligation, clarity, truth and discipline without any love and grace. We go wrong when we focus so much on openness and grace that we forget the wrathful side of God and the clear call to truth and discipline. When openness means ordaining as a Church Leader, i.e. an Elder or Pastor someone continuing in unrepentant sin I think we cross the line. When we are so worried about the letter of the law that we forget the supreme call to love God with all we have and our neighbor as ourselves, we cross the line. When I say cross the line, I am saying that we get outside of and away from what the Bible calls us too. If we don’t live by this book and all of this book then we dare not call ourselves Christians, and we blank well better not call ourselves church leaders.

Let me be clear here. I believe we are called to love, to the full spectrum of forgiveness, mercy, and grace ... all people. But that doesn’t mean that I ordain them as a Spiritual leader, an Elder, or Pastor. And it doesn’t mean that all should be models or examples to follow.

The apostle Paul had a similar problem in Corinth, where Christians of that community felt drawn to different leaders. Some felt they belonged to Paul, others to Apollos, others to Cephas (Peter), and still others to Christ (verse 12). Some of these leaders were eloquent, some were not ... some were Hard, and some were Soft.

But Paul rejected these distinctions by asking the Corinthians point blank as recorded in verse thirteen, “Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?” The inevitable answer is NO! For Paul, the unifying reality for us is always going to be Jesus Christ, whether we are Hard or Soft, competitive or coddling, obligated or liberated. **[NOTE 5]**

The amazing thing about Jesus is that He is simultaneously Hard Jesus and Soft Jesus. That’s why He defies boxes, limits, definitions, and labels. The Hard Jesus lays out the obligations of discipleship and is clear about the Christian way of life. “He who loves me will obey my commands.” **[5a]** He calls us into a New Covenant, one that is sealed in His very own blood. He is devoted to the truth—in fact, He Himself is “the way, the truth, and the life” (John 14:6). And Jesus asks His disciples to be so disciplined that they actually deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him. You simply cannot get Harder than that.

[5b] But At the same time, Jesus is Soft Jesus. He liberates us from captivity to sin and death, He challenges us to show Christian charity to the hungry, the thirsty, the naked and the imprisoned. He leads us on a new exodus, one that passes through death to everlasting life. And He shows amazing grace to all who follow Him in faith, receiving with open arms the outcasts, the sinners, the brokenhearted, and the sick. He is a Soft, Soft Savior—no doubt about it.

The apostle Paul knows this, which is why he calls for unity in the midst of the Christian community’s diversity. He doesn’t expect the Corinthians to have identical views and perspectives on all things, nor does he expect them to live out their Christian faith in exactly the same way. But he does expect them to be united in their determination to follow Jesus, and equally dependent on the power of the “cross of Christ” (verse 17).

In fact Paul doesn’t want to do anything to distract people from the cross—the clearest possible symbol of Jesus’ sacrificial death and life-giving resurrection. He doesn’t want to baptize or speak with eloquence or do anything that might turn people away from the central image of what God has done for us through Jesus. Anything that distracts us from Jesus is potentially bad and most likely to be knocked down the priority list a few notches! **[NOTE 6]**

The cross of Christ is what unites us, according to Paul. It is the perfect symbol of Hard Truth and Soft Grace. So what does this mean to us today? Hard and Soft divisions are going to continue to plague us, but their existence does not mean that we have to lose sight of the centrality of Jesus Christ. Some of us will naturally practice a Hard Faith, and we’ll be clear about our beliefs, our practices, our Scriptures and our morals. But at the same time, we should embrace Soft Faith ideas and concepts and we will show charity to others as we focus on hospitality, inclusiveness, outreach projects and unconditional love.

So how can we be united? What unites us is always going to be more powerful and all-embracing, I pray, than the things that pull us apart. The way for us to be “perfectly united in mind and thought” is to remember the message. The message is the

message of the cross (verse 18) and that message is “the power of God.” That’s what we are all about. If we stay on the message, we’ll stay together. If we remember our mission is to become disciple-makers by the power of the Holy Spirit by standing on the Word, walking in love, and resting in the arms of Jesus! we will stay together. If we remember that our mission is based on the Word of God and the message of the gospel we will stay together.

That reminds me of Benjamin Franklin’s famous advice: “Brothers, let us all hang together, for if we don’t we most assuredly will hang separately.” The trick, is to remember that it’s all about the message of the Gospel. The gospel is simply that Jesus was born of a virgin, lived here on earth, he gave 12 men his attention, example, and training and died on the cross. He was resurrected and lives and reigns with God in heaven and is coming again. His blood paid the debt we owed for sin and if we seek to live his way we will be God’s children and receive eternal life. It is all about Jesus. It is absolutely, positively not about me. [NOTE 7]

Dan Wakefield writing in the *Christian Century* tells of meeting one of his heroes of the faith, theologian and author Henri Nouwen. Flustered by his proximity to someone he held in such high regard Wakefield stuttered a question: “Father Nouwen, I’ve read your *Prayers from the Genesee*. What bothers me is that if someone as advanced as you has doubts and difficulties with prayer, what hope is there for someone like me, who is just starting out?” Nouwen looked at him sternly and said rather sharply, “Mr. Wakefield, Christianity is not for getting your life together.”

No, it’s not. It’s not about Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or people of Chloe’s household. It’s not about you, or me, or us, or Doster Community Church, or the Alliance of Reformed Churches, the Baptists, or the Methodists, or the non-denominational mega-churches. Life, ministry, and church is all about the message. We have to live like Christ-followers, we have to love people, we have to follow Jesus’ example.

It is most certainly about the message of the gospel. Hit the message hard or hit it some, but stay on the message. It is certainly appropriate to teach a class on Christian doctrine, but don’t look down upon those who feel called to feed the homeless. And if you are commended if you do political work on behalf of peace and justice, don’t neglect your prayer life. Hard Faith and Soft Faith. Both are required if we are going to follow Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. So I want you to notice this week whether you are on the Hard Faith or Soft Faith side and notice how we need both. But more importantly, I want you to ask yourself, when making a decision, “does this glorify God?” “Does this reflect the message of the gospel?” “Does this ring true with my being a Christ-follower?” If the answer is NO, don’t do it, don’t say it, ask the Holy Spirit to help you not think it. That’s what I want you to do about it! Run every decision through the gauntlet: Does this reflect the message of the Gospel? Does this decision demonstrate love for God and loving my neighbor as myself? Does this decision ring true with me being a Christ-follower? Let’s pray... AMEN.

Sermon Notes for “Soft Savior” based on 1 Corinthians 1: 10-18
Given at Doster Community Church October 11, 2026

- I. There is a parallel between Hard America and Soft America and Hard Faith and Soft Faith.
- II. There were many divisions in the growing new Church in Corinth. Yet Paul calls the people to be “perfectly united in mind and thought.” Was he dreaming? Or delusional?
- III. The only way to be united is by focusing on Jesus Christ and following His example and being filled His Holy Spirit’s power.
- IV. Hard Faith is all about obligation, clarity, covenant, truth and discipline. Soft Faith is committed to liberation, charity, exodus, grace, and openness.
- V. Jesus is at the same time both Hard and Soft.
 - a. Jesus claims to be “The way, the truth, and the life” and asks His disciples to be so disciplined that they actually “deny themselves, take up their crosses, and follow Him”
 - b. He shows amazing grace to all who follow Him in faith, receiving with open arms the outcasts, the sinners, the brokenhearted, and the sick
- VI. The Cross of Christ and the message of the Gospel unites us.
- VII. It is not about you or me. It IS all about Jesus! We need to focus on Jesus and following Him in thought, in word, and in action.