

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Divisions Because Of Personalities I Corinthians 1:10-17

One of the most difficult concepts to explain to a clear thinking rejecter of Christ is why there are so many denominations in Christianity. There are some two hundred fifty plus different ones, all claiming to have the right slant on the Christian faith. It becomes confusing when Christians claim there is "one Lord, one faith, one baptism," and yet we sing about the church,

"Though with a scornful wonder
Men see her sore oppressed,
By schisms rent asunder,
By heresies distressed,..."

Denominationalism is not all bad if one understands that "denomination" means "part of the whole." Each denomination with its particular doctrines and emphasis makes up part of the whole universal, visible church. Because men are sinful and dogmatic about religious beliefs, there will always be differences among professing Christians over secondary, non-essentials to true Christianity. Realistically denominations are a necessary evil but ideally they are wrong. Whenever a denomination loses sight of the fact it is part of the whole and it alone is right and the only church, then denominationalism has gone afoul. It has become a heresy not just a way of looking at scripture.

"All Christians select different aspects of the truth at different times for particular emphasis. Such selection inevitably brings the focus away from other strands of truth on to one or two specific matters. That is allowable, if not necessary, so long as what is being done is recognized for what it is, i.e. selectivity. When a Christian, or a group of Christians, becomes totally absorbed with one aspect of the truth to the neglect, exclusion or even denial of the whole truth as it is in Jesus, then the danger point has been reached. That is when selectivity becomes heresy and it can be readily seen who is 'genuine' (11:19) and who is false" (David Prior, First Corinthians).

God meant the visible church to be a fellowship of believers, but sadly, it has become a victim of factions, divisions, splits, and schisms. The incipient seeds of denominationalism had its roots in the Corinthian church. This is the first place we know it raised its ugly head. It appears these divisions in the church at Corinth were the result of a party spirit centered around following men rather than Christ, and we will learn in First Corinthians 1:18-31 that the

reason for the following of men was the exaltation of human reasoning above the simple teachings of Jesus Christ.

The Apostle Paul reminded the Corinthian Christians that each one of them had been called into fellowship with Jesus Christ through the sovereign, efficacious, infallible call of God the Father: God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful" (I Cor. 1:9). Their fellowship with Christ had been interrupted and disrupted because of division. Therefore, Paul began immediately to deal with the problem of unity and does so through 4:21. Apparently it was the number one problem that had to be solved in that local church. Without unity, this group had no basis to make an impact for Christ on the unsaved world.

EXHORTATION TO UNITY 1:10

I appeal to you, brothers. The Apostle Paul did not give a command but a gentle exhortation with a note of urgency. Had he commanded them right off, they might have felt he was abusing his authority. He reminded them they were all brothers in Christ; therefore, there should be no divisions among them.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. The word "name" refers to authority, so Paul appealed to them on the basis of Christ's authority over them as the Lord. They should obey not out of respect for Paul but out of respect for Jesus Christ their Lord. A willingness to place themselves under the Lordship of Christ was the key to unification of the church. The Corinthians did not have a problem in their heads but in their hearts because they hated authority and would not bow to any man, not even Christ.

That all of you agree (speak the same thing) with one another. This was an appeal for unit of belief and a presentation of a united witness to the lost city of Corinth. What Paul was obviously asking was not that these Corinthians would agree on every secondary theological issue but that they agree on the essentials or the primary truths of the Christian faith so as to present a united front to the city. Paul wanted to see a harmonious body of believers working together in the cause of Christ. A distinction must be made between truths which are fundamental and truths which are periphery. This is the same concept our Lord taught in John 17:21 "... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me." Our uniting is one of the basic witnesses we have to the world.

So that there may be no divisions among you. This is a categorical statement—there are to be no divisions, rival parties or factions. The word "divisions" refers to an old discarded garment that was torn into pieces. Therefore, a division is when a group of Christians or a local church is torn into pieces by ungodly actions. The only way to overcome divisions is to have unity in the local church and that comes as each person places himself or herself under the Lordship of Jesus Christ and bows to His authority.

And that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. The word "made complete" was a medical term for setting a broken bone or mending a fishing net. Paul wanted the breaks among these Christians mended so that they might come into a beautiful relationship of harmony with one another. They were to be united "in mind." This does not mean all Christians have to think alike. In fact, that would be impossible, but Christians can agree on the basic, primary things and give a united witness to the unsaved world. The Apostles' Creed was an attempt by the early church to state a basic belief of Christians, and it would be well for us to think through this creed to keep us balanced. The Corinthians were also to be united in "thought" (opinions); that is, they were to be of the same general convictions and opinions, being united in faith, hope and love.

For Christians to be of the same mind and opinion, they must be in fellowship with the Lord Jesus Christ, and fellowship with Christ comes when we acknowledge His Lordship over our lives, giving up our rights and personal privileges, taking the place of servants. The Moravians had a motto which sums up what our attitude about unity should be:

In essentials: Unity
In non-essentials: Liberty
In all things: Charity

DESCRIPTION OF THE FACTORS DISTURBING UNITY 1:11-12

My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. Paul received a clear report about the divisions among the Christians at Corinth. He did not base his conclusion on rumor or gut level feelings but on clear evidence that could not be refuted. We do not know much about Chloe, but she could have been the blond beauty of Corinth. Her name means "the blond" or "fair one." She was a wealthy businesswoman and had slaves under her authority. Perhaps some of these slaves, or maybe some of her children, came to Ephesus, looked up Paul, and gave him this report. It was that there were quarrels or contentions among them. There was not just difference of opinion because that takes place in every church. Apparently their differences of opinion led to quarrels, and quarrels led to divisions in the church.

It is interesting to note that "discord," "dissensions," and "factions" are said to be works of the flesh which never please God.

The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambitions, dissensions, factions and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God (Gal. 5:19-21).

The logical sequence is opinions, then quarrels, and then divisions. This has happened tens of thousands of times in the history of Christianity with the result being new churches or denominations. These divisions come about over secondary theological issues or personal preferences when someone says, "My opinion is right and everybody else is absolutely wrong."

This kind of thinking always results in schism, a splinter church, a fragmented church or a denomination. The Apostle Paul says that this kind of reasoning is of the flesh. No wonder the Corinthians were said to be carnal, worldly and fleshly.

Whenever people begin to reason, "This is MY church, and I will do what I want because I give MY money," they have forgotten that the church belongs to no one but Christ, and the only way to get over this wrong kind of thinking is to bow to the authority of the Lordship of Christ and let Him rule our lives.

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". There were four cliques or factions within the congregation at Corinth. These groups had their own slogans, based on the person each chose to follow. They were guilty of following men, of hero worship and this led to trouble in the church. There was the loyalist party who followed Paul. After all, Paul started the church, led many of them to Christ and disciplined them in the faith. Furthermore, Paul was theologically astute, an excellent teacher, versed in the doctrines of grace, expounded a liberal view of Christian liberty. He was a straightforward preacher and could make things so simple to understand. Undoubtedly there was a large group who followed Paul and said, "Paul is my kind of preacher." Then there was the intellectual party who followed Apollos, an Alexandrian Jew who was known for his culture and eloquence as a preacher. He was a man of philosophy and rhetoric. Probably the more educated in the church were followers of Apollos. There was also

the traditional party who followed Peter (Cephas). These people reasoned Peter was not only one of the original Twelve Disciples but he was also the leader of that group. He was a mature and seasoned leader. They wanted to go back to the beginnings, back to Jerusalem, for to be tied up with Peter was to be linked to headquarters. Furthermore, Peter was still partial to the forms and ceremonies of Judaism, giving a liturgical outlook to the Christian faith. There was the exclusive party which refused to follow any man but chose to follow only Christ. This was a super-pious crowd who displayed a spirit of self-righteousness and smugness, separating from the rest because they were "holier-than-thou." These folks often claim to have a hotline with God, giving off a superiority attitude. It can be very intimidating when a person says, "The Lord has told me that..." All three of these groups were wrong because they included people who agreed with them and excluded people who did not.

Unfortunately this is still a problem for there are those who are so emotionally attached to some great Christian leader who helped them that they will only listen to him. They read only his books or listen only to his tapes. There are others who are drawn to some speaking style that turns them on. Some in our day are crying, "Back to the Reformation," and if the word "Reformed" is anywhere to be found, people will follow because they are sure the Reformation was the whole sum and substance of all the great Christian truth and practice. Others will not even bother to listen to anyone

who is not a Dispensationalist or a pre-tribulational rapturist or a Theonomist. And, of course, there are all kinds of people today running around claiming direct revelation from God and honestly believe that this makes them more spiritual than others.

There are great men followers today, just as there have been throughout the history of the church: the Donatists, the Novatians, the Augustinians, the Thomists, the Lutherans, the Calvinists, the Mennonites, the Wesleyans and so forth. At this writing some are dividing saying, "I am of Bill Gothard," or "I am of Bill Bright," or "I am of R.C. Sproul," or "I am of Bob Jones," or "I am of Billy Graham," or "I am of Pat Robertson," or "I am of Benny Hinn." So many are guilty of blindly following either the personalities or systems of men with dogmatism so as to bring division into the Body of Christ.

Most division among Christians is not over major doctrines but over secondary doctrines or personal, petty preferences, forming personality cults around some dynamic leader.

This section of scripture does not mean there is no place in the local church for disagreement. This would not only be impossible, it would also not be desirable. All Christians within the local church and all local churches within the total visible, universal church need one another. As we hold differences of opinions, we ought to hold them without the element of carnality. We should show love, respect and understanding for those with whom we disagree.

Whenever we say, "I'm right and everyone else is wrong; therefore, I will exclude from my fellowship those who disagree with me and include those who agree," we are carnal, fleshly just like the Corinthians.

It is a fact that all Christians have their favorite preachers. Some preachers can minister to us better than others, and it is only natural we should listen to them and follow them. But it is an exclusive attitude that is wrong when people will not listen or come to a service where "their preacher" is not preaching.

CONDEMNATION FOR DISRUPTING UNITY 1:13-16

Is Christ divided? Apparently Paul was horrified at the deteriorating situation at Corinth, and his apostolic indignation with their carnal following of men exploded and he asked three questions. The first was, "Is Christ divided?"; that is, can Christ be divided up into little parcels? Of course not. By dividing up a church, whose members are members of Christ, they were offending the person of Christ. When a Christian follows a man instead of Christ, there can only be trouble. There is simply no human teacher in the church of Christ, past or present, who has a totally complete view of Christ or a perfect system of theology. If we limit ourselves to one teacher or one speaker and feed only on him, we are getting a warped view of Christ. This is an offense to the person of Christ.

Was Paul crucified for you? Was it Paul who redeemed and purchased us to himself?

No! It was the precious blood of Christ that saved us. We are Christ's personal property by divine purchase, and by following other men or claiming to be disciples of strong human leaders, we are an offense to the work that Christ has done on our behalf. Whenever Christians become guilty of preacher-worship, they have taken their eyes off Christ and the result will inevitably be disunity.

No human leader died for us. Cliques tend to emphasize the importance of a human leader. Leaders are built up and almost made equal to the Lord Himself. People begin to think things about him that are not true, and expect things from him that he

cannot do. Cliques tend to deify a leader and look at him as if he can do nothing wrong, and as if he knows all things and can solve all problems. All teachers are men, and Christians reveal their immaturity when they see their leaders as anything else.

Were you baptized into the name of Paul? Paul told the Corinthian believers that to follow men is an offense to their confession of Jesus Christ. The concept of "name" refers to authority. For instance, a soldier swore loyalty in the name of Caesar; therefore, he belonged to Caesar and put himself under his complete authority. When these Corinthians were water baptized, they publicly swore loyalty to Jesus Christ and placed themselves under His authority alone. By following men, they were offending the confession they made when baptized.

I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name. Paul merely stated he had no part in creating the divisions at Corinth, for he baptized only a few of them. Had he baptized many, this would have given them more fuel to say Paul was a leader of one of the groups.

Paul was not minimizing baptism. He taught it and practiced it. All the believers in Christ should be water baptized to be obedient to Christ

(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) Notice Paul baptized a whole household. We assume that there were children and slaves in that household. We cannot prove that there were infants, but we cannot disprove it either. In New Testament times whole households turned to Christ because the father was the head of the home.

Notice though that Paul would not have made a good Baptist because he did not keep accurate baptismal records. Furthermore, he did not believe in any saving power in water baptism, for when people responded to Christ, he did not baptize them immediately but left that to someone else. If he believed in baptismal regeneration, he would have immediately baptized all of his converts.

DECLARATION OF THE CROSS, A FACTOR TO CREATE UNITY 1:17

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel. Paul's primary task was to preach the gospel not to water baptize. Baptism played a prominent role in the New Testament church (as it should today) and yet in Paul's mind it took a back seat to the proclamation of the gospel and the conversion of sinners.

Not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. Paul preached the gospel in simple terms which people could understand. Perhaps he made mention of the cross here in order to heal the fragmentation in this church. By calling them back to the meaning of the cross, Paul hoped to help them find unity. When we get our eyes off men and systems and put them on Christ and His cross, divisions are minimized.

CONCLUSION

What does God want us to learn from this passage? First, the unity of the local church is essential to an effective witness to the lost world. Second, God condemns any attitude which leads to partisanship or faction within the church of Jesus Christ. These Corinthians were all meeting in the same place (probably in a home), but within the group were wrong attitudes which had fragmented the church. God hates any attitude whereby people devote themselves to a man, a doctrine or a practice, refusing to fellowship with anyone who does not think just as they do.

The Christian celebrity phenomenon presents great hazards as well, creating "groupies" who hang on every word (or song) of radio and television preachers or singers without testing their messages against the Scriptures as carefully as they do those of their own pastors and leaders (Craig Blomberg, *First Corinthians*).

Third, God wants us Christians, while holding to our convictions, to feel a part of the total Body of Christ. In New Testament times, denominations did not exist. There were no labels put on groups of Christians. They practiced baptism, but there were no Baptists. They believed in predestination, but there were no Presbyterians. They were committed to holy living, but there were no Methodists. They were Spirit-filled, but there were no Pentecostals. They believed in worship, but there were no Episcopalians. They observed the Lord's Table, but there were no Plymouth Brethren. As Christians, we must get the right attitude about the universal, visible church of Christ. Fourth, separation into cliques often brings pride and not humility, and God hates a proud heart. Pride does not want to change the problem of division, and this problem was never solved in Corinth. Clement of Rome, writing about 95 A.D., talks about the same cliques and divisions in his day. Fifth, the key to defeating divisions in the church is an acknowledgment of the Lordship of Christ, giving Him the authority to rule over our lives through the Word of God. Sixth, we Christians are to be in loving fellowship with all true believers in Christ in whatever denomination or Christian group we may find ourselves.

When will the institutional church and particularly the church in the individualized West put away its petty squabbling and begin to demonstrate this biblically mandated unity more visibly? Not a few unbelievers ancient and modern have rejected the gospel on the grounds that a religion as visibly divided as Christianity could scarcely reflect the truth (Blomberg).

Too often churches, denominations and renewal movements break off and become their own "church of Christ," forming every imaginable sect or way out group. This kind of activity is a shame for the church and is a cause for deep repentance.

John Wesley was very concerned about all the denominations in Christendom in his day. He told about a dream in which he was ushered to the gates of hell. At those gates, he asked the gatekeeper, "Are there any Presbyterians here?" And he found out there were. "Are there any Congregationalists here?" There were. "Any Baptists?" "Yes." To his amazement he also found that there were Methodists in hell. Then Wesley was immediately translated to the gates of heaven, and he asked the gatekeeper, "Are there any Presbyterians here?" The answer was no. "Are there any Baptists or Congregationalists?" Again, the answer was no. "Well, then," said Wesley, "there must be some Methodists?" The gatekeeper replied that there were absolutely no Methodists. Then Wesley said, "Who then is inside heaven's gates?" The gatekeeper replied, "There are only Christians here!"

If you are not a Christian, you should know that no preacher can save you, no church can save you, and no Christian organization can save you. No evangelist can forgive your sins. No teacher can give you a righteousness that will make you acceptable to God. No man can open our eyes and make you see spiritual realities. Only Christ, the God-Man, the Savior, can forgive your sins, heal your broken heart, give you eternal life, cleanse you as white as the driven snow, and give you assurance of heaven. Do not trust in men to save you. Trust Christ. Do not trust any system of theology to save you. Trust Christ. Jesus said, I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me" (Jn. 14:6).