

How Do You Divide And Nearly Destroy A Church?

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Introduction: 1) On the night that He was betrayed our Lord Jesus prayed for His Church. The prayer is recorded for us in John 17. There our Savior prayed very specifically for the Church's oneness and unity.

John 17:11 “Holy Father, protect them by your name that you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one.”

John 17: 21-23 “May they 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 you sent me. I have given them the glory you have given me, so that they may be one as we are one. I am in them and you are in me, so that they may be made completely one, that the world may know you have sent me and have loved them as you have loved me.”

John 17:26 “I made your name known to them and will continue to make it known, so that the love you have loved me with may be in them and I may be in them.”

2) These verses lead me to an unalterable conviction: our Lord is heartbroken by division in His church. Now, to be sure, sometimes division must take place when

the issue is moral or theological. Paul told the Corinthians to exercise church discipline (as did Jesus in Matt. 18:15-20) in chapter 5 and to remove from the fellowship a man who was committing sexual immorality with his stepmother. In 1 Cor. 11:19-20 we are informed that divisions or factions in a church can be used by God to make clear those who truly belong to God and those who don't. And Paul, both in Rom. 16:17-18 and Titus 3:9-11, warns us to avoid those who cause division because of false doctrine. But, when division takes place in a church because of the cult of personality or a party spirit, our Lord weeps in heaven. It dishonors his glory, makes a mockery of the gospel, and does massive damage to the church's reputation in the world.

Sadly, this was the situation in Corinth. Within the church there was now a Paul party, an Apollos party, a Peter or Cephas party and possibly a Jesus party (1:12). Paul was horrified by this news and will spend 1:10-4:21 pleading with the church to pursue unity and not division. Political parties may be the way of the world, but it should be the *modus operandi* (the method of operation) of the people of God. There could not be a more relevant word for the 21st century church. Our eyes and ears need to be wide open to the counsel of God's appointed apostle. God is speaking through him. So, how does one go about dividing and nearly destroying a church? Paul makes four observations in 1:10-17.

I. You stop thinking like Jesus 1:10

Paul is an apostle with God-given authority. However, he begins his exhortation with gentleness. “Now, I urge (*ESV*, “appeal”) you, brothers and sisters.” The word “urge” is *parakalō*. Paul does get in their face but comes alongside of them putting his arm around them. He does not pull rank as an apostle. He approaches them as their spiritual father (4:14-15). This is a spiritual dad talking to his children.

He notes that his appeal is to “brothers and sisters,” and that it comes “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” The use of the full majestic title of our Savior “reminds the [Corinthians] that Paul’s words are not merely his private opinion” (Schreiner, *1 Corinthians*, 61). They come in the authority of the one who is God (Lord), Savior (Jesus) and Messiah (Christ). Leon Morris rightly says, “The full title heightens the solemnity of his appeal and the one name [that] stands over against all party names” (*1 Cor.*, TNTC, 2ND ed., 1985, 39). The Corinthians are in the mess they find themselves because they have lost sight of their Master!

Paul’s appeal is three-fold and laid out very clearly in the remainder of verse 10: 1) “all of you agree in what you say,” 2) let “there be no divisions among you,” 3) “be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.” These words reflect Paul’s instructions to the church at Philippi where he sought to reconcile

Euodia and Syntyche. There he asked these sisters in Christ “to agree in the Lord” (Phil 4:2). He grounded that request in his call to the entire church to “adopt the same attitude [mind] as that of Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5), an attitude characterized by “thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose” (Phil 2:2). The Corinthians had forgotten the mind of Christ. They had stopped thinking like Jesus. The result: they were disagreeing not agreeing; they were divided not united in speech, mind and convictions. They deserved an “F” when it came to obeying the two great commandments (see Matt 22:37-40). They were not loving well either God or one another. My hero in the faith and mentor in ministry is Adrian Rogers. In a private conversation he told me the church is at its best when it is on the battlefield fighting the real enemies of Satan, sin, death, hell and the grave. She is at her worst when she is in the barracks fighting one another. Jesus said love God and one another and go to the nations with the gospel. The Corinthians were doing none of this. They had stopped thinking and acting like Jesus.

II. You start fussing and fighting with one another 1:11

In verse 11 Paul specifies what he knows and how he learned it. He learned of the divisions from “members of Chloe’s people.” This is the only mention of Chloe in the NT and so we know nothing about her or her people. Mark Taylor notes that “those of Chloe” ...

“could indicate family and extended household members, such as slaves, or those who acted on behalf of Chloe as business agents. Some think that since Paul was in Ephesus at the time of the writing of the letter, Chloe may have been a wealthy Asian with business interests that required her representatives to travel to Corinth. We do not know for certain that she was a believer, but it is probable since she had a presence in Corinth and was known to the church, even if through her business agents. The report itself regarding the Corinthian quarrels does not come from Chloe but rather from her household.” (*1Cor.*, NAC, 53).

My own judgement is Chloe was a believer and member of the Church at Corinth. It is difficult to imagine a non-believer bringing such a report to Paul. This answers the “how” question. The “what” question was partially answered in verse 10. There are divisions. Verse 11 expounds on that: “there is rivalry (*ESV*, “quarreling,” *MSG*, “fighting”) among you.” The word “rivalry” or “quarrels” is found only in Paul’s writings in the N.T. It usually appears in vice list (Rom 1:29; 13:13; Gal 5:20; 1 Tim 6:4; Titus 3:9; Taylor, 53). What was in the minds of the church in verse 10 manifested itself in their mouths in verse 11. And what was coming out of their mouths had led to verbal sparring and fisticuffs! Public and ugly describes what was going on. Brothers and sisters in Christ were treating one another like the enemy. And, a watching world was being turned off to the gospel of Jesus Christ in the process.

Today our divisive words may be hustled in a face to face encounter. In times past, and still today, church business conferences have been a favorite arena for verbal combat. More often today, in our social media world, we shoot an email

or post on Facebook or Twitter. We say things there we would never say face to face. A keyboard becomes our weapon of choice as we rip and tear away at one another, doing serious harm to the body of Christ. Leon Morris is right, “*Quarrels* are one of the ‘acts of the sinful nature’... They do not belong among God’s people” (*1 Cor.*, 40). Fuss and fight? You may divide the church. In fact, you may even destroy it.

III. You buy into the cult of personality 1:12-13

What do we mean by the phrase “cult of personality”? There is a song by that title sung by a group called Living Colour, with more than 47 million views on YouTube. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary says it is when “a public figure (such as a political leader) is deliberately presented to the people of a country as a great person who should be admired and loved.” Most articles or discussions relate the concept to politics, usually, but not always, with negative connotations. Tragically, this idolization of a person can work its way into the church with devastating consequences. Churches can put a person or persons on a pedestal that rightly belongs only to Jesus.

Corinth had a battle royale going on over, “who is the greatest” in terms of preaching. Four candidates were in the running (v. 12):

- 1) Paul: their founder but just an average preacher.
- 2) Apollos: the eloquent preacher from Alexandria. Expositor extraordinaire.

3) Cephas: (a.k.a Peter): the Jewish apostle and pillar of the church from the inner circle of Jesus.

4) Jesus: well what more needs to be said! The Savior!!!

Evidently the competition was fierce and the rivalry was heated. Now, do not lose sight of this. The argument was not between these four men. It was all in the church as they argued about the four men. Each party within the church had a slogan, though creativity was certainly lacking. They were virtually identical: ““I belong to Paul” or “I belong to Apollos” or “I belong to Cephas” or “I belong to Christ.”” Getting into the weeds of the details of the situation is difficult. I do think Verlyn Verbrugge’s suggestions are helpful, “we should note that if the church at Corinth was composed of several worship centers in different homes, these “parties” may represent different worshipping communities.” And, if there was a Christ party among the four, those in this group “were trying to rise above any human leaders and claim allegiance to Christ alone” (*1 Cor*, EBC, 265-66).

Paul was scandalized by the presence of party politics in the body of Christ. He expresses his alarm with three rhetorical questions in verse 13 that have clear cut answers. Is Christ divided? No! “Was Paul crucified?” No! “Or were you baptized in Paul’s name?” No! Christ is one and his body is one. Christ and only Christ was crucified on the cross for our sins. Christ and Christ alone is the name into which we are immersed and identified in the waters of baptism. To say

anything else is spiritual insanity! Christ has the preeminence in all things (Col 1:18). Lose sight of that and only spiritual disaster will result. Bottom line: don't take pride in being associated with people you and others think is important. Take pride in Christ and only Christ! As Paul says in Galatians 6:14, "I will never boast about anything except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

IV. You forget what matters most 1:14-17

The Church of the Lord Jesus Christ does many good and important things. In Matthew 28:18-20, Jesus tells us to make disciples of all nations by going, baptizing and teaching. In Acts 2:40-47 the Church is birthed on the Day of Pentecost. There we see the infant church baptizing, teaching, fellowshiping, sharing the Lord's Supper, praying, caring for one another and doing evangelism. In Ephesians 4:1-16 Paul informs us that the Church is to pursue doctrinal unity and ministry diversity, as every member is equipped for their work of ministry. However, all of these good and essential activities rest on a single foundation: THE GOSPEL! Every good thing the Church does must flow out of the good news of the gospel that Jesus Christ, the sinless Son of God, died on the cross for our sins according to the Scriptures, was buried, and rose again the third day according to the Scriptures (see 1 Cor 15:3-6). Christ and the cross must always be seen as of first importance in the life of a church! Otherwise, we can expect division and the absence of the power of God in our midst.

Evidently the administrator of one's baptism was contributing to the party spirit and division at Corinth. What we just noted in Matthew, Acts and Ephesians makes abundantly clear the importance of baptism in the Christian community. To be blunt: no one in the 1st century would have understood or accepted a non-baptized Christian. It would have been non-sensical. To be a Christian is to be a publicly identified follower of Jesus Christ, and the mark of that public identification was baptism by immersion (Rom 6:1-11). Biblical baptism involved three elements: 1) right member (a believer in the gospel of Jesus Christ); 2) right meaning (a believer's identification with Christ in his death, burial and resurrection); and 3) right mode (immersion). Baptism is important, but it is not what matters most. That is the gospel!

So, Paul says in verses 14-16, "I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't recall if I baptized anyone else." Curtis Vaughn notes "Crispus is likely the synagogue ruler whose conversion is narrated in Acts 18:8. Gaius is probably Paul's host in Corinth mentioned in Romans 16:23. Stephanas is mentioned in 1 Corinthians 16: 15, 17" (*1 Cor.*, BSC, 28). Paul, no doubt, was honored to have baptized these people, but what the Corinthians had done with baptism, specifically the status given to the baptizer, was a travesty and mockery of what really matters: THE GOSPEL!

Schreiner nails it, “the person who performed the baptism is utterly insignificant. By paying attention to the person who baptized them, they were missing out on the true import of baptism...baptism must be subordinated to and understood within the context of the gospel” (Schreiner, *I Cor.*, 64).

Paul makes this crystal clear in verse 17. “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.” This is what Jesus called him to do and this is why Jesus sent him to Corinth and the nations. Further, he was sent to preach the gospel “not with eloquent wisdom,” not “with *sophia* (wisdom) of *logos* (word).” Paul is interested in the substance of the gospel not the style of one’s delivery. He was not interested in Greek rhetorical “oratory and showmanship” (Schreiner, 65). Paul knew it was better to say something poorly than to say nothing with flair. Now, don’t think that Paul cared nothing about the “delivery” of the gospel. Paul would absolutely say, “what you say is more important than how you say it, but how you say it is important.” The point is the medium must not get in the way of the message! The power is in the message! The power is in the preaching of the cross! If an incredible delivery overshadows the preaching of the cross, the cross will be emptied of its effect, its power. The power of salvation is never in the messenger. The power of salvation is always in the message, the gospel, the cross of Christ.

Conclusion: I love the simple words of missionary Amy Carmichael in her reflection on the cross:

“God Hold us to that which drew us first, when the Cross was the attraction, and we wanted nothing else.”

—Amy Carmichael, *God’s Missionary*

The Christian spiritualist Thomas à Kempis would add:

“In the Cross is salvation; in the Cross is life; in the Cross is protection against our enemies; in the Cross is infusion of heavenly sweetness; in the Cross is strength of mind; in the Cross is joy of spirit; in the Cross is excellence of virtue; in the Cross is perfection of holiness. There is no salvation of soul, nor hope of eternal life, save in the Cross.”

—Thomas à Kempis, *The Inner Life*

Church, stay with Jesus and the Christ. The Church will be filled with life and unity for the glory of God.