

Sermon 4: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17: Divisions

OUTLINE

The plea for unity
The problem of man-following
The priority of the gospel

INTRODUCTION

When we accuse adults of acting childish there are certain playground antics that come to mind. We think of sulking; we think of pettiness and cruelty; jealousy and rivalry; we think of fighting, and shouting, and name calling, and dividing into groups, gangs with their gangleaders. This is what Paul thinks about the Corinthians church, 1 Cor. 3:1-4, 'But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? ⁴For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?' As Paul begins to address the matters that need addressing, the first matter that Paul feels needs his urgent attention is the matter of the divisions in the church. In fact he begins to talk about them here in 1:10 and addressing this problem and its attending problems all the way through to the end of chapter 4.

Jesus taught us that a house divided against itself cannot stand, it is vulnerable to attack. The devil knows this and one of his key strategies is to divide Christians against each other. Paul warns the Ephesians about the anger that leads to divisions and an opportunity for satan, 4:26-27, 'Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, ²⁷ and give no opportunity to the devil.' Our trouble is that divisions are as natural to us as air. As sinners we are selfish and ignorant and quick to take offence and blindly loyal to our group rather than the truth, and all of this results in endless wars. James 4:1-2, 'What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you? ²You desire and do not have, so you murder. You covet and cannot obtain, so you fight and quarrel. You do not have, because you do not ask.' Jesus saves us into a body, a family, a single people of God. We are to be a love community that shows the world that Jesus is our Lord by the love we have for one another. Jesus parting prayer was that we might experience and manifest the oneness that He has with the Father. When we were in sin we acted out our sinfulness, but now that we are saved, we are to act out our oneness in Christ. The problem often happens that we bring our old ways into the church, and this is the problem in Corinth.

Corinth had a highly charged culture of factionalism. The Corinthian context was fractured along the lines of social strata; philosopher and disciple loyalties; national identities. In particular it seems that the celebrity culture around Orators had seeped into the church. It often happened that a travelling teacher would come into town, he would gather up a large following especially from among the wealthy young men who had the time on their hands to engage in philosophy; the rich and influential would court these teachers having them over to the houses and parties, seeking to curry favour with these celebrities. As a result groups of disciples and fan bases would grow up around these personalities and these would clash with each other. The typical sinful behaviors

associated with these group loyalties would arise: insults, shunning, gossip and slander, even physical altercations, public goading, rallying support, etc. Sadly it appears that this sinful mentality has crept into the one place it should never creep, the church. Today as we look at 1 Cor. 1:10-17 we look at Paul dealing with this problem. We have three headings, firstly we see Paul's plea for unity; secondly the problem of man-following; thirdly, the priority of the gospel as the cure.

The plea for unity

V10, '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.' Paul's opening salvo in dealing with this problem is with an emotional appeal. The word he uses here is one of an emotional appeal not one of pulling rank. You know when a parent is interacting with a hardened child, on the one hand they can order them to do something; but many a time a parent sees that their authority is not being respected and the heart of their child is iron, so they sit down next to them, put their hand on their shoulder, and begin to speak from the heart and not from the office of parent. That is what Paul is doing here. He drives towards his appeal for unity reminding them of their union with one another, 'brothers.' This is a term of familial relation, and nearly 1/3 of the times Paul uses it, he uses it in this letter of 1 Corinthians. He heightens his appeal further by appealing, 'by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.' Inevitably to be appealed to in the name of Christ reminds the Christian of many things. There is the person of Christ who is God and Man; He is their Savior; His example of loving selfless service is what enables them to be saved; He has the authority to order them to do the right thing; they are part of the people of Christ and dare not resist his ambassador beseeching them on His behalf. What is about to follow is as from the mouth of Christ Himself.

Paul makes a threefold appeal for unity, '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.' 'All of you agree'. Literally this can be translated, that you all speak the same thing. Paul begins with matters of truth. It is useless aiming at unity for its own sake, we must be united in the truth. Paul is not asking for people merely to agree, but with the truth. Like a choir all tuning their voices to the pitch of the pitch pipe, we are to all agree in the truth. Any ecumenical attempts that are not a desire to unite in the truth are misguided. Secondly, that there be no divisions among you. The word for divisions here is schismata from which we get the English word schisms, here it refers to party-line divisions, as differing groups were establishing their own identity at the cost of the group. Thirdly, there is a call for unity, and to be of the same mind and judgement. What is interesting about the word 'be united' is that it is a medical term used when setting a broken bone; it is a word that speaks about uniting by repairing. It is a word that carries the connotations of reconciling the rifts. Being of the same mind and judgement was a phrase commonly used to reconcile divided political groups, and refers to having the same opinion of the truth. With Paul's usage there is an underlying sense of having the same mind of Christ so that the issue is not only have the same ideas about what is true, but also the same attitude of humility and service towards each other. This is similar to the way Paul spoke to the Philippians who were also struggling with divisions, 2:1-5, 'So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one

mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. ⁵ Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus.'

Paul has a deep pastoral concern for unity in the life of the local church. This should not be misunderstood to be an ecumenical attempt to unite all churches everywhere, no he is working hard for the peace of this local church. One of the things I thank God for is our unity. I speak to other pastors and I feel for them as they have to deal with a church full of parties. There will be the Charismatic group that wants to toss out everything old and try all sorts of new things; there will be the worship team with its own ideas about what the church needs; then there is the youth pastor with his new ideas fresh out of bible college in contention with the establishment; then there are the older people who remember a better time 50 years ago, and each of these groups works to garner support for its cause, they have spokesmen who represent their case. Public meetings are disturbed as their agenda is always looking to highjack the public meeting. Unity in the local church; peace without having divisions, freedom from a party spirit is a precious blessing and I hope you will all fight to maintain it.

The problem of man-following

V11-12, '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." Paul now shows his hand, he reveals that his appeal for unity is not just a generic one that you would give in any situation, but one that is desperately needed in Corinth. He shows that he has received news from someone associated with Chloe that there were quarrels among them. But not only quarrels there was a party spirit and man following as people were dividing into groups. The word for quarreling refers to heated and emotional discord and contention. Paul uses this word in several of his vice lists. Rom. 1:29, 'They were filled with all manner of unrighteousness, evil, covetousness, malice. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, maliciousness. They are gossips.' Rom. 13:13, 'Let us walk properly as in the daytime, not in orgies and drunkenness, not in sexual immorality and sensuality, not in quarreling and jealousy.' He lists it among the works of the flesh in Gal. 5:20, 'idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions.' (2 Cor. 12:20; 1 Tim. 6:4 those who gather false teachers; Tit. 3:9 those who quarrel and cause divisions that should be disciplined.) The source of this quarreling is the partisanship, the man-following that has tainted the church culture.

Now it is hard to get to the bottom of these groups and what they stand for. There are different theories about these groups Paul mentions. Some think that there are literally four groups, and they are literally collected around the personalities of Paul, Apollos, Peter and Christ. It is suggested that Paul as the apostle of the Gentile was not bound by Jewish scruples and would be the representative for the eating meat offered to idols party. Apollos being from Alexandria and an excellent orator would be associated with the group that were talking about wisdom. Peter the apostle to the Jews would be the patron saint of those who wanted more laws and more separation from the Corinthian culture. And those who said they belong to Christ, well they were the super-spiritual ones who were led by the Spirit and who did not need structure and leaders, even Paul himself was not needed. There may be some truth in this reconstruction but

there is a lot of speculation that injected to maintain it. The second theory is that Paul is using these four names as token names instead of using the names of the leaders of the groups in question. This is based on a comment by Paul in 4:6, 'I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against another.' It has been suggested by many that the original Corinthian context would have been a city wide church that was made up of several house churches. These would be largely independent with perhaps monthly combined services. It is supposed that these various home churches would have their own distinct character and perhaps the various church leaders would be the personalities that people were dividing around. It is apparent that who baptized who was also an aspect of how the divisions came about.

We are no strangers to dividing against one another out of a sense of loyalty, of bringing worldly ways of thinking into the church. Think about some of the rivalry around sports teams, we are well aware of the football hooligans who go to a soccer match to goad the opposition, to insult their players, to throw trash on the field, and to troll spectators after the game. Or think of the tribal attitudes in politics today with the left and right clearly divided against each other. Think of the suspicions that we have of one another; the worst that we will willingly believe, even from an unreliable source; think of how we are willing to cancel people quickly and utterly; think about how we delight in their downfall; rally around slogans; are merely waiting to be triggered and weaponized our rage as a response. In the church we can call a person's salvation into question; accuse them of not having the Holy Spirit or quenching the Spirit. Deliberate misunderstanding; the misrepresenting of another's words and motives; the running down of their name before others; a refusal to talk matters through, these things and much more are part of what results when we become loyal to men first and not Christ first. So how does Paul deal with this problem?

The priority of the gospel

Paul confronts this man centered and worldly way of thinking with gospel truths. First he asks three rhetorical questions, v13, 'Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?' The first question, is Christ divided, assumes certain gospel truths. When we believe in Jesus, the Holy Spirit invisibly and spiritually unites us to Christ and to His body. And here, instead of Paul saying, is the body divided; instead he makes it more personal, is Christ divided. The idea of mutilating Christ Himself is unimaginable for the believer, but this is the point Paul is making. This was a point Paul has impressed upon him when he was on the Damascus road and Jesus appeared to him and said 'Saul, Saul why are you persecuting, not the church, but me; there we see Christ identifying Himself with His people.' This ontological reality drove home Paul's guilt to himself and now he is using the truth to drive the horror we should feel at dividing Christ's church. Secondly, he asks was Paul crucified for you? Here we see Paul using some tact. It is unlikely there was a Pauline party, but he uses this hypothetical party in his own name to make a point. Obviously he was not. The salvation that we have in Jesus Christ is because God came down as a sinless man and offered his sinless life in payment for our sins. Paul is highlighting how salvation cannot come through anyone but Christ, and anything but His death upon the cross. No Christ no salvation; no cross no salvation. Thirdly, every Christian is baptized, and they are baptized into Christ, not into Paul or anyone else.

Baptism is not a saving act but an act of obedience that signals a saving act. It is the outward sign of our belonging to Christ and His people, it speaks of how Christ has saved us by us participating in His life and death, and it speaks of our commitment to Him. Someone has said that there are three parts to baptism. Firstly, you need the right person, only those who have come to understand their sin and need for Christ and who have turned to Christ for salvation should be baptized. Baptism is not the unsaved but the saved, it is not a means of regeneration but for those already regenerate. For this reason we do not baptize babies, nor people in comas on their death beds, nor anyone else who does not show a credible confession of faith. Secondly, baptism must have the right meaning. Baptism points to our salvation in Christ, that He as our substitute lived and died and was raised again and by being one with Him we are saved. Baptism points to Christ and His saving power not the saving power of the church, or the person performing the baptism, or the power of the water, it points to Christ. So if anyone gets baptized by a baptism that is not trusting in the saving work of Christ, we would not call that a biblical baptism. For this reason if you are baptized in a cult without having a proper understanding of the gospel, we would not recognize your baptism as a Christian baptism. If you were baptized trusting in Christ, no matter what denomination you are a part of you have a biblical baptism. Thirdly, baptism must also have the right mode. We understand baptism to be into Christ, a participation in His death and resurrection. Jesus underwent the judgement of God, like the flood which Peter tells us is a type of baptism, like the drowning of Pharaoh's army at the Red Sea. Jesus died as if He were a guilty sinner, which He was in the eyes of God. We believe that immersion is the proper mode to identify us with the grave and judgement. But Jesus having paid for sin by His death and in Himself being sinless death had no right to keep Him, and so the righteous was resurrected from the dead. Friends, if you have believed in Jesus, He has commanded that you be baptized because listen to what your baptism is telling you. It is saying because you are one with Christ through trusting in Him, His death is your death and your sins are paid for; His righteousness is your righteousness and just as death has no right to keep Him, death will not have the last word over you, you to will be raised from the dead.

Now we have said that who baptized who was obviously a point of contention and so Paul continues, v14-17, '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.' Paul as a church planter would have baptized the first converts in obedience to the great commission to make disciples baptizing them. Crispus the synagogue leader is mentioned as one of the first. Gaius, likely a rich person who hosted a church in his house, Rom. 16:23 as well. As well as the household of Stephanas who Paul says were the first in Achaia that he calls devoted converts. Paul like Christ (John 4:2) did not do the baptizing himself but as any good church planter and missionary would have done he delegated the task. This new church would have had leaders appointed and they would have been training in their tasks from the word go. We see something of Paul's method here.

Now Paul thanks God that he did not baptize a lot of them. Why because baptism is bad? Obviously not. Because baptism is irrelevant? Obviously not.

Because baptism is such an administrative burden and hassle? No, he is glad because he has not given the Corinthians fuel for their divisions because their man-following revolved around who baptized who. Like loyalty to a favorite pastor who might have married you or baptized you or buried your parents, these Corinthians had their favorite elder that they followed at the cost of the unity of the church. The divisions were not over mode, emmersion or immersion; nor over whether baptism should be applied to infants or believers; nor whether it should be practiced at all, but over who did the deed and a sinful exalting of them at the cost of the unity of the church.

Now many look at verse 17 where Paul says that he was not sent to baptize but to preach the gospel and misunderstand it. This has resulted in some thinking that baptism is totally irrelevant which is not Paul's point. Comparative to preaching the gospel it is irrelevant. This proves the point that baptism does not save, but that people need to hear the gospel to be saved. Baptism is not essential to salvation but we must not think that therefore it is not important. It is commanded by Christ and is the outward mark of your faith and membership in Him.

Paul pleads with us to be agreed, to repair any breeches, and not to allow our loyalty to others, nor our worldly ways of disagreeing with each other to cause divisions in the church. The challenge I have for us as we end is this. The church is Christ's body, He has paid a high price and granted us a high privilege as we participate in a high reality in being one with Him and each other. This is so much more precious than the petty opinions and parties we have in the world, is there anything that we are allowing to split this unity; is there anything that we are prioritizing above our oneness with each other; is there a man-following tendency that we have allowed to creep into our thinking that we are willing to split the peace of the church over? Let us remember the plea for unity; the typical problem of man-following that can destroy it; and the gospel that makes us into a united people.