

Servants of Unity

Printed Text: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Background Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

Devotional Reading: 1 Corinthians 1:2-9

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

¹⁰ 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 in 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 in 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.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Retell how the church at Corinth fractured.
2. Explain how interpersonal loyalties and insistence on personal preferences can cause division within the church.
3. Tell one way that he or she can give up a personal preference for the sake of church unity.

Introduction - Does Unity Really Matter?

One of the ancient fables of Aesop (620-560 B.C.) was about a hungry lion and four oxen. The lion often tried to find a way to attack the four oxen as they stood together in a field. But the lion was no match for all four together.

Then one day the oxen had a quarrel and separated. When the lion came, he found them standing as far away from one another as they could get. Now it became an easy matter for the lion to pick them off one by one. Aesop's moral to the story was this: "United we stand, divided we fall."

As Paul's opening chapter to the church in Corinth shows, God's will is for His people to serve in unity. In the 2,000 years since Christ, the church has divided into so many different faith expressions that it is virtually impossible to list them all. These divisions have existed for so long that they seem to be almost normal, right, and unchangeable. In this light the question must be asked: Does unity really matter? The answer must be yes for three reasons.

First, unity matters because division denies Jesus' prayer. On the night before He died, Jesus prayed earnestly for the unity of His followers (see John 17:20-26). Sincere followers of Christ simply must not ignore that solemn prayer.

Second, unity matters because division exposes us as carnal. Division is a work of the flesh (see 1 Corinthians 3:3, 4; Galatians 5:20). When the church divides because of power struggles and personality conflicts, it thinks and acts like the world.

Third, unity matters because division destroys our witness. Jesus said the world would recognize His disciples by their sincere love for one another (John 13:35). The reverse of this is also true. Many people are content to ignore Christ and the call of the gospel because they are repulsed by the confusion of so many different churches competing for their souls.

Lesson Background

The church in Corinth was founded by Paul himself (Acts 18:1-21). Despite the wickedness that pervaded this city, many people came to Christ in response to Paul's preaching. Apollos and others stepped in to help lead after Paul left the city to continue on his missionary journeys (Acts 18:24-19:1).

However, serious problems developed in Paul's absence. When Paul heard what was happening some four or five years later (about A.D. 55/56), he found it necessary to write to the Corinthians to correct the situation. Foremost among the problems in Corinth was the way the church had divided itself into factions. As the lesson text will show, the Corinthian Christians were aligning themselves with various leaders. Paul would have none of it. Their duty was to serve God-together!

Paul's Concern (1 Cor. 1:10-12)

Everyone can agree that everyone is different. Since everyone is different, people will not always have the same viewpoints on many different issues. It is important that those viewpoints are not self-centered, but rather God centered.

The Corinthians were extremely gifted, not lacking in resources with regard to serving Christ (v. 7). Their problem lay in their self-centeredness. Just because someone is extremely gifted does not mean that he will use his abilities in an appropriate manner.

The very first problem Paul addressed in his correspondence with the Corinthian church was that of internal division. No church can effectively reach the lost or grow spiritually when they are quarreling among themselves.

Since everyone does not have exactly the same viewpoints, it may seem that unity is impossible. 1 Peter 3:8 reminds us to be one minded and love one another. We must be united on the fundamentals of the faith as taught in the Bible. We can also be united in our desire to carry out the commission of Christ. If we fail to do this, "divisions" (literally, "schisms") will result.

Paul's appeal for unity was based on "the name of the Lord Jesus Christ" (v. 10). Since we are "*one body*" (12:12), division among believers is anti-ethical to what He has called us to be.

Remember, everything we do should be done to *"the glory of God"* (10:31). God does not receive glory from divided Christians. We exalt Christ by uniting with fellow believers, not opposing them.

1. Is it possible to have unity in a local church? Is there room for various opinions? (v. 10)

Paul was not ambiguous about the source of his information. He told the Corinthians that some from the household of Chloe had informed him of the quarrels or "contentions," in this young congregation.

While we know nothing of Chloe, she was likely a member of the Corinthian church. Either family members or servants probably related the information to Paul in Ephesus while they were visiting that city.

"Observe [Paul's] prudence: He names the family, to let it be seen that he made his allegation not without authority. He does not name the individuals, not to excite odium against them" (Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown's Commentary, Zondervan).

2. How did Paul find out about the division of the Corinthian church? (v. 11)

Instead of involving doctrinal distinctives, it seems that the divisions in Corinth revolved around personalities. Even today, churches may experience factionalism when certain people gravitate to one leader over another. More often than not, power struggles are at the root of division, as when one person or group wants to control others. In Corinth, the personalities may have represented certain doctrinal emphases that were distorted by the proponents of the divisions.

Verse 12 tells us the leaders that the Corinthians chose to align themselves with. There were four groups that were established as a result of division in the Corinthian Church. These groups "represented" one of the following leaders: Paul, Apollos, Cephas (Peter), and Christ.

Even in today's churches, people have their favorite preachers, ministers, or teachers that they may prefer to listen to for various reasons. Those in leadership positions must be careful to direct the followers' attention to God and not keep that attention for themselves. In addition, leaders in the church must get along with each other. The church is a team in which all players are striving for the same goal, to reach souls for Christ.

3. Who did the divisions revolve around? (v. 12)

Paul was followed in Corinth by Apollos, an eloquent and learned preacher from Alexandria (Acts 18:24-28). Apollos was instrumental in encouraging spiritual growth in the church. In no way did Paul see him as a rival, for they were both laboring for Christ (1 Cor. 3:4-7).

Because of his background, Apollos may have been welcomed by the more learned members of the congregation, especially those who were still enamored of Greek philosophy. Some see this division as representing a more philosophic approach to the Christian faith.

"Cephas" is the Aramaic name for Peter. While we have no record of him ever being in Corinth, Peter did travel around preaching and certainly was known to the church (9:5). Since Peter's

primary mission was among the Jews (Gal. 2:8), some believe this faction emphasized the Mosaic law and was made up of Jewish converts (Acts 18:8).

We should realize that none of these godly men sought to have religious parties formed around them. They were not instigators of division in Corinth, nor were they encouraging factionalism in any way.

4. Why would some follow Apollos or Cephas (Peter)?

Everyone who has made Jesus Christ their Lord and Savior is considered to be "of Christ." That means that everyone ought to be united with Christ. So how do we reconcile those Corinthians' claim to be "of Christ" in verse 12?

Identifications have ranged from those who were loyal only to Christ to those who were part of some heretical Gnostic sect. Since Paul included this designation among those who were causing division, it is probable that this group claimed to be more spiritual or even the only true Christian among them.

Whatever position they represented; they were being as divisive as the others. These people try to claim that they are better than the rest of the Christians; however, they forget that there is no respect of persons with God (Rom. 2:11). Paul's Complaint (1 Cor. 1:13-16)

5. Who were these people that claimed to be "of Christ"?

Paul mentions two individuals that he personally baptized in verse 13. One of those individuals was Crispus. He was the "chief ruler of the synagogue" (Acts 18:8) and a noteworthy convert. Unlike some of the places to which Paul went on his mission journeys, Corinth produced a number of Jewish converts, not the least of whom was Crispus, the most important Jew in town.

6. Who was Crispus? Why was his conversion important?

The other individual Paul baptized in verse 14 was Gaius. Since there are a number of men with the name "Gaius" in Scripture (Acts 19:29; 20:4; Rom 16:23; 3 John 1), we cannot be sure whether any is the same as the one mentioned here. Since Romans was written from Corinth, however, it is possible that the man mentioned in Romans 16:23 is the same person. There we learn that Paul was staying with Gaius and that this brother had opened his home as a meeting place for the Corinthians.

7. What do we know about Gaius? What problems are there in identifying Him?

Paul also baptized the "household of Stephanas" (1 Cor. 1:16), who were actually the first converts in that part of Greece. Although Paul did not give us details, this family was dedicated to some ministry (16:15).

8. How do we know about the household of Stephanas?

Paul was focused on winning souls for Christ. Baptism is an outer expression of an inner transformation of a person's soul. All baptisms must be done in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost (Matt. 28:19). The fact that Paul only baptized a few converts is evidence

that he was not trying to gain a personal following there. As he wrote later, "*We preach not ourselves, but Christ Jesus the Lord*" (2 Cor. 4:5). Paul's Commission (1 Cor. 1:17)

9. Why was Paul glad he had baptized only a few of the Corinthian converts?

Paul's primary mission was to "preach the gospel." He had been called for this ministry from his mother's womb (Gal. 1:15-16), though he did not become aware of it until his experience on the Damascus road (Acts 22:14-15).

"Paul does not separate the act of baptizing from the proclamation of the gospel, a fact that must also be taken into account as part of his understanding of baptism. It seems clear from this passage that Paul does not understand baptism to effect salvation. The preaching of the cross does that-when of course it is accompanied by the effectual work of the Spirit. But it would be quite wrong to go on, as some do, and say that baptism is a purely secondary matter." (Fee)

Just like Paul, Christians should spread the Gospel to lost souls. That is the primary mission for the church today. Although different churches may perform their baptisms in different manners, the important thing is that new Christians identify with the body of Christ. Churches should not compete with each other to win a person's soul; rather they should rejoice whenever a lost soul is won for Christ.

10. What was Paul's primary mission? How does preaching the gospel relate to baptism?

Conclusion

A. Cost of Disunity

Lack of unity in the church is a costly problem, one that lies at the root of many other problems. Lack of unity prevented the Corinthians from coming together to confront an immoral brother (1 Corinthians 5:1-5). Lack of unity led them to take each other to court before pagan judges (6:1-6). Lack of unity drove a wedge between those who ate certain foods and those who did not (8:1-12). Lack of unity even corrupted their observance of the Lord's Supper, which should have been central to their oneness (10:14-17; 11:18-22). Lack of unity produced the situation where members were in competition with each other to show off their spiritual gifts (chapters 12-14). None of these problems in Corinth could be resolved as long as disunity existed.

B. Cure for Disunity

Disunity can be cured! In the opening chapter of this letter, Paul noted how divided Christians can come together: we must set Christ, the Son of God, above any other loyalty. Loyalty that places anyone else above Christ for any reason can only result in defeat.

Unity will never happen as long as we insist that everyone else has to come and join our group. Unity will happen only when we come together at the foot of the cross. God's Spirit can make us one-but only if we are willing. The way we respond to Paul's plea will determine whether or not we will be found serving in unity.

Prayer

Father, forgive us for promoting divisive squabbles. Help us to find the ways to resolve them. Show us how to serve You in true and loving unity. In the name of Jesus, amen.

Thought to Remember

Service for Christ begins with unity in Christ.