

Challenges Christians Face

Divisions in the Church

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Divisions in the Church

Scripture

Today we continue studying *The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians* in a series I am calling *Challenges Christians Face*.

In our first lesson we looked at the salutation of 1 Corinthians (1:1-3). Then, in our second lesson (last week) we looked at the thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians (1:4-9).

Today, we move into the body of the letter. The apostle Paul begins his letter by addressing the issue of “Divisions in the Church” in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.

Let’s read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17:

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ 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.” ¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ 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. (1 Corinthians 1:10–17)

Introduction

We live in a world in which people often have disagreements. Some of our disagreements are relatively minor, but other disagreements can be rather major.

Perhaps you have heard the story of the man and his wife who were having an argument about who should brew the coffee each morning.

The wife said, “You should do it, because you get up first, and then we don’t have to wait as long to get our coffee.”

But the husband said, “You are in charge of cooking around here and you should do it, because that is your job, and I can just wait for my coffee.”

The wife replied, “No, you should do it. And besides, it is in the Bible that the man should do the coffee.”

The husband was surprised, and said, “I can’t believe that. Show me.”

So the wife fetched the Bible, and opened the New Testament and showed him at the top of several pages, that it indeed says: “**HEBREWS**”!

I like the way pastor John MacArthur shows how disagreements are not only part of life, but also how they escalate in our lives. He says:

Quarrels are a part of life. We grow up in them and around them. Infants are quick to express displeasure when they are not given something they want or when something they like is taken away. Little children cry, fight, and throw tantrums because they cannot have their own ways. We argue and fight over a rattle, then a toy, then a football, then a position on the football team or in the cheerleading squad, then in business, the PTA, or politics. Friends fight, husbands and wives fight, businesses fight, cities fight, even nations fight—sometimes to the point of war.¹

Unfortunately, even Christians can have disagreements. That is the situation in the church at Corinth. The apostle Paul heard that there were disagreements in the church at Corinth. These disagreements had escalated to the point of causing divisions in the church. And so Paul felt compelled to address the matter.

¹ John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 24.

Review

Let me briefly review what we have covered so far in our series on *Challenges Christians Face*.

First Corinthians 1:1-3 is the salutation of the letter. The apostle Paul utilized the standard letter-writing convention of his day by opening with a salutation in which he identified the greeter (himself), the greeted (the church at Corinth), and the greeting (grace and peace).

Then, the apostle wrote the thanksgiving of 1 Corinthians (1:4-9). Paul thanked God for the Corinthians' past gifts, present state, and future prospects.

Now, as we move into verse 10, the apostle begins the body of his letter. And he immediately addressed the issue of divisions in the church in Corinth. Paul urged the Christians in Corinth to heal the divisions in the church because they are contrary to the unity that exists in Christ's body.

Lesson

And so, in today's lesson we are urged to heal the divisions in the church because they are contrary to the unity that exists in Christ's body. Let's utilize the following outline for today's lesson:

1. The Appeal Regarding the Divisions (1:10)
2. The Knowledge of the Divisions (1:11)
3. The Cause of the Divisions (1:12)
4. The Absurdity of the Divisions (1:13)
5. The Correction of the Divisions (1:14-17)

I. The Appeal Regarding the Divisions (1:10)

First, let's look at the appeal regarding the divisions.

Paul said in verse 10: **“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 began with a respectful but forceful **appeal**. The Greek word for **appeal** (*parakalew*) is the same word from which we get the word for “helper” (*parakletos*). The basic meaning is that of coming alongside someone in order to help. Paul wanted to come alongside his **brothers** and sisters in the church in Corinth in order to help correct their sinful divisions.

Paul called his readers **brothers** (which also included sisters) in this verse as well as in the next verse in order to remind them of his intense feeling of love and affection for them. Remember that he had planted the church in Corinth. And so he still knew many if not most of the people in the church, and he felt very close to them.

Paul also revealed the intensity of his concern by appealing to his readers **by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**. By so doing, Paul reminded them that the authority of the **Lord Jesus Christ** himself stood behind his appeal.

The appeal has three parts. Paul asked the Christians in Corinth (1) **that all of you agree**, (2) **that there be no divisions among you**, and (3) **that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment**. Each part says basically the same thing: Christians need to eliminate divisions among themselves and be united together.

In the verses that follow, and, indeed in the rest of his letter to the Corinthians, the apostle spells out the beliefs that should form the center of agreement among Christians. Basically, *Christians are to agree on the central truths of the gospel*. To be sure, there is room for disagreement and diversity of opinion over secondary matters in the church. However, over the central truths of the gospel, there cannot be any disagreement.

John MacArthur is surely right when he says that “for a local church to be spiritually healthy, harmonious, and effective, there must, above all, be doctrinal unity.”²

I cannot stress how important this matter is. Christians have

² John MacArthur, *1 Corinthians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1996), 26.

all kinds of disagreements over all kinds of issues for all kinds of reasons. However, the most serious divisions in the church almost always occur over doctrine.

Listen to Paul's warning to the Christians in the church at Rome, "I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them" (Romans 16:17). Those who teach anything that is contrary to the Word of God are not serving Christ but themselves and their own interests.

In matters on which the Word of God is not explicit there is room for difference of opinion. But in the clear teaching of the Word of God there is no room for difference.

So, Paul's appeal is essentially to eliminate divisions and to be united together in doctrinal agreement over the central truths of the gospel.

II. The Knowledge of the Divisions (1:11)

Second, observe the apostle's knowledge of the divisions.

Paul said in verse 11: **"For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers."**

Notice that Paul again calls the Christians in Corinth **brothers**. This term includes sisters as well. Paul is stressing his heartfelt love and concern for all the Christians in Corinth.

Paul revealed the source of his concern. A report had been brought to him from **Chloe's people**. We are not sure who Chloe was. Some think she was a member of the church in Corinth. Others think that she was a businesswoman in Corinth or even in Ephesus. In any case, **Chloe's people** told Paul that there was **quarreling among** the Christians in the church at Corinth.

III. The Cause of the Divisions (1:12)

Third, notice the cause of the divisions.

Paul said in verse 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.’”**

The apostle Paul had planted the church in Corinth. He lived in Corinth for 18 months and saw many of the Corinthians converted to Christ (Acts 18:8, 11). It is understandable that many of the Corinthian converts would see Paul as a spiritual father.

Shortly after Paul left Corinth a man by the name of Apollos became the pastor of the church at Corinth. He “was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures” (Acts 18:24). Many people came to faith in Christ under the ministry of Apollos. And again it is understandable that many of the Christians at Corinth would see Apollos as a spiritual father.

There is no clear evidence that the apostle Peter ever visited Corinth, although there is some speculation that he did visit Corinth with his wife. More likely, however, Jews who had heard Peter preach in Jerusalem and who were converted under his ministry eventually moved to Corinth. They would obviously think well of Peter. He was one of Jesus’ apostles and had worked closely with Jesus in his ministry. I can almost hear these Christians saying things like, “Well, the apostle Peter used to say. . . .”

As a pastor I occasionally hear well-meaning Christians say, “Well, my pastor back in Atlanta used to say. . . .” Or, “Back in my church in Birmingham we used to do it this way. . . .”

What was happening at the church in Corinth is that the Christians had their favorite leader. Some would say, **“I follow Paul.”** Others would say, **“I follow Apollos.”** And still others would say, **“I follow Cephas,”** which is the Syriac surname given by Christ to Simon.³ And then the truly spiritual would say, **“I follow Christ.”**

It is not difficult to divide into factions. It is especially easy to do so in our day with the ease of so much teaching available in books, on the radio, on TV, and especially on the internet.

³ M.G. Easton, *Easton’s Bible Dictionary* (Oak Harbor, WA: Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1996).

I remember a lady who came back from a conference who was especially blessed by one of the preachers. She desperately wanted our whole congregation to hear him and seriously suggested that one Sunday, instead of having the congregation listen to my sermon, we put the TV behind the pulpit and play his sermon to the congregation!

Now, I do want to say that God has blessed his people with great preachers and teachers. We should learn from them and be blessed by their teaching. However, we should never sink to the point where we pit our favorite preachers against one another.

It is interesting to note that the Corinthian “heroes” (**Paul**, **Apollos**, and **Cephas**) preached the same gospel and they were not pitted against each other. No. It was the Christians in Corinth who were dividing over loyalty to their favorite leader.

IV. The Absurdity of the Divisions (1:13)

Fourth, think about the absurdity of the divisions.

Paul responded to the absurdity of the divisions by asking three questions. By the way the questions are stated in the Greek it is clear that Paul expected negative responses.

First, Paul asked in verse 13a, **“Is Christ divided?”** The kinds of divisions among the Christians at Corinth could perhaps be justified if Christ’s own resurrected body had somehow been dismembered. Elsewhere, Paul described the church as the body of Christ, the community of those joined to him and to one another by faith (Romans 12:3-5; Ephesians 3:6). If Christ had been dismembered after his resurrection, the divisions within the church might have been theoretically acceptable. But since Christ remained whole, the church needed to do so as well.

Second, Paul asked in verse 13b, **“Was Paul crucified for you?”** Because some members of the Corinthian church identified themselves as the followers of Paul, Paul asked if he himself had been **crucified** for the believers in Corinth. By this question he made it clear that to identify oneself as a follower of Paul was to

insult the saving work of Christ. Paul was the servant and apostle of Corinth, but he was not their Savior.

And third, Paul asked in verse 13c, **“Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”** The New Testament makes it plain that Christian baptism was performed in the name of the Trinity (Matthew 28:19). This formula was often abbreviated as baptism “in the name of Jesus” (Acts 2:38; 19:5). Even so, nowhere in the New Testament were believers baptized in the name of an apostle or church leader. The loyalties of believers in all ages must be directed toward Christ alone.⁴

Basically, Paul is urging Christians to understand that our unity is found in Christ alone. It is not found in any leader, no matter how effective and gifted that leader may be.

The *importance* of unity is seen in the Word of God. The Psalmist says, “Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!” (Psalm 133:1). The apostle Paul prayed for the Christians at Rome, “May the God of endurance and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore welcome one another as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God” (Romans 15:5-7). And there are many other passages that stress the importance of unity in the Word of God.

The *purpose* of unity is to glorify God. In Paul’s prayer for the Romans we see the purpose of unity is for the glory of God (Romans 15:7).

And the *source* of unity is the Lord himself. We are called to preserve unity. We are able to destroy unity. But we cannot create unity. The unity of the church is established by the work of the Holy Spirit as he unites believers together in the body of Christ. The Father is one, the Son is one, the Spirit is one, and the church is one.

⁴ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 9–10.

V. The Correction of the Divisions (1:14-17)

And finally, let's see the correction of the divisions.

Paul said in verses 14-17: **“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) 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 breathed a sigh of relief that he had not baptized many people in Corinth. In his ministry in Corinth he had baptized **Crispus** (see Acts 18:8) **and Gaius** (see Romans 16:23), but no others.

These words do not suggest that Paul considered baptism unimportant. Elsewhere Paul stressed the importance of baptism. It is the sign and seal of faith in Christ, demonstrating union with Christ in his death and resurrection (Romans 6:4). For this reason, evangelism includes baptism. Even so, in this particular circumstance where believers aligned themselves against others as followers of Paul, he was relieved that he had not provided them with support for their divisive spirit by baptizing many of them.

Paul then qualified his statement that he had only baptized Crispus and Gaius. In the process of writing these verses, he remembered that he had also baptized **the household of Stephanas** (see 1 Corinthians 16:15). **Stephanas** himself may have reminded Paul of these baptisms as Paul dictated the letter to Sosthenes, since **Stephanas** was apparently with him (1 Corinthians 16:17).

Beyond this, however, Paul confessed that he could not remember if he had baptized anyone else. This qualification indicates how intent Paul was on not providing his opponents any grounds for objections to his argument.

Verse 17 serves as a hinge in Paul's discussion. It closes his discussion of baptism and transitions to his next topic. The conclusion to the previous matter amounts to an explanation that Christ did not send him **to baptize, but to preach the gospel.**

The expression “**preach the gospel**” moved Paul’s thoughts in a different but related direction. What was the nature of the gospel he preached? It was **not with words of eloquent wisdom**. The idea is that his preaching did not rely on cleverness or eloquence. Paul distinguished himself from the Greek orators of his day who sought to persuade with impressive rhetoric and style. Paul insisted that his own preaching was simple and straightforward. He avoided great oratory because he did not want to distract from the message itself. His style of preaching was self-effacing, pointing to the source of salvation, Christ.

Paul was concerned that **the cross of Christ not be emptied of its power** when presented in preaching. The gospel message contradicts human wisdom, so that it cannot be mixed with the power of human wisdom and manipulative persuasion. For this reason, those in Corinth who tried to defend their faith and practices through human wisdom actually opposed the way of the gospel. The **power** of the **cross** was the “power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes” (Romans 1:16). Salvation comes only from the atonement of Christ, purchased by his suffering on the cross. The recognition and reception of that power was Paul’s chief concern as he proclaimed the gospel.⁵

Conclusion

I am grateful to God that there are no divisions in the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church. However, let us remember that we are called to embrace doctrinal agreement over the central message of the gospel and that our unity is to be found in Christ alone as he has revealed himself to us in his Word. May God help us to preserve this unity in our local church for his glory. Amen.

⁵ Richard L. Pratt, Jr., vol. 7, *I & II Corinthians*, Holman New Testament Commentary; Holman Reference (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 2000), 10-11.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and **membership** in his church family,
develop them to Christlike **maturity**,
equip them for their **ministry** in the church
and life **mission** in the world,
in order to **magnify** God's name.*

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Challenges Christians Face

PRAAYER:

O Lord Our God, I thank you for enabling us to study *Challenges Christians Face*. Today we looked at divisions in the church. We see that it is easy for a church to divide.

Enable us to work always to preserve the unity that we have in Christ. Our unity exists in the truth, which has been given to us in the Word of God. Help us to remain in agreement on the central issues regarding the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And for this I pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and live as those who are united in Jesus Christ!