

II. Reported Concerns – News Regarding the Corinthian Church

Paul devoted the first section of his letter to concerns that had been reported to him by visitors from the church in Corinth (1:10-6:20). In the case of some of those concerns, it's unclear exactly who brought them to him. But Paul leaves no doubt as to who informed him of the first matter: The members of Chloe's house brought to him the disheartening news that the body of Christ at Corinth was becoming increasingly divided and contentious.

A. Discord and Division (1:10-4:21)

Of the concerns reported to him, Paul gave the most attention to addressing the matter of division among the Corinthian saints. Commentators have posited various explanations, but the most likely reason is also the most obvious: All of the other problems at Corinth were merely differing manifestations of the church's fundamental disunity; they were thus symptomatic rather than problematic. So also the outward divisions and factions among the Corinthian believers were themselves pointers to the true disease that plagued that body.

As previously noted, the Corinthians were lying against their identity and calling as God's saints; though set apart to God in Christ Jesus, they were living as "natural men" (ref. 3:1-4) – individuals consecrated to their own personal interests. Increasingly it was every man for himself in the church at Corinth, and this mindset of self-concern and self-devotion was the underlying cause of their quarrels, their factions, their immorality, their lawsuits, etc. *The Corinthians had transformed God's good gifts into mammon, and that included the gift of the Body itself.*

1. Paul notably introduced his treatment of divisions at Corinth with an exhortation (1:10). Like a wise father dealing with the contentions of immature children, he first directed the Corinthians toward the real problem and its remedy; only then did he begin to speak to the symptoms, namely the emergence of factions at Corinth. Paul's exhortation was a passionate call for unity, and several things about it are important to note:
 - a. The first is that Paul issued it as a *plea to beloved brethren*. He wasn't addressing them as a detached scholar or rabbi offering Bible-based instruction or counsel, but as their brother in Christ. Though Paul rightly regarded himself as the Corinthians' spiritual *father* in that the Spirit had brought them to faith through his ministry, his fatherhood didn't imply superiority or preeminence. He'd merely obeyed his calling and employed his gifts as a faithful servant of Christ (3:5-7); in the end, he and those among whom he labored in the gospel were brothers, joined as equals and equally beloved by the same Lord and Father.

Paul *did* possess and exercise authority in the Church as the Lord's apostle, but it was Jesus' authority and not his own. Each believer is gifted and called to use his gifts as a servant of Christ and each will give an account to Him. Those given leadership gifts are no less servants than those given gifts of "helps" (12:28), and Jesus will judge both on the basis of how they served the good of His beloved Body (2 Corinthians 5:10). Paul's purposefulness is evident even in his plea: He could not regard himself as superior; how, then, could the Corinthians (4:1-13)?

- b. The second observation is that Paul pled for unity, not in his own name, but the name of Jesus Himself (note Paul's use again of the comprehensive expression *Lord Jesus Christ*). By pleading in this name, Paul was doing a couple of things:
- First, he was invoking Christ's *lordship*. Paul wanted the Corinthians to understand that his exhortation didn't arise from his own authority, judgment or desire, but expressed the will of the Lord of the Church.
 - Second, he was invoking the Christ's *headship*. He isn't simply Lord of the Church; He is the Head of the Body. The former speaks to authority, the latter to relationship. Jesus is sovereign Lord, but not as a detached despot according to the "procedure of the king." He exercises His kingly authority and power as Servant and Benefactor of His subjects – subjects who comprise His own Body as His *fullness* (Ephesians 1:22-23). The One who is *Lord* is *Jesus the Messiah*: the Last Adam and Servant-Son in whom Adam's race realizes its own human destiny as divine image-son.

Paul's plea was Christ's plea, and it called the Corinthians to respond on the basis of the truth bound up in the gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul wasn't suggesting or recommending unity in the church, but neither was he commanding it as a moral or ethical obligation. He was exhorting the Corinthians to recognize and return to the truth of what it means to be the Body of Christ: the truth that they were members of one another because they were members of Christ (again, 12:1ff). *Paul exhorted them to unity because anything short of it is a lie*; it is a denial of the Lord Jesus Christ who now finds His fullness in His Body, the Church.

- c. The third thing to note is that Paul expressed this unity in negative and positive terms. Negatively, its antithesis is *division* (Greek, *schisma*, or schism), this term denoting a rending or tearing apart. In this usage it refers to the rift that results from competing ideas, desires, and loyalties. Positively, this unity consists in the *agreement* resulting from a common mind and common judgment (1:10).

By treating it in this way, Paul importantly shows that unity in the church isn't *uniformity*; being of the same understanding and judgment doesn't mean seeing everything in exactly the same way and with the same level of importance. If unity *were* uniformity, how could the church be defined as a spiritual body comprised of people of every tribe, tongue, nation and people? Differences among the saints are not merely inevitable; they are necessary and healthy. What Paul was calling for is the unity that consists in the shared life and mind of Christ.

Literally, Paul expressed this agreement in terms of "*speaking the same thing*," and he posed it as the antithesis of schism. Here again it is important to understand that Paul wasn't calling for uniformity in speech, but the common conviction of a shared "word": the word of truth as it is embodied in and implied by the gospel. In turn, sharing the same word of truth implies that the Corinthians would have a common *frame of mind* and so a common *judgment* arising from it.

Here Paul was drawing upon his previous acknowledgement of the Corinthians' rich endowment in knowledge and speech. They excelled in insight and understanding (knowledge), but they used it (through their speech) as an instrument of contention and schism, and Paul was calling them back to the proper perception and use of those gifts (and all their gifts).

*Spiritual gifts are endowments of the **one** and **same** Spirit, and so it is with knowledge and speech. Where they are rightly appraised and appropriated, they will tend toward a common "mind" and common "word." Thus, like all the Spirit's gifts, knowledge and speech serve the unity and edification of the church; if the Corinthians would regard and employ them **in truth** they would see the end of strife and schism; they would see the mending of the tears in the church's unity.*

- d. Finally, it's notable that Paul didn't urge the Corinthians to attempt or strive for this agreement among them, but to simply *do* it. This implies that true Christian unity is first and foremost a matter of commitment and will. It doesn't require exhaustive theological study or endless debate; neither does it demand – or even seek – absolute uniformity in conviction with respect to either doctrine or practice (8:1ff; cf. Romans 12-15). What it does require is the body's understanding of what it means to be saints set apart to God in Christ Jesus and their commitment to live out that truth authentically and in all sincerity.

If Paul was right and this sort of agreement can be realized in this way, *why is it that unity in the Church is (and always has been) so very rare? Why is it that churches always struggle against dissension and division?* One obvious reason is that multitudes of Christians don't understand the nature and basis of true unity; how can they be of the same mind and judgment if they don't know what that means or what it is that they're to unify around?

- Too often Christians confuse unity with uniformity: They think that unity means the absence of theological, doctrinal and practical (sometimes even cultural) differences. And since that's a practical impossibility, the alternative is to subjugate differences to an agreed upon standard.
- Many believers fail to recognize that true Christian unity is nothing more and nothing less than *common-union in Christ* – unity which consists in His shared life in the Spirit and the shared truth of His gospel.
- Unity is *spiritual* (of the Spirit), while uniformity is *fleshly*. Unity is common-union in Christ by the Spirit (Ephesians 4:1-6), and so is unconcerned with and puts no ultimate value in any other unifying criterion. (A body of believers may enjoy other arenas of commonality such as culture, lifestyle preferences, etc., but all such things are irrelevant to unity.) On the other hand, uniformity seeks – and often enforces – “sameness” across a broad spectrum; it is preoccupied with human concerns, however religious or “spiritual” they may be.

In the end, unity is impossible where it is confused with uniformity; the best that can be achieved is coerced compliance (through indirect and direct means). But where unity is rightly discerned and valued – as it ought by God’s saints who are enriched in knowledge, it becomes a delightful and easy thing. More than that, the Church becomes what it actually is, namely *heaven on earth*: the foretaste of consummation for the saints and the fragrance of the new creation for the world.

2. Paul explained his call for unity by informing his readers that he was aware of just how fractured and discordant the church at Corinth had become. He wasn’t issuing a generic exhortation; he was addressing them and their issues directly. The Corinthians couldn’t rationalize his plea or hope that he didn’t really know what was going on among them; he knew by firsthand report that they were dividing into a collection of disputing factions – *factions which identified themselves based on their allegiance to certain men* (1:11-12).

a. Religious factions always have men at their center even when they’re organized around and focused on doctrinal concerns. The reason is that doctrine is formulated, systematized and promoted by men. Adherents may bind themselves to certain doctrines and form a community unified by them, but men are always the keepers of those doctrines. This is sadly just as true of Christianity, where so often the “faithful” identify and demarcate themselves by an authorized body of doctrine promoted and enforced by powerful and influential individuals.

b. So it was at Corinth; the factions emerging there were associated with leading men in the Christian community. Paul and Apollos were obvious choices, for both had played important roles in the life of the Corinthian church; Peter likely gained a following among the Jewish believers at Corinth due to his prominence as one of the Twelve and an apostle to the Jews. (It is uncertain whether Peter ever visited Corinth, but his status and reputation were doubtless known to them.)

What is most important to note – and what was most outrageous to Paul – is that the Corinthians were adding *Jesus Himself* to their list of notable men to unify around. Whether or not they realized it, they had effectively reduced the Lord to just another prominent Christian leader alongside Paul, Apollos and Peter. One could be *of Paul* or *of Apollos* just as he could be *of Christ*. It’s possible that the latter group consisted of those who were rightly devoted to the Lord in opposition to the other factions. But the fact that Paul lumped them with their counterparts and used the same language to describe them indicates that this group was itself a faction implicated in the schisms and strife at Corinth.

- Thus some have speculated that the “Jesus group” consisted of individuals who regarded themselves as super-spiritual and so couldn’t be bothered with human teachers and authority (the “I only submit to Christ” crowd).

- Others have concluded that this group was following Jesus as if He were a spiritual guru – a quasi-gnostic philosopher – and they were the truly enlightened few among the believers at Corinth (ref. 1:17-2:5).

Whatever the specific convictions and orientation of this Jesus faction, it's clear that Paul regarded it, as all the other factions at Corinth, as scandalous and deeply troubling. He understood all too well that, "*when 'I belong to Christ' becomes the rallying cry of one contentious faction within the church, Christ is de facto reduced to the status of one more leader hustling for adherents within the community's local politics*" (Richard Hays). Personal agendas and church politics always go hand-in-hand; it was the case at Corinth, and so it continues to the present day. Christians remain ever inclined to "walk by sight," and this natural-mindedness (the "old man") manifests itself in their allegiance to traditions, movements and theological systems as well as individual men; two millennia after the debacle at Corinth, nothing has changed in Christ's Church.

3. The factions in Corinth were bad enough, but they were made all the worse by the fact that Jesus was implicated in them. Irrespective of which particular faction a Corinthian believer happened to align himself with, he was guilty of making the Lord Jesus simply one notable individual among many. The Corinthians were trampling underfoot the Son of God, but in so doing they were also denying His gospel – the very gospel they had embraced and by which they identified themselves. *Ironically, in aligning themselves with the person they believed was the best advocate of Christ and His gospel, the Corinthians were actually denying both, and so also themselves as Christians.*

The Corinthians doubtless believed that their factionalizing was about faithfulness to God and His truth. But in reality they were serving their own agendas, denigrating their Lord by setting Him alongside His servants and setting those servants against one another by exalting one over the other (4:6; cf. 1:30-31, 3:21-23). Paul confronted this travesty head on, unmasking it through a series of rhetorical questions (1:13-17).

- a. In the first place, by splitting into factions the Corinthians were effectively *seeking to divide Christ*. Paul would go on to remind them that all of them were members of His one body; unless Christ can be divided up into various parts and parceled out, what they were doing in dividing among themselves was absurd and a lie against the truth of the Church as Christ's Body and fullness.
- b. Moreover, reducing Jesus to simply another spiritual leader *denied Him as the unique Lamb of God*. Paul hadn't been crucified for them and they hadn't become the church of God at Corinth through union with him (or Apollos, Cephas, or anyone else). If the Corinthians were indeed *Christians*, then they were sharers in *Jesus' life* by virtue of His atoning death and resurrection as the Last Adam.
- c. Hadn't they each affirmed that truth when they were baptized? Each of the Corinthians had undergone baptism as testimony to his forgiveness, cleansing and new life, and none of them had been baptized in Paul's name. Paul's subsequent disclaimer (vv. 14-17) suggests that the Corinthian factions may have had some basis in who'd been baptized by whom, and he made it clear that that issue was totally irrelevant. It didn't matter who'd administered baptism, *but in whose name – and in the faith of what gospel – a person had been baptized*. Baptism didn't produce disciples, but God's power through the truth of the gospel of Jesus Christ.