

3. Church cliques and divisions

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In a perfect world, everyone would love each other and get along with everyone, especially in the Christian churches. Newsflash!!! In case you have not noticed, we don't live in a perfect world, because we are still on earth, not in heaven. It means that we bump our heads with each other, insist our ways over others, struggle for power control, even in the churches. Much to unbelievers' horror, when Christians are at each other's throat – figuratively, they are used by demons while they quote Bible verses and have pious looks.

Church division is painful and tragic, especially for new believers in the Lord who look to their spiritual mentors for security and nurturing. And it is a disgraceful thing to the Lord and it gives an opportunity for the enemy of God to blaspheme the wonderful name of our Lord.

The church at Corinth was about to experience such a division. What was it that threatened to split and tear the bond that the Corinthian congregation once enjoyed under the apostle Paul?

Paul knew. He saw the cracks in their unity. He knew that the church would soon split, so he wrote a letter encouraging the Corinthians to reconcile – to leave their selfish desires and renew their vows of commitment by cleaving to each other in the Lord Jesus.

This church division is NOT limited to the first century churches, but it is very relevant to the 21st century churches in America. That is what we are going to study this morning.

A. PAUL'S EXHORTATION

1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

In addressing the Corinthians as “brethren,” Paul approaches them tenderly. Yet his words also carry the authority of God, as he exhorts them “by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” – compelled by God's love for them and using God's authority to speak in Christ's name.

It is very important to remember this: If you see one of your brothers in the Lord is sinning, you know that you need to exhort that brother with godly advice. You'd better pray hard and advise him by the power of the Holy Spirit in the love of Jesus Christ. If not, it will blow up in your face.

Galatians 6:1 Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness, considering yourself lest you also be tempted.

The word “Divisions” comes from the Greek word “schisma,” meaning “to separate, to rip, to tear, to split.” Obviously we derive our English word “schism” from this Greek word. This body Paul has loved and nurtured is now ruptured, broken, divided; and he is deeply concerned.

He wants the Corinthians to have an attitude of flexibility and oneness. They were all doing what was right in their own eyes, creating an obnoxious spiritual stench and Paul wanted them to tune in to the Spirit and live in harmony.

The words “joined together” come from a single Greek word “katartizo”. It is a medical word used of mending together bones that have been fractured, or joining together a joint that has been dislocated.

B. CHURCH CLIQUES

1 Corinthians 1:11-12 For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. 12 Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.”

Notice that the apostle does not blame Satan for their quarreling. Paul lays the blame squarely on the Corinthians’ shoulders, and pointing out that their spiritual immaturity was creating the divisions.

When we are saved, our sin natures don’t disappear unfortunately. They just get a new roommate – the Holy Spirit and our own carnal nature. So the roommates constantly wrestle for possession of the prized property, our hearts. Please remember that our hearts are the battleground, not playground which we absolutely should not take lightly.

Romans 7:15-16 I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do. NIV

Who has control of your heart? It’s not too late to lock out your heart’s old roommate, carnal nature, and give the key to the Holy Spirit.

The Corinthians’ boasting about their “clique leaders” was really boasting about themselves. It wasn’t so much that they thought Apollos was great, but that they were great for following him. If these leaders were in their church and found out that they’ve been bickering all this time over whom they are associated with, they would have given them a strong rebuke.

Let’s take a look at each clique:

1) The clique of Paul: Paul ministered to the Gentiles. In fact, it was from Paul’s lips that they first heard the Good News about liberty in Christ.

2) The clique of Apollos: After Paul left the church at Corinth, Apollos arrived.
Acts 18:27-28 And when he desired to cross to Achaia, the brethren wrote, exhorting the disciples to receive him; and when he arrived, he greatly helped those who had believed through grace; 28 for he vigorously refuted the Jews publicly, showing from the Scriptures that Jesus is the Christ.

Apollos was intellectually and scripturally excellent, as well as an eloquent preacher. It’s easy to see how some Christians would have been so impressed by the dynamic Apollos that they would have come to compare all other ministers to him, particularly Paul.

3) The clique of Cephas: Cephas, meaning “stone,” another name of the apostle Peter. The Corinthian believers probably knew that Peter was one of the spiritual pillars of the church and one of Jesus’ original 12 disciples. With all these credentials, no wonder Jewish Christians formed around him.

4) The clique of Christ: Feeling they were too holy to be led by mere men, this clique claimed to have received their teaching directly from the Lord Jesus Christ. They thought that since Christ is the head of the Church, human authorities were unnecessary. But instead of claiming that they belonged to Christ, they actually were claiming that Christ belonged to them. Though they spoke pious words, their air of superiority was a stench to the nostrils of God. And so it is today.

We have five basic options for where to place our focus – each one demands the undivided attention of our eyes:

- We can fix our eyes on THINGS, which leads to materialism and a nagging dissatisfaction.
- We can focus on our SITUATION, which teeters us between false security when our situation is good, but devastation when things look bleak.
- We can have our eyes on OURSELVES, become preoccupied with pride, and suffer from ingrown eyeball disease.
- We can focus on OTHERS. Here's where the Corinthians chose to turn their eyes. They made people into idols, set them up as objects of worship.
- The only right choice, we can focus on the LORD.

Hebrews 12:2 looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith

It is sinful for church congregations to compare their pastors, or for believers to follow human leaders as disciples of men and not disciples of Jesus Christ. The "personality cults" in the church today which I call following Christian celebrities is in direct disobedience to the Word of God. Spiritual elitism is terrible, no matter whose name it is practiced in. Only Jesus Christ should have the place of preeminence.

Though I know that the Lord did not originally intend for His followers to have many denominations within the body, we have them. But in a way I am glad that there is a great variety among Christians. There are people who relate to the Lord in a formal, liturgical way, while others enjoy a more casual worship atmosphere. Some prepare a more academic approach to Bible teaching, while others learn more toward a devotional perspective. It is great that we have different types of churches and denominations to meet the needs of different people.

But the problem comes in when the different denominations and theological groups begin to argue and fight, looking down on those who are different. This leads to the statement Paul mentioned, "There are contentions among you."

We can be different and express those differences, but we also need to be one in Christ, loving each other, accepting each other, praying for each other, and supporting each other within the body of Christ. Of course, I am not talking about embracing heresies or cults' theologies.

C. IS CHRIST DIVIDED?

1 Corinthians 1:13-17 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 lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. 16 Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

Just as Jesus did not baptize people according to John 4:1-2, so both Peter and Paul allowed their associates to baptize the new converts. Until the church grew in Corinth, Paul did some of the baptizing, but that was not his main ministry.

In this section, Paul was not minimizing baptism, but rather he was putting it into its proper perspective, because the Corinthians were making too much of it. Corinthians' quarrels and cliques were fueled by their combustible and fragile pride. Apparently, they had come to believe that the authenticity of their faith rested on not only their baptism but also their baptizer. "I was baptized by Apollos!" one would boast, while another would say, "Oh, but I was baptized by Paul!" Paul challenges their boasting sharply in this portion of the Scriptures.

Keep in mind that baptism is an important matter in the NT church. When a sinner trusted Christ and is baptized, he is declaring publicly that he identifies himself with the death of Jesus Christ as he submerges into the water. When he is pulled up out of the water, he also declares that he is risen with Christ.

If the baptism ceremony were as crucial as the Corinthians were making vainly Paul would have been glad to perform it. He emphasized the message of the cross, not baptism or oratory eloquence. Although he upheld these as important, he wanted to encourage the Corinthians to see that sharing the responsibility, the Gospel was their major responsibility.

Spiritual elitism is ugly and stinks, no matter whose human name it is practiced in. The Pharisees of the time of Jesus on earth were these spiritual elitists as well. There was an old, contentious Quaker who went from one church to another, never finding the "TRUE" church. Someone once said to him, "Well, what church are you in now?" He said, "I am in the true church at last." "How many belong to it?" "Just my wife and myself, and I am not sure about her sometimes."

For Paul, preaching was more important than baptizing, though he was certainly not opposed to baptism. Baptism is one of the two rituals that the Lord Jesus instituted before He left the earth – baptism and communion. Yet, we can see by this that baptism is not essential to salvation. If it were – if the teaching of baptismal regeneration were true, then Paul could never thank God that he baptized so few in Corinth, and he, as an evangelist, could never say, "For Christ did not send me to baptize."

Listen, it doesn't matter whether it is about baptism, church denominations, or the church you attend. If you think that you are spiritually superior to others because of those things and treat others as inferior people, you are in sin with pride and you are dividing the body of Christ.

D. APPLICATIONS

1) We divide our churches when we multiply quarrels and cliques due to our own selfish, stupid, and self-justified pride.

2) We subtract from the Gospel when we add a display of the flesh.

Whenever we add our fleshly motives in the fellowship of Christ in the church, the devil doesn't have to do anything to break the body of Christ. All he has to do is sit back, watch, and enjoy it. In other words, we are doing the devil's work for him. May it never be.

3) We exalt Christ when we lift up the cross and become obscure in its shadow.