

1 Corinthians

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.
(1 Cor. 1:10 ESV)

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.
(Rom. 16:17 ESV)

The Dangers of Division

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1 Corinthians 3

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INTRODUCTION

I can't tell you how many times in the past year I have heard the sentiment repeated that we are living in one of the most polarized and divisive times in all of history.

I don't know if there is any historical fact behind that statement, but how many of you feel like this is true today? So do I.

We are not only divided as a culture, if you think politics or worldview, but many would lament that as a church we are more divided than ever also.

Today we see multiple kinds of camps arising in the church – there are camps that form around people's views on certain issues, and there are divisions based on theological beliefs, and generally those camps calcify around a leader, generally a celebrity teacher or pastor.

But this is not simply a new problem. Factionalism and division in the church was alive and well in the early church as well.

In today's text, the Apostle Paul is writing to the church in Corinth who was dealing with this division/factionalism and he addresses this straight on.

The church in Corinth had become divided around certain teachers. Paul says in **1 Cor. 1**,

"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.'"

We see this kind of splintering today.

Think of the John MacArthur camp or Tim Keller camp.
The John MacArthur camp doesn't like Tim Keller camp that much.

Even in Canada we see it!

There is the "did you keep your church open during COVID" camp and the "we will abide by government regulations" camp, and they don't like each other at all.

Well, Paul hears of this kind of division, and so in Paul's letter he identifies the cause of these kinds of divisions, the dangers of them, and he provides the solution to a divided church.

Paul will explain why he wants to confront this division in **1:10**,

"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's longing for the Corinthians, and for the Church today, is that we would eradicate division in our churches, and that we would all agree, and be united in the same mind and judgement.

If it is true that the church is more polarized than ever, if there is any truth to the fact that we are fractured as the church of Christ today, then our unity is at stake.

So, turn with me to **1 Cor. 3**.

As we read this, let us stand together. Church, these words are God's words. They have been inspired, by God, to be proclaimed among the churches. GOD HIMSELF is speaking as we read. So let's humble our hearts to hear from our Creator, the Lord of the Church.

Hear now God's Word for you, Cornerstone.

READ & PRAY

So, what does this text teach us about division?

The first thing Paul will show us is...

The Source of Division

Division derives from spiritual immaturity.

The Apostle Paul had planted the church in Corinth 3-5 years earlier, and so the church in Corinth had known the gospel for a number of years now.

Paul says in **vs. 1-2** that when he planted the church he spoke to them as “fleshly” people. This word “*sarkinoi*” communicates the idea of an over-emphasis on the human side of existence as opposed to the spiritual side of existence.

When Paul started the church, he was teaching spiritual things to very fleshly minded people, so he had to start with the very basic truths of the Gospel.

The problem was, after 3-5 years, Paul says the Corinthians were still acting immature.

Look at **vs. 3**, “*for 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?*”

Paul here will use the analogy of a family – the Corinthians are acting like children who need milk, when they should be acting as young adults who eat meat.

The Corinthian church is full of grown man-children who are dividing and arguing over teachers and theology like little boys.

D.A. Carson says,

“Paul’s point becomes potent. Those who have the Spirit, and who therefore come to grips with the message of the cross are expected to mature rapidly... It will also show itself in a large-hearted attitude that avoids quarreling and jealousy, and refuses to sink into narrow factionalism. If some who have the Spirit are slow to display this rising maturity, the kindest interpretation is that they are ‘worldly.’”¹

This is how people who don’t know Jesus act! They divide into hostile & jealous camps around their differences! In **vs. 19** Paul will cause this kind of behavior worldly.

Think of the divisions in our world:

- Rebel News vs. CBC.
- Mask vs. No mask.
- Vaccinated vs. Unvaccinated.

Factionalism and aggressive quarreling is what this world does best, but Paul says, “That is not spiritual thinking, it is fleshly, worldly, childish behavior!”

¹ D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), pg. 83.

Think of when Paul speaks of the fruits of the Spirit in **Galatians 5**. Paul says there that, “enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions and divisions” are works of the flesh, and those who do them will not inherit the kingdom of God!

Uh, have you been on Twitter lately? Have you been on Facebook?

That is ALL that is happening! Social media has given Christians an excuse to completely tear out 1 Cor 1-3 out of the Bible and participate in all kinds of factionalism, tribalism, celebrity worship and divisiveness.

But Paul says, that is fleshly, worldly, childish thinking.

Now, maybe you are thinking, “Rob, are you saying allying yourself with like minded people is bad? What about denominations? What about affiliations with certain likeminded groups? Is that divisiveness? We can’t debate theology?”

There can be great unity in associating with likeminded brothers and sisters who agree with certain theological beliefs. There are important theological issues that require us, at times, to do ministry in different ways.

But that wasn’t the problem in Corinth.

Paul’s problem was the heart behind these divisions.

This wasn’t friendly but important discussion about theology - this was pride and jealousy motivated quarreling over teachers and theological camps.

Listen to what James says in **James 4**, *“What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?² You 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. ³ You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions.”*

James says that often the heart behind divisions, quarrels, and fights are sinful passions at war within us. Often what lurks behind factions and divisions is not a godly Christ-like pursuit of truth and unity – what lurks behind division is sinful fleshly passions.

D.A. Carson in his book “The Cross and Christian Ministry” which is a kind of commentary on 1 Corinthians, says,

“Their love of pomp, prestige, rhetoric, social approval, publicly lauded ‘wisdom’...demonstrated that they had no reflected very deeply on the entailments of the gospel.”²

² D.A. Carson, *The Cross and Christian Ministry* (Baker Books: Grand Rapids, MI, 1993), pg. 78.

Many today will justify their divisiveness, their polarizing slander, their oversimplistic generalizations, their fierce loyalty to their favorite pastor's camp as "boldness" or "masculinity" or "standing up courageously for the Truth".

But Paul says behind these aggressive, angry divisions - behind these territorial theological camps - was not a concern for orthodoxy or truth, but rather was a spiritual immaturity that was rooted in worldly concepts of popularity, favoritism, jealousy and pride.

Many of us have grown incredibly argumentative, combative, and arrogant because we have become isolated in our own camps, because we have become so loyal to our factions over the past few years.

Whether it is about masks, about vaccines, about politics, or even about theology, some of us are finding personal pride in our allegiances to our groups with whom we agree.

We think we are fighting a just battle for truth, but when the fruit is hostility, anger, arguments, slander, polarization and disharmony, we betray ourselves.

You know what Paul says to people who engage in this petty childish argumentative behavior – he says, 'Hey, grow up. Stop acting like a child.'

We need to hear that this morning. The CHURCH needs to hear that.

It's a hard word, but it's a Word for our good and for our maturity. Divisions are a fruit of the flesh, NOT of the Spirit.

So Paul has revealed the source of division, he then goes on to describe...

The Dangers of Division

The first danger Paul identifies in division is that...

Division diverts glory from God.

We know that the Apostle Paul had planted the church in Corinth. But we also know from **Acts 18** that Apollos had come as well to Corinth and taught the Gospel there. Apollos was a learned and eloquent man, who had a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures and was able to teach. It also likely that Peter (Cephas) had come as a guest preacher as well.

The problem was each preacher now had a certain fan base grow around them, and these camps began to compete with one another in the church.

Well Paul answers this silliness by saying in **vs. 5-7**, *“⁵ What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth.”*

Paul says, **“We are only servants! GOD gave us to you! GOD called us! GOD equipped us!** The only one who matters is the One who gave the growth!”

Paul will bitingly emphasize this in **1:12**, *“Each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”* [Those are the real annoying spiritual people]. *¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”*

For the Corinthians to pit pastor against pastor, teacher and teacher, and engage in petty divisive quarreling was to make the ministry of the Church and the work of the Gospel about men!

But Church, pastors, elders, teachers, apologists, authors – they are all table waiters!

They are simply servants.

They are mere hired hands.

They are only sent ones delivering a message.

And yet in our immaturity, in our worldly passions, we want to turn them into idols!

The motivation to create divisive camps around our favorite pastor or celebrity teacher, or factions around theological issues or popular debates, is purely rooted in a misunderstanding of God’s power.

We attribute the eloquence, the talent, the giftedness to the man rather than to the one who GAVE the gift.

Paul will say this very thing is **1 Cor. 2**, *“² And, when I came to you, brothers, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. ² For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. ³ And I was with you in weakness and in fear and much trembling, ⁴ and my speech and my message were not in plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, ⁵ so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”*

Paul understands that our human inclination is to worship and give glory to man for their lofty words or wisdom. Humans have this deeply sinful reflex to give glory to the creation and not to the Creator.

But this kind of alliance to a teacher, this kind of divisive attitude, this kind of quarreling spirit forgets something critical - Church, it is CHRIST's WORD that transforms you – not a man!

Spurgeon, in a sermon on this text, says,

“Recollect that the ablest ministers, the most successful evangelists, the profoundest teachers are, after all, nothing but labourers on God's farm — ‘labourers together with God.’ Let your mind be set upon the Master and not upon the servants...but let us join in ascribing all honour and praise unto God who works all our works in us, since every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, to whom be glory world without end.”³

Enjoy listening to preachers! I love reading Spurgeon, Richard Sibbes and the early Church Fathers. Every day I listen to sermons from guys like Matt Chandler. I listen to Pastor's Talk with Mark Dever. I read books from all kinds of perspectives.

You can enjoy 'Truth For Life' with Alistair Begg or 'Grace to You' with John MacArthur.

But do not worship the waiter!
Do not factionalize around farmhands.
Do not make couriers compete with one another!

Give glory to God alone!
Men are weak and feeble and frail and bound to make mistakes.
Paul says, “Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything!”

**God ALONE should get the glory for the growth in your life.
God ALONE should get the glory for how His Word comes alive in you.
God ALONE deserves your true jealous allegiance, not a Bible teacher.**

Isaiah 42:8 says, *“I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other.”*

When we give glory to man that is only due to God, and God does not share His glory.

This leads us to the second danger of division...

Division damages the Church of Christ.

In vs. 10-17, Paul uses the analogy here of builders building a structure – God's temple. However, you cannot build this Temple with ANY types of material. They temple cannot be built with worldly materials, it must be built with spiritual materials.

³ Charles Haddon Spurgeon June 5th, 1881. Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit Volume 27.

Paul says in **vs. 12-13**, *“if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw— ¹³ each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.”*

Christ's coming will be like a fire falling upon the Temple, and only those who are truly in Christ, only the work that is true, will last.

Paul's point here is that the divisions in Corinth were based on worldly and fleshly motives, and building the Temple with the fleshly materials of jealousy, pride, and quarreling are like adding straw and wood into the structure of a Temple.

Paul then says in **vs. 16-17**, *“**16** Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? **17** If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.”*

Any attempt to build with the fleshly motives of division, popularity, factionism, quarreling and jealousy is an attempt to weaken the structure - it's an attack on the stability and the health of the Temple.

And woe to the person woe to the person who seeks to destroy the Temple!

Leon Morris clarifies this helpfully,

“The seriousness of the divisions at Corinth is seen in the light of this understanding of the Church. Because it is God's Temple anyone who fails to react rightly towards it is guilty of no light sin. To engage in making divisions is to destroy the divine society and thus to invite God to destroy the sinner.”⁴

Division, factionalism, and strife in the Church is an act of war. It is taking up arms against the Temple of God and seeking to do harm to Christ's bride.

Divisive people are a threat to the health of the Church.

Paul till warn Titus about the judgement coming against divisive people.

Titus 3:10-11 *“As for a person who stirs up division, after warning him once and then twice, have nothing more to do with him, knowing that such a person is warped and sinful; **he is self-condemned.**”*

⁴ Leon Morris, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries: 1 Corinthians (InterVarsity Press: Downers Grove, IL, 1985), pg. 71

Condemnation awaits those who would seek to harm the body of Christ by dividing into factions, creating divisions and teams according to teachers and theological camps.

I've been thinking about this recently, because we keep seeing famous celebrity pastors, famous teachers with these large camps, failing out of ministry!

It seems that for many of these pastors who represent these camps, we end up finding out that they have had an affair, or they've been abusive.

Have you ever wondered why?

Mere men cannot handle the glory that is only intended for God, and so they collapse under the weight of it!

Factionalism is a rot!
It is sin at its core!

It erodes the foundations of ministries.
It tempts weak men to greater sins.

To participate in factionalism is to seek to build the Kingdom of God with the materials of fame, popularity, divisive camps and quarreling. When the temple is built with the materials of pride, ego, popularity, controversy – we forget that God will fiercely defend His church and judge the work!

We must humbly, with great fear, tear down divisions within our hearts, avoid quarreling, avoid championing celebrity leader led camps, because it is ultimately worldly wisdom and fleshly materials that will be consumed on the Day.

God will judge. God will defend His Temple.

Paul says, **"God will destroy him who destroys the Temple."**

Church, we ought to be careful about the motivations in our hearts to follow celebrity teachers, to jealousy attack other groups we disagree with theologically, to jump into echo chambers of theological thought that demonize other camps, because that is to attack the very body of Christ.

Paul thus far has show us the dangers of division. He shows us how division derives from immaturity, how it diverts glory from God, and how it damages the church.

So then, how do we defeat division in the church? What is the cure for division?

The Cure for Division

Division is defeated by the Gospel.

In these last few verses, Paul says in **vs. 18-20** that the Corinthians had deceived themselves and put their trust in worldly wisdom, which had led them to create divisions and factions.

It is worldly thinking, worldly rationale, that led them to create theological camps based out of jealousy and led them to stir up quarreling and division.

But Paul gets right down to the root of how this division formed.

In **vs. 21-23**, *"21 So let no one boast in men. For all things are yours, 22 whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or the present or the future—all are yours, 23 and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's."*

The Corinthians had forgotten what Christ had accomplished for them. They had forgotten that ALL THINGS had been won for them in Christ.

The Corinthians had lost the plot of the Gospel.

Paul says, "It's silly to be squabbling over teachings, and dividing into factions, because ALL things are yours in Christ! ALL these teachers are yours, and more!"

Last week, Brother Jon reminded us of all that is our in Christ from **Ephesians 4**, *"1 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ."*

Church, do you understand what has been won in Christ?

There is no more celebrity in Christ! All are equal!

Paul will say in **Galatians 3:28** that, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."*

John MacArthur is no more valuable to Christ than you! Your favorite Bible Teacher is no more valuable than one of your pastors because, in Christ, we are all ONE!

There is no more scale of value of gifts in Christ! All are needed!

Paul will say in **1 Cor. 12:4-6**, *“Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone.”*

A preacher is no more valuable than a prophet.
A teacher is no more valuable than an encourager.

In fact, Paul will later say that Christ has bestowed GREATER honor to the **humbler parts** of His body. Paul will say that the weaker parts of the body are indispensable, and therefore deserve greater honor!

We want to give honor to the preacher, the teacher, the famous Bible scholar, but that’s not how Christ works!

Listen to this, **12:24-25**, *“But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, ²⁵ **that there may be no division in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another.**”*

When we understand that the Gospel has flipped everything on its head, that is how division is defeated. The GOSPEL is the cure for division!

When we remember that Jesus told us that first will be last and the last will be first (**Matt. 20:16**), when we remember that God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the strong (**1 Cor. 1:27**), when we remember that we all are recipients of God’s grace alike, we stop worshipping celebrity pastors or breaking off into jealous theological factions because we see that the playing field is equal before the Cross.

These kinds of divisions in the church reveal that we still are children that need milk.

CONCLUSION

For some here today, we have participated in this kind of divisive factionalism that quarrels over matters of theology and politics.

We have our theological camp that we are loyal to, or we have our favorite celebrity teacher or pastor that we idolize, and it has led us into division, to quarreling, to combativeness and to jealousy.

For some of us it’s “I follow R.C. Sproul” or for some of us it’s, “I follow John Calvin”, or “I stand with these Canadian Pastors,” or “Those Canadian pastors.”

There ought to be no loyalty above our loyalty to Christ.
We ought not to build the church with such frail materials.

So what do we do?

O Church, how do we repent and how do we resist division in the church?

We return our gaze to Christ. We remind ourselves of the basic, milk, Gospel message.

I love what Spurgeon says here,

“And, oh! *what unity there will be in heaven*, where Christ will be the centre of the redeemed, where all shall sing of him, and where all shall equally behold him! All of us, who believe in Jesus, will be with him where he is, and so we shall behold his glory, the glory which his Father gave him. **Certain brethren think that they will have a place all to themselves. Well, they have not been very amiable down here, and therefore I should not be sorry if they were going to have a place to themselves; but, at the same time, I pray the Lord to have mercy upon them, and to enable them to give up all idea of having a place for themselves, and all thought of having anything different from the rest of the Lord’s family.”⁵**

Let us not be people who think that heaven will belong to only us and our small tribe. Let us be people of the Gospel, that unites us on the foundation of Christ.

The Gospel defeats division.

So Paul says, **“*So let no one boast in men.*”**

Cornerstone, let’s not boast in pastors, or teachers.

Let’s not give in to proud, arrogant theological one-up-manship.

Let’s not build with worthless materials.

Let’s build with what lasts.

Let’s defeat division with a wholehearted devotion to Christ, and we will see a united body that bears GOOD fruit.

Amen.

⁵ Spurgeon, same source.