

Introduction

The sin of sectarianism/schism is the theme of this next passage, and this theme undergirds the first four chapters.

The church had been blessed with many gifts. Particularly, Paul speaks of what we call “speaking gifts” (see v. 5). Not only was this church gifted with such remarkable gifts of tongues and prophecy, it had also been blessed with gifted teachers, among whom, in addition to Paul, were Apollos and Peter (Cephas). But rather than appreciating this diversity of giftedness, and rather than being blessed by the same *message* that these men proclaimed, the Corinthian church was sinfully divided over the preferences for the *messengers*. Paul, in these verses, begins a rebuke and a correction of this faulty, worldly thinking.

As we will see, the church should be united in the gospel; they should not be “cliquishly” divided by wrong-headed loyalties.

This remains a problem faced in the maturing church of our own day. Too often church members can fall into the trap of preferring one teacher, disciple, elder, minister, etc. over another. And the result is that sometimes unintentional divisions occur in the life and ministry of the church.

The way that Paul tackles this problem is by pointing the church to Jesus Christ—specifically, to his name, to his gospel, to his cross. Verses 10–17 provide the foundation for what he will say concerning these matters in vv. 18–31.

Division in a church is the default of the sinful flesh. It is for this reason that Paul exhorts believers, in most (if not all) of his epistles, to guard the unity that we have with one another in church. Again, this is precisely what he is doing here.

TO THINK ABOUT

In what ways might we such divisions in a church?

The Making of the Church (1:10-31)

In vv. 1–9, we saw the marks of the true church. But how did this come to be? Was it due to man’s abilities or God’s power? How we answer this question has everything to do with how we view the church. It was due to the Corinthian church’s failure to grasp the power of God as the cause of the church, which contributed to needless divisions over personalities. Thus, from v. 10 through the end of the chapter (and well into the next chapters), Paul makes it clear that God alone “makes” the church through his gospel.

The lesson is needful: God uses preachers, but what is preached is more important than who preaches it.

The Problem (vv. 10–12)

Simply put, some in the church were elevating God’s messengers to an idolatrous position. Still others were discounting God’s messengers to irrelevance. Division was occurring due to “personality cults.”

“Perfectly joined together” (v. 10) translates a word used in classical Greek to describe the resetting of a broken bone (cf. Matthew 4:21—“mending”; Galatians 6:1—“restore”; Ephesians 4:12—“equipping” or “perfecting”).

“Same judgement” speaks of discernment concerning what is most important; what is of the greatest value. In the context, Paul is concerned that they will all value Christ and his gospel; that these will have priority in their affections, not mere messengers of the glorious message.

“Contentions” (v. 11) means a quarrel, strife—which is a work of the flesh (cf. Galatians 5:20). There were fractures in the fellowship, and Paul desires that these be healed. If they had the same mind, they would experience such healing.

TO THINK ABOUT

It is vital that the church be unified in their “mind” concerning who received the glory for the forming and sustaining of the church. That is, the Lord. In what ways do personality cliques, and “hero worship” tend to break the health of a local church? If every member of the church is looking up in worship to the same Lord, then, practically, how can this tend to heal fractures in the fellowship? Clearly, every member needs to be unified in our commitment to Christ and his gospel. Does unity of mind demand uniformity in lifestyle, in preferences? Explain.

Paul had received word from church members “of Chloe’s household” that all was not well back in Corinth. So he did something constructive about it.

TO THINK ABOUT

How should church leaders respond when there is “trouble in the house”?

“Every one” (v. 12) shows that the problem was pervasive.

“Paul” was the founder of this church. “Apollos” was an eloquent speaker (Acts 18:24–28). “Cephas” (Peter) was an earthly and intimate acquaintance of Jesus Christ—a leader of leaders.

Two issues were causing division: “heroism” and “individualism.”

TO THINK ABOUT

What kind of parallels might we see to these temptations in our own day?

The Solution to the Problem (vv. 13–31)

This final section of chapter one provides the solution to the problem of such man-centred divisions. Of course, the solution is to keep the gospel of God front and centre and to move the messengers to their proper place. The messenger of the gospel must be appreciated for his ministry, but this is because of the greatness of the message! Without the glorious message, there would neither be a need for a messenger nor anything worthwhile for the messenger to say. Paul makes this very point in what follows (vv. 13–17).

Common Sense Refutes the Division (vv. 13-17)

“Is Christ divided?” (v. 13): If all believers are “in Christ” (v. 2), and if all believers “share in” Christ (v. 9), how can one argue for separate fellowship in his church? There is one Lord and one gospel. Unite in this.

“Was Paul crucified for you?” (v. 13): Did Paul secure their redemption or merely announce it? We need to beware of attributing too much to mere men. God saves (Jonah 2:9), not preachers.

TO THINK ABOUT

In what ways can we obscure the power of Christ and his gospel by the exaltation of mere men?

“baptised in the name of Paul?” (v. 13): cf. Matthew 28:19–20. The point: Who saved you—God or Paul?

Verses 14–17a form a deathblow to the idea of baptismal regeneration.

Note: “Crispus” (cf. Acts 18:8).

Paul is not discounting the importance of baptism. He is simply emphasising the priority of the gospel. The actions of man are only important as a result of the action of God. God’s wisdom takes priority over man’s works.

TO THINK ABOUT

What does this statement teach us about the significance of baptism? That is, what does baptism signify? Does it matter who baptizes you? Is there a danger of having someone close to us be the one who baptizes us? Does it matter? Is there a danger?

“I do not know whether I baptised any other” (v. 16): How does this statement strike you? Cold and uncaring? Or perhaps wisely distancing himself from a personality cult?

“but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect” (v. 17): This is the crux of the matter. Whereas Corinthian culture put much emphasis upon man’s wisdom and ability, Paul points out that man’s wisdom and ability fails him at the point of his greatest need: salvation from sin.

Consider the following quotes:

“No man can show himself clever and show the power of the cross to save at the same time” (James Denney).

“Whatever obscures the cross deprives the gospel of its power” (Charles Hodge).

“Only a crucified preacher can preach a crucified Christ” (Richard Baxter).

TO THINK ABOUT

How do these quotes apply to what Paul is saying?