

Gospel Correction to Division - 1 Corinthians 1:10-19

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Introduction

Please turn to 1 Corinthians 1:10.

Nothing cripples a group or organization more than division. We see it in nations and their governments, in companies, in sports teams, and the list goes on. Borrowing from Jesus' words and applying them to his country, Abraham Lincoln famously said, "*A house divided against itself cannot stand*". I am sure we have all witnessed the effect of division personally and from afar.

Paul writes to the church at Corinth to address a multitude of problems. In verses 1-9, he thanks God for the abundant grace God has given them. This grace included enriched speech and knowledge, all sufficient spiritual gifting, a promise to persevere them to the end, an assurance that they will be guiltless when Christ returns, and fellowship with Jesus throughout.

But despite this grace, many problems existed in Corinth. In our text this evening, Paul will address the critical problem of division in the church – a problem for which every church must be vigilant.

An Appeal for Gospel Unity (1:10)

¹⁰ I appeal to you, brothers,^[a] 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.

So in verse 10 Paul begins with an appeal – and the word “appeal” is an understatement. Paul begs and exhorts the church. He says “please” may you agree and let there be no divisions between you. His appeal is emphatic and carries urgency.

Note that he calls them “brothers” here and later in verse 11. His aim is not only to express affection to them but to appeal to the natural unity that comes with belonging to the family of God. Addressing them as “brothers” or “sisters” carries a built-in call for unity. It is a reminder that they are a family – one family who ought to behave like one.

But the primary basis of his appeal for unity though is “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”. This is what truly enforces Paul's appeal – it is not his opinion or some sentimental call for unity. Paul is pointing to the name of Jesus Christ which refers to Christ and all that His name stands for; His Person, His character, His work, His teaching, His will, His salvation, and His Word. Paul wanted them to consider Jesus Christ and all that He is in the midst of what was going on among them.

To better understand the depth of Paul's appeal, remember the Lord's prayer in John 17 for His disciples and for all future believers that would believe their apostolic teaching. For His disciples he prayed in 17:11;

11 And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one.

And for all believers he prayed, 20 *"I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, 21 that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, 23 I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one, so that the world may know that you sent me and loved them even as you loved me.*

Unity is a major theme in the Lord's prayer for His people. And notice the common reference point in the Lord's praying for unity. It is the perfect unity expressed between members of the Godhead. God's people are to be united with one another and therefore be united with the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Participation in this unity by His people was in the forefront of the Lord's thinking immediately before His going to the cross – and so it was for Paul in addressing the Corinthians.

And the focal point and content of this unity according to Paul is the name of the Lord Jesus Christ which is to agree on biblical truth proceeding from and through Christ and as we will see, on the gospel message specifically.

In view of this, Paul says there ought not be any factions among them. He goes on to say recognize these divisions and close up and heal these gaps with the goal of perfectly keeping the same mind and opinion based on Christ. He is not referring to non-essentials or the natural differences they had in personality, preferences, skills, giftedness, etc.

The Present Problem of Division (1:11-13)

Paul goes on to explain in verses 11-13 the nature of such division in the Corinthian church. We read:

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?

Its Specific Cause (1:11-12)

Paul was informed of the problem by the people or household of Chloe. The bible does not tell us the identity of Chloe nor does it mention her anywhere else. But we can probably be sure she was a key person in the early years of the church. Her people had told Paul that the church was

quarreling – quarreling because the church had divided into factions with each group gravitating towards one of the early leaders in the church.

Some said they were following Paul who had a history there. He came to Corinth in Acts 18 and founded the church five years earlier. He met Aquila and Priscilla who had been expelled from Rome because they were Jews. They were of the same trade and they worked together during the week making tents. On the Sabbath he regularly went into the local synagogue and testified to the Jews that the Christ was Jesus. And as usually happened, the Jews vigorously opposed Paul and more specifically the message. Paul then went next door to a house and began meeting there with some Corinthians of which many believed the gospel. The Lord encouraged Paul to remain for many people were to be saved there. He therefore stayed more than 18 months and then departed leaving a newly formed church at Corinth. Paul was obviously revered there for a “*Paul fan club*” had developed by the time of this letter.

Some said they were followers of Apollos. Acts 18 tells us that Apollos was an eloquent preacher of the gospel, “*competent in the Scriptures*”, who had come to Corinth after Paul and played a vital role in the formative years of the church. He started in Ephesus where he was helped by Aquila and Priscilla to understand “*the way of God more accurately*” (Acts 18:26). He later went to Corinth where Acts 18:27 tells us “*he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, 28 for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus.*” He was obviously popular in the church as well for back in our text we are told he also had a “*fan club*”.

Others claimed to follow Cephas or the apostle Peter. The Bible does not tell us with certainty that Peter ever came to Corinth although some think 9:5 indicates so. In any event, Peter had an impact on this church – enough for a faction of its people to follow him also.

Now how could the church have formed into divisions that each followed a mere man? Well, it was natural in their culture. The people in Corinthian culture admired and pursued strong leaders and those who could speak, teach, and philosophize with the latest wisdom. They valued highly those with a good outward appearance and who spoke eloquently – form trumped the substance of content and truth. They were fascinated by the rhetoric of these philosophers and scholars who delivered it with keen wit and eloquence. The Corinthian believers, being part of this culture, appeared to be no different and were susceptible to bringing these kinds of values into the church. They tended to align to these leaders and then looked down upon those not in the same camp as theirs.

And there was yet another division of the believers – they followed Christ. It was the “*Christ only*” crowd. At first glance this seems noble – why would you not want to simply follow Christ? What is wrong with that? They were not following a man. But look carefully. We know there is a problem with this group too because Paul lists this faction with the others that are in error. It seems there was an attitude problem. They thought of themselves as clearly above the fray and followed the Lord only. They self-righteously thought themselves to be more spiritual and far more mature. And it also seems they rejected and ignored scriptural teaching that God gives His people teachers and leaders in the church (Eph 4:11-13) to equip them for the work of

ministry. They were rejecting God's authorized manner of leading and shepherding His church. Perhaps they also ranked Christ as their ultimate philosophical hero and leader.

Corrective Questions (1:13)

The result of these various camps was that the church of Christ was divided. Christ had been broken into pieces and distributed among the brothers in the church.

Paul hits this situation head on with the central question of this passage, *"Is Christ divided?"* How can this be? You serve One God and Savior and are indwelt by One Spirit. There is one ruler and King. It is Jesus. Division among believers makes no sense and is not an option. We have already seen the focus on unity in the Lord's Prayer in John 17. And as we see throughout the New Testament and what Paul surely taught the Corinthians in his time with them, God's people are one spirit with Him in 1 Cor 6:17 and in Eph 4:4-6, they are *"one body and one Spirit, and possessing one hope belonging to our call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all."* God's will for His people is to be one with Him and one with one another. And His people ought to be eager to be so.

He goes further by asking "Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" In other words, did any of the men listed do the same atoning work of Christ or share in it? Paul's argument is that he was never crucified for anyone nor was anyone baptized in his name. Paul is just like each of them and all believers - a mere man saved by grace. He wanted nothing to do with leading a faction of believers.

His having never been crucified was obvious but he goes on further to refute the notion that anyone was baptized in his name. We pickup in verse 14:

Christ's Priority for Paul's Ministry (1:14-17a)

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.

Not only should anyone not be baptized in his name, but Paul is not even a baptizer. In fact, he has scarcely baptized anyone - Crispus and Gaius, yes. They were some of the first converts in the new church. And oh yes, he baptized Stephanas but beyond that he does not remember any others. In reality, he could have baptized a few more but it is not significant – the point being that baptizing other people has never been his focus so how can people in the church elevate him to the leader of a faction in the church on this basis?

Most importantly though, the Lord's priority for Paul was different – he was sent to preach the gospel. And this is a key point – as important and special as baptism might be, preaching, teaching, and sharing the gospel far exceeds it in importance. Proclaiming the message of the gospel is paramount in ministry. It is how the lost get saved and believers are exhorted,

encouraged, assured, corrected, and matured. Nowhere did the Word of Christ call for Paul or for anyone to divide the church into factions and become one of its' leaders. The gospel message is central and primary to ministry as we pick up again in verse 17:

God's Design for Gospel Preaching (1:17b-19)

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.¹⁸ For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. ¹⁹ For it is written,

*“I will destroy the wisdom of the wise,
and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.”*

Its' Effective and Unifying Method (1:17b)

The gospel of the cross of Christ is so many things but here we see its method of communicating, its irresistible power and complete opposition to the world's (and frankly our own) wisdom and discernment, and ultimately its unifying effect upon God's people.

Preaching the cross is not to be proclaimed “*with words of eloquent wisdom*” Paul tells us in verse 17 – at least not as an end in and of itself. There is nothing wrong with the preacher possessing the ability to deliver the Word of God in an eloquent manner. Apollos did so in Acts 18 and God used him to bless the church at Corinth. Paul will later commend Apollos in this letter. But his point is that it must not obscure or interfere in any way the plain gospel message. And it must not be why a person listens to it which was what the average Corinthian believer was doing. The primary focus must be placed squarely upon what God has done in Christ Jesus and not upon how it might be crafted and delivered with an eloquent flourish like the philosophers of their day, or to entertain, or like the most gifted attorney arguing a case with flawless logic in a court of law.

The focus though must remain on the message of the cross of Christ - that horrible and shameful cross. Crucifixion was a contemporary reality in Paul's time. The Roman government used it routinely to punish non-Roman criminals. The cross was a topic most did not want to discuss in that day. It would have been like for us discussing the electric chair or the lethal injection of a condemned criminal over a cup of coffee.

But Paul chooses his language with purpose – “*the cross of Christ*”. The notion is in complete opposition to what was attractive to the Corinthian believers; the eloquent philosophizing that tickled so many ears, led to division, and caused so many problems in the church. More importantly, the gospel message of the cross of Christ has power – power to convict, to save, and to change hearts like nothing else can. Eloquent communication without the simple truth of the cross of Christ is powerless to cause any effect. In fact, not only is it powerless but serves to drain the gospel of its true significance and power.

Its' Opposition to the World (1:18-19)

Paul goes on to say in verse 18 that the word of the cross is ineffectual among those who will not believe – those held under the sway of worldly thinking. To them, who particularly cares about a God who has created everything, and a story of man falling into sin and separated from this God, a virgin birth, a savior who humbly suffers and then dies on a shameful and awful cross, a dead savior (what good is that?), and a resurrection (like that is true!). This person says, “Sounds like foolishness to me. I am going to play golf or whatever – you are wasting my time.” Or he can say, “how simplistic”, “this sounds like backward superstition”, or “this is just a crutch for the weak”. “Where is the scientific proof, where is the logic?” According to Paul, these people are perishing.

But to those who hear and receive the cross of Christ, there is power – they are being saved.

In verse 19 Paul quotes Isaiah 29:14. Here we see this power is opposed by what the world values and relies upon. It also shows that this has always been God’s plan.

In the book of Isaiah, the nation of Judah is being confronted by God for its idolatry, pride, complaining, tendency to stray from God and reject His Word for what 30:10 says are the “*smooth things*” and its desire to attain security apart from Him. They also looked to their leaders and wise men who told them lies. *{This will sound familiar as we move through 1 Corinthians in the coming weeks}.*

Also at this time of the Isaiah passage, the king of Assyria was planning to conquer Judah and his army openly mocks God’s ability to save them. God through Isaiah told King Hezekiah not to worry or be afraid because the king’s plan would fail – they would be delivered. But deliverance would not come by any wise strategy of King Hezekiah, his wise strategists, or the strength of his army. Nor would they be delivered by any other nation. Rather they would be delivered by God alone – His power would save them. They needed only to trust and obey. Isaiah 30:15 says, “*In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.*” The wisdom of the king’s advisors would perish and the discernment of their discerning men would be frustrated. They would be of no help to the people – God alone would deliver. And did He ever...the Assyrian king left his army in Judah to fight another enemy and was later killed by his sons and then God killed 185,000 of those left behind in the Assyrian camp.

Now standing in the New Covenant, Paul explains this passage on a much grander scale and gives it ultimate meaning and fulfillment. God would and will receive no help from the worldly wise and discerning in saving those who are being saved. They are saved by simply believing and trusting in the word of the cross and not by the best wisdom and discernment this world can offer. Man is powerless to save and if he persists in trying he will perish. But God saves those who receive the gospel of the cross of Christ.

Now what does this mean for the problem of division? Well, it means everything. Preaching the cross routinely unifies God’s people and prevents and heals division. And this is Paul’s point here. Christ did 100% of the atoning work on behalf of man; He lived a perfect and sinless life and was persecuted, beaten, mocked, shamed, and placed upon that rugged and shameful wooden

cross for our sins. And though all of this was done against Him by sinful man, God the Father permitted it. In fact, it was His will for His beloved Son to be rejected by Him in that moment and for His life to be taken. Christ did it all. Paul, Apollos, Cephas nor any other believer contributed to Christ's work.

Realizing this simple message puts all people in the church at the same place – knowing they are powerless and unable to contribute to their salvation – silenced before God - thankful and overwhelmed by the grace of God in Christ.

In this message of the cross work of Christ, there is power - power to save and to grow – power to function with one another in unity.

Now the brothers at Corinth got sidetracked and divided into factions who followed men whom they perceived as strong and important men in the church. They had forgotten the essence of the gospel. They had forgotten who they were before God without Christ. They had forgotten what living for the gospel was all about...sharing it with others, serving one another with their spiritual gifts, loving one another (and overlooking and forgiving the slights and offenses against them from each other) and recognizing that the Lord is ultimately the Head of His church. In doing these things, divisions could have been avoided or faded away.

The cross of Christ has never been popular. The wisdom of the world finds it to be foolish and quickly rejects it.

It is not even popular in the church. “Might we just hear about a Jesus who loves us and can fix us?” And “Are you not going too far when you preach the cross over and over?” The gospel of the cross is central to us as believers but we often recoil from it. Mention of the cross brings to mind shame and death. The cross calls for a death – the death of the Christian to self and then a coming to life to Christ moment by moment, day by day. It brings about the seeming contradictions of Scriptures like 2 Corinthians 12:9 (*“I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may rest upon me”*) and Gal 2:20 (*“I have been crucified with Christ, It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me”*).

But when this happens, power is being demonstrated – power like the world has ever seen nor imagined – God's power, unaided in any way by man so that it is clear who saves and who transforms. It is God alone and He will not share His glory with anyone. But then again that is the problem...might I just keep a little of this glory for myself? Not if you are a dead man though, crucified to self and alive to Christ

Reflect and Respond

So what might this mean for us today?:

Do you remember what binds and unifies us?

We are one with Christ and with God and with one another on the basis of the cross of Christ and the merits of the finished work of Jesus Christ. To tolerate divisions among us is unacceptable in view of the Lord's will for us. Remember what the Lord prayed for; that we would be one as the Father and the Son are one and that the world might believe that the Father sent His Son Jesus into the world and that He loved us like He did His Son.

And let us not base our unity upon something other than the name of the Lord Jesus Christ such as sharing a hobby, being at the same stage of life, common occupations, etc...whatever it might be. Yes, we may have other common interests but remember our primary basis for unity is Jesus Christ.

There might not be visible divisions among us as in Corinth but might there be in our hearts?

Hear what this text says; close up any divisions and allow them to heal. If needed, go to that person or persons and confess and ask for forgiveness. Make it right with them. And if you are the one offended, then rush to forgive. Let us not maintain merely an outward unity but let it be real and genuine from the heart.

We do not have the same problem as Corinth did in following Paul, Apollos, and Peter. But do you listen to or gravitate only to a certain pastor or pastors? Perhaps you see them as the only legitimate sources of wisdom and understanding in spiritual things. And it is understandable to some degree because of your firsthand knowledge of them. But do you recognize the leaders in this church as gifts from God to serve us and to shepherd our souls? Each brings different giftedness and life experiences and the sum of the whole exceeds the individuals to our good

Or perhaps you only listen to world renowned Christian pastors or leaders. These are a gift from God as well. But God intends for us to look first and foremost to those within the local body. Together we live life here in southwest Ohio and live out this Christian life together – in this local context.

Or perhaps you belong to the "Christ only" group. It is sort of a personal me and Jesus relationship. To you what we do at church is "nice" but you lean primarily on what you are personally gleaned from the Word in your own study. Personal study is good and vital and we all need to grow in this area. However again, body life is critical as well. The Spirit is working among us and is present among us when we come together. We are meant to learn and grow in community. Our sovereign God has put us together in place and time and gifted each of us sufficiently so that we all may be edified and prepared for the work of ministry.

Do you realize the power contained within the gospel message of the cross of Christ?

How might this change how you share it with the lost? Will you now be more apt to share and proclaim with them?

And do you see how keeping the cross of Christ front and center in our lives allows gospel power to flow through us? It protects us from division and preserves unity – a unity which shows the world that Jesus Christ has been sent into the world to save and that we belong to Him and gives witness to the lost.