

Holy by Grace. Bound for Glory. Now What?

Division and Unity

I Corinthians 1:10-18

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. 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? 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.

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.

- I Corinthians 1:10-18, ESV

Why Are Churches Divided?

Christians have a wonderful reputation in the world for being willing to overlook minor differences and worship and work together for the glory of God in the world. It's kind of the defining characteristic of our history and our reputation in the world – We're uniters, not dividers. And if you believe that, I have some nice swampland in South Central Florida you might want to buy, or maybe some oceanfront property in Arizona.

The sad truth is that divisiveness among Christians and churches is a problem as old as the church itself. The Apostle Paul thought it was significant enough that he chose to address it first among all the problems he needed to address in the church at Corinth. That's pretty remarkable when you think of the list of problems at Corinth Paul had to address. The church had sent him vital questions about the Lord's Supper, about food sacrificed to idols, even about the resurrection of the dead. Also, he had heard reports about gross sexual immorality, believers suing one another in court, and other serious problems. Yet the #1 issue on his priority list, the one he tackles first, is division.

One of my favorite Sunday School classes from our days at New Covenant was one taught by Matt Miller – *Respectable Sins* by Jerry Bridges. The book tackles the sins we seem to simply accept and overlook as Christians. They're not sexual sins or scandalous sins; they're "respectable sins." Yet Jerry Bridges points out that these "respectable sins" can be deceptively deadly. When we deal with the problem of division in the church, it's a problem that might not grab our attention like someone sleeping with his father's wife or people visiting prostitutes or other people getting drunk at the Lord's Table. But division in the church touches on several of these "respectable sins" – discontentment, pride, selfishness, and judgmentalism, among others. In fact, it's a serious symptom of a deadly disease in the church, and so it is one that Paul addresses with urgency.

A. An Appeal for No Divisions, v. 10

I. What Does Paul Want?

So, what does Paul want from the church? – *“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 makes a strong personal appeal – “I strongly urge” or “I urgently appeal” would convey the strength and personal nature of his appeal – that the Corinthian believers all agree. The expression he uses for “agree” is literally “same word” and it speaks to a common confession, a united profession of faith. All churches have degrees of diversity in them. People come from different backgrounds and have different life experiences, perspectives, preferences, etc. But Paul is urging them to be united in what they believe and in what they profess to believe.

He states further *“that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”* The word for divisions here is “schisma” (“schisms”) and the word for united is a word used for mending torn fishing nets and for setting dislocated joints back in place. So, he wants the tearing and dislocating of the church to stop and be mended, for the church to be made whole “in the same mind and the same judgment.” Judgment here speaks not of legal decisions but of purpose and priority.

Paul uses the word “same” three times in this verse, as he describes unity – same words, same mind, same judgment. This makes it clear that what he has in mind is neither theological minimalism nor mere organizational unity, but something richer and deeper than either of those. Paul isn’t pleading, “Can’t we all just get along?” but something better, “We need to confess the same faith, think the same way, and make the same kind of purpose, pursuing the same priorities.”

2. Why Does Paul Want It?

Why is this kind of unity so important? Because without it, we cannot obey God or present a proper witness to the world. Paul makes this appeal using the word “brothers” to emphasize the family nature of the church. He is appealing as a brother to them as his brothers and sisters, not as an apostle exercising authority. This is a family issue; God has made us brothers and sisters by adopting us all as His children, and He calls us to love each other. When we refuse to love each other, we’re refusing to obey our father and to live out His purposes for us.

But Paul also makes his appeal *“by the name of our Lord Jesus,”* which us a reminder that the name of Jesus is dishonored by divisions in the church. The credibility of our confession that Jesus is the Savior and Lord is undermined when those whom He saves and rules cannot get along with each other.

B. A Description of the Divisions, vv. 11-12

After the appeal of verse 10, Paul then unfolds a description of what has been reported to him: *“For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 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.”*” Notice that Paul clearly names the source of the report he has received – no anonymous complaints or nameless rumors here, just a straight-forward report from a respected member of the community. We don’t know anything about Chloe, but she was evidently a wealthy and prominent person in the church.

I. How Does the Church Get Divided?

The church at Corinth had fallen into worldly patterns – conforming to the culture around them. In the Corinthians culture, as well as in the whole Greco-Roman world, great speakers were celebrities. In an age before radio, television, or the Internet, if you were a powerful and effective public speaker, you became a famous celebrity. If you could combine great wisdom with impressing eloquence, you were sure to gain a following.

The Corinthian church was taking this same cultural pattern from the world and applying it to the Christian life of the church. So, while the manifestation of the division in Corinth is a cult of personality, I think the underlying cause is cultural conformity.

Paul was the founder of the church at Corinth. Apollos was a well-educated dynamic speaker who came to Corinth after Paul. We learn of Apollos in Acts 18, the same chapter that tells of Paul's time in Corinth. After Paul leaves Corinth, he goes back to Antioch in Syria, his home church, and then heads out on his third missionary journey. He returns to Ephesus, and in verses 24-28, we read this about Apollos:

Now a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was an eloquent man, competent in the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord. And being fervent in spirit, he spoke and taught accurately the things concerning Jesus, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue, but when Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they took him aside and explained to him the way of God more accurately. ²⁷ And when he wished to cross to Achaia, the brothers encouraged him and wrote to the disciples to welcome him. When he arrived, 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. (ESV)

Achaia is the southern part of Greece which included Corinth, and so Apollos evidently went to Corinth and “helped those who through grace had believed.” Later in I Corinthians, Paul will speak more of Apollos:

For when one says, “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human?

What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, as the Lord assigned to each. I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.

- I Cor. 3:4-6, ESV

Cephas is the Aramaic name of Peter; they both mean “rock.” So, this is a reference to the Apostle Peter. It could be that some of the believers in Corinth had come from Jerusalem since Paul had left 4-5 years earlier.

You don't need much of an imagination to think of what these various factions in the church were saying: “Well, when Paul was here, he said . . .” “Oh, yeah, but Paul was just weak and trembling. Apollos is a really powerful man of God, and he said . . .” “You're both wrong. Back in Jerusalem, I learned from Cephas himself – you know, the one Jesus called “the rock on which I will build my church - and He said . . .” And then you had the super-spiritual ones, the holier-than-thous, who said, “You all are just following men and the teachings of men. I follow Christ. I don't need anyone else but Jesus.”

It strikes me that none of these men they were claiming to follow was actually ordained and installed as an elder of the church at Corinth. They weren't following their local leadership but the celebrity leaders who had either visited the church or who had influenced them in their early Christian lives.

2. Why Does the Church Get Divided?

What's really behind these cults of personality, besides cultural conformity? In his sermon on this passage, David Strain from First Presbyterian in Jackson, Mississippi, says that behind the cult of personality lies the cult of personal pride. Notice that while each of these four groups is saying something different, they're all saying something identical, too – "I follow Paul." "I follow Apollos." "I follow Cephas." "I follow Christ."

Pride is indeed the root sin, and all of them are saying "I." They appeal to certain men because it boosts their authority and standing in the church.

The irony, of course, is that none of these celebrity church leaders would want them doing this. Paul writes this letter condemning this practice, but Apollos and Peter would condemn it just as strongly. 1500 years after the Apostle Paul wrote I Corinthians, the German reformer Martin Luther gave a similar powerful rebuke to those who claimed, "I follow Luther."

I ask that my name be left silent and people not call themselves Lutheran, but rather Christians. Who is Luther? The doctrine is not mine. I have been crucified for no one. St. Paul in 1 Cor. 3:4-5 would not suffer that the Christians should call themselves of Paul or of Peter, but Christian. How should I, a poor stinking bag of worms, become so that the children of Christ are named with my unholy name? It should not be dear friends.

C. The Cure for the Divisions, vv. 13-18

So, if pride is the real root cause of these divisions, what is the cure?

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 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.

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.

The cure is clear: Christ, specifically the cross of Christ.

I. A Focus on Christ, v. 13

In verse 13, when Paul says, “*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” he’s re-directing their attention back to Christ. These three questions are asked in such a way that demands NO as the answer? So, “Christ is not divided, is he? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? You were not baptized into the name of Paul, were you?”

Later, Paul would write Ephesians, and in chapter 4, he emphasizes the strong unity of believers in the Body of Christ and the need to maintain this unity:

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, ² with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, ³ eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call— ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. ⁷ But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift. ⁸ Therefore it says,

*“When he ascended on high he led a host of captives,
and he gave gifts to men.”*

*⁹ (In saying, “He ascended,” what does it mean but that he had also descended into the lower regions, the earth? ¹⁰ He who descended is the one who also ascended far above all the heavens, that he might fill all things.) ¹¹ 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.
– Eph. 4:1-13, ESV*

Notice: Not only do we have a seven-fold unity – one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all – but it is Christ Himself who gives leaders and teachers to His church – “*he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers*” Why? For building up the body of Christ (THE body) until we all attain to the UNITY of THE faith.

Again, what’s clear in Ephesians 4 as in I Corinthians 1 is that Paul teaches neither theological minimalism nor mere organizational unity. Deep, rich, Christ-centered, mature Gospel unity is the goal.

So, he directs the Corinthians away from their obsession with human preachers and teachers and back to Christ. Christ cannot be divided against Himself. That’s impossible! Neither Paul nor Apollos nor Cephas were crucified for the church at Corinth and no one in the church at Corinth was baptized into the name of Paul or Apollos or Cephas.

2. The Right Perspective on Secondary Issues, vv. 14-16

While he’s on the subject of baptism, Paul takes a small and somewhat humorous detour to address their unhealthy distortion of fixating on who baptized them. I do find it strangely comforting and encouraging that Paul can’t remember for sure who he baptized. This section also gives us some insight into the composition of this letter, which was evidently dictated by Paul to Sosthenes.

But apparently one source of division in the church in Corinth was a fixation on who was baptized by the better and more impressive leader or preacher. So, “I follow Paul” and “I follow Apollos” was also evidently accompanied by “I was baptized by Paul” or “I was baptized by Cephas himself!”

So, Paul says, ***“I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel”***

Is Paul saying baptism is unimportant? Not at all! But it is a secondary issue, and you don’t create schisms in the body of Christ over secondary issues. The Gospel is Jesus Christ is an must remain primary and central to the life of the church.

Secondary issues are not completely unimportant or irrelevant, but we must not allow them to become primary or divisive. You may or may not like a certain type of music, or a certain way of administering the Lord’s Supper, or the way the preacher dresses, or the way a certain elder leads worship, or the fact that we only have elders lead worship. We need to be able to distinguish between primary issues, secondary issues, and then things that are simply matters of preference.

I’ll give you an example, since Jacob Lee is coming on Friday and will be preaching next Sunday. He’s a Baptist. Okay, don’t walk out of the church now, and don’t plan on not being here next week. Jacob and I disagree on baptism and on a couple of other issues, too. However, our brotherhood in the Lord is strong and our partnership in Gospel ministry is strong. When the Sudanese men come for training, they come from Presbyterian, Baptist, Anglican, and Charismatic churches, but we focus on Christ and the Gospel and we teach from the Scriptures, and we can spend hours and hours together, learning together and worshipping together, without any division or animosity. At the end of the day, our churches may not be able to organizationally unify, because we do have real disagreements on secondary issues, but we can still enjoy strong spiritual unity and engage in Gospel ministry side-by-side for the salvation of the nations and the glory of the name of Christ!

3. A Commitment to Gospel Proclamation, vv. 17-18

And the focus is thus not only on Christ Himself as primary and central in the life of the church and the lives of believers, but also on the proclamation of the Gospel in the power of the Spirit, and not on human wisdom and eloquence:

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.

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.

The gospel is the word of the cross. For the world, the word of the cross is absolute foolishness. We’ll explore this more next week, but sometimes we forget how foolish sounding the word of the cross is to the world. We believe that our sins are forgiven and we are accepted by God and have eternal life because an itinerant Jewish rabbi, the son of a carpenter, was executed by the Romans outside the city walls of Jerusalem 2,000 years ago. And we believe that this crucified itinerant Jewish rabbi rose again from the dead in power and glory and that He

sits at the right hand of God Almighty as King of kings and Lord of lords, and that He is the only hope of salvation for anyone in the world.

To the world, perishing in its rebellion and unbelief, this is absolute stupidity. We are morons. And if we dress up this message in layers of human eloquence, to make it sound really good, we risk emptying the message of its power. Because for us who are being saved, the simple and clear message of the cross is the power of God for salvation. The only thing more foolish than believing in the cross is believing that God saves people through simple, sinful human beings proclaiming this simple, foolish message in the power of the Holy Spirit.

And yet this is how God has been saving His people for 2,000 years. From Crispus and Sosthenes in Corinth to a former Muslim sheik and imam, Omar, in Uganda, from a militant Jewish persecutor of Christians, Saul of Tarsus, to a freckle-faced Air Force brat named Jason in the 1980's, God has been pleased to use the foolish preaching of a foolish Gospel about a scandalous cross to save His own, whom He calls to Himself through the power of Gospel as the Spirit moves through the proclamation of the Gospel to bring the dead to life and bring the lost to salvation.

For the church, this is the only real power we have been given, and this is the glue of our only real unity: The Gospel of the cross of Christ, the crucified and resurrected Son of God and Savior of sinners. May we never, ever lose sight of the cross or ever dare to make any other message or man central to the life of the church of God!