

Cornerstone Baptist Church

So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. Give no offense to Jews or to Greeks or to the church of God, just as I try to please everyone in everything I do, not seeking my own advantage, but that of many, that they may be saved.

(1 Corinthians 10:31–33 ESV)

Unity

August 9th, 2020

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Introduction:

Good morning everyone! I hope you brought your Bibles with you and that you are able to open them now to 1 Corinthians chapter 1:1-17. We're going to jump back into 1 Corinthians this morning in order to facilitate a conversation about UNITY in the church of Jesus Christ.

I mentioned two weeks ago that our intention was to use these couple of weeks between the end of our apologetics series and the start of our series in 1 John to cover a few topics of particular relevance to our situation as a church during this pandemic.

COVID19 has put a remarkable amount of stress on the local church and while that can be very difficult it can also be very helpful as we are alerted to any existing cracks or deficiencies in our makeup. Just as a mechanic might put a tire into a barrel of water in order to identify and repair a leak – so too we have a wonderful opportunity to take stock of our health and maturity as a people – and my prayer is that we will do the work and chase down the little bubbles so as to make whatever corrections and adjustments may be required. We want to present the Lord with a useful and fruitful vessel – don't we? We want to be able to say as a COLLECTIVE BODY – here am I Lord, send me! Send us! Use us! For the glory of Christ and for the good of all people – amen! So we are using this time to self-assess, and where necessary to make appropriate changes.

Toward that end I hope you have your Bible open now to 1 Corinthians 1 verses 10-17.

I mentioned two weeks ago that biblical scholars often refer to 1 Corinthians as an “occasional letter”, meaning that it was written in response to particular needs or questions. Some scholars identify 10 separate questions or concerns. The first several being Paul’s concerns based on the reports he has received from Chloe’s people and then the 3 men mentioned earlier, followed by answers to the questions contained in the letter that they delivered. That is probably correct - whether there are 10 questions or 11 or 9 - I’m not going to quibble. The point is that this is a letter in response to a whole bunch of live local issues in a particular church.

As to the nature of these various challenges, the Pillar NT says that:

“Many of their faults can be traced to their uncritical acceptance of the attitudes, values and behaviors of the society in which they lived.”¹

And that becomes very clear as Paul begins to address the first of the problems of which he has been made aware. He has learned from “Chloe’s people” that there are factions and divisions in the church and so he begins to address that – and he spends a surprising amount of time in so doing. This section on unity actually runs all the way from 1:10 – 4:21 – and then Paul comes back to it in chapter 11 in order to discuss how this problem is manifesting in their corporate worship, so this issue actually receives the largest amount of word count in the entire letter.

Think about that.

Paul says more about UNITY than he does about sexuality, church discipline, gender, spiritual gifts and even the resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That’s remarkable.

¹ Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 4.

However, because it is such a long and detailed discussion, we won't be able to read all of it so I have tried to identify the passages that take us most efficiently into the heart of the Apostle's argument. We'll begin reading at 1:10 and we will read all the way through to verse 17. Hear now the Word of the Lord:

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. (1 Corinthians 1:10–17 ESV)

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Now remember, the root problem in Corinth was:

"their uncritical acceptance of the attitudes, values and behaviors of the society in which they lived."²

Corinth was a Roman colony. It had originally been a city of the Greeks but it had fought an ill-considered war against Rome and had lost badly. The Romans obliterated the city in 146 BC and it remained in ruins until it was rebuilt as a Roman colony by Julius Caesar in 46 BC – so by the time Paul visited it about a 100 years later it was thoroughly Romanized in all respects including of course their approach to rhetoric and politics.

Roman politics was aggressively PARTISAN and that attitude and approach appears to have infiltrated the church:

² Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 4.

I follow Paul, some said!

I follow Apollos, other said.

I follow Peter, some declared.

While the super spiritual said: “I follow Christ” –of course by that they meant, their version of Christ, irrespective of what the Bible says and irrespective of what the authorized Apostles of Jesus had laid down. The church has always had a mystical party, and the church in Corinth was no exception.

The point is that these people were TRIBAL and CONTENTIOUS.

Paul says in verse 11 that he has heard from Chloe’s people that there is open quarrelling in the church – the word he uses there means:

wrangling: — contention, debate, strife³

The church in Corinth looked and sounded a great deal like the Roman Senate but bore very little resemblance to Jesus Christ. He didn’t quarrel or cry aloud, nor did anyone hear his voice in the streets:

“He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets; a bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not quench, until he brings justice to victory; and in his name the Gentiles will hope.” (Matthew 12:19–21 ESV)

So that was the issue here. These Roman Christians were simply far more Roman than they were Christian.

³Strong's Greek Dictionary of the New Testament, s.v. “paragraph 1.

That leads us to our second text. Turn forward a page or two in your Bibles to 1 Corinthians 3:1-9. You'll see for yourself that two chapters later Paul is still addressing the same theme. He says in verse 1:

¹ But I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ² I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, 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? ⁴ For when one says, "I follow Paul," and another, "I follow Apollos," are you not being merely human?

Now, it is worth noting here that the Apostle Paul does consider these folks in Corinth to be CHRISTIANS by and large - he calls them "brothers" in verse 1 - but it is also clear that he considers them to be BABY CHRISTIANS. He says in the second half of verse 1 that he could not address them as SPIRITUAL PEOPLE because they are clearly still functioning as babes in Christ - and he is not happy about it - meaning he believes that they OUGHT TO HAVE BEEN much further along in their development than they actually are.

This obsession with human leaders is STAGE APPROPRIATE Paul says – much like sucking your thumb or soiling your diaper is STAGE APPROPRIATE – but for you to BE IN THIS STAGE at this point in your spiritual development is deeply disappointing. Like a 5-year-old breast feeding or a 30-year-old still living at home in momma's basement – it is time brothers and sisters, for you to grow up.

That's the substance of Paul's pastoral rebuke and now in verse 5 and following he begins to provide some remedial teaching:

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. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.

Like a good teacher, Paul makes use of an accessible metaphor – he says that pastors and leaders are really just seasonal labourers - they are migrant workers assigned to a particular field; they do

their work and they pass away and therefore it is foolish for you to over identify with these human leaders - we ought to identify with the One who owns the field, commands the workers, sends the rain and enables the harvest.

You have put the EM-PHA-SIS on the WRONG SYLL-ABLE, boys and girls, and you sound like a country bumpkin.

That's what Paul is doing here – much as he does with the gift of tongues - he is not delegitimizing human leadership he is simply deprioritizing it.

The Pillar NT Commentary threads the needle very helpfully here when it says that:

"Ministers do have value. But when respect or fondness leads to an exclusive loyalty, and when this causes division or detracts from a proper theocentric or christocentric orientation, Paul wishes to point out that *only God who makes things grow* is worthy of our undivided gratitude and adoration."⁴

So that's what Paul is doing here – he is not trying to discredit their favourite leaders – he is simply demoting them and I think we need to hear that. The evangelical church has become sinfully tribal in the last several decades – would you not agree with that? Partly this is due to our access to extraordinarily gifted preachers via television and the internet and partly this is due to our uncritical adoption of worldly models of leadership from the culture. But regardless of where it came from - it has to be confronted and rebuked.

Who is John MacArthur?

Who is John Piper?

Who is Mark Dever?

Who is Dane Ortlund?

⁴Roy E. Ciampa and Brian S. Rosner, *The First Letter to the Corinthians*, Pillar New Testament Commentary. Accordance electronic ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010), 147.

Migrant workers only.

And therefore it is foolish - it is infantile - to over identify with these merely human teachers.

And it isn't just in the wider church that we do this - we often do this inside our own local churches. Every church with multiple pastors has to wrestle with this issue. As soon as you have multiple pastors, immature members will instinctively identify their favourite: "I like the young go getter!" "I like the older, patient one." "I like the smart one who reads all the books".

But who are these people?

Merely servants through whom you believed.

To switch metaphors - they are waiters! They bring you great things from the table - but they themselves are nothing.

Christ is everything.

He is the source, he is the banquet - he is the owner - he is ALL. And all human leaders work for him. So, Paul says, stop over-estimating the value of these human leaders – it is very immature of you to do so.

Now, the last passage I want to look at this morning comes from Paul's section on worship. The worldly attitudes of the Corinthians and their party spirit affected them in a variety of ways – but perhaps most distressingly for the Apostle – it was affecting their approach to the Lord's Supper. Flip forward now to 1 Corinthians 11:17-34. Let me read that passage to you as well.

But in the following instructions I do not commend you, because when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse.¹⁸ For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions among you. And I believe it in part,¹⁹ for there must be factions among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized.²⁰ When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat.²¹ For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal. One goes hungry, another gets drunk.²² What! Do you not have houses to eat and

drink in? Or do you despise the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing? What shall I say to you? Shall I commend you in this? No, I will not.
²³ For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread,²⁴ and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, “This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.”²⁵ In the same way also he took the cup, after supper, saying, “This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me.”²⁶ For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes.

²⁷ Whoever, therefore, eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty concerning the body and blood of the Lord.²⁸ Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink of the cup.²⁹ For anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment on himself.³⁰ That is why many of you are weak and ill, and some have died.³¹ But if we judged ourselves truly, we would not be judged.³² But when we are judged by the Lord, we are disciplined so that we may not be condemned along with the world.

³³ So then, my brothers, when you come together to eat, wait for one another—³⁴ if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home—so that when you come together it will not be for judgment. About the other things I will give directions when I come.

(1 Corinthians 11:17–34 ESV)

Now, we are running out of time so I will only explain this passage very briefly. It will be helpful here to remember that the church at this time was meeting in the house of a man named Titus Justus – or at least they were when Paul left them. You will recall that the Christians were kicked out of the synagogue and that they moved the whole church into the house of the man who lived next door – you can read about that in Acts 18:7. Historians tell us that a good sized Roman home at that time would likely have had a dining area that could comfortably sit 10-12 people. It would also have had an outdoor courtyard that could have sat between 30-70 people depending on the size of the home.

And so it seemed that what was happening was that when the church gathered on the Lord’s Day for communion, the rich, important people were eating in the dining area and the poor people were sitting huddled together outside in the courtyard.

Like good Romans always did – they were dividing according to class.

But that's not acceptable Paul says! In fact, what he says here is quite astonishing. Look at verse 20. He says:

When you come together, it is not the Lord's supper that you eat. (1 Corinthians 11:20 ESV)

That's quite remarkable! Apparently, we can't just DO the Lord's Supper however we like. If we don't do it the right way, then it isn't the Lord's Supper – it is just you eating a piece of bread and having a sip of wine or juice. If the MEANING is OBSCURED by the METHOD – then it would be better not to do it at all – that's what Paul says in verse 17:

"when you come together it is not for the better but for the worse." (1 Corinthians 11:17 ESV)

Every time you do communion you actually GET WORSE as Christians, not better – your communion liturgy is actually a DE-SANCTIFYING EXPERIENCE and you'd be better off if you stopped practicing it entirely - that's a pretty remarkable thing to say!

But then again, the communion liturgy in Corinth was a pretty remarkable thing – and not in a good way. In addition to sitting by class, there was also no coordination. The meal in the main dining area would be served when those guests had assembled and then everyone else would eat on their own – if they indeed they had any food to eat. Some got drunk and some went home hungry and humiliated – the whole thing DID MORE TO OBSCURE THE GOSPEL than just about anything they could have designed had that been their actual intention.

And so Paul reminds them of what the Lord's Supper is – he walks them through the basics once again. The Lord's Supper is a RITUAL MEAL – it is a COVENANT MEAL – it is a COMMUNITY MEAL – it is an act of WORSHIP. It is a SOLEMN CEREMONY and if you eat and drink in an unworthy manner you are likely to invite the Lord's judgment upon your assembly.

That's what Paul says, and interestingly, it appears that it was this text which ultimately transformed the early church's approach to communion. Prior to this historians suggest that the

Lord's Supper was conducted within a common meal – that there was a church supper as it were that included a RITUAL COURSE of bread and wine – but that got mucky and so Paul here effectively transforms the Lord's Supper into a TOKEN MEAL. We will take a piece of bread and a sip of wine – altogether please – so as to keep the focus on the true meaning and intention of the act.

Are you seeing that? The Corinthians have actually INSTITUTIONALIZED their spiritual immaturity – their liturgy facilitates the spread of ROMAN CULTURE as opposed to CHRISTIAN CULTURE - so Paul INTERRUPTS, ADAPTS and REFORMS their worship so as to re-initialize their growth and development in Christ.

Now having traced this conversation through to its application and conclusion let me see if I can quickly summarize what we have learned in terms of the various causes of division and disunity in the church. Paul appears to identify 4 essential causes:

What Caused The Division In The Church At Corinth?

- 1. Their spiritual immaturity**
- 2. Their over identification with human leaders**
- 3. Their worldliness in speech and conduct**
- 4. Their carelessness in worship and liturgy**

And it has to stop.

They are obscuring the Gospel. They are giving BAD WITNESS and they are actually DE-CHRISTIANIZING people every time they gather together as a local church.

Now what can we learn from this?

Well, when you summarize Paul's teaching in this way – it almost applies itself doesn't it? Every single one of those points could be applied to the North American church.

I think a fair argument could be made that the evangelical church has never been LESS MATURE than it is at present. We have REGRESSED tremendously in the last several decades. We have become fat and flabby through poor diet and very little exercise. We have been pampered and spoiled by our own power and prosperity and we have completely lost our edge haven't we? Where is our RESILIENCE? Where is our ENDURANCE? Where is our GRACE UNDER FIRE? It is nowhere to be seen in this pandemic! The church is having a giant pity party and temper tantrum on the front lawn for all the world to see – I'm not sure how anyone could deny that. It is shameful, it is infantile and it needs to stop.

And who could argue that the church in our day has over identified with human leaders? We're all MacArthur men now or Piper people or IX Marks devotees – or whatever else we want to call ourselves. And we all want to hear from our favourite sources – much to the detriment of our local churches.

In a recent Barna Report on the state of the church they reported that:

"among practicing Christians—those who identify as Christian, agree strongly that faith is very important in their lives and attend church at least monthly (prior to COVID-19)—over half (53%) say they have streamed their regular church online within the past four weeks. Another 34 percent admits to streaming a different church service online other than their own, essentially "church hopping" digitally."⁵

Are you hearing those numbers?

Only about HALF of professed Christians in this culture – 53% - are continuing to track with their local church under the pressure of this pandemic. Of the half that are not, about half of them are not attending anywhere and the other half are "church hopping" digitally. They are watching Piper or MacArthur online.

My point is not that COVID19 has created this problem, my point is that COVID19 has REVEALED and ACCELERATED this problem. The data on this is overwhelming. Modern day evangelicals have a dangerous tendency to OVER IDENTIFY with particular human leaders, often at the expense of our local fellowship.

⁵ <https://www.barna.com/research/new-sunday-morning-part-2/>

And a quick survey of our social media accounts would reveal that we have also ADOPTED WHOLESALE the STYLE and TONE of cultural debate. We ZING each other, we CANCEL each other, we characterize each other – JUST LIKE THEY DO ON CNN – just like they do on FOX NEWS.

And these issues are not merely skin deep in our congregations – they have infiltrated every aspect – every structure – and every tradition of the modern-day church.

So what should we do?

How can we turn this around and begin to nurture and encourage real Christian unity in our churches?

What Can We Do To Nurture And Encourage Unity In Our Church?

Let me VERY QUICKLY suggest 3 things that I believe would be very helpful. The first is this:

1. Let's receive this pandemic as the spanking and time out that it almost certainly is

I'm not suggesting that God sent this plague SPECIFICALLY and UNIQUELY to chastise the North American Evangelical church, I am just saying that it does certainly appear TUNED so as to cause MASSIVE and UNPRECEDENTED DISRUPTION to our corporate life and worship – that cannot be a coincidence!

Is it just a coincidence – is it just an accident that we haven't been able to celebrate communion as a church for the last 6 months?

Is it an accident that we haven't been able to sing as a church for the last 6 months?

Or could it be that God is putting us on time out? That our Father is saying: “Go to your room and think about what you've done and don't come out again until you've learned your lesson”.

Could that be what's going on? Or at least PART of what's going on?

And so let's not be in such a terrible hurry to "get things back to normal". Let's take advantage of this opportunity to do some soul searching and some self-evaluation as a church. It is really hard to do substantive maintenance on an airplane in flight. You can wipe down the seat trays and vacuum the carpet, I suppose, but that's about it. So isn't it just possible that God sent this MASSIVE BANK OF FOG to GROUND the airplane of the church so as to FACILITATE some SERIOUS EVALUATION and OVERHAUL?

I think we have to at least consider that as a serious possibility. We ought to use this time to re-evaluate how we think, how we talk, how we learn and how we worship as a gathered people.

Secondly, and flowing right out of that – now is the time for us to :

2. Let's allow the Word of God to challenge, correct and clarify our opinions and convictions

The 16th and 17th century Protestant reformers used to describe the Bible as the norma normans non normata, or "the norming norm that is not itself normed."⁶

Are you hearing that?

What they're saying is that the BIBLE DOESN'T CHANGE – which is good because the church is always DRIFTING!! We are always effected by the gravity and demands of our host culture – and so every couple of generations everything in the church has to be pulled out and thrown onto the table for a complete audit and examination. And the only standard for that evaluation is the unchanging, life giving, standard setting Word of God – and we need to do that again – would you say amen to that?

And then finally, if we want to grow in authentic Christian unity then we need to pursue:

3. Let's pursue an unmediated, unadulterated allegiance to the person of Jesus Christ

⁶ As per Tim Enloe, <http://tgenloe.com/sc/?p=754>

He is the one who lived for you, he's the one who died for you, he's the one who was raised for you and he's the one who even now intercedes in the heavens for you – so you should worship him! He needs to be the centre! He needs to be the focus – and of course the closer we get to him, the closer we're going to be to each other.

So, of course you can appreciate your pastor; of course you can learn from your pastor, and if you are very keen you can supplement all that with good books and helpful podcasts by other Christian teachers and leaders – but don't buy into the brand, don't drink the Kool Aid, don't OVER IDENTIFY with ANY HUMAN LEADER – because who are we, really, at the end of the day?

Only servants and stewards through whom you have believed.

Thanks be to God, let's pray together.