

United in Christ: Meeting the challenges of diversity
Studies in 1 Corinthians
Cracks in Unity: Dividing over teachers

Intro: Last week we noticed that Paul begins his letter to the Corinthians with a typical greeting and prayer of thanksgiving; but even in this section he anticipates his message of unity by reminding the Corinthians of God's provisions for their unity.

God past provisions--God's people are united by their calling to fellowship with Christ!

God's present provisions—God's people are united by their equipping in Christ!

God's future provisions—God's people are united by their hope in Christ!

Paul's concern in this letter is how the diversity of attitudes and viewpoints in the congregation is causing "cracks" in this unity. In our lesson tonight we see Paul addressing one of those "cracks" in the unity of the congregation—divisions around teachers.

A problem at Corinth—Division around teachers

For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you. Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."

Paul had received intelligence apparently through the family or slaves of a presumably a female disciple named Chloe that the peace and unity of the church had been disrupted.

Such competitive quarrels had been a part of Corinthian life.

In our first lesson we noticed that Corinth was a town given to self-promotion and personal ambition. It was a place where people of poor beginnings could rise to wealth, power, and prestige; and with this possibility were the dangers of pride and disdain for others.

This ambitious and competitive mindset had apparently also influenced the way these new disciples related to one another.

There were rivalries, dissensions, or quarrels among them as they vied for importance and sought to establish their superiority.

But how would someone establish his superiority over another?

Rationale for the problem—Which teacher is "wiser?"

The performance of the teacher became the rationale for superior claims and self-promotion.

Apparently through disputes about who was the greatest or wisest man who had taught there, the Corinthians were seeking to stake out their individual claims to be resultantly greater or wiser than others. And so

they were saying, “*I am of Paul,*” and “*I of Apollos,*” and “*I of Cephas,*” and “*I of Christ.*”

In Corinthian life this tendency to glory in one’s instructor had been a feature of the culture. Commentators like Ben Witherington document the existence of vying Sophists who spoke with great eloquence and whose disciples were so zealous for their instructors that they resorted to public quarrels and even at times acts of violence (“Conflict and Community...”, p. 100-101).

The Corinthians appear to have incorporated this conception into their attitudes toward those who may have influenced them to become disciples (like Paul, Apollos, and Peter.)

For example, Apollos spoke with a polished eloquence that some would have associated with superior wisdom. However Paul deliberately avoided using “words of human wisdom.” And it is not hard to imagine that in their comparisons you might hear a conversation like this, “You know, Paul is a good man; but Apollos speaks with a mastery of the language that is just divine. It has been a privileged for me to learn from a man like that.” And then another say, “But Paul is an apostle; he may not be the most polished speaker; but he has performed so many great signs. I think my experience has been a better one.”

The issue was not merely that the Corinthians are divided up over who was the greater teacher. They were using that discussion as a rationale for asserting their own personal superiority! “I am...I am...I am...”

Paul’s solution to the problem—Christ-centered unity

Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree, and there be no divisions among you, but you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Paul’s solution is to stress to the Corinthians “the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Paul looks past all the men who have taught in Corinth to the one who is the author of gospel—Jesus Christ.

He is the one who bound them together as a body.

Paul calls for agreement, unity, and spiritual maturity based on Him, and Him alone!

Paul chooses to describe the Corinthian divisions as “schismata”—a word that might suggest cracks or fissures in a rock, which hold potential for breaking it apart.

Instead the focus should be on uniting upon the truth, and growing up into the truth that Christ has revealed through His various teachers.

Rationale for the solution—distinguishing between the teacher and the Savior

Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, that no man should say you were baptized in my name.

Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, that the cross of Christ should not be made void. (1 Cor. 1:10-17)

Paul's response is intended to cause the Corinthians to distinguish between the teacher and the Savior! Sometimes men get so focused upon the messenger that we forget the one whose message we are following. Paul's questions are designed to make the Corinthians remember that:

Christ is the Savior!

He was the one crucified for us!

We were baptized in His name!

We were united in His body!

Again, Paul is showing that it is these things that have made the Corinthians united.

Paul, Apollos, and Cephas were simply messengers of the Savior!

Since the teacher who baptized the Corinthians became the basis for their self-promotions and competitions, Paul could

only respond that, if that was the case, he was glad that he

personally baptized only a few of the Corinthians. And He

would remind them that his primary calling was not to

administer baptisms, but to preach the message of Christ!

(Here we should pause to remember that this text has been

taken out of context to assert that baptism is not necessary to salvation. Nothing could be further from the truth! In fact the

text teaches the opposite. We become members of Christ's

body by believing that He died for us and by being baptized in

His name!)

The logical result of these truths is that there are no big Christians and little Christians or big and bigger; but just Christians. Attitudes of superiority based on human teachers reflected a serious misunderstanding of gospel priorities.

Lessons for us!

We need to avoid the one-upmanship that characterized the Corinthians.

The whole mind-set of competition and self-promotion is totally contrary to the humble spirit of the Lord and His teaching.

Our unity also depends upon staying focused on Christ as the Savior, not upon the greatness of those who taught or are teaching us.

This text almost universally prompts a discussion about all the divisions of denominationalism and how sinful that is. Such divisions based on following men rather than Christ, or more benevolently as they teach about Christ, is still contrary to the spirit of the Gospel and the prayer of Christ for unity among believers.

But we sometimes artfully find ways to apply Scripture to everybody else and not to ourselves!

What about divisions in congregations professing to belong to Christ? What about quarrels and dissensions that grow out of loyalty to “our man?”

Many a church conflict has centered on dissatisfaction with preachers/teachers and whether they measure up to someone’s criteria of “greatness.” And we can foster that, even if only by longing for the preacher/teacher that we don’t have, instead of supporting and helping the one that we do!

If our focus is on men, we will begin to divide over who teaches us. If our focus is on Christ, we will be grateful for any who shares His message in the proper way.

We can honor teachers for their work, without exalting them as saviors.

Refusing to exalt teachers as saviors does not require that we withhold needed encouragement, appreciation, and support. It is problematic when preachers/teachers are exalted over Christ it is also problematic when we fail to see them as Christ’s “gifts” to the church for their spiritual benefit (Eph. 4:11-13).

Imagine what it is like to study hard and prepare diligently to feed the people and some people will walk by you service after service without honoring your effort, without a word of appreciation for the investment of yourself in their well-being, without acknowledging the hours of work and the personal investment of his resources by considerate financial compensation.

I can appreciate not wanting to give a preacher/teacher “the big head;” but I can also appreciate the possibility that you may give him instead “a deflated heart.”

Three keys to unity

These lessons may suggest three important actions we can take to keep the church united.

A starting point for unity is to honor every brother or sister in Christ for what He is—a person loved and saved by Jesus Christ, an important member of the body of Christ, and an equal guest at the Lord’s Table.

A second key to unity is to recognize that we all have the same Savior and that we must exalt Him in our hearts.

The third key to unity is to get behind those who serve us as teachers and help them succeed.

Wherever these things do not exist the unity of the church suffers and the success of its efforts will be minimal. But where there is honor for one another, exaltation of Christ, and helpfulness to those who serve us, there will not only be unity but influence with others.

Conclusion: This paragraph speaks powerfully to the need to stay focused on Jesus Christ. It shows us that some of the most dangerous divisions are not those about Scriptural differences; but those that where people are unduly exalted or

torn down for the sake of personal advantage. Let us examine our own hearts and let us pray that we never contribute to such a spirit that would create “cracks” in our unity.