

BEHIND DIVISIONS

by Ray C. Stedman

As we read through First Corinthians, I think we will see how very much like modern day churches this ancient church of Corinth was. Unlike most of his other epistles, Paul plunges right into the heart of the practical problems that were affecting this church, and the first of these, the problem of divisions within the church, he begins to deal with in Chapter 1, Verse 10.

A young pastor who was facing that problem in his church called me this week from another state. The church was divided into factions, and one group was urging him to take half the congregation and go to another part of the city and start a new church. He called to ask whether I thought that would be right or wrong to do. My answer was that it all depends on the motive. If it is to expand the congregation and further the work of the Lord in that area, and he had the whole agreement of the leadership of the church behind him, then it is fine to take part of the congregation and go away and begin another work. But if it is to escape pressures and difficulties and problems in the congregation, then it is absolutely wrong and the worst thing he could do, because it sets before the watching world a false testimony concerning the church of Jesus Christ.

Now, the Apostle Paul is very concerned about this matter of incipient division in the church at Corinth, and he begins dealing with it in this powerful appeal for unity in Verse 10:

I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. {1 Cor 1:10 RSV}

Paul always expresses great concern about the possibility of a split in the church. You may be reminded by his words in Verse 10 of the similar passage in his letter to the Philippians where, in Chapter 2, he says to that church, "So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any incentive of love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord, and of one mind," {Phil 2:1-2 RSV}. You may recall also that in writing to the church at Ephesus, he exhorted the elders there to be careful to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace," {Eph 4:3 RSV}.

Now, church unity is a very important matter, and, because of its significance, Paul puts it first in the list of problems he has to deal with here at Corinth. Many of the other problems were flowing out of this division within the congregation. Here in Verse 10 he briefly shows us the ground of unity, and the nature of unity in a church. The ground, of course, is the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. "I appeal to you," he says, "by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Their relationship to Christ was the unifying factor of the church. There is no other name big enough, great enough, glorious enough, and powerful enough to gather everybody together, despite the diversity of viewpoint and the differences of background or status in life, than the name of Jesus. That is why the apostle appeals to it. He recognizes that we share a common life if we have come to Christ; we are brothers and sisters because we have his life in us. He is the ground, always, of unity. And more than that, we have a responsibility to obey him, to follow his Lordship. Therefore, the only basis upon which you can get Christians to agree is by setting before them the Person of the Lord Jesus, and calling them back to that fundamental base. This is what Paul does here.

Now, he describes the nature of unity this way, "that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment." That does not mean that everybody has to think alike. With all the differences among us, it is impossible to get people to think alike. Obviously, here at Peninsula Bible Church we cannot do that. It would be great if all of you would think like me, but unfortunately there are stubborn ones among you, there are depraved ones among you, there are those who have different backgrounds than I have, and some of you just do not think like I do! That, of course, is as it should be. The church is never called to having everybody think exactly alike.

But yet the apostle says they are to be of the same mind. Now, how could that be? I think the letter to the Philippians helps us here, because in that passage I just quoted from, Paul goes on to say, "Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus," {cf, Phil 2:5}. He then goes on to describe for us the mind of Christ, which is a willingness to give up rights and personal privileges and give in and take a lower place. Then comes that great Christological passage where he describes how Christ,

who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. {Phil 2:6-8 RSV}

That is the mind Paul is talking about. When everybody decides to put the things of Christ first, and is willing to suffer loss that the honor and glory of Christ might be advanced, that is what brings harmony in a congregation. That is always the unifying factor in a church, and that is the mind that is to be among us, the mind that does not consider itself the most important thing.

I remember a few years ago being at a family congress in St. Louis, Missouri, when one of the evening speakers was Dr. Oswald Hoffman, the very capable and powerful preacher on the Lutheran Hour radio program. He was introduced in a rather extended and flowery way, but he came on and in his great, booming voice said, "I'm not Dr. Oswald Hoffman, the great preacher of the Lutheran Hour. I'm nobody, just like you!" I've not forgotten that incident because it seems to me to capture the very attitude Paul is describing here.

Who are we, that we should put our interests and our desires ahead of that of the Lord for his church? I have been in many places where they were having church fights and almost invariably the thing that gives away that a church is in trouble is when people start talking about "my church," not in the sense that is perfectly proper as meaning, "The church where I go," but leaders of the church actually saying, "This is our church," and telling other people they have no rights to do something because the church belongs to them. They forget, of course, that the church never belongs to anybody but the Lord. This is what Paul uses as the basis for unity in this church -- not only the attitude of selflessness, which is the mind of Christ, but the responsibility to submit to his Lordship, the common responsibility that we have together.

Paul goes right on, in Verse 12, to describe the forms that these divisions were taking in the church of Corinth:

What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas" [another name for Peter], or "I belong to Christ." {1 Cor 1:12 RSV}

Now, there was the trouble at Corinth. These were not schisms yet; they had not split off into other congregations, but there were four cliques, or factions within the congregation.

There were, first of all, the loyalists who said, "We are of Paul. He started this church. We came to life in Christ by Paul, and Paul is the one we're going to listen to above all others." So undoubtedly there was a big group that followed Paul.

Then there were the stylists, those who were attracted by the different kinds of preaching, and they had especially been drawn to Apollos. From the book of Acts we learn that Apollos was an outstanding orator in a world that loved and appreciated oratory. He was a rhetorician who was especially capable in the allegorical style of teaching of the Old Testament. I am sure there were many in Corinth who were saying, "Oh, I love to hear Apollos! He's a great preacher, a warm, capable, eloquent man, who can make the Old Testament come alive!"

Then there were the traditionalists (there always are), those that say, "Well, I don't know about Paul or Apollos. Let's get back to the beginnings. Let's go back to Jerusalem. We are of Peter." (Peter, evidently, had been through Corinth and had preached there.) So they said, "When Peter came, we really felt that we were on solid ground. After all, he was one of the first apostles that Jesus himself called." So they were splitting and

arguing and quarreling over the relative merit and authority of these various teachers.

There was still a fourth group, and in some ways I think they were probably the worst. They were drawing themselves up and saying, "Well, you may be of Paul or of Peter or of Apollos, but we are of Christ! We go back to the Lord alone. What he says we'll listen to, not Paul or Peter or anyone else -- it makes no difference to us." With that spirit of self-righteous smugness, they were separating from the rest, dividing up the congregation and quarreling with one another over these things.

Now, you do not have to be very old to recognize that that is still a problem in the church. The same viewpoints are still dividing people. There are those who are emotionally attached to some great Christian leader who has helped them, and they will only listen to him. They read only his books or listen only to his tapes. And there are others who are drawn to some speaking style that has attracted them. They love to listen to someone because he turns them on emotionally.

There are still others today who follow after some school of thought. It is the popular thing today to cry, "Back to the Reformation!" If someone comes on preaching the doctrines that were emphasized during the Reformation, he will get a great following of people who think that the Reformation was the whole sum and substance of all great Christian truth.

Some people will pick other matters of doctrine to affirm. There are the Calvinists and the Arminians and the Dispensationalists -- these are some of the things that are held up as the "summum bonum," the highest good, in theology. If you survey the church scene all over America today, you find people dividing up this way. Some say, "I am of Gothard," and others say, "No, I am of Bright." Still others say, "We are of Schaeffer," and others, "We are of Graham," or, "We are of C. S. Lewis."

I find there are these tendencies right here in Peninsula Bible Church. Some are of Ritchie, and some are of Roper, and a few of Stedman! So we have the possibility for this very thing right here.

Now, Paul says this is all basically, fundamentally wrong. Whenever this attitude of gathering around a man is allowed to perpetuate itself, it is the source of much trouble and difficulty.

Paul then goes on to give us three very carefully stated clues in Verse 13 as to what is wrong with this kind of thing. But first, it is very clear that he is deeply troubled by this. When you divide up among men you lose something, that is what he is saying. It is a serious threat to the life of a church to find people choosing favorite preachers, to the degree, at least, that they do not want to listen to anyone else. Now, we all have our favorite preacher, and up to a point that is not wrong. There are some people who minister to us better than others, and it is only natural that we should listen to them and follow them. But it is the exclusiveness that Paul is concerned about here -- people who do not even want to come to a service if someone other than their favorite is preaching. That is what Paul speaks about.

Now, in Verse 13 you understand why. To all of this Paul would say to us, as he says to Corinth,

**Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?
{1 Cor 1:13 RSV}**

Here are our first clues as to what is wrong with this kind of cliquishness in a church.

The first thing Paul says is that it tends to chop up Christ and parcel him out as though his person and his work came in various packages, thus you lose perspective of the whole of Christian theology. When you follow one man you are getting a view of Christ, but there is no teacher in the church who has ever come along -- including the Apostle Paul himself -- who has ever had a totally complete view of Christ. That is why we have four gospels, because not even one of the disciples who was with the Lord was capable of giving us a complete enough view of Christ. It took four viewpoints to report his earthly life and ministry accurately enough to us. God, therefore, has designed that there be many teachers, many preachers, many viewpoints, in a church. In the body of Christ at large there are many who can make a contribution to the understanding of Christ. If you limit yourself to one speaker or one teacher and feed only on him, you are getting a distorted

view of Jesus Christ; you are chopping Christ up, dividing him and taking one little portion as one man reports it and ignoring the rest, thus your view of Christ is deficient and unable to satisfy you as it was intended to do.

Now, the second thing Paul says is, "Was Paul crucified for you?" There he indicates that the problem with cliquishness is that it tends to overemphasize the significance of the human leader. It builds him up too much; it makes him a rival, to some degree, of the Lord himself. People begin to think things about him that are not true, and expect things from him that he is unable to deliver. You only have to listen around you today and you find outstanding leaders being held up by their congregations as almost the equal of the Lord himself in their value to the church. We tend to deify men, and people look at them as if they can do no wrong, can make no errors, that they know everything and can settle all questions. I have had to do some degree of battle with this myself. I have had people say to me, "Oh, Mr. Stedman, when you speak I see so clearly! I hang on every word you say. Whatever you say, I believe." (I have been trying for a long time to get my wife to accept that!) But that is a very dangerous attitude, and yet we tend to think of people as being the channel by which deliverance can come to our heart.

Now, it cannot. Paul is putting his finger right on the problem when he asks, "Was Paul crucified for you?" There is not a single Christian teacher who ever lived who can help us be forgiven one single sin, not one. There is not a single teacher who ever lived who can heal the hurt of a broken heart, or supply energy and adequacy to someone who feels worthless and unable to function in society, not one. There is not a teacher among us today, or at any other time, who is able to open the mind and open the eyes of the heart and reveal to us the glory and majesty of God, not one. That is not the work of men; that is the work of God himself. He chooses various channels through which to work. We must allow him the privilege of doing that. They will not all be the same flavor; they will not all have the same characteristics. We reveal our immaturity when we insist that only those with certain characteristics are the ones we will listen to, or we feel can bless or strengthen our lives. No man is the Savior; no man can deliver us except Jesus. All are mere teachers; there is only one Lord. He said so himself. "One is your master; all of you are brothers," {cf, Matt 23:8 KJV}.

The third danger of groups is given in the latter part of Verse 13, and on through the next few verses:

Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. [Then he thinks of another group that he had baptized] (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else). {1 Cor 1:13b-16 RSV}

Now, here the apostle makes very clear that the tendency among groupies is to distort the meaning of symbols. They take an innocent teaching medium, in this case baptism, and make it into an identification badge. That is the problem, and it is still going on today. Many of us are familiar with this common phenomenon in human psychology of thinking that some symbolic thing that is of use to us is so important that we finally make it a badge of the group to which we belong.

As a young Christian in my early twenties during World War II, I was stationed in Hawaii, and I became acquainted with the work of the Navigators. At that time it was under the leadership of its founder, Dawson Trotman, and it was my privilege and delight to be a close friend of his, to have spent a good deal of time with him and to come under the influence of his teaching and his methods. The Navigators in those days did a great work in the Navy throughout the whole of the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, and hundreds of young men were led to Christ through their efforts during the war years. I used to attend a Navigator group which met in Honolulu on Sunday afternoons. Sometimes two or three hundred sailors, all of them Christians, would be there. We had some great meetings and great times together. It was a glorious work.

But you could always tell a Navigator because there were three things that he always had:

First, he had a Scofield Reference Bible tucked under his arm. This Bible was pushed by the Navigators, and everybody had to have one. Since I was working at that time in the ship's service department in Pearl Harbor, we ordered great quantities of these Bibles. They were hard to get in those war years, and every shipment that came in went out like hot cakes. Every Navigator had to have a Scofield Reference Bible; that was the only

"Authorized Version."

Then not only did they have the Bible, but every Navigator who was anybody at all had to have an index drawn in on the pages of the Bible, a kind of a ladder that gave you a clue to where the books were so that with your thumb you could turn up any book in the Bible almost instantly. And if you were really on the inside circle, your ladder was drawn by none other than Dawson Trotman himself! I still have at home the Scofield Reference Bible with the index ladder drawn by him.

The third thing that every Navigator had was a little black notebook covered in rough-grained leather. On opening it you found a loose-leaf notebook with many of the small, half-page materials that the Navigators printed their Bible helps on.

You could spot the Navigators going up and down the streets of Honolulu. They would have the Scofield Reference Bible and a notebook under one arm, and you knew that if you examined their Bibles you would find the ladder index on the pages. That was the mark, that was the identification badge. Now these things were good. There was nothing wrong with them, they were very helpful, but it was not very long before they became status symbols, and they were used to put down, not always intentionally, those who did not have them. They became symbols of prestige and standing that became divisive factors among the men.

Now, almost every group does this. Something shows up sooner or later as an identifying badge that marks them as "special," with special privilege and special status in that group. That is what they were doing with baptism here in Corinth. They were boasting over who had baptized them. Some of them were saying, "Well, Paul baptized me." Others were saying, "Well, Apollos himself baptized me." And there were some who said, "Well, when Peter came through, he baptized me. And, after all, Peter even walked on water!" That was a mark of status with them. They were dividing over this whole issue, and Paul says it is all wrong. It would destroy the unity of the congregation and split them up and provide an inaccurate testimony to the Person of Christ before the watching world. So he says, "I didn't baptize many of you. I thank God that only a few of you can say that about me."

Now, in one verse he introduces to us the cure for these divisions (Verse 17):

**For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom [literally, "wisdom of words"], lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.
{1 Cor 1:17 RSV}**

This introduces one of the greatest passages in the Bible, setting forth the difference between the wisdom of man and the wisdom of God. Paul here introduces that which can cure divisions, both negatively and positively. He says, in effect, "You don't cure divisions in a church by identification badges. Christ did not send me to take scalps or to cut notches on my gun handle as to how many converts I've won." Now, he is not saying that it is wrong to baptize; he himself did it, and acknowledges that he did. He does not say we should stop baptizing because of this problem. No, he says that is not why he was sent: "I was not sent to emphasize symbols, but, positively, I was sent to preach a whole gospel, not one emphasizing style, not in wisdom of words, but that which emphasizes content." The facts in the gospel are what will set us free, and particularly, he says, the word of the cross.

The cross of Christ is what will heal the fragmentation of Christians wherever they are. When you call them back to an understanding of the meaning of the cross, you will find all the divisions disappearing; they fade away like the morning mist. When you get men's eyes off all these status symbols, and call them back away from following men to the Person of Christ and his cross, all the divisions will disappear. There has been no other cure that I know of through the years. The cross of Christ cuts across all human value systems. It wipes out all the petty distinctions that men make among themselves. The cross strips away our illusions and brings the pride of men tumbling down from that high place where it exalts itself against the knowledge of God. Paul is going to go on to describe this radical force that is so different than anything else there is nothing like it in the world. No man would ever have planned the cross. If it had been left up to us to plan the program by which God would change the world we would never have included a cross. This is a radical principle that we need to understand, because, when you understand the cross, there will be no room left for the divisions of

men. That is why Paul calls us back to it.

This is a very propitious time for us to consider the cross for this is Palm Sunday, commemorating the day when our Lord entered Jerusalem for his last week. On Friday of this week we will gather again to consider the cross of Christ. As we do, I hope every one of us will understand more and more fully the character of this radical principle that God has turned loose among us, this revolutionary idea represented in the cross of Christ that wipes out all these distinctions among men.

I would like to close this service by reading what one man wrote about the cross:

It is well that we should think sometimes of the Upper Room and the Last Supper, and of his soul, "exceeding sorrowful unto death"; of Gethsemane and the deep shadow of the olive trees; his loneliness, prayers, and disappointment with his disciples; his bloody sweat; the traitor's kiss; the binding, the blow in the face, the spitting, the buffeting, the mocking, the scourging, the crown of thorns, the smiting; the sorrowful way and the burdensome cross; the exhaustion and collapse; the stripping, the impaling, and the jeers of his foes, and the flight of his friends; the hours on the cross; the darkness, his being forsaken of God; his thirst, and the end.

Near the cross, O Lamb of God,
bring its scenes before me.
Help me walk from day to day,
with its shadows o'er me.

Prayer

Thank you, Father, for this time here contemplating the cross. We pray that it may be rich and real in our hearts as we live this week together. Let it do its great work of cutting down and eliminating from our lives those things over which we take pride and which separate us from others; these distinctions that make us dislike our brother or sister, and turn our backs on them. Help us to judge these in the light of the cross, and, by its light, to walk before thee. In Jesus' name, Amen.

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