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To Serve The Lord



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Paul's Concern About Division

By Brian R. Kenyon

Division in the church is tragic. Sometimes that division is over matters of judgment among people whose egos are out of control. Sometimes that division is over doctrinal matters that must be corrected. The church at Corinth was divided over many issues, but surrounding all of these issues was their being worldly minded (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-4). Examining Paul's instruction concerning division in Corinth (1 Cor. 1:10-17) and applying its principles will keep the church from division, even today.

Appeal for Unity

Paul began this section on the problem of division with an appeal to unity.

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. (1 Cor. 1:10)

"I beseech [plead, NKJ; exhort, NAS; appeal, ESV]" is an urgent appeal that required immediate attention (cf. Rom. 12:1). This appeal was tempered with the affectionate address, "brethren" (i.e., fellow Christians cf. Mt. 23:8). Paul used a form of "brother" in First Corinthians more than any of his other epistles (38 times). By his appeal to "the name of our Lord Jesus Christ," Paul was basing this instruction on divine authority (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5). The full title "Lord Jesus Christ" stands supreme and in stark contrast to all divisive names (cf. 1 Cor. 1:12). The apostles spoke with Christ's authority (Jn. 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; 2 Cor. 5:20), and so should church members today (Col. 3:17)!

Following God's word is the only way to bring about true unity (cf. Jn. 17:20-26; Eph. 4:1-6), thus Paul said to "speak the same thing" (1 Cor. 1:10c). This does not mean that Christians must agree on every single thing (cf. Acts 15:36-41; Rom. 14:1-23), but that they must agree on everything that God's word teaches (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). Lack of religious unity, especially among the churches of Christ, hinders the world from being saved (Jn. 17:20-21). There must be no divisions among God's people. The divisions Paul addressed with Corinth seemed to have been dissensions, or cliques, that had not yet completely ruptured the body (cf. 1 Cor. 11:17-18), but would if left unchecked. God never intended for His people to be divided into sectarian organizations—He has only one body (cf. 1 Cor. 12:12-13; Eph. 1:22-23; 4:4; Col. 1:18).

The expression, "same mind and ... same judgment," refers to unity in both the inner state of mind and the outward exhibition of it (Winters 16). How can members of the church be of the same mind and judgment? Some have explained that this can only be accomplished when members of the church submit to the eldership's decision on matters of expediency. However, this view limits the passage only to those Christians who are members of a local church that has an eldership and/or to only those matters involving local church procedure (such as times of services, order of worship, etc.). A Christian's life, though, involves more than just local church activity. It seems a better way of understanding the expression is that each Christian must Scripturally acknowledge that matters of judgment are matters of

judgment and that matters of obligation are matters of obligation. Members of the church have liberty in matters of judgment (Rom. 14:1-23; 1 Cor. 6:12; 10:23), even if their judgment is different than that of the eldership.

Paul's appeal for unity is as important today as it was when first penned. In most places, there is not a very large concentration of faithful members of the body to begin with, and so maintaining unity is even more crucial. While it is true that "there must be also heresies [factions, NKJ] among you, that they which are approved may be made manifest among you" (1 Cor. 11:19), it is a shame when brethren divide over matters of indifference to God! May God's people today only "bind" what God has "bound in heaven," and "loose" what God has "loosed in heaven" (Mt. 16:19; 18:18), and have the wisdom to know the difference!

Acknowledgement of Division

Paul knew about their division.

For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.

¹²Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. ¹³Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? (1 Cor. 1:11-13)

Paul's source of information was the household of Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11). Although the exact identity of Chloe is not known, she may be

a Corinthian with connections in Ephesus (or vice versa). "Declared [signified, ASV]" indicates that evidence had been presented to Paul, which he seemed to have been reluctant to accept (cf. 1 Cor. 11:18).

Each faction in Corinth attached itself to its favorite teacher (1 Cor. 1:12). The list of teachers showed the influence each had. "Paul ... Apollos ... Cephas [Peter]" were very influential in the early church. People dividing the church by elevating and claiming one teacher over another is not necessarily the fault of the teacher, but can often result from carnally minded people (cf. 1 Cor. 3:3). Even those who claimed, "I [am] of Christ," in this context, seemed to have had a wrong attitude, not truly viewing themselves as humble servants of the Lord, but considering themselves in a better clique. Paul does not refute the teaching of any one of these divisive groups, but the very fact of their existence is contrary to the will of God!

Their division was ridiculous (1 Cor. 1:13). Christ is one, and His church is one (cf. 1 Cor. 12:27; Eph. 4:4-6). "Paul crucified for you" points to the ridiculousness of their division—only the cross of Christ can accomplish redemption! In division, they forgot



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the significance of their baptism. They were baptized “in Christ,” not “in Paul” (cf. Rom. 6:3-4; Gal. 3:27).

The very thought that some other person could even come close to providing the spiritual blessings made possible by the redemptive work of Christ is a clear indication of worldly minded people. Even today, this attitude shows itself in church divisions. Some church members are more militant about following the will of men rather than the will of God.

Antithesis of Blame

While it is true that some preachers are the direct cause of local church division, Paul was not the cause of division in Corinth. The apostle declared:

I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; ¹⁵Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. ¹⁶And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. (1 Cor. 1:14-16)

Paul only baptized a few of the Corinthians (1 Cor. 1:14, 16). Crispus was likely the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:8); Gaius was likely Paul’s host (Rom. 16:23); and Stephanas was among the earliest converts in Achaia (1 Cor. 16:15). The one who does the actual baptizing is not of primary importance (cf. Jn. 4:1-2). Paul is thankful that he did not baptize more because they might have thought he was making converts for himself (1 Cor. 1:15). This is one reason why it is usually better on foreign missionary campaigns to have the local preachers do the baptizing, lest converts think they are being baptized in the name of an American missionary.

Paul, Apollos, and Cephas were definitely free from blame in having a part in Corinth’s division. This cannot be said of some preachers today. There seems to be a growing segment in the brotherhood today in which preachers are becoming more like sectarian church leaders, seeking to draw disciples after themselves rather than pointing souls to Jesus. This writer recently spoke with two men on separate occasions, about forty years apart in age, who over the years left their culturally comfortable congregations because of the “foolishness” of their preachers. One brother described the preachers as dressing like “space men,” wearing shiny suits with buttons all over, and whose doctrine and antics while preaching were “out of this world.” The other brother described the preachers as “bossy” and by the way they thought and acted toward other congregations, seemed like they were always “fighting for their turf.” What kind

of people would tolerate these kinds of preachers? Those, like in Corinth, who are carnally minded! Preachers today must follow the example of Paul and make sure they are free from blame in contributing to divisiveness (cf. 1 Cor. 11:1).


Apex of the Mission

The thrust of Paul’s mission was to preach the Gospel. He made known, “For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect” (1 Cor. 1:17). The thrust of Paul’s work was not merely to baptize. He was letting the Corinthians know that “Christ did not send me to be a baptizer.” The apostle was not minimizing baptism, but he was refuting their division, which may have partly been based on the one who baptized them (cf. 1 Cor. 1:13). Baptism was and is still necessary for one to be saved (cf. Mt. 28:19-20; Mk. 16:15-16; Acts 2:38; 22:16; 1 Pet. 3:21).

The Gospel Paul preached was not a message of human wisdom (cf. 1 Cor. 2:1-5; Gal. 1:11-12). “Wisdom of words” refers to human wisdom and eloquence, which tends to draw followers to the messenger rather than to the message (cf. Rom. 16:18b). Human wisdom renders the death of Christ meaningless.

When all members of the church, preachers included, are doing all they can to promote the Gospel, church division will not occur. The apex of a Christian’s mission is to glorify God (1 Cor. 10:31 cf. Col. 3:17). This cannot be accomplished by self-promotion, but by learning, believing, teaching, and living the Gospel of Christ (cf. Eph. 4:1-6).

Conclusion

As worldliness creeps more and more into the church, the potential for division becomes greater. Church members today must recognize God’s desire and plan for unity (Jn. 17:20-21; Eph. 4:4-6), and then make sure they first make application to their own lives before teaching others. If church members avoid being worldly minded, the local church will not be worldly minded! Local church division is tragic and can be avoided when members of the church are busy about the “Father’s business.” 

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