

Dividing Over Leaders
1 Corinthians 1:10-17 (II)
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Introduction

This morning we are going to be continuing our trek through 1 Corinthians. Last week we began to tackle the first major section of the letter, which runs from 1:10 all the way to 4:21. In this section Paul addresses one of the church's largest problems, division over leaders. The fact is that the church in Corinth was beginning to splinter, the church was in turmoil because certain members were "in favor of one person over another" (4:6). Paul set out to rebuke them for their disturbingly elevated view of God's messengers and then sought to fix their unbiblical view of leaders by drawing their attention to the supremacy of Christ in the Gospel. Last week we took up the issue of division in a general way, focusing on vs. 10. This morning we will be focusing our attention on two things: 1. we will seek God's perspective on divisive people and 2. we will consider the specific concern of division over leaders as discussed by Paul in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17.

God's View of Divisive People

The bulk of the letter of 1 Corinthians has to do with Paul addressing the unity problems plaguing the church in Corinth. Over the last few weeks I have been asking myself; what does God think about divisive people? What does God have to say in His word about those who sow discord and dissension within the body of Christ? I am not going to spend much time answering this question, but the Lord has directed me to two specific passages which deal with God's take on divisive people. As I have been meditating on these two passages, it has become quite clear that I have had far too soft of a stance on the sin of divisiveness. This morning I want to visit these two passages.

Is it not true that we oftentimes attribute divisiveness to a person's unique personality? Do we not often look to divisive people and make excuses for their contentiousness? For example, we may look at a person who is bent on dividing the church over an issue having to do with the conscience; they have no problem, for example, for dividing over a debatable issue such as eschatology or a conviction for women to not wear pants or for a certain conviction having to do with a certain style of Christian music or for a conviction regarding what sort of schooling Christian parents should chose for their children—we often times look at such Christians who cause divisions over such issues and excuse their divisive actions or behavior out of deference to their 'good intentions.' After all, even though they may be causing division are they not doing it in order to protect their weak conscience; are they not doing it out of a passion for what they believe to be the truth? Well, I want to take you to two passages to see what God has to say about those who cause divisions. Let us first look at Proverbs 6:16-19.

16 Six things the Lord hates; in fact, seven are detestable to Him; 17 arrogant eyes, a lying tongue, hands that shed innocent blood, 18 a heart that plots wicked schemes, feet eager to run to evil, 19 a lying witness who gives false testimony, and one who stirs up trouble among brothers.

Notice the last 'thing' that is detestable to the Lord. Notice that the last thing is not just an action but a person who does a certain action. God hates "one who stirs up trouble among

brothers.” Other translations translate it as, “a man who stirs up dissension among brothers” (NIV) or “one who sows discord among brethren” (NKJV). Do you think that we might be a bit too soft on divisiveness? God hates not just the sin of divisiveness, but the person him/herself who actually sews the seeds of discord. To get an even keener understanding of how God sees divisive people, turn with me to Titus 3:9-11

9 But avoid foolish debates, genealogies, quarrels, and disputes about the law, for they are unprofitable and worthless. 10 Reject a divisive person after a first and second warning, 11 knowing that such a person is perverted and sins, being self-condemned.

What is God’s way of dealing with a divisive person? Well, Paul warns Titus to simply ignore their knit-picky arguments—ignore their petty disputes. If they continue in their divisiveness after two warnings, disciplinary action needs to be taken. As with any other disciplinary matter, action must never be motivated out personal revenge and must always be intended for the restoration of the brother or sister. Now you must understand that some of these knit-pickin’, law-keepin’ legalists had great intentions. I am sure that many of them were just wanting to do the right thing; I am sure that many of them were standing up for what they knew was right. Although we must be sensitive to this fact, Paul’s statements are clear. How does God view a divisive person? As a detriment to His body, the church. As I said last week, divisiveness is not tolerated in Christianity. It is no more tolerated than sexual immorality. What seems clear from Titus 3 is that divisive people get the church side-tracked from the things of first importance, sucking the people of God into a vortex of endless, speculative debates and contention, and in the process replacing the things of first importance with peripheral issues. Divisive people need to be rebuked as opposed to being engaged. Paul’s game plan for dealing with divisive people is to ignore their positions and call them to repentance (which can be difficult, because it gives the appearance of weakness—but the mature, humble man or woman of God will willingly take a shot to the ego for the sake of the health of the community and the centrality of the Gospel).

Do we take divisiveness this seriously? Do we see divisiveness as something worthy of church discipline? Paul’s words to the Corinthians are no less strong than what we find in Proverbs 6 and Titus 3.

Division Over Leaders in Corinth

Now we get to the particular issue of division that plagued the church in Corinth. Last week we looked at vs. 10 where Paul introduces the topic of division in a general way. In vs. 11 Paul provides the Corinthians concrete proof that they are actually in need of the appeal/exhortation to not be divided as given in vs. 10. What is this concrete evidence? A verbal report from persons in some way connected to a respected member of the church of Corinth, Chloe.¹ Yes, to put it in modern day terms, Chloe ‘ratted them out.’ We must not see Chloe as a

¹ I describe the “members of Chloe’s household” as those “in some way connected to... Chloe” because Paul does not make clear the exact relation of these people to Chloe. They are literally referred to as ‘those of Chloe’ (in the Greek). Gordon D. Fee speculates as to who these ‘members of Chloe’s house’ could be: “One cannot tell whether her ‘household’ was intended, or her ‘business,’ although the two could be one in this case. These people could be either family, slaves, or freedman; there is no way to tell.” He does go on, however, to assert that he believes that it is more likely a reference to slaves or freedman. See Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; The New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1987), 54. Ben Witherington III strongly suggests that the ‘members of Chloe’s household’

big tattle tale or anything of the sort, but there is no mistaking the fact that Chloe had great reason to be concerned. After all, she sent messengers from her house to Paul to inform him of the division that was beginning to contaminate the unity of the church in Corinth. Take a look at the passage with me.

¹¹ For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers, by members of Chloe's household, that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I am saying is this: each of you says, "I'm with Paul," or "I'm with Apollos," or "I'm with Cephas," or "I'm with Christ."

Paul appeals to the report by the members of Chloe's house in order that they might know that he was not basing his rebuke on mere hearsay.² All sorts of churches have all sorts of quarrels for all sorts of reasons. Some churches quarrel over doctrine, others over the color of the carpet, others over church government, others over a certain translation of the Bible, others over church music, others over personality differences; however, the specific quarrels (divisions) in Corinth centered on leaders.

Before drawing out some modern day parallels of the situation in Corinth, it will be helpful to first understand the nature of the conflict in Corinth. I want you to notice three things about the situation at Corinth. **First, notice that the saints in Corinth were segregating themselves by the specific leader that they followed.** They were each following a specific leader, and claiming that the leader that they were following had the best form or version of the Christian faith. Some were saying "I have the best form of Christianity; I follow Paul." The next man stood up and said, "No, I have the best version of Christianity. I do not doubt that Paul is a man of God, but if you really want to be full of the Spirit, you must adopt Apollos' version of Christianity." We human beings have this incessant desire to become immediate evangelists of whatever thrills us. Think of your favorite movie or your favorite restaurant; do you not have an overflowing desire to tell everyone you know about these things? Of course you do! There is nothing inherently wrong with this (especially when it involves being thrilled with Jesus). However, whenever we become especially enamored with a certain leader, we have the tendency to so elevate that one leader that we begin to demonize all other leaders who do not share with him/her the same gifts or emphases. Although Paul, Apollos, and Cephas all preached the same

were slaves. He helpfully explains the ancient practice of slavery, demonstrating that the slavery of Greco-Roman society was much different than that experienced in Colonial America. He says, "In ancient society slaves had a wide variety of roles, including serving as business agents for their owners, as Chloe's people are likely to have been doing. 'Slaves served in occupations ranging from personal stewards, custodians of children (*paidagogoi*) to grammarians, geometricians, musicians, managers of farms, masters of ships, estate stewards (*oikonomoi*) and money-lenders.' Slaves were not necessarily people of poor background and little education. Some slaves were reasonably well-to-do, well-educated people who were then captured in some Roman conquest. These conquests were the major source of slaves for the empire. Furthermore, numerous people sold themselves into slavery because of economic necessity. There was often more security and more possibility for advancement as a slave than as a free poor person." Witherington goes on to explain; "This does not mean that slavery was a good thing, but in order to perpetuate this huge pool of relatively low cost labor, the Romans had built into the system certain advantages not available to free poor people. These advantages also served as hedges against slave revolt." Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 99. To get a better understanding of what God thinks of slavery read 1 Corinthians 7:20-23; Ephesians 6:5-9; Colossians 3:22-4:1; 1 Timothy 6:1-2; Philemon 1-25 (especially vss. 15-19).

²Anthony C. Thisseleton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 120.

Gospel, they packaged the Gospel in their own unique way, using the unique set of gifts that the Lord had given them. Paul is quite transparent about the fact that he was not an eloquent speaker, but we know from Acts 18-19 that Apollos was. In fact, this may be what caused so much of the division in Corinth—some were questioning the validity of Paul’s calling because of his inability to speak (see especially 1 Corinthians 2:1-5 and 2 Corinthians 10).

The fact is that the church in Corinth was dividing over leaders. They were turning *followership* into a competitive game. Competition ran deep in their veins in Corinth, and especially when it came to public speaking. Rhetoricians were the Hollywood movie stars of ancient Corinth. Instead of flocking to a concert stage to watch the Dave Matthews Band or Garth Brooks perform live, they would flock to the amphitheater to watch professional debaters, Sophists, dismantle each other with eloquent (even if unintelligible) speech. The rhetoricians were the movie stars of the ancient world. These circumstances created quite the stage for the entrance of a religion which was built on the back of public proclamation (see Romans 10:13-17). It was easy for the believers in Corinth to evaluate their church leaders on the same basis that they evaluated their favorite rhetoricians, because they really did the same thing, speak in public. It is also true that one’s social status and public reputation was largely determined by whomever they followed in the public square.³ These same practices found their way into the church. *An overemphasis on eloquence coupled with competitive followership for the sake of gaining status and power marked Corinthian Christianity.* The values of the Corinthian world slowly but surely crept into the church, hence all of the strife in the church over leaders.⁴

This competitive edge crept into the church and they began to evaluate and profile each other based on which leader they followed. They would think something of this sort; “I am closer to God because I follow the right leader. Sure, we have Christ in common, but we don’t have Paul in common, and until we have Paul in common, seeing him as *the* spiritual leader, we will not have true unity. When you see the light—that is, when you follow the right leader—we can have true unity.” It seems that what was at first a mere preference in regard to leadership became a litmus test for Spirit-filled leadership. In other words, when Apollos came to town many were wooed by his charismatic presence and larger-than-life preaching. As a result, many of the believer’s in Corinth had a certain affinity for Apollos. However, it did not take long for that affinity to turn into idolatry. Those who were at first merely appreciative of Apollos’ ministry began to favor Apollos so much that they made him the standard of all Spirit-filled, Christian leadership, chalking all other leaders up as second rate, lower-class leaders.

Second, it is important to note that the problem did not lay in the leaders themselves. In other words, it was not Paul, Apollos, Peter, and it certainly was not Christ who was to fault for the party spirit at Corinth. Sometimes division over leaders is the fault of the leaders. Sometimes leaders build themselves up, tearing all other leaders down as if they alone had an insider’s relationship with the Godhead. But this was not the case in Corinth. The sin lay at the feet of the people in the pew in Corinth. When you first read through 1 Corinthians you might begin to wonder if Paul and Apollos didn’t get along well; however, once you read it a few

³ Garland offers a helpful modern day parallel; “In our age, it may be compared to persons who aspire to self-importance from the slightest association with someone famous. To give an extreme example: ‘This is so-and-so. His sister-in-law takes her dog to the same veterinarian that movie star X’s aunt uses.’” David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 44.

⁴ For more information on this see Witherington III, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 100-101. Especially helpful is Witherington’s discussion about the seriousness, intensity, and even brutality surrounding the pupil/teacher relationships which characterized ancient sophism. Garland shares a similar view as that posited by Witherington. See Garland, *1 Corinthians*; 42-43.

times it will become quite clear that Paul and Apollos were both annoyed with the church for ‘lionizing’ them,⁵ using their names as a cause for division. For instance, we know from 1 Corinthians 3:5-6 that Paul considered Apollos his partner in the advancement of the Gospel. 1 Corinthians 16:12 is also quite interesting;

About our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to come to you with the brothers, but he was not at all willing to come now. However, when he has time, he will come.

You get this sense that Apollos didn’t want to come to Corinth for a specific reason. Some have suggested that Apollos didn’t want to return because he did not want to fuel the fire; he did not want to make the competitive party spirit even worse, knowing that he himself, as much as he hated it, was a large part of the equation.⁶ This makes good enough sense. Either way, it evidences the fact that Paul and Apollos had a good relationship—there was no bad blood between them. This verse gives us every reason to believe that they advocated for each other, combating the very division that revolved around them. You even get the sense that Paul himself was annoyed with the Corinthians for elevating him. Look at his biting words of rebuke in 1 Corinthians 1:13-17.

Is Christ divided? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? 14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, 15 so that no one can say you had been baptized in my name. 16 I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't know if I baptized anyone else. 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with clever words, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied [of its effect].

There is no doubting the fact that Paul is expressing frustration in these words. In this way, it reminds me of how Martin Luther responded to his followers when they did silly and even destructive things in his name.⁷ Paul challenges the Corinthians by asking a series of rhetorical questions that are clearly to be answered with a resounding ‘Never!’ In vs. 13-17 Paul is going to the extreme to show them how stupid they have been by dividing over mere men, himself included. He even goes so far to thank God that he didn’t baptize many of the believers in Corinth. And why does He thank God for this? Because if he had baptized more people, more people would have had reason to elevate him above Christ. He is thankful that God did not give him a greater platform than what he had. How contrary to the our modern day ‘success-driven’ mindset! Verse 16 is especially interesting because Paul communicates the fact that he doesn’t even really care to know how many people he baptized—it is really no concern of his—he does not put another notch in his belt as he baptizes more people, as if baptism could be used as a reason for boasting!

⁵See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 44.

⁶For example see Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 824-825; Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth*, 86-87, 317; Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 1332.

⁷Garland reproduces Luther’s reaction to how high he had been elevated as a Christian leader; “What is Luther? The teaching is not mine. Nor was I crucified for anyone... How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name.” See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 49.

Third, let us consider the dynamics of each of the four groups that Paul mentions.⁸

First, there is the Paul group. Some in the church elevated Paul, making him out to be the quintessential Christian leader. It is easy to understand why many in Corinth would have done this. After all, Paul was their “father in Christ” (1 Corinthians 4:14-15). He planted the church in Corinth (Acts 17). This is common in Christianity; oftentimes a special affinity exists between a believer and the pastor or leader that led him/her to the Lord. Paul brought the Gospel to Corinth. He spent a year and a half organizing and establishing Christ’s work in Corinth. There is no doubt that those who were ‘of Paul’ were following him for these precise reasons. There is, of course, nothing wrong with having an affinity for a certain leader; however, the Corinthians had taken what was at first a simple affinity and had turned it into an issue for division. They had so elevated Paul that they excluded all other leaders from being in ‘Paul’s league,’ as it were.

Second, it seems reasonable to say that those who followed Apollos did so because of his great speaking ability (see Acts 18-19). There is no doubting the fact that he was something of a George Whitefield or a C.H. Spurgeon or a John Chrysostom or a D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones; he was able to captivate a large audience with his preaching. Apollos was to Paul what Barak Obama is to George Bush, or what John Piper is to J. Vernon McGee.⁹ It is also true that Paul handed the baton off to Apollos in Corinth. In other words, although Paul dug the ditch in Corinth, Apollos labored with the people in the ditch after it was dug (“I planted, Apollos watered” 1 Corinthians 3:6). I am sure that many saw Apollos as the true discipler while Paul was just the evangelist. Some may have been thinking, “Surely, things got off the ground with Paul’s ministry, but we really grew when Apollos took over—he carried the church from her mere infantile stages of development over the threshold into maturity.”

Third, it is more difficult to nail down exactly what the distinctive marks of the Peter group were. It is true that Peter was the apostle to the Jews. Some may have preferred Peter for this very reason—especially the Jews in their number. It is also true that Peter had walked with

⁸ There are, as would be expected, a whole host of differing perspectives as to the composition and unique distinctives of each of the four groups listed in 1 Corinthians 1:12. It will not be profitable to lay out the particulars of the debate in this setting. However, I will say that the position I advocate below is standard. Thiselton has produced the most extensive treatment of the subject (it is the most extensive that I have read, at least); however, his treatment of subject is strictly academic and leans on the obnoxiously thorough side of things. See Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 123-133. Fee, Barrett, Morris, Hodge, and Garland all deal sufficiently with the topic. See Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 55-59; C. K. Barrett, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*; Black’s New Testament Commentary (Peabody, Hendrickson Publishers, 1968, 2006), 43-46 (although Barrett’s position on the ‘Christ’ group is a bit of stretch, his position is clear enough); Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians: An Introduction and Commentary*; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 46-47; Charles Hodge, *A Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians*; Geneva Series of Commentaries (Carlisle: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1857, 2000), 13-14; Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 44-51. Garland’s and Fee’s commentary on the subject are by far the most helpful. Although it would be convenient to nail the distinctives of these various groups down with exact certainty, Paul simply does not lend us enough data to do so. What follows is an educated guess; however, Paul’s main point is clear (and that is all that really matters); the church in Corinth is dividing over leading personalities in the church. The actual make-up of the splintering groups is what is not 100% clear. I would, however, assert that the reasons why some were pitting Apollos against Paul (and vice versa) is much clearer than the divisions existing among the two other personality groups mentioned by Paul in 1:12. After all, the Paul/Apollos divide seems plain enough after even a cursory read-through of 1 Corinthians 1-4, and especially when read in light of Acts 18-19.

⁹ I have nothing but the highest respect for Dr. McGee, but there is no questioning the fact that he was from a different generation and communicated the word of God with much less pizzazz than does Piper. This is not to say that Piper is more full of the Spirit than Dr. McGee—to say such a thing would be just as absurd as saying that the Apostle Paul was less full of the Spirit than Apollos!

Jesus from the very beginning. They may have seen him as one of the only fully legit apostles. It is obvious, for example, from 2 Corinthians that many in Corinth were questioning Paul's apostleship because he had not walked with Christ as had the other apostles. Some may have preferred Peter, considering him to be a "super-apostle" (2 Corinthians 11:5). They may have pitted him against Paul and Apollos for these reasons. Paul also knew that many in the church consider Peter, James, and John to be the 'pillars' of early Christianity (Galatians 2:9). For whatever reason, the believers in Corinth were elevating Peter to the exclusion of Christ's other Spirit-filled leaders.

Fourth, the Christ group is the most difficult to assess.¹⁰ Paul just doesn't elaborate on who the Christ group consisted of or what set them apart from the other groups. It has been suggested, however, and I would agree, that those who are 'of Christ' are those who have come to a place where they feel that they are not in need of any of God's messengers or apostles. This sounds good on the face of it, but is actually quite absurd. First of all, it must be said that this group was not merely pledging allegiance to Christ alone; no, they were pledging allegiance to Christ alone as a way of separating themselves further and further from those who were pledging allegiance to Paul, Apollos, and Peter. Thus, they were using Christ Himself as a reason for division. As Dio Chrysostom says, "Even those who said they were of Christ were at fault because they were implicitly denying this to others and making Christ the head of a faction rather than the head of the whole."¹¹ They were claiming to be independent; they thought that they didn't need Christ's appointed messengers, not realizing that Christ has gifted certain men for that very task. We would call these sorts of Christians 'Lone Ranger Christians.' They see themselves above the need of leadership. This position seems to be the most spiritual, but is actually just as horrid as the others.

Bottom line, each party was 'out of bounds,' spiritually speaking. They were using God's very messengers, and even Christ Himself, as a reason to divide. This is what Paul is calling them to repent of.

Conclusion

Next week we will conclude our study on 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. I will be dealing with modern day parallels to the situation that was confronting the Corinthian church. In the meantime, let it be sufficient to remember that Christ's messengers must never be pitted against each other. Christ, and Christ alone (as revealed in Scripture, of course), must be the banner around which we rally.

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¹⁰ Some have unsuccessfully sought to prove that there was no "Christ group" in Corinth, but rather that Paul was claiming to be of Christ, and in so doing calling the Corinthians to follow him in the practice. Although this would be convenient, the simple grammar of the passage does not favor such a position as Fee explains. "Despite the attractiveness of Lake's translation... it has against it the clear listing intended by the *μέν, δέ, δέ, δέ*, with no signal that there is a break with the fourth member, not to mention that the first question in v. 13 seems to suppose that the fourth slogan is one of theirs." Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, footnote 54 on pages 58-59.

¹¹ Dio Chrysostom as cited in Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 134.

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