

Cracking Down on Division

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Introduction

This morning we will be turning our attention to the main body of Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians. Before moving into this first major section of 1 Corinthians it will be helpful to remember what the Spirit (through Paul) has said up to this point. Paul has been building the Corinthians up by reminding them of the grace of God that is theirs in Christ Jesus. You will remember from our study through 1 Corinthians 1:4-9 that Paul labored to encourage them in the grace of God, reminding them that God's grace was sufficient to get them in the door, to make them thrive while they were in the door, and to keep them in the door until the return of Jesus. He sought to remind them of the basis of their Christians assurance, which is the faithful and gracious character of God as mediated through His Son. We established the fact that it was necessary for Paul to encourage them in these things because of the hard, stinging word that was to follow.

Overview of 1 Corinthians 1:10-4:21

After greeting the Corinthians (1:1-3) and grounding them in the bedrock of God's grace (1:4-9), Paul wastes no time and gets right to his reason for writing in vs. 10-13.

10 Now I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. 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." 13 Is Christ divided? Was it Paul who was crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name?

As is clear from vss. 10-11, Paul wrote this letter to the Corinthians to combat their divisiveness. The church in Corinth was splintering. And what was the cause of their division? Leaders! Well, the problem was not the leaders themselves, but rather the Corinthian's elevation of leaders. We are going to discuss this section in greater detail this morning, but I want to first point out the fact that Paul deals with the issue of division over leaders all the way to the end of chapter 4. On the first read through you may not realize that chapters 1-4 comprise a long, elaborate discussion on one primary issue. It at first seems as though Paul were almost aimless in his discourse; first he talks about divisions, then preaching, then the Spirit and revelation, then the danger of desecrating the temple of the Holy Spirit, and then the status of Christ's ministers. Certainly, Paul does touch on each one of these various issues, but this does not mean that he deals with each of these as isolated topics. This section is comprised of one overarching issue, and the reason why Paul touches on so many different subjects is because doing so is necessary to get a biblical view of the primary issue, which has to do with the Corinthian's division over leaders.¹

¹ Both Anthony C. Thisselton and David E. Garland offer a helpful overview of the flow of Paul's argument about division over leaders from 1:10-4:21. See Anthony C. Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*; The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand

Paul does not get off topic even once in these first four chapters. This should say something to us about the urgency of the situation in Corinth. Division over leaders is something that the church of Jesus Christ still struggles with today. The problem was concentrated in Corinth because of some of the cultural realities in Corinth at the time (more on this next week). Nonetheless, a word about divisions, and especially about division over leaders, is just as relevant to us today as it was to the Corinthians in the first century. What we will find as we move along in this section is that the root of the Corinthian's division over leaders was found in the fact that they were evaluating these men with the yard stick of Corinth instead of evaluating them with God's yardstick, the yard stick of the cross. Because they were not using the cross as their standard of evaluation, they put these men on a pedestal and in the process dethroned Christ as the foundation of their fellowship.

Paul introduces the main reason for which he is rebuking the Corinthians in 1:10-17 (as is clear from the text, he is rebuking them for dividing over leaders), and then he seeks to fix their division problem in 1:18-4:21. The bulk of Paul's instruction is theological, as opposed to practical, in nature. In other words, he seeks to fix their unity problems by fixing their theology. Paul did not waste his time focusing on their external behavior (as many of our modern day Christian counselors would); rather, he sought to, by the power of the Spirit, foundationally shape their worldview. Paul went straight to the root of the problem. He knew, being inspired by the Holy Spirit, that orthopraxy (right living) flows out of orthodoxy (right believing).

1 Corinthians 1:10

Let's go ahead and dive into 1 Corinthians 1:10. It is interesting how Paul just jumps headlong into the heart of his grievances with the Corinthians. Some people have the natural ability of bringing up controversial issues in a completely noncontroversial way. Some of God's

Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 107-108; David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*; Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 37-39. Fee has also developed a helpful outline of Paul's flow of thought, but differs a bit from Garland and Thisselton in that he sees a greater amount of anti-Paul sentiment in Corinth, and thus suggests that a great deal of 1:10-4:21 is defensive in nature (in other words, Fee argues that Paul spends a great deal of time defending his own apostleship in 1:10-4:21). See both 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), 47-51 and Gordon D. Fee and Douglas K. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*; 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 59-68.

Although I believe that Fee reads the ethos 2 Corinthians a bit too much into 1 Corinthians (not allowing for a large anti-Paul sentiment to develop between the deployment of 1 Corinthians and the composition of 2 Corinthians), his reasoning is quite clear. I would allow for more of an anti-Paul sentiment in Corinth that Garland and Thisselton are willing to accept. It seems that both sides go a bit too far in their positions. Most helpful was Gary S. Shogren's 'down to earth' structuring of 1:10-4:21. Rather than merely explaining the flow of Paul's thought, he demonstrates it by offering a 'making-a-long-story-short' version in modern day lingo. See Gary S. Shogren, *1 Corintios*. Comentario Bíblico Iberoamericano (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Kairos, forthcoming), 53-54. Basically, in this section Paul seeks to dismantle their unwarranted elevation of the leaders of the church by demonstrating for them that the power of God lay not in the leader's ability to package the Gospel, but rather in the Gospel itself (1:18-2:5), that the Gospel is advanced most chiefly through the working of the Spirit, not through the cleverness or determination of God's messengers (2:6-3:4), and that God's appointed messengers are nothing but stewards who fearfully labor knowing that they will have to answer to their master for how they served His sanctuary, the church (3:5-17-4:13). Paul then ends this section of exhortation with a fatherly and gentle reminder that Paul spoke to them bluntly about these things (about their unwarranted exaltation of God's messengers) for their good, for their restoration (4:14-21). Garland posits that Paul uses the word for "I exhort you" (*parakalo*) in 1:10 and 4:16 as book ends (called an *inclusion*), marking the beginning and end of this section dealing the Corinthians division over leaders. See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 39.

kids are calm, collected, and smooth when they bring up sensitive issues. Some people have the ability to tell you that you are ugly in a way that makes you feel good about yourself. On the other hand, some people are like a bull in a china shop; instead of bringing up a sensitive or controversial issue with ease and fluidity, everything they say lands with a loud Thud! It seems that Paul fell into the latter of the two categories. Although the first nine verses of 1 Corinthians are formal (that is, they are standard components to a typical letter in the ancient world), they are full of encouragement and grace. Once he gets to vs. 10, however, he, in essence, says, ‘Now lets cut to the chase... you guys need to grow up!’ I am not suggesting that his words in 1:1-9 were forced or that they were mere formalities, but I am suggesting that Paul was not the sort who was going to beat around the bush. He said it like it is and never danced around the issues at hand. Take a look at the passage with me.

10 Now I urge you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all say the same thing, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.

Paul does not disrespect the Corinthians in any way, nor does he speak down to them. He refers to them as ‘brothers,’ putting himself on same level with them. But there is no mistaking the fact that he is here calling them to repentance ‘in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.’ You get the sense with the word “now” in the first part of the verse that Paul wanted to waste no time in addressing the matter at hand. His approach to the subject is terse, authoritative, and urgent, and yet is not “the lordly demand of a tyrant who bludgeons underlines into submission.”² In other words, he approaches them with an element of humble authority. The truths laid forth in vss. 1-9 are no mere trivialities—God had certainly extended abundant mercy to the Corinthians—and yet the truth of God’s grace in no way led Paul to minimize the undeniable truth with regard to the Corinthians need to repent of their divisiveness.

In the second half of vs. 10 Paul issues a series of three similar exhortations: he exhorts them to 1. “say the same thing,” to 2. have “no divisions among you,” and to 3. “be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.”³ We will look at each of these three exhortations in the order that they appear in the verse. **First, Paul exhorts the Corinthians as a whole to “say the same thing.”** The phrase “say the same thing” is literally rendered, “think the same thing,” and carries with it the idea of agreement.⁴ Those who *say the same thing* are unified—they speak with one voice, as it were. Garland illustrates Paul’s intended point; “They are to be like a chorus singing from the same page of music, not like a cat’s concert with each howling his or her own cacophonous tune.”⁵ They are acting in opposition to one another. They are not in fundamental agreement about what the church is primarily supposed to be about.

When an on-looking world glances our way, what do they see? Do they see a group of people who are basically meeting together but all for completely different reasons? Are we all on the same page or are we all about our own little thing; like a bunch of little kids each playing with their own little toys in their own little microcosms? Are we all wandering around on our own, or are we fixed on one goal? In the church we often times think that we have the same goal

² Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 41.

³ Notice that the first and third exhortations are positive (do this) and the second is negative (don’t do that).

⁴ Ibid. Garland, Thisselton (following Lightfoot) are both in agreement that the language used here by Paul is from the political arena in ancient Greco-Roman culture. See Garland, *1 Corinthians*, 41-42 and Thisselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians*, 116-117.

⁵ Ibid., 42.

when, in reality, we do not. What is our mission as the church? To bring glory to God through the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. We bring this mission about by living, believing, and obeying God's word. We would all also agree that this cannot happen as a mere exercise in discipline, but must rather be the overflow of a heart that loves and rejoices in the good Person we know God to be. I think that we would all agree that this is the foundational mission of the church. But so often we make our own pet agendas, as biblical as they may be, the center of the church's mission. Even though our unique emphases may even be essential (that is, they are undeniable, non-debatable truths or activities), when we make them the foundational component to the mission, we set ourselves up for disagreement on the foundational mission of the church. In this way, then, we must be able to distinguish what is of first importance from what is of second importance from what is of third importance. The fact of the matter is that every single letter of the word of God is important, and yet there are certain things that are of central importance. A truly mature believer will learn to discern those things of first importance without losing a passion to hammer out the things of second or third importance.

So when we speak of being in agreement it must *not* mean that we are to seek complete agreement on every little, cotton-pickin' issue under the sun. It must mean that we are in agreement on two things: 1. the essential components of the Christian faith and 2. that we will unreservedly maintain unity in the essential components of the Christian faith. In other words, being in agreement has more to do than just agreeing to the same set of essential doctrines, it has to do with being in agreement to let nothing get in the way of our unity on those essential doctrines. On the one hand, I can maintain meaningful and beneficial fellowship with an Arminian believer (or a dispensationalist or a cessationist), even though we will be miles apart on a whole host of theological issues **if** (and only if) we not only agree on the essential tenets of the Christian faith, but if have an unswerving commitment to keep those essential tenets of first importance. On the other hand, it would prove difficult to maintain any level of serious sacrificial fellowship even with a believer with which I had a great deal of doctrinal agreement on all of the major debatable issues if our fellowship was not built first and foremost upon an unswerving commitment to keeping the first things first. Unity based upon compatibility, even if it be doctrinal compatibility, only goes as deep as the compatibility. In other words, the most minor difference in theological nuance is enough to rip apart a Gospel partnership if there is not something larger than debatable doctrine holding the partnership together.

Paul will go on to assert (in the context) that Jesus Christ crucified must be the center of our fellowship. Paul exhorts the Corinthians to think the same thing. This should not cause us to push for some sort of a universally accepted systematic theology. Rather, it should cause us to unreservedly commit ourselves to the essential tenets of the faith; namely, the person and finished work of Jesus Christ *as revealed in Scripture*. Not just nodding the head to these central tenets, but arranging our lives and the whole our Christianity around these tenets in such a way that reflects the fact that these essential tenets are in fact of first importance. This is what the Corinthians are *not* doing, and this is why Paul lambastes them here in this passage. The Corinthians are letting peripheral things (such as what Christian leader to follow) short circuit their unified agreement on the things of first importance. As already stated, and which we will explore in greater detail next week, the Corinthians were not basing their unity on the central tenets (or shall I say *Person*) of the faith, but rather on their preferred version or expression of the faith—the version or expression associated with the particular leader they happened to find most appealing.

Second, Paul issues forth a negative exhortation; “that there be no divisions among you.” The word ‘division’ (*schisma*) is a reference to a tear that can be made in a garment. BDAG suggests that it may refer to “the condition resulting from splitting or tearing.”⁶ The word is used, for instance, in Matthew 9:16, where Jesus says,

No one patches an old garment with unshrunk cloth, because the patch pulls away from the garment and makes the tear (*schima*) worse.

Jesus is here speaking of the fact that when you put a new patch on an old garment, because the fabric of the new patch has not yet shrunk—because it has not yet been washed—and because the fabric of the old garment has already been shrunk—because it has been washed—as soon as the garment finds its way into the wash tub for the first time, the new patch will shrink, creating an even larger tear (*schisma*) in the garment.⁷ This is exactly what is happening at the church in Corinth. The body is being ripped apart. The body is being torn in two. No wonder Paul asks such a ridiculous rhetorical question in vs. 16; “Is Christ divided?” He asks this question to demonstrate for the Corinthians the absurdity of their division over leaders. It will become evident that the cause for the division in Corinth is not the result of doctrinal disagreement, but rather is the result of them following certain leaders—which is oft times referred to as the ‘personality cult.’⁸

Third, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to “be united.” The second and the third exhortation should really go together. Paul negatively exhorts them to not be divided (to not be torn) and then he positively exhorts them to be united. The word ‘united’ (*katartizo*) connotes the idea of “restoring anything to its right condition.”⁹ This word was used in the Gospel of Matthew when Jesus called James and John as they were in their fishing boats *mending* (*katartizo*) their nets (see Matthew 4:21). The idea is that the Corinthians are being torn (*schisma*) because of their unbiblical, childish way of turning God’s messengers into superheroes, and he now here exhorts them to mend (*katartizo*) what has been torn. He is calling them to mend the fellowship, to restore it, to refurbish it to its “proper condition.”¹⁰ Thus, I would see an intimate connection between the second and the third exhortation given in vs. 10. Indeed, Gary S. Shogren says the following about the word *katartizo*; “‘perfectly united’ in other contexts has to do with the literal mending of tears in a fabric; it is more than keeping it in one piece, but restoring the oneness that had already been lost.”¹¹

And how are they to fix (or mend) the tears that have occurred in their fellowship—how are they to seek restoration; how are they to attain perfect unity? By having “the same understanding and the same conviction.” *First of all, notice the word ‘same.’* They are to have a shared understanding and a shared conviction. *To have the same understanding refers to having*

⁶ Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (BDAG). Edited by Frederick William Danker, 3^d Ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 981.

⁷ Craig L. Blomberg helpfully explains; “One cannot put an unshrunk patch on an already-shrunk garment; for when it is washed, the patch will shrink, pulling at the garment and tearing it further.” Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*; The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 158.

⁸ This phrase is used by John R. W. Stott, *Basic Christian Leadership: Biblical Models of Church, Gospel and Ministry* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 100.

⁹ Leon Morris, *1 Corinthians*; Tyndale New Testament Commentaries (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1985), 46.

¹⁰ See BDAG, 526.

¹¹ Shogren, *1 Corintios*, 55.

the same mind, or to “thinking the same thing” (1:10). To “have the same conviction” refers to sharing a common purpose or goal. Paul communicates the same idea in Philippians 2:1-4.

1 If then there is any encouragement in Christ, if any consolation of love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any affection and mercy, 2 fulfill my joy by thinking the **same** way, having the **same** love, sharing the **same** feelings, focusing on **one goal**. 3 Do nothing out of rivalry or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves. 4 Everyone should look out not [only] for his own interests, but also for the interests of others.

Notice the emphasis on the word ‘same.’ Once again he is communicating the idea of sharing. The Philippians are to think the same way, have the same love, have the same feelings, and to have one goal. Everything is shared--everything is the same. Also, notice Paul’s emphasis on unity through selfless and sacrificial service in vss. 3-4. In other words, Paul cannot imagine unity being possible when the people of God selfishly pursue their own agendas to the detriment of the primary mission.

Concluding Application

I want to close with just a few concluding points of application. 1. Unity is not maintained by uniformity, but rather by way of a common goal.¹² There is a world of difference between seeking agreement on every single minute doctrine and seeking agreement on the essentials. The church in Corinth was diverse itself. Paul never exhorted them to put all of their differences aside, rebuking them for their diversity. Rather, what Paul did do was call them to find unity in regard to a foundational purpose. A unity which is dependent upon complete uniformity is no unity at all. In other words, the goal of Christian discipleship should not be the reproduction of carbon-copy, cookie-cutter Christians. Unity is not achieved when everyone reads the same bible translation, when we all wear the same clothes, when we all like the same sort of music, or even when we are all in agreement on all of the confrontational doctrines of the faith. Unity is not evidenced by uniformity.

2. Unity can only be had when the saints rally around Jesus Christ and Him crucified. Unity can only be had when we ‘think the same thing,’ when we have one common goal. **The glory of God in the advancement of the Gospel of Jesus Christ born out of hearts that love and cherish God must be a goal that we all share.** And we must allow nothing to get in the way of the pursuit of this one ultimate goal. We must have our eyes fixed, our gaze unmoved. We must not simply seek agreement to a set of common held beliefs; we must rather be committed to keeping these common held beliefs at the center of all that we do and believe.

3. It is impossible for the church to keep her focus on one goal if she does not learn selfless and sacrificial commitment to the one goal. Just as in the military, the objective will never be reached unless all of the soldiers embrace the essential agenda, come what may. The problem with the Corinthians was that they were all aimlessly pursuing their own selfish goals. They saw the church as a stepping ladder to get where they wanted to go. All commitments to self must be abandoned for the sake of the ultimate goal.

4. Disunity is not tolerated in biblical Christianity. Disunity must never be seen as a simple fixture in Christianity. As we look back at the 2000 years of Christian history that have

¹² Shogren’s commentary stands a good head and a half taller than the others in the area useful application based in solid exegesis. See especially Shogren, *1 Corinthians*, 55-58.

went before us, we see a long history of schism upon schism, disunity upon disunity. The saints have found any and every reason to divide. However, we should never look at church history and conclude that divisions are just part and parcel with Christianity, something that we just simply have to accept. To willingly embrace division as an acceptable feature of Christianity is to encourage the dividing of our Christ. Paul chastises the Corinthians for their divisions. Accepting division as a foundational part of what Christianity is distorts the very heart of what it means to be the body of Christ. John, in John 17, seems to communicate that it is unity in the face of diversity that evidences to the world the unique character and mission of our Triune God (see especially John 17:20-31).