

Turn your eyes to Jesus (Corinthians 1:10-17)

Key text for our study

¹⁰ “I appeal to you, brothers and sisters,^[a] in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹ My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹² What I mean is this: One of you says, “I follow Paul”; another, “I follow Apollos”; another, “I follow Cephas^[b]”; still another, “I follow Christ.”

¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don’t remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

(1 Corinthians 1:10-17 NIV)

Introduction

The main theme of this passage is that the family of God should unite with one another in Christ, refusing to create divisions or elevate anyone as more important. Within the church, there were factions following Paul, Apollos, Peter or Cephas, and possibly even a Jesus faction (1:12). Paul was horrified by this development and would spend (1:10–4:21) pleading with the church to pursue unity, not division. Dividing into political parties may be the way of the world, but it should not be the practice of the people of God. There could not be a more relevant word for the twenty-first-century church.

Apostle Paul is appealing to the congregation in Corinth. He calls them brothers and sisters in Christ. When we are part of the Church, we are brothers and sisters; we belong to a family. The phrase 'perfectly join together' is a medical term that describes the unity of the human body knit together. What we need in the house of the Lord is one mind, agreement with one another, and perfect unity in mind and thought. This is the norm in God's family. Let there be no divisions among you. Another thing to note here is the full, majestic title of our Saviour reminds the Corinthians that Paul's words are not merely his private opinion but they come with the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ.

Here, Paul is addressing the division in the Corinthian church, and I like the way Paul tackles the issues. He doesn't want to address things in a vacuum or sweep them under the carpet. He is not saying that he had a dream and the Holy Spirit revealed to him the cause of the issues. He is addressing them clearly, saying that he heard this matter from Chloe's household. We need to commend the household of Chloe. They did not try to hide the problems; they were burdened by them and not afraid to be mentioned by Paul. If you say something, you need to stand by your word. Sister Chloe spoke to Paul, explaining everything going on in the church. She didn't go to social media and

announce it to the whole wide world; she didn't go around sharing it with scores of people but shared it with the right person—the person who planted the church. This family was not trying to make the problem worse but was burdened by it and seeking a solution. Paul addresses the problem directly and the source of the information he got. When we address a problem, we need to be as clear as possible, not beating around the bush or spiritualizing it but dealing with it straightforwardly.

Is Christ divided?

The church is divided over its leaders. There are at least four different groups in the church. The first group labels themselves as Pauline. Many Corinthians aligned themselves with Paul. Maybe it's because they first heard the gospel about Jesus Christ, and Paul's preaching emphasized freedom from the law. After Paul left Corinth, Apollos arrived and 'helped greatly those who had believed through grace, for he powerfully refuted the Jews in public, demonstrating by the Scriptures that Jesus was the Christ (Acts 18:27-28). Apollos was not only intellectually astute but also verbally eloquent. The Greeks, especially, would have flocked to him as they respect the skills of logic and rhetoric. The third group follows Apostle Peter, the most prominent among the original twelve disciples of Jesus. He carries significant influence over the followers of Jesus at that time, especially the Jewish Christians in Corinth. The fourth group says they follow Christ, and it looks good at first glance. Paul puts them in the category that is not acceptable as followers of Christ. Why? The group of Christ followers must have taken their single devotion to Christ to an unhealthy extreme by rejecting all other church authorities, including those appointed by Christ. They might have forgotten the truth that Christ is the 'cornerstone' along with apostles and prophets as the foundation of the New Testament Church.

Imagine these groups trying to compete on theology, service, vision, mission, etc. Every group will try to prove they are better. The congregation was made up of different schools of thought instead of being united behind the gospel message. Of course, when you have proud people depending on human wisdom, adopting the lifestyle of the world, you are going to have problems. To help them solve the problem, Paul brings them back to the fundamentals. Looking to the cross helps us to overcome the boundaries that separate us. Before the cross, we are all one. No human wisdom, no family background, no philosophical thought, no good works, no prejudices can surpass the glory of God. Only one thing stands above everything, which is the cross of Christ.

Paul is asking, 'Is Christ divided?' Paul did not preach one Christ, Apollos another, and Peter another. There is but one Saviour and one gospel (Gal 1:6-9). How, then, did the Corinthians create this four-way division? Why are there quarrels among them? One answer is that they were looking at the gospel from a philosophical point of view. Corinth was a city filled with teachers and philosophers, all of whom wanted to share their wisdom.

Another answer is that human nature enjoys following human leaders. We tend to identify more with spiritual leaders who help us and whose ministry we understand and enjoy. Instead of emphasizing the message of the Word, the Corinthians emphasized the messenger. They got their eyes off the Lord and on the Lord's servants, and this led to competition. There are many people in the world who call themselves Christians,

taking a stand on various theological factions such as Calvinism, Arminianism, Lutheranism, etc. Some people follow John Piper, and others follow NT Wright. Let us come back to the Word. Let us come back to the one and only Saviour who said, "Whoever believes in Him shall not perish but have eternal life."

Paul will point out in 1 Corinthians 3 that there can be no competition among true servants of God. It is a sinful act for believers to compare pastors and their ministries. The personality cults in the church today are in direct disobedience to the Word of God. Only Jesus Christ should have the place of pre-eminence.

Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Keep in mind that baptism was an important matter in the New Testament church. When a sinner trusted Christ and was baptized, they cut themselves off from their old life and were often rejected by their friends and families. It cost something to be baptized in that day.

In the Corinthian church, people boasted based on who baptized them. Apparently, they had come to believe that the authenticity of their faith rested not only on baptism but also on their baptizer. They felt superior to others based on the baptism by the leaders. It is wrong to identify any man's name with your baptism other than the name of Jesus Christ. Amid conflict, this ordinance of Christ that should have marked the believers' unity in one body (Ephesians 4:4-6) had deteriorated into a basis of arrogant boasting.. Some people like to be baptized by certain preachers, in certain waters like the Jordan River, and on special days. I am not against it if you have the money or opportunity, but it should never be a discussion point or an element of boasting in our Christian life. Whenever we exalt men more than Jesus, there will be problems, divisions, and quarrels.

When we lose focus or take our eyes off Jesus, it is possible to take pride in anything we see in our life. It doesn't matter whether the servants God granted into their life to nurture them in Christ or over who laid their hands on them and spoke the name 'of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'. Clearly, they had lost focus. They allowed the act of baptism as their visible response to the gospel message to overshadow the message of the Father who sent His Son to die for their sins, rise from the dead, and give new life by the Spirit.

What matters the most?

At the climax of this exhortation to forsake their quarrelling, division, cliques, and boasting, Paul redirects their attention to what matters most, the central thing, the thing that should hold them together in one mind: the gospel. Paul didn't go to Corinth to put on a show or parade his abilities or turn the spotlight onto himself but to preach the gospel. The story of the cross is the centre of the church community. He didn't try to preach the cross of Christ with rhetoric or cleverness or eloquence or any effort to divert this focus. Paul certainly cared nothing about the delivery of the gospel. Paul would agree that what you say and how you say it are important, yet the point is the medium must not get in the way of the message. The power is in the message! The power is in the preaching of the cross! The cross of Christ reminds us that we all fall short of God's

glory, His standard, and none of us will make it to heaven by our own ability or works, but Christ did it all. We all stand equal before the cross of Christ.

The gospel of Christ's person and work should stand at the centre of everything we think, say, and do. Sadly, many people lose this focus and major on minor things. In our entertainment-driven culture, the Word of God or the work of Christ becomes outdated when cult personalities take the centre stage. We need to carefully focus on what matters most. The apostle Paul couldn't have been clearer: when you glorify the messenger, you distract people from the message. We must fully focus on Christ. When we take our focus off Christ, the result will be pursuing selfish interests, marginal issues, favourite personalities, etc. This will ultimately lead to divisions, which will produce quarrels, which will produce cliques and strife.

Where is your focus today?

Is Christ the centre of your vision, or is His image beginning to blur?

1. Have I fixed my eyes on mere things? This invariably leads to materialism, the unquenchable lust for more; more money, more plastic, more gadgets, more houses, etc. Paul urges in 1 Timothy 6:17, those with means "not to be conceited or to fix their hope on the uncertainty of riches but on God".

2. Have I fixed my eyes on circumstances? This is a great way to promote either self-pity or pride. Good circumstances tend to give a false sense of security; bad ones nudge us to feel anxious or depressed. Colossians 3:2 says we must turn our eyes "on the things above, not on the things that are on the earth".

3. Have I fixed my eyes on myself? When we adore the trinity of 'me, myself, and I', our concern for others suffers, leading to disunity in the church. Nowadays, everyone tries to be a brand or become something, nothing wrong with a healthy self-image. We are not created to focus inwardly or take care of our comfort, family, security. In Philippians, Apostle Paul exhorts us, "Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others." We need to live out the selfless humility Jesus modelled for us.

4. Have I fixed my eyes on others? The Corinthians excelled at turning their attention from Christ to Christ's workers. They bronzed people into idols, set them on pedestals, and made them objects of worship. This kind of personality-driven ministry always leads to conflict, division, and controversy because every frail, fallen human will ultimately fall short and bring disappointment.

Let's turn our eyes of our heart to Jesus. We will find that the things of this world start to fade, and most of the seemingly irreconcilable differences we have with others in the body of Christ will disappear. We will grow and become the church united and perfectly joined together as one body. Amy Carmichael in her reflection on the cross: 'God holds us to that which drew us first when the Cross was the attraction, and we wanted nothing else'. Believer, stay with Jesus and the cross. As we do, the church will be filled with life and unity for the glory of God. The church is at her best when she is on the battlefield

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fighting the real enemies of Satan, sin, death, hell, and the grave. She is at her worst when she is in the barracks fighting her own members. Jesus said love God, love one another, and go to the nations with the gospel.

Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does division in the church distort the gospel and ruin the church's reputation? How does unity promote the gospel to a lost world?
2. What does this passage teach about the church's identity? How can remembering this identity lead to unity? Why does forgetting it lead to division?
3. What is God saying to me from the study today and what am I going to do about it?
4. Who can I tell what I have learned here in the course of the next week?

Memory verse:

1 Corinthians 1:17 (NIV) – “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power”

References

- Daniel L Akin and James Merritt, *Christ-Centered Exposition: Exalting Jesus in 1 Corinthians* (B & H Publishing Group, Tennessee, 2023)
- Charles R Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights: New Testament Commentary 1 & 2 Corinthians* (Tyndale House Publishers, Illinois, 2017)