

II. Wrongly Dividing the Church of Christ

September 18/20, 2012 1 Corinthians 1:4-17

Aim: To understand that the gifts of grace God gives to the church are intended for uniting, not dividing the body of Christ.

The task of chapters 1-4 of this letter is to mend the rift between the church and their father-in-God (4:14-15), and this is the precursor for addressing more serious problems. The latter burden is discharged from 5:1 onwards. Until Paul can show the Corinthians that their essential problem is that they have veered away from the Christ whom he preaches, and consequently from His appointed messenger, he can do no more for them. This is the rationale behind chapters 1-4.

A. Thanksgiving Because of God's Grace (1 Cor. 1:4-9)

Paul takes the first nine verses of 1 Corinthians to show believers who they are—saints, holy ones, sanctified ones. The rest of the letter is built on this foundation. 'You *are* holy; therefore *act* holy. Live a life commensurate with who you are.' Verses 4-8 form one long sentence in the original.

Some form of the Lord Jesus' name appears nine times in the first nine verses. Can there be any doubt that Paul was deliberately underscoring the centrality of the Lord Jesus? And isn't this his way of saying the Corinthians had lost sight of their Lord? One of the principal problems is their abuse of the gift of tongues, for them perhaps the most coveted of all spiritual blessings. Paul's opening verses constitute his attempt to turn their eyes away from themselves and back to their Lord. Paul sought to do this by stressing for them again what they had in Christ. And what did they have? We can summarize it all by that word 'grace.'

There is no explanation for the existence of the church in Corinth other than that God's grace had been given to them. It had been given to them in the person of the Lord Jesus and in all that He had accomplished for them.

1. Saving Grace – Past (1:4)

⁴I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus...

The first thing the Corinthians enjoyed through Christ was saving grace. The basic meaning of the word 'grace' (*charis*) is 'favor,' but in regard to God's saving men through His Son it always has the special and distinct sense of undeserved and unrepayable kindness or mercy given to sinners. 'Was given' is in the aorist tense, indicating action completed at a particular, definite point in time. At the moment a person trusts in Jesus Christ, he receives God's grace and the testimony of Christ is confirmed in him (v. 6).

That simply means their salvation was entirely His doing. The truth is, there was nothing for Paul to praise in the Corinthians. Everything they were and everything they had came to them as a gift of God's grace. As elsewhere, his thanksgivings are 'always' directed heavenwards. So Paul opens this letter, not by praising them, but by praising God for what He has done in them. It is significant that Paul is thankful that the congregation is being endowed so liberally in spite of the fact that their spiritual gifts have become objects of abuse (see chapters 12-13). Whenever God's favor touches a life all of God's bounty and goodness that we could never have deserved

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of ourselves begins to flow in. Grace gives us what we do not deserve and mercy shields us from what we do deserve.

How did God give this marvelous gift of salvation to them? ‘In Christ Jesus.’ God has freely bestowed salvation on His people because of something Jesus did. In other words, God does not save indiscriminately and arbitrarily, but only through Christ. The first thing the Corinthians needed to do to overcome their problems was reflect on the saving grace of God bestowed upon them through Jesus Christ.

Paul’s gratitude is not so much for the church as for the transforming work of the Spirit of Christ among them providing His grace (*charis*), a graciousness manifested by the bestowal of spiritual gifts. This is a pre-emptive strike: whereas the Corinthians exult in their *charismata* (meaning ‘favours,’ unmerited benefits), the apostle revels in the graciousness of God who has bestowed them.

2. Equipping Grace – Present (1:5-7)

a) *Enriched* (1:5, 7a)

(1) Given All Gifts (1:5)

⁵...that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge—

There is more to God’s grace than our sins being forgiven. His is also an enriching grace. It had not only saved them; it had equipped them to serve God acceptably. The particular ‘speech’ in mind here is that of telling God’s truth. He also provides ‘all knowledge’ necessary. It is not that we know everything we need to know to speak effectively for the Lord. God has given us enough revelation and will give us enough understanding to speak His truth to the world. ‘Speech’ and ‘knowledge’ are terms that are going to recur many times in the course of the letter. In all probability they reflect the areas of church life and experience with which the Corinthians were especially concerned and of which they may have become inordinately proud (cp. 4:18; 5:2).

The term that Paul uses for ‘gift’ (v. 7) is *charismata*, usually translated ‘spiritual gift’ but better translated literally as ‘grace gift.’ It is derived from the term for ‘grace’ (*charis*) used in verses 3-4. Our English word ‘charismatic’ comes from the term used here, and refers to the endowment by God of gracious gifts to His people to minister to His church. It does not refer to the endowment of special, extraordinary gifts to those who are supposedly more spiritual or more advanced in the faith, as maintained by man in what is generally known as the charismatic movement. God endows all believers with *charismata*, although, as with His other blessings, these gifts are often misused or ignored.

The apostle relates the ‘gifting’ to the gospel of grace, with which Paul begins his thanksgiving. In that sense these gifts are the proof that the Corinthians have indeed received and believed the testimony about Christ. This is a very gifted church and Paul does not want to deny that fact, nor question it, for one moment. But he *is* concerned that they should attribute all of this to God’s grace alone and not to human agents or to their own imagined worthiness.

Paul mentions just two gifts God had granted them. One was the gift of ‘utterance,’ which is the ability to share the truth. In the Greek, Paul uses *logos* (literally, ‘word’) to refer to these gifts of utterance such as tongues-speaking (sometimes referred to as ‘glossolalia,’ an English word

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deriving from *glōssa*, ‘tongue,’ and *lalia*, ‘speech’), prophecy, and the interpretation of tongues. The other was the gift of ‘knowledge’ (*gnōsis*), which would have been equivalent to a ‘word of knowledge,’ a prophetic gift (cp. 12:8; 13:2). The church as a body has access to all the wisdom, insight, discernment, and truth which it needs; it needs no special gurus to bring it to them.

Paul is referring to ‘gifts’ of speaking like teaching, prophecy, and ‘speaking in tongues’ which arise from their new ‘knowledge,’ that is, of their Father and their Lord. This is not merely the activity of speaking and knowing, however, but of *what* is spoken and known, the confession of the Lord Jesus Christ in contrast to their former worship of many gods and many lords. In other words, Paul is pointing to the manifest fact of their conversion from pagan idolatry.

(2) Lacking No Gifts (1:7a)

⁷...so that you are not lacking in any gift...

In verse 7, Paul repeats negatively what he has indicated positively in verse 5 – namely that, being enriched in all utterance and knowledge, they lack nothing within the range of benefits bestowed by the Spirit. In their speaking and knowing, the Corinthians did not fall behind any other church. This is probably Paul’s way of telling them that, in fact, they *exceeded* other churches in these things (cp. 2 Cor. 8:7). But while Paul genuinely wishes to encourage them, there is also an edge to his words. What if their speaking and knowing were not matched by love within their community of faith? As the letter proceeds it will become clear that this is precisely their problem (cp. 8:1-3; 13:1-3).

Unlike the Thessalonian and Philippian churches, the Corinthian church was exceptionally lacking in spiritual maturity and in moral purity. But they were not lacking, Paul says, in any spiritual gift. They did not have the same spiritual maturity and moral character as believers in those other churches, but they had all of the same resources. Paul was speaking of God’s provisions, not their use of His provisions. The apostle seems to be emphasizing two things in this statement. First, the believers in Corinth, as believers everywhere, did not need to look for, and should not try to look for, additional special blessings or gifts. God has already provided every spiritual gift His children need or may have. Second, believers should claim and begin to use the gifts that the Lord has given them. The Corinthians lacked no gifts, only the willingness to use them.

b) *Established (1:6)*

⁶...even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you—

Through God’s enriching grace, they were also established in faith. ‘Testimony’ was a witness’ sworn evidence in court, based on what he or she had seen and heard. In Paul’s case it referred to the gospel which had come to him so personally on the road to Damascus. But the same principle applies to us. The gospel we give to others, whether as preachers or as individuals, must always be *our* testimony, words about things that are deeply true in our own experience. The word ‘confirmed’ means to have something settled in our convictions. The association between ‘confirmed’ and ‘testimony’ (*martyria*) is striking, suggesting a courtroom scene in which a deposition is solemnized by oath; Paul’s ministry had been authenticated by God.

‘Testimony’ is the Greek *marturion*, meaning ‘witness,’ It is from this term that we get the English ‘martyr.’ Christ’s witness is settled and confirmed in us when we trust in Him as Lord and Savior. In the New Testament *marturion* is most commonly used in relation to the gospel,

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and first of all to its proclamation. The context indicates that the deepest meaning of *marturion* (or *marturia*) however, is in its representing the gospel itself, not merely its proclamation.

a) *Expectant (1:7b)*

...as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ...

The grace of God further enriched them by making them expectant. The Greek word *apekdechomenous* ('awaiting eagerly') means to wait with eager anticipation and also activity. It is not an idle, passive waiting, as when sitting on a street corner waiting for a bus. It involves working while we wait and watch and hope. Right knowing and faithful speaking will help sustain them as they, with others, look for the coming of Jesus. In other words, it gave them a glorious hope. They had something to look forward to: the day when the Lord Jesus Christ would be revealed in all His power and glory.

3. Preserving Grace – Future (1:8-9)

⁸*...who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.* ⁹*God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

Mention of the return of Christ naturally prompts Paul to reassure the readers about their ongoing spiritual security. Paul says that God's grace is also preserving grace. The Lord Jesus will continue to 'confirm' them, that is, 'place a solid floor under' them until the end. *Bebaioun* literally means 'to lay a foundation.' The Corinthians could depend on God's preserving grace to continue to work in them and keep them until the day they stood blameless before Jesus Christ. 'Blameless' develops the courtroom nuance of verse 6: God's testimony has been confirmed among those who remain guiltless.

Paul gives two reasons for believing in the keeping power of God's grace. The first is the faithfulness of God (cp. Dt. 7:9; 32:4). In the Greek text, 'faithful' (*pistos*) comes first for emphasis. If we are not responsible for salvation in the first place, how can we be responsible for keeping it? The keeping of our salvation doesn't rest on our faithfulness, but on God's faithfulness in maintaining His work in us.

The second reason Paul gives for believing in preserving grace is the fellowship (*koinōnia*) of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not only the individual but also the church is 'in Christ.' Thus the church is 'the fellowship of His Son.' The word *koinōnia* also means partnership, oneness. We are secured to glory by being one with God's beloved Son. We enter the kingdom by grace and we will be kept in the kingdom by grace.

This fellowship means we have both union and communion with Christ. The doctrine of union with Christ means we have been joined to Christ. This union is so complete that if we were to lose our salvation and perish, Jesus Himself would have to perish! To have fellowship with Christ also involves communion. This means we are conscious of Christ's presence in our lives.

Paul's perspective shifts to the future. The phrase 'the day of our Lord Jesus Christ' echoes other biblical references to the day of the Lord as the day of judgment. The link between verses 6 and 8 is the term used in both verses where the same root is translated as 'confirmed' and 'will sustain.' Just as the testimony about Christ was confirmed in the grace gifts given to the church, so the believers will be confirmed 'blameless' when Christ returns. Both are the fruits of His grace alone. The grace that saves is the grace that keeps.

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But the apostle is concerned that the Corinthians keep that end point firmly in view. There is a danger that they may become so obsessed with their present experiences of enrichment that they will be tempted to imagine that already they are enjoying all the blessings of heaven. A clear future focus is essential for healthy Christian living in the present. Grace ‘now’ is the guarantee of grace ‘then,’ when Christ is revealed and we shall need to be ‘guiltless’ before Him. So, verse 9 provides the assurance that this is absolutely central to God’s purposes and the certainty that it will be accomplished. The full title of Jesus is used to impress upon us the immense privilege and the supreme certainty of God’s grace. But the emphasis in verse 9 is on the first word, ‘faithful.’ ‘God is faithful’ is the key to every assurance the believer enjoys. If he has called us to be holy, He will present us blameless. It is that quality of assured conviction that produces godly living in the present.

In this thanksgiving Paul has ‘placed a floor under’ his readers’ feet, the sure foundation of God’s faithfulness in calling them and keeping them. Paul is declaring his confidence in them: notwithstanding their severe problems, they are an authentic church, blessed by the manifestation of the Spirit and awaiting the revelation of the Lord. Certainly he will challenge them and rebuke them in what follows. But first let them be assured that they are secure in God’s love and care.

If we are Christians, we have exactly the same things that the Corinthians did. God has saved, enriched, and preserved us. Do our lives reflect gratitude and praise? Or do we grumble and show discontent and resentment?

B. Appeal Because of Human Divisions (1 Cor. 1:10-17)

The first need of the Corinthian church was for harmony. It is also the need of many churches today. With this discussion, Paul moves into the exhortation and instruction that occupies the rest of the epistle.

Paul informs the Corinthians that he has been told about their divisions. Nevertheless, there is no evidence to suggest that the church has split into opposing factions, or that any particular individuals have allowed themselves to become figureheads. The problem is much simpler—or more subtle: although they are ‘saints,’ too many in the church are spiritually and emotionally immature. Dragging their feet, they find it difficult to respond to the moral demands of the gospel and are reluctant to abdicate the cultural norms of their city in favor of commitment to the scandal of a crucified Messiah. ‘Wisdom’ (*sophia*) and ‘wise [man]’ (*sophos*) occur far more frequently in 1 Corinthians, and in particular the first three chapters, than elsewhere in the New Testament, and this raw statistic may provide an indication of the Corinthians’ mindset.

1. The Reality of Human Divisions (1:10-12)

In reality the Corinthians are united because they have been called by God to participate in Christ (1:9). But sadly, within their church this oneness is well disguised.

a) The Appeal (1:10)

¹⁰*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*

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The letter's opening section has referred to the Lord Jesus in every one of the first nine verses, and verse 10 is no exception. In many ways it is a bridge between the greetings and thanksgiving section and the main business of the letter, to which Paul now turns.

'Now' signals an abrupt shift from the positive to the negative. The words of commendation are over and the words of correction begin. 'Plead' or 'exhort' (*parakalō*) reveals the intensity of his feeling about this issue. It is a strong word, meaning, 'to beg, to implore, or to beseech.' It is the verb root of *paraklētos*, the 'Helper' of John 14:16, 26 and the 'Advocate' of 1 John 2:1. The basic meaning is that of coming alongside someone in order to help. It is not a military command to be dumbly obeyed, but a warm encouragement to be acted on, that is, 'be united.' Paul wanted to come alongside his Corinthian brothers and sisters in order to help correct their sins and shortcomings. By this approach Paul, like a wise parent, puts before them (and us) an important principle of Christian behavior, which is the need for unity within the congregation, but in such a way that its fulfillment will prove to be a growing experience for the readers.

'Brethren' reminds them of the basis of their unity—they all belong to the same family. 'By the name of the Lord Jesus Christ' reminds them of the authority of the One to whom they had professed their greatest allegiance.

Paul's appeal has three related components. The first is 'that all of you agree.' The literally meaning of this phrase is 'that the same thing may be said by you all.' For a local church to be spiritually healthy, harmonious, and effective, there must, above all, be doctrinal unity. The teaching of the church should not be a smorgasbord from which members can pick and choose. Nor should there be various groups, each with its own distinctive and leaders. Unfortunately some churches today, and even some seminaries, have just that sort of doctrinal and ethical selectivity.

The second phrase is 'that there be no divisions among you.' The word 'divisions' translates the Greek *schismata*, from which we get 'schism.' In the physical sense the meaning is 'to tear or rip,' that is, to separate (e.g., Mt. 9:16). Metaphorically it means to have a difference of opinion, a division of judgment, a dissension. The most serious divisions a church can have are those involving doctrine, but there are also other matters, even those not specifically taught in Scripture, about which the church should be of one mind when the elders and pastors have come to agreement on it. There was no doctrinal disagreement among the teachers whom the Corinthians looked to (1:12); the division was one of personality or style preference on the part of the Corinthians—a popularity contest. No *schismata* – no rents or tears in the fellowship – is the evidence of the deep unity of heart and mind for which Paul is working. But sadly, the reality in Corinth was rather different, as indeed it is in many congregations today.

Finally, 'that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.' Here Paul uses a metaphor from clothing. The idea is that of being thoroughly knit together – no chinks or gaps appearing in their oneness. They are to be 'knit together' in 'mind' and 'opinion' in the one garment. Paul's verb *katartizō* (here *katērtismenoi*) was used of fishermen 'mending' their nets (Mark 1:19); it could also refer to mending bones, dislocated joints, broken utensils, or torn garments. It was also used of the help given to someone in a church who had fallen into sin (Gal. 6:1). The basic meaning is to put back together, to make one again something that was broken or separated.

Such a 'knit together' mind and opinion concerns their commonly held commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ. This can only be the case when there is genuine unity of thinking and opinion.

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Being of ‘the same mind and ... the same judgment’ rules out grudging or hypocritical unity. Unity must be genuine. We are not simply speaking the same thing, while keeping our disagreements and objections to ourselves, making a pretense of unity. Unity that is not of the same mind and judgment is not true unity. Hypocrites will add to a congregation’s size but they will take away from its effectiveness. Only when God’s people think alike – about God Himself, about Christ and the gospel, and, consequently, about themselves and the church – can real unity be demonstrated.

b) The Report (1:11)

¹¹*For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.*

The household of Chloe was probably not from within the church at Corinth, but were presumably visitors who had become very concerned about what they had observed at Corinth and were determined that Paul should be informed. Whether or not she was a member, it is clear that the people in the Corinthian church knew her. Paul refuses to deal in anonymous gossip and reveals his sources; it is only fair to the church that they should know the origin of the criticisms laid against them. What they said was out in the open and they themselves were identified. Any insistence on anonymity would put an immediate question mark upon their motives.

Not only are there divisions in the church, there are also ‘quarrels.’ Chloe, probably a prominent member of the Corinthian church, was so concerned about the ‘quarrels’ in the congregation that at some expense she sent associates or family members to inform Paul, a journey of several days across the Aegean Sea. The inference is that Chloe was a woman of means, perhaps a trader. Her name on its own suggests that she was a widow. The name ‘Chloe’ is drawn from Greek mythology and implies that she was not a Jewess, though she may have been a Gentile ‘God-fearer’ who had previously attended the synagogue in Corinth before her conversion to Christ. Her initiative in sending her people to Paul probably means that she was an early convert in Corinth and one who had valued Paul’s ministry in the city three years earlier.

c) The Specifics (1:12)

¹²*What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”*

The most frequently used word in this verse is ‘I,’ in stark contrast to the frequent use of the names and titles of Christ in verses 1-10. The focus of the Corinthian congregation has shifted from Christ to ‘me,’ and this was the root of the problem.

Paul expands on Chloe’s report, which he seems to accept as true. The ‘quarrels’ in the church were due to factionalism as the members identified themselves with the minister who had baptized them (see vv. 14-16), whether Paul, Apollos, or Peter, who were the great Christian teachers of the early years of the church.

He begins with his own supporters. These were probably those who had responded to the gospel when Paul first arrived in Corinth. Obviously many members continued to look to his leadership. Doubtless they had often defended Paul’s ministry when it was under attack, but Paul does not commend them for this ‘loyalty.’

But it was now three years since he had left and in the meantime other ministers had visited the city. First came Apollos, the brilliant Jewish scholar and preacher from Alexandria (Acts 18:24-

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26), and he too had his admirers (cp. 16:12), most likely among the better educated members who prized rhetorical speechmaking.

Next came Cephas/Peter, the spokesman of the Twelve and the leader for twenty years of the mission to the Jews in Palestine. Apparently Peter had also visited the Corinthian congregation. One can imagine those of more Jewish inclination rejoicing at making him their champion and claiming, ‘I follow Cephas.’ While Peter and Paul had their differences (Gal. 2:11-21), yet they always remained at one. But it would not be surprising if some of the followers proved to be more sectarian and divisive than their mentors.

Lastly, there were those whose claim distanced themselves from these squabbles. ‘I follow Christ’ was their watchword, dissociating them from all those unworthy rivalries. Perhaps they say themselves as the really ‘spiritual’ party. This intriguing group may have been those we encounter later in the letter who prized ‘spiritual gifts,’ in particular ‘speaking in other tongues,’ which they may have claimed as coming to them from the risen Christ, setting them apart as an elite group.

Evidently there was a division between the Gentile Christians and the Jewish Christians, with the former claiming to follow Paul while the latter clung to Cephas (Peter). Another division apparently existed between the more intellectual members, who were enamored of the cultured, eloquent Apollos, and the more ordinary members. A final division existed because some felt they were spiritually superior to all the rest. They considered themselves the spiritual elite, the spiritual aristocracy. This group boasted they were in Christ. By their boast that they were in Christ, they were denying that the other members of the church belonged to Him. The ‘Christ-boasters’ were making it appear as if Christ belonged exclusively to them.

Paul’s concern is that the whole controversy is wrong, because at root it is all about glorying in individuals, who are just human agents. Paul does not regard Apollos as a threat. In chapter 3, he will go out of his way to put him on the same level as himself, but both are only servants (3:5). If some of the Corinthians value Apollos more because of his rhetorical abilities, they are building on the wrong foundation. So are those who favor Paul because he was the original messenger, or Peter, because of his stronger Jerusalem connections. And no one should ‘corner’ the name of Christ for his own party, for how can Christ be divided?

While Paul rejoiced in the *charismata* (1:7) that God had poured on these Christians, the tragedy is that these very gifts had been used to strengthen the *schismata* outlined here. The problem with gifts is that they can so easily divert attention to the gifted person and away from the giver.

Here is the tragedy of division. Instead of moving towards the goal of Christian maturity, this church was bogged down in the swamp of childishly disputing which group was superior! But the tragedy went even further. Because of their divisions, they were causing the church and the cause of Christ to have a bad name. Paul had learned of their quarrels while ministering in distant Ephesus! A church quarrel never has to be advertised; it always advertises itself.

Churches and denominations continue to be hotbeds of factionalism. Members very readily cluster exclusively around one minister or elder against the others, whether current or previous leaders of the congregation.

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2. The Folly of Human Divisions (1:13-16)

a) Three Rhetorical Questions (1:13)

¹³*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

From the tragedy of division, Paul moves to point out the absurdity of it. He spares nothing in heaping scorn and sarcasm upon them for allowing divisions. Three short, biting questions put the whole matter in perspective. Paul wanted them to look long and hard at these things and ask themselves how they could be divided when they had so much to unite them. How could they allow division when they all belonged to the same Christ?

Paul's tactic is to recall the divided church in Corinth to its senses, by posing three rhetorical questions. The answer to each, of course, is 'No.' Anything else would be unthinkable. The central principle of Paul's argument is that believers are one in Christ and should never do anything that disrupts that unity. No human leader, no matter how gifted and effective, should have the loyalty that belongs only to the Lord. Paul began his letter by establishing his authority as an apostle. But he wanted no part of the faction named for him.

The first question teaches that Christ *is* the church. No assembly of believers confessing the risen Christ can in principle be partitioned within itself. Let the Corinthians understand that Christ has not been parceled out only to some with obvious spiritual gifts. The second question points out the impossibility of raising up someone in the place of Christ. Paul is merely Christ's apostle, sent by Him, one of a number of His servants through whom they had come to believe. The third question points out the folly of looking to the baptizer instead of Christ. Only in Christ's name could a believer be baptized. To sum up, these three questions show that the divisions at Corinth are unnecessary, unreasonable, and sinful.

These questions, with his assertion that 'Christ sent me to preach the gospel' (v. 17) are closely connected. Together they form a window through which we glimpse the initial missionary penetration of Paul in Corinth, and we suppose of other places as well. First, he preached the gospel, a message focused on Christ crucified for their sins (see 15:3). Then, as they received the gospel, they were baptized 'in the name of Christ.' Third, baptism incorporated them fully into the body of believers, notwithstanding the divergent nature of their ministry gifts.

A Christian church that is divided is a contradiction. When the Lord's people quarrel and dispute and fight, they reflect against the Lord before the world, they weaken His church, and worst of all they grieve and put to shame the One who brought them—who died to make them one in Him. The Father is one, the Son is one, the Spirit is one, and the church is one.

b) Three Pauline Baptisms (1:14-16)

¹⁴*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)*

The names and associated details are helpful for our understanding of Paul's mission work. The three persons he baptized were each significant in some way.

Crispus was a Jew, mentioned in Acts 18:8 as the 'ruler of the synagogue' who 'believed in the Lord together with his entire household.' From his position, we can infer that he was a man of wealth and high standing.

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Gaius is mentioned in Romans 16:23 as Paul's 'host and of the whole church' in Corinth. The book of Acts, however, says that Paul stayed with a 'God-fearer' named Titius Justus (Acts 18:7). Most likely this is one and the same man, a Roman whose full name was 'Gaius Titius Justus.' He, too, was a man of prominence whose home was sufficiently spacious to accommodate a meeting of the 'whole church.'

Reference to the 'household of Stephanas,' with its implication of retainers and servants, also signals material prosperity. Indeed, this man's household were Paul's first converts in Achaia, and he has ministered materially to the saints in Corinth (cp. 16:15). Stephanas, with his (probable) retainers Fortunatus and Achaicus (whose names 'Lucky' and 'Achaian' suggest that they were nicknamed slaves), have now visited Paul in Ephesus and are probably the bearers of this letter back to Corinth.

These three, with Chloe (as noted above) and, for example, Erastus, the director of city works (Rom. 16:23), give the impression that Paul found significant support among people of wealth in Corinth, though probably these were in a minority within the total congregation.

Paul obviously did not keep records, or lists, both because baptism was not his primary calling (v. 17) and also because of the danger of individuals assuming baptism by the apostle to be in some way superior and so shifting their focus from Christ to Paul (v. 15). The fewer he baptized personally, the less the danger.

Paul's failure to remember any further baptisms in Corinth is an oblique statement that the identity of the person carrying out baptism is irrelevant as long as the rite is performed adequately. This statement also gives an interesting insight into the inspiration of Scripture. As an apostle writing the Word of God, Paul made no errors; but he was not omniscient. God protected His apostles from error in order to protect His Word from error. But Paul did not know everything about God or even about himself, and was careful never to make such a claim. He knew what God revealed—things he had no way of knowing on his own. What he could know on his own, he was prone to forget. He was one of us.

Do you see Paul's point? He wanted no cult built around himself or any other church leader. The Corinthians didn't belong to him or to any of the other great preachers of the day. They belonged to Christ—all of them, not just an elite few. They had lost sight of the very thing that united them—Jesus Christ! Having placed their divisions in those terms, Paul was in a position to point out the remedy for the whole mess. They had to start magnifying Christ and minimizing themselves and their favorite preachers.

3. The Remedy for Human Divisions (1:17)

¹⁷*For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*

Each Christian seems to have a particular fondness for the preacher who baptized him and for the one who speaks with unusual power and eloquence. Paul had shunned both of these roles. He had baptized only a few at Corinth, not because he wanted to disparage baptism, but because his calling was to be an apostle, whose essential task was to evangelize. Paul had no desire to be exalted, but only to see Christ exalted.

Paul's great commission was to preach the gospel and he would never be deflected from it. His call was to go and make disciples; others could, and did, baptize. But the whole thrust of the

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apostle's ministry was to exalt Christ, who is the good news, and to minimize himself. This is not to say that Paul dismisses the importance of baptizing but to insist that it is ancillary to his prior and overarching calling to proclaim the gospel of Christ. Baptizing is entirely dependent on and subsidiary to preaching the gospel.

It seems as though Paul had made a definite choice not to attempt to persuade his hearers to believe by eloquence and rhetorical skills, which were the currency of the pagan philosophers. 'Wisdom of speech' (*Sophia logou*) probably referred to the style of Greek philosophical discourse en vogue. Paul's conviction is that had his ministry among them taken the format of Greek philosophical dialogue, he would have been ineffective. Rather, he would proclaim the cross of Christ, in the assured knowledge and conviction that this was where God's power lay. Paul will develop this argument all through the next few paragraphs, with his final explanation (in 2:5): 'that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.'

It seems the Corinthians had become interested in and diverted by somebody preaching with 'words of wisdom.' Most probably this person or persons had so preached as to place the spotlight on the speaker, rather than the message itself. Thus the attention of the hearer had been diverted from Christ crucified to the 'wise' preacher. But what can a preacher accomplish if he fails to draw attention to Christ? Nothing. What would be the consequences had he taught the church to rely upon him instead of Christ? These converted saints would remain as they once were – sinners.

To rely on 'eloquent wisdom' (literally 'wisdom of speech') is to put one's confidence in man, which is precisely the Corinthian problem that Paul was addressing. By contrast, the message of the cross is totally humbling. Confidence in human skills of communication and argument tends to minister to the sort of ambition and self-glory which was proving so schismatic in Corinth. It draws attention to the messenger and to his method, rather than the message. Indeed, these things will come between the hearers and the gospel, so that they cannot see the cross. Whenever we rely on the preacher, or he on his communication methods, especially in situations where entertainment dominates, we shall empty the message of the power of the cross. But these alternatives will always be more popular, because the means of our salvation is still despised and contemptible in the world's eyes. As soon as the world is allowed to write the agenda for the church's mission, the cross will be relegated in favor of something much more culturally in tune and acceptable.

The remedy for the schisms developing at Corinth, therefore, was to return to the gospel of the cross, which is God's wisdom and God's power. Humbled at the foot of the cross, Christians recognized one another as sinners saved by grace, sisters and brothers, in God's family. Submitting to the one Lord, we are bound together in His one body, and we must express that unity in thought and speech.

For next time: Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31.