

“Be United”

The Second in a Series of Sermons on Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians

Texts: 1 Corinthians 1:4-17; Isaiah 40:9-26

There is nothing so tragic and gut-wrenching as a church split. Some among us have been through them and almost nothing good comes from them. Even in the case of a “Scottish revival”—the facetious term for the departure of a group of disaffected trouble-makers who cause the very problem they are complaining about—division in the church is still division, as Christ’s spiritual body is torn apart by our sinful behavior. While church splits are probably the worst case scenario, there is another more subtle form of division which is found in Christ’s church (and often within Reformed churches). This is the case of factions. “I follow the teaching of so and so.” “Oh yeah, well I follow the teaching of so and so, and he said that your so and so . . .” It had come to Paul’s attention that several factions had formed in the Corinthian church. Paul regards this as such a serious matter that this is the very first issue he takes up in his letter to the Corinthians.

In the first sermon we devoted most of our time to the historical background needed to understand the “whats” and “whys” of this very important letter. I would encourage you to get a CD or listen to the sermon on-line, because this is one epistle which requires that we understand the historical context in which it was written to interpret it correctly. The similarities between the culture and religious climate of ancient Corinth and that of modern America are really quite striking—and I attempted to draw out some of these similarities in my introductory remarks, and will continue to do so throughout this series. The ancient Corinthians were much like modern Americans, and the issues Paul addresses with the Corinthians are issues facing the church again today. This is a letter with which we should be well familiar.

We also covered Paul’s opening greetings to the Corinthians in which he reminded them of the fact that he had been called by God to be an apostle. Paul had been with these people for some eighteen months but two years earlier and knew most of them personally. Now he has gotten reports from people in the church (Chloe’s family) and from a letter to him written by the Corinthians and delivered to him in Ephesus, revealing a whole series of issues facing the church as well as a description of the sinful behavior of some of its members. Awareness of these matters prompts Paul to write his first Corinthian letter.

Why does Paul speak as an apostle, and not as a friend? Paul speaks with Christ’s authority because he must rebuke and instruct this congregation. Paul’s authority is unlike many teachers who had come to Corinth leading their own “ministries” in the church without the sanction of the Lord of the church. Paul first arrived in Corinth in fear and trembling, without eloquence of speech or personal charisma. A number of self-appointed teachers took advantage of Paul’s personal unimpressiveness, and sought to undercut his office and authority. Yet, Paul’s authority trumps that of all others. He is an apostle, set apart by the Risen Christ to minister to the Gentiles. This letter does not contain advice, but a stern rebuke from an apostle—which is but another way of saying this rebuke is from Christ himself.

Paul addresses the Corinthians as a “church” (the *ekklesia* or “assembly”), people who are called out from the nations through the preaching of the gospel and who assemble together in Corinth “*to call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” Unlike the nation of Israel during the Old Covenant era, which must assemble as a nation in a divinely appointed place to call upon the name of the Lord, Christians are to

call upon the name of Christ wherever they happen to assemble for worship—even if that be in a pagan city like Corinth, or a modern pagan city such as Anaheim.

It is this undisciplined body of believers in Corinth whom Paul describes as “*those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints.*” To call this church to account, Paul must remind them of their calling unto holiness. Unlike the churches of Galatia (or even of Rome) where there was confusion about the gospel (which is why Paul focuses upon justification in those letters), in Corinth the issues Paul must address center around the behavior of Gentile converts to Christianity who are struggling to give up their pagan ways of thinking and doing now that they are Christians. The Corinthians understand the gospel. Apparently, there was little controversy about how someone was made right with God through faith in Jesus Christ. But the Corinthians are struggling to give up their pagan past. How do they follow Christ in a culture which is dominated by pagan rituals and practices (in virtually every area of life), as well as a pagan sexuality universally present in every guild hall and public bath in the city? The Corinthians don’t know how to behave, hence Paul begins by reminding them of what they are in Christ—“holy.” Having been reckoned “holy,” the Corinthians need to act like those who are sanctified.

As we move deeper into the first chapter, once Paul has made his introductory remarks, he stops to give thanks, before addressing the matter of division within the church.

While we might be surprised that Paul includes a thanksgiving in the opening of this letter—given the stern rebuke he is about to extend to the Corinthians—we shouldn’t be. Paul doesn’t give thanks for the Corinthians’ horrible conduct. Instead, he gives thanks for what God has graciously done in their midst, despite their conduct. As Paul states in verse 4, “*I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus.*” Paul uses this thanksgiving to introduce some of the theological themes which follow, including discussions of God’s grace in Christ (including his giving to the Corinthians spiritual gifts), as well as eschatological matters (the work of the Spirit and the return of Jesus Christ), and finally the doctrine of the church and the *koinonia* (fellowship) which all believers have in Christ. This is Paul’s foundation from which to deal with the problems within the congregation.¹

That all good things extend from God’s grace can be seen in verse 5 when Paul affirms “*that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.*” It is clear from these comments that Paul’s understanding of grace is centered in our union with Christ. God’s grace is extended to the Corinthians not in the abstract, but “in him” (i.e. “in Christ”). Because the believers in Corinth are “in Christ” they are “enriched in every way”—extending to “*all speech and all knowledge.*” Paul is referring to matters he will discuss later in the epistle. Speech refers to Spirit-inspired speech (Christian speech in general and speaking in tongues in particular), and knowledge (*gnosis* in contrast to *sophia*) refers to a correct understanding of Christian truth, in contrast to pagan philosophy.²

As in Galatians, where Paul mentions on two occasions that it was the preaching of Christ crucified which established the church (3:1-5; 6:14), so now Paul reminds the Corinthians of this truth in verse 6, “*even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you.*” Christian preaching centered in the “testimony about Christ,” (the preaching of the cross). Through the preaching of Christ crucified, God was pleased to confirm his work among the Corinthians. The verb used by Paul (translated “to confirm”)

¹ Hays, First Corinthians, 17

² Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 37.

means something like “a legal guarantee.”³ The effects of the preaching (the testimony about Christ) includes such things as people coming to faith, the growth of the church, the change in people’s lives, and so on. These things are the guarantee of the truth of the gospel. These are effects which everyone can see, and they point back to their cause, Paul’s testimony about Christ’s death for sinners.

It is because of the grace of God in Jesus Christ that the Corinthians “*are not lacking in any spiritual gift.*” The word translated “spiritual gift” is *charisma*. Although most people associate the *charisma* with the *charismata*, the so-called “sign gifts” which include the speaking in tongues, miracles and healing, the word “*charisma*” means “spiritual gift,” and is used in three ways by Paul. First, the word can be used of salvation, as in Romans 5:15, where Paul contrasts the gift of God (“salvation” from God’s wrath on the day of judgment) with the trespass of Adam. Second, the word can be used in a broader sense of God’s good gifts in general (i.e., Romans 11:29, where Paul mentions that God’s gifts and his call are irrevocable). Third, the word can be used for special endowments of the Holy Spirit as in 1 Corinthians 12:4 ff.⁴ Because of their union with Christ—the effect of the preaching of the gospel—the Corinthians are not lacking in any spiritual gifts from God. The practical consequences of this statement are obvious—there is no excuse for the Corinthian’s behavior. They lack no gifts from God, since he has been gracious to them. God has given them all they need to leave paganism behind.

While some are surprised by Paul’s sudden introduction of the second advent of Jesus Christ, when he states “*as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ,*” this too should not come as a surprise. Throughout Paul’s writings, the Holy Spirit said is the herald (or announcer) of the age to come and is often associated with the end of the age.⁵ In Romans 8:23, Paul speaks of the first fruits of the Holy Spirit, while we wait our Lord’s return and the redemption of our bodies. Likewise in Ephesians 1:13-14, Paul speaks of the believer’s present possession of the Holy Spirit as a pledge or down payment of the redemption of our bodies. To be indwelt by the Holy Spirit is the guarantee that we will participate in the age to come and receive all of Christ’s blessings including the resurrection of our bodies.

The reason for the Christian’s hope—the second coming of Christ—is explained in verses 8-9. “[God] *will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*” In verse 8, Paul makes a direct connection between God “sustaining us” and God confirming his testimony in us in verse 6. The same verb is used in both places. God confirmed his testimony, and will also confirm all believers until the time of the end. Because God has given the Corinthians his grace in Jesus Christ, he has enriched them in every way (including giving them spiritual gifts) so that they lack nothing. Having done this, God will ensure that they are blameless on the day of Jesus Christ (i.e., his second advent), when Jesus returns to judge the world, raise the dead, and make all things new. And since believers will be blameless on that day, the second advent of Christ is an event for which Christians eagerly await since it is the day of redemption, not the day of judgment. God confirms this in us, because God gives his people his grace and his gifts.

Believers can be confident, therefore, because the God who called them to faith in Jesus Christ is

³ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 37.

⁴ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 37-38.

⁵ See Geerhardus Vos, Redemptive History and Biblical Interpretation, trans., Richard B. Gaffin (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1980), 91 ff.

faithful. Just as Paul has been called to the office of apostle, so all believers have been called through the testimony of the gospel into mutual fellowship in Jesus Christ (our union with Christ), so that we might have fellowship in this age with the same Savior who will declare us to be blameless at the end of the age. God's grace and the gifts the Corinthians presently possess, point ahead to the day of Christ Jesus when the present blessings of the Holy Spirit lead to final glorification. What God begins in us, he will confirm us until the end. And this gives us hope.

In verse 10 Paul sets out what amounts to the fundamental theme of the entire letter. *"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."* In fact, most everything which follows until 4:21 grows out of Paul's appeal here: that there may be no divisions, and that the Corinthians be united.⁶ The division within the church stands in sharp contrast to the ideal set forth in the previous verse: *"God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord."* Sadly, the Corinthians are not characterized by their fellowship, because of the current divisions within their ranks. When Paul had left them they were united around a common fellowship with the Risen Savior. Now they are divided into factions identifying with their favorite teacher.

Paul does not use as harsh a rebuke or express great amazement as he does in his letter to the Galatians (cf. Galatians 1:6). Rather, he appeals to the members of this church as his brothers, a term of endearment which he will use some 39 times in this epistle.⁷ Paul knows these people personally, they have been called into fellowship with Christ through the gospel. Paul makes an appeal to them with Christ's authority with which he, as the apostle to the Gentiles, now speaks.

Paul's appeal to the members of this church is that *"all of you agree"* (literally, "speak the same thing"). This is a classical way of speaking of being united.⁸ The problem is that various "divisions" have formed within the church, destroying their unity. The Greek word Paul uses here, *scismata*, (schism) should probably be understood in this particular context in the sense of "factions" or "cliques," which had been informally formed in the church as people began following a favorite teacher—as we will see in v.12. Instead of being divided along such superficial and trivial lines, Paul exhorts the Corinthians to *"be united in the same mind and the same judgment,"* using a verb which means restoring something to its proper condition (the same verb is used in Matthew 4:21 in reference to repairing fishing nets).⁹ The Corinthians are to repair their fractured unity by restoring their thinking and focusing upon the doctrine of Christ, not the personalities of those teaching them.

As we learn in verse 11, the report of division (contention) within the church has come to Paul from the household of a church member named Chloe. *"For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers."* The members of this family somehow got word to Paul of what was going on within the congregation. We do not know whether Chloe lived in Ephesus (Paul's location when he wrote this letter) or in Corinth. But we do know that people in her household had been

⁶ Hays, First Corinthians, 21. Thiselton, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 107.

⁷ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 39.

⁸ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 39.

⁹ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 39.

in Corinth, were likely members of this church, had seen what was going on, and reported it directly to Paul while he was staying in Ephesus about two years after leaving Corinth.¹⁰

In verse 12, Paul speaks to the specific cause for the division and factions within the church. “*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.’*” Apparently, each faction was following their favorite teachers. There is no mention of their doctrine, so the faction probably formed around the teacher’s style and personality, and more than likely, without that particular teacher’s permission or encouragement. Cliques had formed, with individuals joining based upon their preference for a particular teacher. And this was like a fast growing cancer.

Since Paul has a long history with this congregation, the mention of his name should come as no surprise. At least one clique had formed claiming to be followers of Paul! Others cliques, apparently, were challenging Paul’s authority. There is a clique devoted to Apollos—who may be the author of the Book of Hebrews—and who is mentioned later by Paul, as someone whom Paul felt was important to send to the Corinthians in his own absence (cf. 1 Corinthians 16:22). Luke describes Apollos as a learned Jew from Alexandria (cf. Acts 18:24-28).¹¹ Whatever differences existed between the teaching of Paul and Apollos remains unknown to us, although from Luke’s account it is easy to see why people would have identified with him and his teaching. From what we know, Paul thought very highly of him.

The inclusion of Peter (“Cephas” being the Aramaic form) in this list is a bit more problematic. We have no knowledge apart from this passage that Peter was ever in the Corinthian church. But what is clear is that some of the Corinthians identified themselves as followers of Peter. We know that Peter was a Christian much longer than Paul, he was the leader of the twelve, and according to Paul’s account in Galatians, Peter remained closer to Jewish piety than did Paul. But the precise nature of Peter’s distinctive influence in the Corinthian congregation remains a mystery.¹² It is certainly possible from the reference to him in 1 Corinthians 9:5, that Peter had been in Corinth with his wife.

Another puzzling question has to do with Paul’s statement, “*I follow Christ.*” Is Paul saying, “As an apostle, I am not a member of any such faction, I follow Christ,” or is Paul saying there was a faction within the church saying, “*we follow no man, instead we follow Christ.*” The latter seems the most natural and fits with the rhetorical question which begins the next verse. The best way to understand this would be as follows. Some in the church were offended by the factionalism and reacting against it affirm, “*we follow no man, we follow only Christ,*” in effect, forming another faction based upon not joining in the other factions! If true, this is merely another form of boasting. It also means that Christ has been reduced from the head of the church to simply the leader of another faction.¹³

The very thought of such a thing leads Paul to ask three rhetorical questions in verse 13, all of which expose the foolishness of such thinking. “*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*” The first question, “is Christ divided?” gets at the logical consequence of

¹⁰ Fee, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 54.

¹¹ See Hayes’ discussion of this in First Corinthians, 22.

¹² Morris, 1 Corinthians, 40.

¹³ Hayes, First Corinthians, 23.

what results from this division. Ironically, the body of Christ is torn apart by those who claim to be followers of Christ, not men!¹⁴ In terms of his second question, the very thought of Paul being the savior serves as a *reductio ad absurdum*.

But it is the last of these questions (“*Were you baptized in the name of Paul?*”) to which the answer is obviously “no” which leads Paul to conclude in verses 14-16, “*I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)*” Apparently, it was apostolic practice, following the example of Christ, to delegate baptism, which was done in the name of Christ, to the officers of the church to avoid the very problem Paul is dealing with here—“I was baptized by so and so, hence am a follower of so and so.” Paul also baptized entire households (*oikos*)—important evidence for infant baptism I might add. The factions in Corinth may have been based, in part, upon the fact that the individuals were baptized by the people just mentioned (Christ excepted, of course). This may have led to the unfortunate situation in which the baptized individuals formed an illegitimate connection to the person who baptized them. This is why Paul is thankful that he baptized so few of them, so that people could not claim to be baptized into Paul’s name.

So, Paul asserts in verse 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.*” Paul clearly understands his divinely-appointed mission is to preach the gospel (and not to become overly involved in the day to day affairs of church life). His emphasis upon the centrality of preaching contains loud echoes from Isaiah 40 (our Old Testament lesson) which speaks of the messianic age as one in which the Messiah would establish the preaching of good news. The office of apostle is centered in the responsibility of preaching in an evangelistic context (establishing churches), with the day to day responsibility for church life assigned to the successors of the apostles—ministers of word and sacrament, elders and deacons.

Notice too that Paul is concerned that the Corinthians realize that the preaching of the cross does not center in “words of eloquent wisdom” (literally “cleverness in speech”). This comment may be added by Paul because people often like the preacher more than the message, or because the Corinthians were preoccupied with “wisdom,” which in Hellenistic Greek culture was a reference to a skilled rhetorician and logician (story-teller) who could keep an audience in rapt attention. There is a big difference between preaching Christ and impressing people with your “wisdom.”¹⁵

To a Greek audience, the cross is a very unpopular message of shame and degradation centering in a crucified God (a “*skandalon*”). But the cross alone is the divinely appointed means by which God saves sinners. Preaching which softens, weakens or “spices up,” the cross (as one writer puts it), nullifies the power of the cross by drawing people to the preacher, not to the Savior.¹⁶ As Paul sees it, Christian preaching centers in a particular message—the doing and dying of Jesus—however scandalous that message may be to a Greek. The gospel is not grounded in the eloquence and rhetorical skills of the preacher. In fact, it was the attraction to the styles and abilities of various preachers which was the root of the problem in Corinthian. People liked other teachers more than they liked Paul. They broke into factions

¹⁴ Hayes, First Corinthians, 23.

¹⁵ Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians, 49.

¹⁶ Morris, 1 Corinthians, 42-43.

without considering the content of what was preached. And so the Corinthians ended-up dividing into factions based on the creed, “I follow, so and so.” And, Paul says, this kind of behavior must stop. Those who are members of this church need to be united.

What, then, do we take with us from this section of 1 Corinthians?

Paul’s warning to the Corinthians about the ease in which destructive factions form in churches needs to be heeded. It is here where we see the wisdom of being a “confessional church.” Reformed Christians are not able to say “we follow John Calvin” because the ministers and elders do not subscribe to Calvin’s personal views or his theology. Instead, we subscribe to a series of documents (the *Belgic Confession*, the *Heidelberg Catechism*, and the *Canons of Dort*), known collectively as “The Three Forms of Unity.” By confessing a common faith, spelled out in some detail in the Belgic Confession, we have a built-in bulwark against factionalism. We confess a common faith. We believe the same doctrines.

In this we also see the wisdom of Presbyterian (and Reformed) church government. Churches are not ruled by a charismatic pastor, but governed by a group of elders elected by the congregation. This too is a great safeguard against factionalism. I guarantee that you’ll never hear someone boast “we belong the party of elders at Christ Reformed.”

That said, we too are as sinful as the Corinthians and just as prone to factions and division. As Reformed Christians we need to be careful about identifying too closely with a influential teacher or writer (a Mike Horton, or an R. C. Sproul). Instead, we should direct our allegiance to that doctrine regarding the person and work of Christ found in those confessional documents which spell out the content of our faith, and to which we agree. When we say we are “Reformed,” we are confessing (along with our brothers and sisters) a common faith, defined in the *Three Forms of Unity*, which we believe summarizes the Bible’s teaching about Christ, his gospel, and his church. Our common doctrine unites us.

Therefore, we always need to keep before our eyes the glories of the gospel. Jesus died to redeem us as individuals whom he includes in his church. Seeking to divide that body which Christ died to create is a serious thing. It is because Christ died for us (as individuals and as a church) that Paul can say “*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.*”

Beloved, because we are all self-centered sinners, the only way we can “be united” is to keep our eyes on the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Jesus died for our sins and was raised for our justification, so that he might save us (not me, but us) to be members of his body, which is his church. And because he came to save his people, we need to agree and be united in mind by confessing a common faith, and we avoid division by seeking that which is best for his body, even if that means putting our personal issues or agendas aside.

Beloved, in Jesus Christ we are one, and we are members of his church, which is his body. This is why we must “be united.”