

Introduction

Our culture seems to be in a unique place when it comes to division. A kind of perfect storm where we are all mad at each other. Plus we now have these litmus tests to decide whether or not you want to have a relationship with someone. Unless you agree on every single thing, you can't be civil.

Unfortunately this spirit of division has seeped into the church. There are so many things that it seems like we just can't agree on.

This is a similar situation to the Corinthian church.

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

10 Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, 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 and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. **12** What I am saying is this: One of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." **13** Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name? **14** I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, **15** so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. **16** I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't recall if I baptized anyone else. **17** For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.

This is the end of the introduction to the letter and Paul is getting into the actual body of the letter, and as such the tone and the contents shifts a bit. Paul changes his tone and gets more harsh. He wants them to know that they are not doing well - they are struggling.

Three words that describe the Corinthian church:

Divided

Delusional

Dead (or dying)

- **Divided (10-11)**

- “I urge”
 - Beg, implore, urge, etc.
 - This is not a secondary issue for Paul - he is serious
- “brothers and sisters”
 - Familial language
 - He still cares about the Corinthians - he loves them
 - *Because* he loves them Paul can’t let them continue to be in error
 - So he appeals...
- “in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”
 - Paul is speaking on the authority of Jesus - not his own authority
- “No divisions...same mind and conviction”
 - No *schismata*
 - “Agree on what you say” - other translations - “Say the same thing,” “Be on the same side”
 - Does this mean we have to agree on everything?
 - There is room for disagreement on non-essential issues - that list may be long, and Paul will get there in a few chapters
 - What does it mean that the Corinthians should be united in the “same mind and conviction”?
 - There is something going on at Corinth that is unique - it is a unique kind of division that Paul has to deal with
 - It is *not* just that some people were disagreeing, but that there was some kind of division occurring that was tearing at the very fabric of the body of Christ, it was a threat to the gospel

How is that division manifesting itself?

- **Delusional (12-16)**

- Cultural context
 - One of their sources of entertainment for people in this time period were public speakers, orators, who wowed people with their eloquence and wisdom
 - People were drawn to these speakers and teachers, and would even become competitive
 - The people were being drawn to these teachers in the same way they were drawn to other Corinthian orators
 - When they became Christians they just transplanted this same way of thinking to different teachers within the church

- “A church should never become a mere religious expression of its surrounding culture.” - Preben Vang
- “Instead of allowing Christ to change Corinth, the church was allowing Corinth to change Christ.” - Preben Vang
- Explain who these different people are
 - Paul
 - Paul founded the church in Corinth
 - They knew him
 - Apollos
 - A Jewish man from Alexandria
 - Well-spoken and educated
 - May have been a better speaker than Paul
 - May have unknowingly contributed to these issues by his eloquence
 - Cephas (Peter)
 - Not entirely sure where this faction came from - not a clear record of whether Peter ever ventured to Corinth
 - Paul and Peter butted heads at times, so this may have just been a contrarian group
 - Christ
 - This is confusing
 - Perhaps they were trying to be super-spiritual, but still twisting Christ into their own secular model
 - Perhaps thought of themselves as more spiritual than anyone else
 - There were differences between these teachers but not enough that it would warrant division
 - **VERY IMPORTANT:** None of these teachers were adding to the tension or division - it was happening completely separate from them. The teachers were not involved or supportive of these splits. None of these teachers are the “bad guy.” The church at Corinth were solely responsible for creating this division
- What kind of division was it?
 - Not a theological division
 - All of the teachers were on the same side - they may have had minor differences but in general agreed
 - Plus, if it had been theological, Paul would have dealt with it - he would have called out the false teachers
 - There is no evidence that the division was about staunchly different beliefs
 - So what was it?

- Factions were forming around these different teachers - and the uber-spiritual “Christ” party
- Power struggle - not a theological controversy
- Cliquish behavior - caused by forceful personalities, etc., external influences
- The church had been so influenced by secular models of leadership that they themselves had moved toward personality-centered leadership
- They associated themselves with high-profile figures, pitting them against each other like it was a competition (even though in this case those high-profile figures were not aware)
- Corinthians had adopted the secular idea of following one teacher over another and competing with others - causing bitter rivalries
- Paul’s response this division
 - This worldly, party-minded spirit tears apart the body of Christ!
 - Paul speaks very clearly and explicitly about how division in the body of Christ tears apart the body of Christ
 - Disunity is sinful
 - It undermines the power of the gospel - its unifying power
 - It is a threat to everything the church is supposed to stand for
 - It is a threat to the church’s witness
 - It is a threat to the gospel
 - It devalues Christ
 - Paul is saying - you are supposed to be completed in unity and instead you are letting yourselves be torn apart by this division - this division hurts everyone
 - Because the Corinthians are part of Christ’s community they need to represent Christ
- Paul uses something bordering on first century sarcasm here to get his point across
- Asks rhetorical questions
 - Is Christ divided? No! Though they are acting like it
 - Was Paul crucified for you? No!
 - Were you baptized in Paul’s name? No!
 - None of these teachers died for them, and no one was baptized in their name
 - What about the “Christ” group?
 - Instead of genuinely following Christ they have just decided to make their identity as being super-spiritual, and better than everyone else. In this way, they’ve devalued Christ to just being another teacher
 - If they had really been following Christ they would be working toward reconciliation - not continuing the division

- In essence, Paul is asking, why are you giving your undying loyalty to these men who aren't your Savior?
- Paul gets personal
 - He says that he is "glad" that he didn't baptize many of them
 - That must have hurt to hear
 - In fact - Paul racks his brain to figure out if he baptized anyone else
- Why is he emphasizing this so much? Was Paul not supposed to baptize?
 - He is not devaluing baptism - obviously it is important
 - The Corinthians were apparently giving special allegiance to the one who had baptized them - got a certain amount of pride from it. Even baptism became competitive
 - Who baptizes is not as important as whom you are baptized into
 - Paul did not want them to think that them being baptized by him was more significant
 - Because of their twisted view of baptism - Paul baptizing anyone might have done more harm than good
 - Paul would have unintentionally added to the division if he had baptized
 - Paul is as critical of his supporters
 - Christ is the centerpiece of salvation and baptism - not the one who preaches or the one who baptizes

What is this division causing in the Corinthian church?

- **Dead (17)**
 - The Corinthians were trading the power of the gospel for the power of human persuasion
 - The good news of the gospel - the cross of Christ is inherently powerful and transformative
 - But what is the nature of the power of the gospel? What is the secret?
 - It *isn't* in the eloquence or wisdom of the person who is proclaiming the gospel - it isn't in their ability
 - There are people who are gifted in teaching and preaching - and there are those who are not
 - But someone's gifting does not give the gospel any power that it doesn't already have
 - What is this "eloquent wisdom"?
 - Manipulative rhetoric
 - Preaching that seeks applause from people
 - Preaching can either elevate the preacher or elevate God - it can't do both
 - This type of speech is focused on winning arguments and impressing an audience instead of winning souls for Christ
 - If someone is focused on their own self-promotion they are in this camp

- The gospel does not need the eloquent wisdom of self-absorbed orators
- Eloquent wisdom drains the gospel of its power - because the gospel won't share its power
 - It substitutes the power of the cross for the power of human persuasion
 - It appeals to emotions without touching any spiritual depths
 - The moment that the spotlight moves from Christ to the preacher the power of the gospel begins to atrophy
- A true minister of the gospel takes the focus off himself
- The beauty of the gospel is diminished when we try to overshadow it with the beauty of our own words

It's easy to be critical of the Corinthians, but the American church is probably more like the Corinthian church than we would like to admit. Here are some ways the spirit of the Corinthians may be infecting the church in America, framed within three things that Americans really like...

- **Celebrities**

- Typically the direction gone with this passage
- We have heard of "celebrity pastors" - people who for some reason or another have gained popularity
 - Usually you'll see clips of them on social media
 - Many of them are wonderful, faithful servants of Christ who preach his name faithfully
- You have your favorites
 - And you judge everyone else's favorites
 - Usually cloaked in spiritual language "mature," "theologically sound," etc.
- If you're honest with yourselves, in *most* cases the differences between these preachers/teachers are very slight
 - Of course there are exceptions
- But you really like who you like and it's okay
 - Certain people connect best with you and that's alright
 - What is *not* okay is when you begin to create some kind of cult following around them. Or begin to put up walls to divide because you think that "your guy/gal" has it figured out and is better than everyone else
- Be *really* careful about calling people heretics
 - We need to be careful with that word
 - Just because someone said something you don't like doesn't mean they should be burned at the stake

- See it as a beautiful tapestry
 - Beware of false teachers
 - Thank God for those that are different from your own tastes/preferences and how they are able to preach Christ to a whole different demographic

- **Buffets**
 - We are supremely blessed to have a buffet of options available to us when it comes to churches
 - You can find anything you want most places to fit your own preferences and tastes
 - Just in the NRV alone there are so many options - most of them are great
 - You have the ability to find whatever flavor you like
 - The “just right” combination of music, speaking, lights, atmosphere
 - This is not a bad thing!
 - Just be aware that it is a privilege, not a guarantee
 - Some of you may go places where you will not have these kind of options
 - In that moment you will have to decide what is really important

- **Competition**
 - You love your church and you think it is the best
 - That’s okay, to an extent
 - You might begin to feel kind of protective/possessive about *your* church being better than other churches
 - This usually looks like taking it personally when people leave to go to another church (even if there are no hard feelings)
 - Being implicitly or explicitly critical of other churches
 - Getting hurt over attendance numbers
 - Churches should not be competing with one another!
 - We have a commitment to not talk badly about other local churches
 - Example of people who come to Northstar and talk about other churches
 - We’re friends with them!

- All of these elements lead to division, strife, chaos. What unites us?

- **Christ**
 - Christ should be the unifying factor of every true church, every pastor, every preacher or teacher

- Christ is in... Our preaching, praying, singing, giving, serving
 - We exist to glorify Christ
 - We want to do nothing that would even approach draining the gospel of its power and replacing it with our own
- How do you decide who to listen to? What church to go to?
 - Are you drawn to the biggest and the best, or to Christ?
 - When you walk out are you focused on yourself or on Christ?
 - Was it a good, self-help talk that made you feel better about yourself, or did it stoke the fire of your love and worship for Christ?
 - Why are you here (at Northstar)?
 - You like our music, the way we talk? Our atmosphere - the vibe?
 - That's all okay for now - we like our music, the way we preach - but this is all for the glorification of Christ - to make him known - that he would increase and that we would decrease
- We've been spoiled
 - We have so many options it is easy for us to get spoiled
- Has your heart been captured by the beauty of the gospel?
 - Of course you are allowed preferences - but if your preferences are a roadblock to your worship that is a maturity problem
 - If Christ is being proclaimed you should be able to praise God for that no matter what
- The gospel is not personality-centric
 - We can't make it more beautiful by flowery language
 - Our goal is to present Christ through the Word, through song, etc., and then get out of the way
 - "The most fitting response to a powerful sermon is not, 'what a great preacher!' but 'what a great God!'" - Tim Challies
 - "The motto of all true servants of God must be, 'We preach Christ; and him crucified.' A sermon without Christ in it is like a loaf of bread without any flour in it. No Christ in your sermon, sir? Then go home, and never preach again until you have something worth preaching." - Spurgeon

Conclusion

When we lose our wonder at the beauty of the gospel - we are on the road toward division. Instead of gazing in wonder at Christ and the work he has done, we start looking around at each other and comparing, contrasting, criticizing.

Have you lost your wonder at the beauty of the gospel? You don't outgrow it - you don't get to a certain place of spiritual maturity where it isn't important anymore. Maturity in the Christian life is marked by being more and more in love with Jesus, a greater wonder for the gospel, and a deeper emphasis on magnifying Christ.

Consider the beauty of the gospel, and pray for your to be stirred in love for Christ to glorify him with your whole being.

Ephesians 1:3-14

3 Blessed is the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavens in Christ. **4** For he chose us in him, before the foundation of the world, to be holy and blameless in love before him. **5** He predestined us to be adopted as sons through Jesus Christ for himself, according to the good pleasure of his will, **6** to the praise of his glorious grace that he lavished on us in the Beloved One. **7** In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace **8** that he richly poured out on us with all wisdom and understanding. **9** He made known to us the mystery of his will, according to his good pleasure that he purposed in Christ **10** as a plan for the right time—to bring everything together in Christ, both things in heaven and things on earth in him. **11** In him we have also received an inheritance, because we were predestined according to the plan of the one who works out everything in agreement with the purpose of his will, **12** so that we who had already put our hope in Christ might bring praise to his glory. **13** In him you also were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit when you heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and when you believed. **14** The Holy Spirit is the down payment of our inheritance, until the redemption of the possession, to the praise of his glory.