

## 1 Corinthians 1:10-17

It's fairly obvious from reading chapter one that Paul doesn't hang around too long on the niceties of Christian fellowship – he says what he says and he does what he has to do and it's all there in verses 1-9.

Then, like a flash, he gets to the nub of the matter. There's a big problem looming in the church at Corinth – division has reared its ugly head, these good folks are in serious danger of coming apart at the seams. A split is on the cards – and Paul doesn't like what he sees and hears! Hence his stern words in verses 10-17.

They're straight from the shoulder, at the same time, they're straight from his heart. He tells it like it is! By saying what he does, Paul leaves them in no doubt that he knows what's going on. No matter who might plead innocence, they can't pull the wool over his eyes. He's heard it on the evangelical grapevine, as it were, and that's why he pulls out all the stops to urge them to get their act together.

The basic problem is simply this: God's people aren't getting along with one another – there's different factions and they're fighting among themselves, they are fragmenting – they're doing their own thing and going their own way. People are polarised, they're taking sides, no one is prepared to back off never mind back down, that's asking too much! That's not good for them and it's certainly not helping the testimony of the gospel in the wider community.

People outside the church are not impressed with what they see and hear going on inside – it turns them off. The devil's happy, he's laughing up his sleeve at the pandemonium he's caused, he can't believe his luck! Needless to say, Satan is thrilled to bits when God's people get their eye off the ball and start throwing punches at one another. It's one of his master strokes and, on this occasion, he's making hay when the sun shines.

No wonder Paul says what he does in verse 10 – he makes an impassioned appeal for them 'to agree with one another'. He knows

he has a fair bit of clout, but he doesn't use his name or his position as a threat, or even as a carrot. The apostle's plea is based on the impeccable character and good name of the Lord Jesus Christ. The fact is, it's God's name that is dragged through the mud when God's people act like spoilt children. It's his reputation that is at stake, not Paul's.

Paul doesn't go softly-softly in his approach – he doesn't play into their hands by patronising them. He goes after them with a resolute spirit. Paul doesn't single out one particular group for special attention – they are all included in his heartfelt injunction. He wants them to agree with one another – in their situation, it appears it's easier said than done! Nevertheless, it can be done when men realise that the kingdom is bigger and more important than they are!

They need to jump down from their high horses and eat a meal of good old humble pie. You see, a divided church makes a mockery of the uniting power of the gospel of Christ, it flies in the face of the oneness that we share in God.

Sure, they may not always see eye to eye, they won't agree on everything, but that's not the issue – there is so much more to unite them than there is to divide them! A lot of the things they are fighting over aren't worth losing sleep over! Some things in life are worth living for and some things in life are worth dying for – we have to find out which is which!

That was Paul's overriding concern for them – he wants them to be 'perfectly united in mind and thought'. In other words, in Jesus Christ, they are family, they are brothers and sisters, they are not all the same, but they are all one! That unique spirit of fellowship should prevail among them – they need to bury the hatchet and get on with fighting the real enemy.

We'll take a short music break and when we come back I want us to look at some of the personalities and explosive issues that were driving the agenda in the church at Corinth.

**MUSIC BREAK**

Paul teaches us a vital lesson in verse 11 when he deals with the problem head-on. He doesn't shirk his responsibilities, he doesn't sidestep the crisis, he doesn't pretend that nothing is wrong – far from it! He knows, and they know!

It's also worth noting that Paul names his source. That's hugely important. I believe if people pass on information to another person, they have to be willing to be quoted! That's what these folks in Chloe's household did when they shared their concerns with Paul. They're willing to be identified, and that gives a lot more credibility to what they're saying – it's not just tittle-tattle and juicy gossip; if they're not prepared to be named, then you must question their motives for saying what they say in the first place. The chances are people like that tend to have a hidden agenda up their sleeve! To me, that's an essential principle we need to take on board in our churches in the third millennium. There's a lot of sense in Paul's approach – it means that his comments are not up-in-the-air, they are earthed to reality, he's talking to them and what he says is factual. So important that we have our facts right before we walk into the lion's den of church squabbles.

The word that Paul used in verse 11 is an intriguing expression – the message conveyed to him was that 'there are quarrels' in the church at Corinth. We catch the general drift of what Paul is saying – but there's more to it than meets the eye. They were not only engaged in spiritual fisticuffs, they were sowing seeds of strife; at the rate they were going, given time, there wouldn't be too much left of the assembly. It would be battered beyond recognition. It would be a shadow of what it once was. There were fireworks! It wasn't a pretty sight!

Paul explains himself in verse 12 when he highlights the issues at stake; basically there are four camps operating under the one roof and each reckons theirs is the real McCoy. You'll notice that each one owes its loyalty to a different figure – one is for Paul, one is for Cephas or Peter, one is for Apollos, and there's even one for Jesus. Now, it needs to be said that none of these individuals are

encouraging or actively promoting this kind of partisan fellowship. It's being done in their name but it's not being done with their blessing.

There you have it – four groups, four cliques, and they're all vying for supremacy. They all want to be top dog! Funny, no one ever wants to play second fiddle. Wonder why!

We'll pause here for a music break and when we come back I want us to examine each of these groups and see what lessons we can learn from them.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

In one sense, Paul's been around churches long enough to know that people don't always sing from the same song sheet, but the Corinthian shenanigans is appalling, to say the least. It really bugs him, it bothers him big time. He has better things to do with his time than spend it putting out fires – especially fires caused by spiritual arsonists.

That's why he goes for them, all guns blazing; he calls a spade, a spade in verse 12. He labels these folks for what they are, he names them and shames them. They know exactly who he is talking about, they can run but they can't hide – Paul has them in his sights, as it were.

As I said there were four hyperactive groups in the church at Corinth – each one thought they were the bees-knees, each one felt they were God's answer to sin city, each one believed they were the greatest thing to hit planet earth since manna fell in the desert! My question is: what are their distinguishing traits, can we pull back the skin and see what makes them tick?

The first one, ironically enough, prides itself on following the thinking and theology of Paul. Bless their little hearts – the fact is Paul is not amused! Their misguided loyalty and devotion to him doesn't swell his head; if anything, it gives him a sore head – the kind of thing he can well do without!

These guys probably sat under Paul's ministry when he was in Corinth for eighteen months – they enjoyed it and were blessed by

it. The chances are they probably came to faith in Christ as a result of his evangelistic preaching. That meant they, quite naturally, had a soft spot in their hearts for Paul. At the same time, they also realised he was the biggest name in evangelical circles in his day – there's no point in following also-rans when you can follow number one!

Paul probably introduced them to the great thrill of liberty and freedom in Jesus Christ. The shackles are gone for grace has snapped every fetter. They are free from the law! It's possible that this was the same group that was becoming more lax in its teaching and lifestyle – they may have been turning grace into a green light for the flesh. Obviously I can't be sure that this was the case, but it wouldn't surprise me!

The second group was the Apollos party! When Paul left the church for greener pastures, it was Apollos who replaced him. A fine fella, by any standard. He was an intellectual giant, he was spiritually alert and aware, he was a marvellous preacher – I mean, the guy was eloquence personified. The Greeks would have been drawn to him and his unique style – it's the kind of thing that would've warmed the cockles of their hearts.

It's easy to see why some of these folks would've worshipped Apollos over Paul; there's really no comparison between them. Paul himself says that his own style and delivery were nothing to write home about: in fact, he was embarrassed by it on more than one occasion, he says as much in 2 Corinthians 10:10 and 11:6. So far as they were concerned, Paul was dull and boring whilst Apollos was dynamic and had you sitting on the edge of your seat.

It's worth pointing out that there was no aggro between Paul and Apollos – they were the best of friends and were happy to serve the Lord together. If there is a wedge between them, it was put there by overzealous Corinthian believers. It's easy to see how that can-do mindset could cause a fair bit of friction in the local church.

The third group is the Cephas party—Cephas is an Aramaic word for Peter. This is quite remarkable for there is nothing to indicate in

Scripture that Peter ever visited Corinth. It's fairly likely that these folks knew about him being renamed by Jesus – he's the little rock! They also knew he was one of the great missionaries entrusted to the Jews, we suss that from Galatians 2:7-9; he was one of the original twelve disciples. With all these impeccable and impressive credentials, it's no surprise that a personality cult was formed around him. I reckon most of the folks in that group were Jewish Christians – they liked the big fisherman for who and what he was! The final grouping is the Jesus party. A kind of super spiritual group, I suppose. These guys claimed to have received their teaching direct from the Lord himself. They were followers of Christ and it didn't matter too much what men said, they were following the founder and leader of the church!

But instead of claiming that they belonged to Christ, they were actually saying that Christ belonged to them. There's a subtle distinction between the two. It has been said of them: 'even though they spoke pious words, their air of superiority was a stench to the nostrils of God.' Their attitude is reprehensible, it stinks!

It seems to me that the major issue with each of these groups is their failure to follow in the footsteps of Jesus. At some point, for whatever reason, they took their eyes off the Lord; they got sidetracked and taken up with other things. Their focus was diverted away from the main thing, that main thing being Jesus. Instead of Christ being the centre of the picture, his image was a blur on the edges. When that happens to any man or church, disaster looms on the horizon. As sure as night follows day, it is going to happen.

On that sombre and challenging note, I think we'll pause for a moment's reflection; when we come back I'll give you another reason why it all went pear shaped.

### **MUSIC BREAK**

Paul asks three leading, loaded questions in verse 13: 'Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptised into the name of Paul?' You see, when we analyse what happened in the

church at Corinth, pride is at the root of their problem. I can just hear them rambling on about this one and that one, he did this and he did that! Big deal!

That's when Paul pulled the carpet from under their feet when he told them they couldn't exalt him because he only baptised a few of them. Two, to be precise, Crispus and Gaius. Crispus had been the ruler of the synagogue in Corinth, we know that from Acts 18:8. Gaius was probably the man Paul stayed with when he wrote the book of Romans, we glean that info from Romans 16:23. Then he has a vague recollection that he also baptised the household of Stephanos – that's it!

That means they can't use his name to bolster their claim that he was a fantastic hero in their church – the same holds true for Apollos and Peter, like Paul they were only servants for Jesus sake. And there's no way either would condone them riding on the back of their fame!

That explains Paul's comment and observation in verse 17, he refuses to tiptoe around the issue, he wants to sharpen their thinking and refocus their energies on to that which is pivotal in their faith. Baptism is important but it's not the be-all and end-all. The ability to speak is important, but again, it's not everything. What matters most is the cross of Christ, it's the message of Jesus Christ and him crucified; that's a potentially life changing message - that's the only thing worth talking about. That was Paul's reason for living, that's why he jumped out of bed in the morning, because his passion was to make Christ known to the peoples of the world. If that's what gripped and motivated him, it should also be the compelling factor in their lives as well.

Paul tactfully reminds them that eloquence isn't what wins the lost sinner to Jesus, it's the drawing power of the cross of Jesus Christ. We can talk nice and sound good – but if our words are empty they fall to the ground; much better for us to be on fire for God, to be filled with the Spirit and proclaim the good news of Jesus with a passion and fervour.

People respond to the claims of the gospel of Christ when they see reality in our lives, they say 'yes' to Jesus when they are confronted with the dynamics of the love of God. And, as we well know, that love was best expressed at Calvary.

I suppose the big challenge we face today is: in our lives, are we coming apart at the seams, are we following men rather than embracing Jesus Christ? In our churches, are we fragmenting in a cluster of splinter groups or are we pulling together for the kingdom of God? Challenging questions! Yes, they are, but it's only you and me who can answer them!

As the old boy said one day: 'I don't care who takes the credit so long as the job gets done!' It's all down to priorities. Let's not get distracted, let's not be divided – let's be united, let's get the job done!