

Further reflection and discussion material
The Church THEN and NOW – The challenge of division
1 Cor 1:10-17

Introduction to Paul's letter known as 1 Corinthians

(1) Background:

It is believed that Paul made three missionary trips (journey) During his second journey, Paul arrives in Corinth from Athens (Acts 18:1-17) and he stayed 18 months – He befriends Aquila and Priscilla who share the same 'profession' as him and they become followers of the Lord. Take some time to read the account of the start of the Christian church in Corinth through Paul's direct ministry.

From Corinth Paul moves on to Ephesus and then to Jerusalem. After some time he starts his third missionary journey and returns to Ephesus from where it appears he writes the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. (see 1 Cor 16:5-8)

(2) Paul's letters and correspondence with Corinthian church:

- 1 Cor 5:9 – Paul refers to his previous letter written to the church. We do not have a copy of that letter.
- 1 Cor 7:1 – Paul refers to the letter he has recently received, and which he now responds to in this current letter (1 Corinthians)
- 1 Cor 1:11 – A visit from people from Chloe's household alerts Paul of current concerns. NOTE: Chloe may be a resident of Corinth OR a resident of Ephesus. If it was the latter then presumably correspondence from people in Corinth with people in Chloe's house in Ephesus has alarmed the household and they have alerted Paul. If it was the former then presumably people from Chloe's household delivered the letter from Corinthian Church, to Paul and while they delivered it, they also gave a first hand report of what is going on.

(3) A key point for understanding this current letter by Paul:

Please read 1 Cor 1:1-2 and 1 Cor 3:1-3. Paul is an apostle of Jesus the Messiah and he is writing to the Church of God in Corinth. These people to whom he writes actually belong to God and they are part of the new community of Gods people spreading across the world. They have a gospel to proclaim and this is the royal announcement of what God has done in King Jesus, who is the Messiah: His glorious incarnation, His sin bearing death on the Cross and His glorious resurrection and ascension which foreshadows the restoration of all things in Him. As the people of THIS God and King, they have a 'service oriented' lifestyle to live out and Paul is urging them to stay true to who they are and what they are called to engage in.

Central in all this therefore is the place of the message of the Cross of King Jesus. It is pivotal to understanding what he is about to write concerning 'divisions' or 'factions' in the Church in Corinth as well as what is central to the whole gospel of Christ: The gospel is about the Cross and by extension the way the people of the Cross live the way of the Cross of Jesus. This has significant implications for both 'salvation' by grace and the way those who proclaim the message are received and viewed.

Looking at the text.

Verse 10-12:

"I appeal to you" – The 'asking' that Paul makes in this passage is made, not so much as an Apostle of Jesus but as a brother in Christ. He asks, with deep emotion and appeal, his brothers and sisters in the household of God. This is one family member appealing to other members of the family. The simple yet significant implication is that Paul is asking his brothers and sisters in Christ to stay close to the

family story! In effect, he is saying, “we are family in Christ Jesus and we need to behave in that manner.

“That you all say the same thing” – Its important to appreciate that Paul’s encouragement here is NOT that they form a focus group and work out what the common shared story will be. The shared story IS the gospel story (see the underlined and italicized statement seen earlier at point 3) and Paul reinforces this in verse 17 “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” For Paul, the gospel story is not negotiable and it is not part of the gospel – it is the gospel. Nothing else compares to this reality for those who are in the household of God and this reality needs to be honored, proclaimed and guarded. The implication of this is that God’s household of faith will all agree with the central story of the gospel and NOT do anything to jeopardize or put at risk this core message; the Cross must not be emptied of its power.

For reflection and discussion:-

- Why do you think Paul says that failure to stay true to the centrality of the Cross in the gospel story, ‘empties the cross of its power’?
- What do you think might help the household of God be clear about what is important to agree on?
- What are some of the things that will hinder the household of God remain focused on and clear about the centrality of the Cross of Jesus?

“That you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” – the technical word that Paul uses here, which in English is translated as ‘united’ is the word used in the day, for reuniting or realigning a fractured bone in a limb.

For reflection and discussion:-

- As you read this line of the verse, what is the connection between realignment of mind and thought and the issue of divisions or disharmony in the church community?
- Paul’s reference to ‘mind and thought’ is his way of saying the people of God ought to adopt a Christ-like attitude and way of thinking – in this way we are being ‘realigned’ with Christ. Read what Paul writes in 1:4-9; Are there things in these verses that prompt you about what might help us be “realigned”?

Quarrels about leaders and issue of attaching oneself to mere humans

Reports have come to Paul that there are disagreements within the church in Corinth however these disagreements arise, not between various prominent leaders but between those who follow the leaders. Something to note in this description that Paul gives is the direct link between what Paul asks of them in verse 10 (that is agree on ‘what they say’) and his criticism that ‘one says’ while another ‘says’ and yet another ‘says’. In effect, Paul is saying that if you allow the Cross to be what shapes your attitude and mind, there will be agreement in what you say, whereas if you allow various allegiances to human leaders to shape your attitude and thoughts, you will all say different things; that is you will disagree. And when the household of God disagree, the impact of the gospel is compromised.

For reflection and discussion:-

- What is the issue with disciples of Jesus placing too much emphasis on mere human leadership and all that comes from that leadership?

Verse 13-16

“Is Christ divided?” – There is an inherent integrity in Christ Jesus. Christ cannot be divided, or portioned out. As disciples of Jesus we become ‘in Christ’. Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5 “Those who are in Christ are a new creation”. At one level Christ is therefore not divided, cannot be divided and therefore we ought not divide him by

putting one group of believers against another group. However, if the Corinthian Church continue as they are, they are in fact fracturing the Body of Christ, that is the Church of God.

- Think about ways in which the Body of Christ might be fractured and broken by the attitude and action that Paul describes?

“Was Paul crucified for you?” – The Cross of Christ is central because ONLY Christ can gain our salvation. Salvation is NOT found in Paul, nor Apollos and nor Peter. Whenever discussions about Jesus move to discussions about particular Christian leaders, or preachers or pastors, the focus moves away from the Cross of Christ.

- How might you as a follower of Jesus, run the risk of shifting your eyes away from the Cross of Christ and onto the activity, words and lives of female and male leaders in the church?
- What do YOU need to be careful about or repent of?

“Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”

When a person is ‘baptised’ they are effectively, signing their life over to the one whose name they are baptized in. In Baptism, we become the possession of Jesus the King. He is now Lord of our life. By extension, Paul is also making a statement about the actual importance of the one who does the Baptism – there is no importance in this for it is not the Baptiser that is important but the one in whose name we are baptized in.

- Why is it important to be careful about personality-cults?

Going Further

What about THE CHURCH NOW?

1. Don’t behave as merely human! Don’t attach yourself to human personalities – What do you need to do today to be sure you are not attaching too much importance to particular leaders, preachers, pastors or personalities in the church?
2. Don’t divide over things that are NOT central to the gospel of the Cross of Christ – What do YOU need to do to get the CROSS OF CHRIST central in your thinking and attitude?
3. DO call out those things that threaten division because of human frailty or preoccupation with petty likes or preferences. What preferences do you align with that may risk Cross centred unity?