

FIRST CORINTHIANS

Chapter 1:10-31

Introduction

You would not have wanted to attend the first century church in Corinth. It was suffering from *divisions*, *defilement*, *disputes*, and *discord*. After a visit or two, you'd be looking for another good church to attend. But you wouldn't find one, **because there was only one church in Corinth!**

That would leave you with two options: You could either withdraw from the fellowship, or you could work within the fellowship to resolve its problems.

Withdrawing from fellowship is an option, but not a **biblical** option! A lot of Christians choose to withdraw from church, but they are wrong to do so.

That leaves only one option: Work within the fellowship to resolve its problems.

First Corinthians is a corrective letter that encourages you to work within your fellowship to resolve its problems. It contains many severe statements, but it always assumes you will remain in the church. In this letter the church on earth is portrayed as a *building*, and as a *body*. You can no more remove yourself from the church than a brick can remove itself from a building and still have a purpose, or a body part can remove itself from a body and still have life.

We therefore turn our attention to working through the problems. The first one we encounter in this book is **divisions**.

From verse ten of chapter one all the way to the end of chapter four, Paul is dealing with divisions. In verse ten of chapter one you read there were "divisions" that were causing "contentions." It was worse

than you might think. There was open quarreling, the losing of tempers, and shouting.

Where did these terrible divisions come from? As you read chapters one through four you can identify three sources of division:

1. In chapter one, verses ten through seventeen, divisions were being caused by *magnifying* the *messengers* of the Gospel.
2. From chapter one, verse eighteen, through chapter two, divisions were being caused by *minimizing* the *message* of the Gospel.
3. In chapters three and four, divisions were being caused by *misunderstanding* the *ministry* of the Gospel.

We want to take a look at chapter one where we will see two things: #1 The Messenger Of Christ Is Not A Person You Should Magnify, and #2 The Message Of The Cross Is Not A Power You Should Minimize.

#1 The Messenger Of Christ Is Not A Person You Should Magnify (v10-17)

The Corinthians had formed cliques around the teaching of several men. Look at verse twelve:

1 Corinthians 1:12 Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."

Paul continues to refer to this throughout these opening chapters. In chapter three and four you will find further references to cliques surrounding Paul, Apollos, and Cephas. Divisions were being caused by magnifying certain messengers of the Gospel.

The opposite of their divisions was unity – and that is where Paul starts in verse ten.

1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you, but *that* you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.

He pleaded with them as "brethren," members of a single family unit. It was "in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ" – which made them

common subjects under one Lord. He appealed to their speech. Instead of their contentions, they should “all speak the same thing.” This doesn’t mean there can be no differences of opinion. It does mean that their speech should be gracious and bring glory to God. “Perfectly joined together” is a phrase that is used of mending fishing nets or setting broken bones. It was an appeal for healing.

Instead of unity,

1 Corinthians 1:11 For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s *household*, that there are contentions among you.

It took courage for “those of Chloe’s household” to report these divisions to Paul, but it was the right thing to do. I’d like to think that they first tried to resolve the divisions by appealing to the quarrelers. But, if that doesn’t work, you need to go to the next step. I can’t tell you how much trouble could be avoided if you would simply not listen to divisive talk!

1 Corinthians 1:12 Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.”

Paul was the apostle who had founded the church at Corinth. Apollos had spent some time there. Cephas is another name for the apostle Peter.

Each of these messengers had his own unique teaching style, delivery, and emphasis. Paul emphasized liberty in Christ and freedom from the Old Testament law. Apollos was noted for his intellect and great oratory. Peter continued to enlighten believers on certain Jewish aspects of the Gospel.

So, quite possibly, the cliques in Corinth were dividing into those three groups, each emphasizing a certain truth over others because of the unique style, emphasis, and delivery of the messenger. Then there was a fourth clique, those who were “of Christ.” They probably reacted against these other three groups by rejecting all human messengers of the Gospel. Who needs a teacher when you have Jesus?

This division was furthered by arguments over baptism:

1 Corinthians 1:13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

1 Corinthians 1:14 I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

1 Corinthians 1:15 lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name.

1 Corinthians 1:16 Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other.

The Corinthians had developed a sense of pride and spirituality because of which messenger of the Gospel had baptized them. Paul is not minimizing the importance of baptism; he's simply pointing out that it really doesn't matter who baptizes you! And it is wrong to think you are more spiritual because of who baptized you.

There is nothing wrong with having a favorite Bible teacher; or of preferring to hear the messages of one minister over another; or of listening to certain radio programs. What we are discussing here is something different. This is a magnifying of the messenger so much that you lose perspective and begin to cause division in your fellowship.

It happens all the time. Someone gives you a book, or a tape, or a video. It emphasizes one small part of the Bible. The next thing you know, that is all you can think about and talk about. You want to change everybody's mind. You begin even to argue with them over your position.

What is the solution?

1 Corinthians 1:17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect.

Paul was the messenger of Christ who had been sent to "preach the Gospel." The Gospel is really a very simple and straightforward message of salvation by grace through faith in Jesus Christ alone, delivered to all those who are perishing in their sins. Every true messenger of Christ preaches this same fundamental Gospel. It is wrong when we magnify them because of the "wisdom of [their] words." Paul says it makes "the cross of Christ... of no effect." The effect of the cross is to humble you. It will not have the effect of humbling you if you are puffed up with pride over who baptized you.

God gives you messengers to build you up in your faith. Don't magnify them. Magnify Jesus, the One they are teaching you about.

#2 The Message Of The Cross Is Not A Power You Should Minimize (v18-31)

“Wisdom” is the key word in these next verses, occurring seven times. The word “wise” occurs four more times. Paul is contrasting the wisdom of God with the wisdom of the world. He begins by reminding the Corinthians,

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

God's method of salvation seems foolish to unbelievers, “those who are perishing.” Without meaning any disrespect, I want you to think for a moment how foolish God's methods seem to the natural mind. For example: If you were the sovereign Creator of all things, would you send your Son to be born in a stable to a woman who everyone suspected of being an adulteress? The more you contemplate the life of Jesus, culminating on the cross, the more you understand that the wisdom of God seems foolish to the natural man.

In verse nineteen Paul gives you a biblical example:

1 Corinthians 1:19 For it is written: “I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, And bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent.”

This quote is from Isaiah 29:14. The Jews were about to be attacked by the mighty Assyrians. In their natural wisdom they sought to form an alliance with Egypt to save them. Instead, God miraculously intervened to save them. He sent an angel into the Assyrian camp, who killed 185,000 of them in one night. The wisdom of God seemed foolish, but His plan was perfect.

Why is Paul telling them this? It seems that the Corinthians were catering to the so-called wisdom of the unsaved world around them. Since the cross seemed foolish to the unsaved, they were minimizing that part of the message.

Paul identifies the two groups of people the Corinthians were catering to:

1 Corinthians 1:20 Where *is* the wise? Where *is* the scribe? Where *is* the disputer of this age?
Has not God made foolish the wisdom of this world?
1 Corinthians 1:21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world through wisdom did not know God, it pleased God through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe.
1 Corinthians 1:22 For Jews request a sign, and Greeks seek after wisdom;
1 Corinthians 1:23 but we preach Christ crucified, to the Jews a stumbling block and to the Greeks foolishness,
1 Corinthians 1:24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.
1 Corinthians 1:25 Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

The “wise” people that the Corinthians were seeking to impress were “the scribe” and “the disputer of this age.” The “scribe” is a reference to the learned Jews who found the message of the cross offensive because they sought after miraculous “signs.” They were stumbled at the thought of their Messiah dying a criminal’s death on a cross; that was foolishness to them. The “disputer of this age” is a reference to the Greek philosophers who found the message of the cross offensive because they sought after worldly “wisdom” that ignored the existence of God. When Paul spoke to some of them on Mars Hill, they mocked the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. It seemed foolish to them that God should die and be raised from the dead.

Until you are saved, the message of the cross and the methods of God seem foolish to your natural way of thinking. But after you are saved you see that what seemed foolish is wiser than the wisdom of men, and more powerful than the strength of men.

To make his point more meaningful, Paul reminds them of the power of the message of the cross in their own lives:

1 Corinthians 1:26 For you see your calling, brethren, that not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, *are called*.
1 Corinthians 1:27 But God has chosen the foolish things of the world to put to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to put to shame the things which are mighty;
1 Corinthians 1:28 and the base things of the world and the things which are despised God has chosen, and the things which are not, to bring to nothing the things that are,

The Jewish scribes and the Greek philosophers – the two groups who thought God’s plan and methods were foolishness - would **never** have chosen *any* of the believers in the Corinthian church to be

saved! The wisdom of the world tells you to choose people who are the wise, the mighty, and the noble. The ones God chose were “weak,” “base,” and “despised” by the world’s standards. *Yet He called them* – and it was the message of the cross by which they were called.

The message of the cross is the message of salvation by grace. Grace is God’s unmerited favor. If there was something you could do to merit salvation, it would not be of grace – and you would not give God alone the glory, but would share the glory. Salvation is by grace through faith so

1 Corinthians 1:29 that no flesh should glory in His presence.

1 Corinthians 1:30 But of Him you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God—and righteousness and sanctification and redemption—

1 Corinthians 1:31 that, as it is written, *“He who glories, let him glory in the LORD.”*

Why, then, would they minimize the message of the cross to reach others? To answer that question, let’s ask it of ourselves. Why do we minimize the message of the cross to reach others? Let me give you a contemporary example of how Christians do this.

Evolution is making a comeback among Christians. It may surprise you, but more and more Christian colleges and universities are teaching Christian evolution. One reason they give for doing this is that they say people will not believe the Gospel unless we admit that the scientists are right. The funny thing is, the scientists are now the ones telling us that evolution cannot be correct! Yet more and more Christians are doubting the literalness of the opening chapters of Genesis. Ultimately, if you deny the literalness of Genesis, you minimize the message of the cross. If Adam and Eve were not real people, specially created by God on the sixth literal day... Then they did not literally sin and there is no need for the cross of Jesus Christ to take away the sin of the world.

The message of the cross is what saved **you!** It is God’s wisdom and power to save others. You don’t need to minimize the message in order to appeal to unbelievers. Until they get saved, people will think the message of the cross is foolishness. But after they get saved they will know it is the power of God unto salvation!

Conclusion

A messenger of Christ brings you the message of the cross. Don't magnify the messenger; don't minimize the message. Instead – Minimize the messenger and magnify the message!