

# The danger of division

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Rwanda is one of the smallest countries in Africa and most well known for being the site of one of the worst genocides in recent history. History teaches us valuable lessons, and the history that led to the genocide in Rwanda is no exception. Long before the genocide took place, both Germany and Belgium colonized Rwanda and set about to take advantage of the tribal divisions to weaken and the control of the Rwandan population. According to all historical accounts, it worked. The Belgians began to hand out only 4 types of identity cards, even though there were originally 8 tribal groups in Rwanda. The largest two groups were the Hutu and the Tutsi. So minor were the ethnic differences among these groups that the government began to say that if one had lighter skin, owned more than 10 cows, or had a long nose, you were a Tutsi. If not, then you were a Hutu. There were even Hutu and Tutsi members in the same extended family. They also intermarried. Though only 30% of the population was Tutsi, the Tutsi were given supremacy over the rest of the population, along with special privileges, including education and government positions. Obviously, the Hutu majority was not at all happy with this. So much to no one's surprise, after the Hutus finally rose to power and obtained their independence, a series of hateful and brutal acts of retribution followed against the Tutsi minority. What was shocking to all was how quickly these acts escalated and culminated in the genocide of anywhere from 500,000 to 1,000,000 Tutsi. But what was no shock at all to anyone was how it all came about. The colonizers had divided the Rwandans and set them against each other. Wikipedia in its article called "Divide and rule" lists 4 common tactics to divide and conquer peoples. I have simplified the language to help us understand the concept better:

- Creating or encouraging divisions.
- Aiding and promoting those who are divisive.
- Fostering distrust and enmity between local leaders.
- Encouraging meaningless expenditures that reduce the capability for true change.

Division is a very effective strategy for defeating enemies. God used this strategy when he divided the nations at Babel by confusing their speech so they couldn't understand each other's languages. This God did to keep them from coming together as one to defy God and build a tower to heaven to make a name for themselves. At another point, God tells Gideon to surround the enemy camp, play trumpets and make noise. Hearing the trumpets and the noise and thinking they were being attacked, the enemies of Israel became divided, and in the confusion they rose up and killed each other. Israel needed no sword. The division and confusion were enough. God knows division leads to defeat. But so does the Devil, and he has also used this strategy against the church. How many local churches have been destroyed because of silly, childish, disagreements?

Immanuel Baptist Church is capable of doing amazing things if we will just maintain unity and focus. Don't misunderstand me. I am not saying we have problems now (though we probably do, because no church is perfect). But God has a way of drawing our attention to what he wants us to see. He warns us of what to be careful about. Unity about the right things is a blessing, but unity over evil things is a curse. We can never ignore evil inside the church in order to preserve unity. We must never protect abusive spouses for the sake of unity. We should never tolerate false doctrine in the name of unity. There are times we must divide. In fact, our Lord himself said that he had not come to bring peace, but rather division, as those who would believe in him would necessarily be divided from those who wouldn't. Truth and falsehood cannot be united. This the Devil knows well, and we are not ignorant of his strategies, as Paul once said. So what I am saying today is that in a church like ours, where brothers and sisters are living in harmony, enjoying healthy unity of doctrine and purpose, the enemy will bring inner strife and division to weaken us and to keep us from carrying out the very purposes for which God made us.

As Tim mentioned last week, the church at Corinth was a mess. And so, it might seem rather strange that out of all the problems the apostle could have addressed in Corinth, he begins his letter by addressing the divisions. I believe he did this because everything he saw seemed to be a symptom of their unhealthy division. They were divided over who they followed, on how to treat sin in the church, on how to handle disputes, on the importance and use of spiritual gifts, over whether Jesus really rose from the dead, on whether to get married or not, over whether to eat food sacrificed to idols, or not, and much more. They were so divided that they didn't even bother to wait for one another to share bread and wine together to celebrate the Lord's supper. Can you believe it? It's actually not surprising. The church at Corinth was under attack. The enemy was there dividing them into rival factions and groups, so they might set their attention on anything but Christ and him crucified. Ultimately, this is the reason for the letter: the Apostle Paul wrote this letter to correct the Corinthian church over its division and to set it back on course to Christ, the one who had united them. Today, we will see three main ideas in this passage and then 4 applications for our lives.

## **1. Unity is God's will for the local church (v. 10-12)**

***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. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. 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".***

First, I want to draw your attention to the phrase ***“I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ”***. It is rare for any of us to hear that phrase. When is the last time you heard your boss at work or your parents or your spouse say, “I appeal to you”? I am sure not often. Paul uses the Greek word translated “appeal” often in his writings. It is sometimes translated beseech, urge, beg or appeal. But this is not just any appeal; this is a very serious appeal. So serious that he appeals in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. To do something in someone’s name was to do it as their representative and in their authority. So Paul is making a request based on the authority of Jesus. Just look at the way he talks about Jesus, calling him the Lord Jesus Christ. Do you know how emphatic that is? The idea of Lord is the one who has the authority. This word is the most common translation of *Yahweh* into the Greek language. It has the idea of authority and kingship, as well as deity. Christ means Messiah or the divinely appointed king. So Jesus is the Lord and Messiah who rules and reigns. Paul, however, is not wasting words. We should have spiritual alarms going off when we read these words. The Divine Messiah King calls on you to unite and fight against evil. It is also important to understand Paul is not appealing to enemies, but to the brothers and sisters at Corinth. Not only will he remind them of their identity in Christ as saints, in verse 2, but he also reminds them they are a family here, in verse 10. They are brothers and sisters. He is not just appealing to the pastors and deacons. He appeals to the entire church. In the Bible, every Christian is called to take an active role in the church and so Paul appeals to the entire group.

In verse 11, we get another important detail. They were ***“quarreling”***. The word “quarrel” means to argue or disagree with anger, emotion or hatred. It is not godly at all. This was not a simple doctrinal disagreement; it was war. It seems the battle lines were drawn around leaders who were not even in the church. Paul started the church, Apollos preached there, Cephas (or Peter) appears to have preached there too, and each preacher added people to the church. But as the preachers left, the Devil used the charisma, history and ministry of each of these men to divide the church. Now the Corinthians fought over many things, and when they were pressed, they would use these men to validate their division. So the appeal Paul makes is for unity. Unity is not an option; it is the will of God. I don’t know about you, but when I shop for anything today, they always want to sell me optional things. Your car needs tinted windows. Your computer needs extra memory. Your Iphone needs Apple Care. These are extras. But unity is not an extra. It is the frame of the car, the screen of the laptop, the wiring of the phone. None of these things are options, precisely because without these things, the car, the laptop and the phone no longer serve their intended purpose. In the same way, unity is not an option in the church. It is the will of God. Without unity, we cannot fulfill our God-ordained purposes. Whether you agree or disagree about many different things, therefore, you must have a heart of love and unity. That is what Paul wants.

## **2. Division contradicts the work of Christ (v. 13-16)**

***Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 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).***

Now Paul asks three questions that are intended to rebuke the Corinthians. Let us take them one at a time. First, ***“Is Christ divided?”*** The literal Greek word for “divided” gives the idea of cutting something to pieces. If Christ is the head and we are his body, is that body alive if it is cut into pieces? There is only one Christ, he in us and we in him, and so we are not divided. Because of Jesus, you have been united with each other.

Second, he asks, ***“Was Paul crucified for you?”*** Paul is just a man who was also saved from his sins. He cannot replace Jesus as the focus of someone’s faith or their connection to God. This is a great truth to remember in our times. We live in the day of celebrity Pastors. They speak well. They have thousands of people and big buildings. None of that is necessarily evil. The problem is when the congregation puts their faith in a mortal man. I believe that when men are not careful to give God his glory, God will do whatever it takes to get it back. Isaiah 42:8 says, ***“I am the LORD; that is my name; my glory I give to no other.”***

The last question Paul asks them is, ***“Were you baptized in the name of Paul?”*** This evidently was a factor in the division. Groups had formed around those who had baptized them. If Paul was the baptizer, then you followed Paul. If Apollos, then you followed Apollos, and so on. In verses 14-16, Paul focuses on how thankful he is for the fact that he did not baptize many people or that he did not remember exactly who he baptized. He only mentions 3 names. Crispus, who according to Acts 18:8, was the synagogue ruler, or leader of a Jewish congregation. Crispus converted when he heard the gospel. According to Romans 16:23, Gaius was the man who housed Paul while he was in Corinth, as well as the man who owned the house where the church met. According to 1 Corinthians 16:23, Stephanus and his household were the first converts in the entire province of Achaia, that place where Corinth was. These were significant people to the church. Paul says that honestly, he remembers these people, but he cannot remember who else he baptized. That may sound cold, but it is intended to remind the Corinthians what baptism is and what it is not. Baptism is about publicly declaring their faith in Christ. Baptism is not about declaring their allegiance to the one who baptized them. The point he is making is that by their division they are contradicting the gospel itself. Dividing the body of Christ and claiming allegiance to men over God is the exact opposite of the Gospel. This leads Paul to his last idea about division: Division shifts the focus away from the preaching of the Gospel.

### **3. Division shifts the focus away from the preaching of the Gospel (v. 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.***

Tim will focus on the preaching of the cross next week. Today, all I want to emphasize is the first line of this verse: ***“For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel.”*** Paul knows what is important. He can distinguish the main point from the periphery. I want you to imagine a group of us going to an art museum and seeing a painting there of Jesus holding a lamb, with mountains and trees in the background. Could you imagine us arguing about which mountain is more beautiful? Or whether the trees were realistic or not? What would you think about that? That is exactly what Paul is saying to the Corinthians. He is saying Jesus is the center of it all, and everything else is just the background. Who baptized you is the background. The worship music here is the background. Your

pastor is the background. Honestly, everything is the background, because the magnificent Jesus is the one who has saved us and united us. Christ did not send Paul to proclaim the background. He sent Paul to preach his glorious Gospel. That is what matters. The name of Jesus is not loved. People are under the wrath of God and dying all around them because they don't have Christ, and the Corinthians are focused on who baptized them! Now, you may think that was then, but this is now. We know better now. But I don't want any of us to get overconfident about this. I want to remind you that we're always tempted by the Devil to put Jesus in the background, and so I want to end with a few thoughts on how this passage might apply to us here.

### **Division happens when we live like spiritual orphans**

By God's grace, through Christ, we have been given all we need for unity in the gospel. We are children of God. We have received all spiritual blessings in Christ, and this occurred before the foundation of the world. We have fellowship and intimacy with God. We can trust God. We have been adopted by God and are his forever. So, how can we be divided? Division happens when the desire of our hearts is set on anything other than Christ. Ask yourselves, why do you judge each other's motives? You are not authorized to judge each other's motives. You don't know why they do what they do. Why do you compete to show others how much you know? Why do you try to make others like you? God has given you so much. He has poured out his grace on you all. Each of you is special. Each of you has gifts. Stop seeing what is wrong in others and start seeing the effects of God's grace in others. See the good God has placed in them. Unity is formed in what we are and can be in Christ.

### **Denominations are often not against each other, but for each other**

At the conference this week, one pastor claimed denominations were bad. I certainly understand that way of thinking. We put names on the church that seem to divide the greater body of Christ. But I think there is a misunderstanding about these things. Here at Immanuel, we are Christians first and Baptists second. We welcome Presbyterians, Methodists, Anglicans, Lutheran's, Non-denominational's and other denominations here. May God bless your churches for his glory. May he multiply us all like the sand on the seashore. But we must be honest. Those churches are very different from each other. Some baptize infants and some do not. Some come to church on Saturday and some on Sunday. Some practice washing each other's feet while others do not. Some speak in tongues and pray out loud during the worship service and some do not. Each group has a different focus. But we are not against each other, and nor are we competing with one another.

Many times, denominations were formed because the first church refused to believe the Gospel and called a remnant out. That happens. But whatever you think about denominations, be careful not to criticize them without really knowing them and thinking through what you are saying. Let me tell you what happens in my country. One nondenominational church can support only so many people in ministry or missions. Sometimes they are too small to make a difference. But when 40,000 Baptist churches give leaders, join their resources and pray together, they are able to become one of the strongest mission forces in the world. Not only that, these missionaries train people from different denominations, blessing the universal church. That is a peculiar kind of unity which is only possible within a denomination. Whatever you think about denominations, be careful not to criticize them

without really knowing them and thinking through what you are saying. I want you to know something. Heaven will be filled with people from every denomination that believe the true Gospel. Most of all, please know we welcome you here in Jesus' name and are for you.

### **Baptism does not save us, Jesus does**

One of the most important points in this text is the way Paul speaks about baptism. If baptism in water actually saved people, why would Paul say Christ did not send him to baptize but to preach the Gospel? Obviously, it is because it was through the preaching of the Gospel that God saved the Corinthians and not by baptizing them. Baptism is important. It is a symbol of a greater reality. But the preaching of the Gospel soars above it, and so we should never put baptism at the same level as the Gospel and much less above it.

### **Strive for unity**

It is easy to join sides. Humans, by nature, form groups and then fight among themselves. It is the default setting of fallen men and women. Division resembles anger in the way we should approach it. There are times where anger is righteous. Jesus got angry. But most of the time our anger is not like Jesus' anger. In the same way, sometimes it is right to divide. I am protestant and believe wholeheartedly that Luther was right when he left the Catholic Church. The gospel was almost forgotten. I believe that division was from God. On the other hand, I also believe that almost all of the churches that split do so for the wrong reasons. Will you be an instrument of division or one of unity? Be the instrument of God to bring unity and healing. You cannot put oil and water together; they will always separate. You need an emulsifier. Emulsifiers bond to both water and oil. They tie the elements together, so you can have mustard or mayonnaise. What is impossible for men God has made possible. We have the cross, the blood of Jesus and the Holy Spirit, so why can't the rich and poor mix? Why can't the black and white be together? Why can't Immanuel Baptist Church be united? Strive to be unified. Remember, they will know we are Christians by our love. Let us love each other for the glory of God.

### **Questions for reflection:**

1. How important is unity to the church? How is it a blessing?
2. What does the gospel teach us about unity?
3. What kinds of attitudes, actions and behaviors lead to division?
4. Denominations are not the ideal situation, but are they always causing division or is it possible that they can be for each other, even when they do not agree on everything?
5. What ways do you think you can be a help to bring greater unity at Immanuel Baptist Church? How might you speak the same things and be of a same mind and judgment with your brothers and sisters?