

Chapter One

The Controversy of Divisions in the Church

I Corinthians 1:10-17

Our church is blessed with leaders who are strong-minded. Every elder has definite views on individual issues, but it is a kind providence that we always arrive at agreement. In fact, in all the years we have worked together, I can't remember a single battle over the numerous difficult issues we face. What is the means God uses to accomplish this unity? Each of us is committed to something far beyond a personal agenda. We are first of all committed to the advance of the kingdom of Christ and His church. We really listen to each other and entertain ideas that may be very different from our own. Also, and most importantly, we are committed to a biblical resolution to each problem we face in the church. This immediately reduces the number of possible solutions.

Sad to say, this is not the case in every church. In my wider experience with church life, and perhaps your experience as well, some church leaders are unable to reach agreement. They compete with each other, try to promote their own agendas, and have their own group of "followers". There are power struggles and lack of respect for God's providential placement of co-workers in leadership. Some of these churches have forced out pastor after pastor from his position of leadership. This is an abysmal example to the body of Christ that they are leading and does not yield the blessing of God.

There is to be complete agreement, not only among the officers of the church, but in the entire body of the church. Paul said, "All of you agree with one another, so that there are no divisions in the body of Christ, and that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (verse 10). Think of it--"no divisions in the body". A division of one's physical body is a horrible thought. A divided church is just as gruesome as that! Perfect unity is something we all greatly value, in our physical bodies and in the church body.

The situation of the Corinthian church was anything but unity. In fact, this is the first issue that Paul addressed after he greeted the church and expressed his thanks for them. He came back again and again throughout his letter to the issue of unity. Every other problem in the church was influenced by the lack of unity and could not be effectively solved as long as the church was divided.

Paul got right to the heart of the issue. He reminded them that they possessed every spiritual blessing in Jesus Christ so they were able to live holy lives. The point he wanted to make was that holiness, and disputes and divisions, stand in opposition to each other. A church is not holy and quarrelsome at the same time. The apostle was not naive. He knew that as long as people are alive there would be conflicts and divisions. But he knew that it is horrible to see it happen, and should be avoided, if at all possible. As Paul said in Romans, "Be at peace with everyone wherever it is possible for you" (12:18).

The immediate question comes to mind, "Why then do such quarrels arise?" This is exactly the same issue James raised in his epistle in chapter 4 verse 1. It is a question he answered this way, "Fights and quarrels come from your desires that battle within you. You want something and you don't get it. You kill and you do not ask God. When you ask, you do not receive, because you ask with wrong motives, that you may spend what you get on your pleasures" (4:1-2). James' answer is so revealing. Fights and quarrels break out because people are self-oriented, self-directed, self-serving, self-interested, self-consumed, and self-obsessed. They always want more for themselves. Selfishness then, is at the heart of the fighting and quarreling that goes on in the church.

However, James did not stop at the analysis of the problem. He also gave a solution, "Ask God." We should ask God in the right way, with the right motives, not so that we can gratify our desires, but so that we can help others. I remember hearing Dr. James Kennedy, pastor of Coral Ridge Presbyterian Church, one of the largest churches in North America, speak on a related issue. He said that in 25 years of pastoral ministry he had never prayed for something that would advance himself. In the church community at-large that has learned *from the world* that *self* is the most important person, Dr. Kennedy presented an entirely different model. Maybe that is why his church has weathered the numerous storms that have destroyed so many other churches.

Consider if it isn't true, that in every case where there is quarreling and fighting, if selfishness and selfish ambition are involved. The Apostle Paul said that quarrels are schismatic. This means that they "rip or tear apart". These quarrels rip up and tear apart the body of Christ, which instead of being unified, has a group here and a group there. Each group is alienated from the other. According to Chloe, a central figure in the Corinthian church, groups fought and disputed with each other over allegiance to Paul, Peter, Apollos, or Christ. Can Christ be made to compete against his servants in some kind of personality contest?

Over the years, I have mediated in several church battles. These battles are ugly events born of pride and selfishness. One of the things I have found is that the perpetrator is never concerned for the church. He is concerned for his own desires, interests, or ambition, just as Paul said here.

One of the forms of selfishness expressed by the Corinthians was the desire to raise their standing in the eyes of others by being associated with someone "important". There is a certain security in being part of a clique. But in verses 18 to the end of the chapter Paul reminded them of how differently we as Christians should approach life--with humility. The fact that God CHOSE the weak, lowly and despised should give us comfort. We're IN and we don't have to worry about losing that because of how ordinary we are.

Paul said also, "be perfectly joined together" or "be perfectly united", using language that makes you think that he was talking about marriage. But he was not--he was referring to the church. It is inevitable that communities, even *Christian* communities, will at times be torn apart. The crucial issue is whether we will work to bring about mending. We are aware of how important this is in

the physical body. The divided parts of the body must be brought together in unity, so that mending can take place.

In Matthew 4:21, the fishermen James and John were in a boat with their father, mending their nets. The Greek verb *katartidzw* is used for the word *mend*. This mending process had to be done regularly in order to make sure that they didn't lose their livelihood by losing fish! Relationships have gaps like holes in a net. We must always look out for these holes, and be ready to mend them. All of us must at the very least show sympathy to the hurting, the suffering, the "torn-apart" people all around us. We must let their situations affect us! We must look beyond our own troubles to help others. Problems won't necessarily disappear just because we become involved. But at the same time, the mending process is *greatly* facilitated when people realize that others care and want to help. Mending can start from something as seemingly insignificant as that. (For more on this, see my book Psychobabble, p. 94.)

For members of the church to be united, there must be mending of all the hurts and sins that have occurred. This uniting and mending must be a complete process, because the text continued, "Be of the same mind." Which mind is this? In Philippians 2 we learn that it is the mind of Christ, a mind that is marked by humility and obedience, even unto death. This mindset would not dishonor God by fighting, bickering and self-righteously killing the church. This is the antidote to divisive quarreling.

We are also to have the same judgment, that is, what we believe should correspond with what others in the church believe. I remember someone who was not a believer, who tried to join my congregation. Doctrine after doctrine got in the way and eventually he left. But we who stay together are to be of one mind and one judgment regarding our faith in Jesus Christ. Some of the lesser issues may see us diverge, but in the heart of the matter, our judgments correspond. This is why the model of the teachers of the church is so important. These leaders form the thinking of the congregation. If the teaching of the leadership is sound and united, the congregation will grow strong and united--and for this they should be grateful.

Throughout the history of the church, unity was the clear intention. When the Judaizers demanded the circumcision of the Gentiles, elders from all the churches met in the first synod to resolve the issue. After they reached their conclusion, a letter expressing their resolution was circulated to all the churches. It was expected that they would all agree. In fact, that is what Presbyterian Church government is all about. When the elders come to agreement on an issue, unless their decision goes against the Bible, the entire church should put its quarrels aside and be of one mind and judgment. Even if the elders' decision must be challenged, it is never to be done in a divisive manner. It should then be resolved by the Presbytery. Presbytery should be called to adjudicate only when the lower court finds itself unable to resolve the issue successfully. A church problem should not be decided privately. It certainly should never be decided by gossip or slander.

Paul's point was simple. If oneness of mind and judgment marks the church, it is because Christ is one. Oneness is a basic principle of the Christian church, and it should affect our attitude about the

church. So often, though, the church is run down most by the people who should be building it up.

Many times, believers who are critical are in churches with a good doctrinal position, a good minister, and good elders. Yet the people grumble and complain, and no one stops them. I spoke on the subject of the resurrection of Christ at a conference, and a person said to me, "Dr. Ganz, that was wonderful. Our pastor has never preached on the resurrection." I was not flattered. I knew the man that he was criticizing to be a very sound, biblical pastor in an orthodox denomination. I had heard him preach and had been blessed. I couldn't possibly imagine that he had never preached on the resurrection, so I knew I was dealing with someone who was sowing discord. I asked the pastor if he had ever preached on that topic, and he produced for me his own recent series on the resurrection. I then returned to this man who had been complaining, told him that what he had said about his pastor's teaching was false, and that he must stop speaking against a godly ministry at once, or discipline would follow.

There are also people who consciously build the church of God by building up His people. They are not always very noticeable. Simple acts of kindness and encouragement, and wise words of advice or rebuke, are deeds of love that are sometimes inconspicuous. Believers who devote themselves to others can be assured that they will never be unnoticed by God because the scripture says, "Whoever...gives to one of these little ones even a cup of cold water to drink, truly I say to you he shall not lose his reward" (Matthew 10:42).

The life of the church is up *to the church*. When we are in a church which keeps us safe from the storms of heresy and compromise swirling about us, we should really be thankful. I once counseled a family whose oldest son sat across from me with his lip curled in what seemed to be a permanent sneer. He complained about everything and everyone, but especially his parents. One day he returned to see me, shaking and weeping. In a state of shock, he said, "They told me to leave--how can they do that?" What did he expect? That he could freely complain and provoke vicious quarrels? When he belittled his parents and everything they gave to him and did for him, did he expect to receive hugs and kisses in return? His behavior was serious business, and it cost him his HOME AND FAMILY.

Church members as well should realize that persistent divisive grumbling and complaining can cost them their church family. Paul put it this way in Romans 16:17, "Mark those who cause divisions in the church by teaching doctrines contrary to what you have learned. AVOID THEM." Notice that it says of them, "These people are not serving Christ, but their bellies." In other words, these individuals who tear up churches, and who teach doctrines contrary to what they learned, are selfish, self-centered, self-indulgent individuals, with whom believers are to have no fellowship. Unity in Christ doesn't mean that you have Christian fellowship with everyone, but only those who are biblical. In this instance it means that fellowship and unity cannot include divisions in the body.

To accomplish this, Philippians 2:2 says, "Be like-minded, one in spirit and purpose." The next

verse adds, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit." Once again we are warned against selfishness and pride. Enlarging on this it says that rather, "In humility esteem others better than yourself, with each of you looking out not only for your own interests, but also the interest of others." This will defeat selfish divisiveness every time.

This was only the first of many controversies that plagued the Corinthian church, as we will see in the following chapters.