

Week 2 **Divisions in the church (1 Cor 1:10-17; 3:1-9)**

Revd Dr Claire Nye Hunter

Recap :

1. **Genre** 1 Corinthians is a corrective letter, written by Paul to the young church at Corinth which he had founded during his 2nd missionary journey.
2. **Historical and religious context:** Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, so the church included converts who were diverse in terms of race, culture, religious, economic backgrounds

Introduction

In our text today, we discover the first set of problems Paul needed to address.

Literary context. (vs 10-11) Some from Chloe's household had informed Paul that there were problems:

- 1:10; 11:18-19 divisions, differences (Gk haireseis = heresy)
- 1:11; 3:3 quarrelling (argue, protest)
- 3:3 jealousy

There appear to be several causes of this, the first being a wrong understanding of Christian leadership, where the personality or leadership style of the leader has assumed greater importance than the message of the gospel. They have shifted their focus from Jesus to human personalities.

It seems that within the Corinthian church people have formed what we could call "**Personality 'cults'** (1:12) – groups or cliques centred around their favourite leader.

(Other divisions and differences caused by Theological disagreements (1:10 mind and thought) Possibly linked to baptism (1:13-17; 15:29)

Also Problems at Worship – inappropriate dress (11:2-16); appalling behaviour at Lord's supper (11:17-34); arrogance around spiritual gifts (14:1-25); chaotic worship (14:26-39)

The Corinthian Groups. "I follow..."

1) The Paul Group

Why Paul?

Paul established the church during his 2nd missionary journey (Acts 18:1-8) approx. AD 50. Missionary to the Gentiles.

(4:15) Spiritual father, Founder, leader. He led them from darkness to light. Under his ministry they were converted to Christianity. So whatever he said (or was thought to have said) was above reproach. Even though Paul had left several years previously and new leaders emerged – Paul's way was the only way!

Theological emphasis: Justified by faith (Rom 5:1); saved by grace, Freedom in Christ (Rom 6:15-18)

What sort of people might be attracted to Paul? Then, and now?

- *Those who harp back to 'the good old days'*
- *"As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be..."*
- *People who resist change, and want to keep things as they always have been*
- *Those who prefer to look back, rather than look forward.*
- *These people make it very difficult for new leaders..*

Might you find yourself in this group?

2) The Apollos Group

Who was he? What kind of person was he? See Acts 18:24-28

He was a Jew from Alexandria, a learned man with a thorough knowledge of the scriptures. He spoke with fervour and boldness. He taught about Jesus accurately

How was he different to Paul?

- *“Some say Paul’s letters are weighty but in person he is unimpressive and his speaking amounts to nothing” (2 Cor 10:10)*
- Paul wrote of himself, *“I may not be a trained speaker, but I do have knowledge” (2 Cor 11:6)*

By contrast to Paul, Appollos was intelligent, well educated, clearly a gifted and dynamic preacher.

What sort of people might be attracted to Apollos? Then, and now?

- Intellectual elite
- Young Christians attracted by a dynamic personality (*we sometimes find youth groups move en mass from church to church depending on where the ‘cool youth leader’ is, or who is ‘the flavour of the month’*)

Beware of the ‘favourite preacher syndrome’. Do you fall into this trap sometimes?

(At the Cathedral, we had a discussion as to whether or not we should publish the names of our forthcoming preachers- as it was evident some people only came to church when their favourite preacher was on duty, and stayed away on other Sundays. Do you come for the preacher, or come to worship God regardless of who is on duty?)

3) The Cephas Group (connected to Peter)

Peter was the missionary to the Jews (see Acts)

This group represents Jewish Christianity.

For them, there was security in obeying the law: so their temptation was to revert back to a religion of legalism rather than freedom in Christ.

What sort of people might be attracted to Cephas?

- Jewish converts, who felt safer with laws of ‘right and wrong’ to obey

Today:

- Those who prefer being given clear boundaries
- ‘Just tell me what to believe – is it right or wrong?’
- People who struggle with ‘grey areas’ in our life of faith and practice – want to understand things clearly in ‘black/white’ (eg *Following the election of Donald Trump, the Episcopal church agree to host a service for the president. This became a fiercely controversial issue, with Christians divided over whether this was right or wrong*)

4) The Christ Group

At face value, this group would appear to have got it right. *“We follow the Master, not the Pastor”!*

Whereas other Christians show allegiance to human leaders, we turn to Jesus. We don’t need leaders – we take our instructions direct from Jesus himself.

“You worship the Lord in YOUR way; we will worship the Lord in HIS way”.

In the historical context: mystery religions – with their emphasis on spiritual experience, there came the danger of a ‘super spiritual’ elite. This could lead to a spiritual arrogance or superiority, where the believer puts themselves above reproach:

“We have a hotline to heaven. Who needs leaders anyway!?” *The Lord told me...*” resulting in the danger of misuse of spiritual gifts; spiritual manipulation.

What sort of people might be attracted to this group? Then/now?

- Those who emphasise the spiritual gifts and supernatural experiences (especially the more spectacular ones eg tongues) while bypassing the mind. Whereas the gifts are good, a misuse of gifts can lead to people exerting an unhelpful 'spiritual power' over others.

That is why later Paul emphasises the need for discernment-testing/weighing the spirits. He also stresses the importance of humility – we need to hear and discern God's voice together (one body, many parts- we need one another) and he reminds them that the greatest gift of all is Love (1 Cor 13)

Think: *There are strengths and weaknesses in each group. We all have a tendency to lean towards one of these groups! Which one would you most likely fall into? Why?*

How does Paul address the problem of 'follow MY leader?'

He challenges/ corrects their theology

a. He emphasises the 'wholeness of Christ' (1:13)

"Is Christ divided?" The answer...NO. Does one group have more of Christ than the other group? NO. Christ cannot be divided and passed around with some getting more of him than others.

b. The cross of Christ (1:13)

"Was **Paul** (or Apollos, or Cephas) crucified for you?" The answer...NO! No-one can take the place of Jesus. He alone, through his death on the cross, brought us eternal life, salvation, forgiveness, redemption. The cross is the unifying factor (as someone said, the ground is level at the foot of the cross).

c. The Lordship/ownership of Christ (1:13)

“Were you baptised into the name of Paul (Apollos/Cephas)?”

The answer...NO!

1:13-17. What is important about baptism?

We are given the stamp of ownership on our foreheads (sign of the cross), showing that we belong to Jesus. We come under God’s authority. We are baptised in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit- that’s what matters – it is irrelevant which person/priest performed the baptism, likewise it is irrelevant in which denomination you were baptised. (see Acts 2:38; Rom 6:3; Matt 28:19)

d. A correct perspective on Christian leaders

(see 3:5-9) Illustration gardening. One plants; one waters (add one fertilizes, weeds etc) but God gives the growth! Different gifts, different roles, all play their part- but God ultimately brings the growth! Can’t boast. Need one another. We are all co-workers with Christ. (*later he emphasises ‘One body, many parts 12:12-30)*

(see 3:10-11ff) Illustration building. Jesus is the foundation, One lays the foundation, the other builds on it.

Paul’s closing argument (3:23)

No more boasting about human leaders...all things are yours...and you are of Christ, and Christ is of God”

Application for our context today?

Divisions, quarrelling, jealousy are still issues that rear their ugly heads in both church and society today. There are many things that can serve to divide us – race, language, sexual orientation, background, education, denomination, political views. God urges us, just as Paul did the Corinthian Church, to be united. This does not mean that we will all think the same, share the same views on everything, agree on how

things at church should be done, or find some leaders more easy to relate to than others. Rather he appeals that we should hold on to one another, work together, celebrate our different contributions, respect one another, recognise and affirm that different leaders fulfil different role. We are not in competition with one another- we are in the same team! Complement one another.

Let us pray for the leaders in our church (rather than criticise and find fault), appreciating their differences and celebrating their gifts.

Let us pray that all of us may be faithful co-workers with Christ and one another in spreading the good news of God's love and salvation, making disciples, and being faithful to our calling.

Some questions for discussion:

1. What warnings are there for us to heed?
2. How might we fall in to the trap of "follow the leader"? (why do people go church hopping?)
3. How has the danger of 'personality' following played itself out in Christian circles in recent history? (*eg Nigeria? Following prophets/healers etc*)
4. Why do you think **divisions/ disunity** such a big issue?
5. What sort of things cause disunity/divisions in our congregations/ between denominations today? What could we do to prevent it or work against it?

