

1 CORINTHIANS

4) "There are contentions among you"

Read Chapter 1: 10-17

As we have already noticed, the epistle is addressed to "the church of God which is at Corinth, to them that are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints" (v.2). Paul's description of the church in this way emphasises at least two most important facts:

- The assembly there was a sacred place in a profane place. It was **not** 'the church of God which is **of** Corinth', but "the church **of** God which is **at** Corinth". Bearing in mind the character of Corinth, the assembly there has been called 'the church in vanity fair'.

- The assembly there comprised men and women "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints" and "enriched by him, in all utterance, and in all knowledge... waiting for the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ...called unto the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord" (vv.5-9).

Sadly, however, the believers at Corinth had failed to ensure that their practices corresponded to their position. Christians are sanctified, set apart for God, at the moment of their conversion. At that happy moment they "are sanctified in Christ Jesus". They become "called...saints" (the word "called" is an adjective). This status is bestowed upon them. But they are to practice what God has made them.

Alas, these believers were not behaving in a 'saintly' manner, and this becomes clear as we read through the epistle. As we have noted, Chapters 1-6 deal with things Paul had heard **about** the assembly at Corinth, and Chapters 7-16 deal with things about which he had been **asked** by the assembly at Corinth. Confining ourselves now to the first section of the epistle (chs.1-6), Paul deals with two reports which had reached him (see 1: 11; 5: 1). Chapters 1-4 deal with first report, and chapters 5-6 with the second. We must say again that the order is significant. He deals first with things about which he had **not** been asked! These were:

- ***The cliques among them, chs. 1-4.*** The section commences as follows: "it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren...that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" (1: 11-12). The assembly had come to resemble a 'tug-of-war' competition.

- ***The immorality among them, chs. 5-6.*** This section commences as follows: "It is reported commonly that there is fornication among you, and such fornication as is not so much as named among the Gentiles, that one should have his father's wife" (5: 1).

Paul addresses the first report by pointing out that they had no valid reason whatsoever for grouping themselves under their self-appointed champions, with all the resultant boasting and rivalry. Just listen to the "I" of pride! "I am of Paul...Apollos... Cephas...Christ". Paul therefore emphasises that they had no justification at all for this, and does so in four different ways:

- ***In Chapter 1,*** he emphasises that their salvation and calling were divine, not human. That is, they had no reason to glory in men in the matter: "For ye see your calling, brethren, how that not many wise men after the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble, are called...that no flesh should glory in his presence" (1: 26-29). Rather, "He that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1: 31). Chapter 1 emphasises that it was not man's wisdom that operated in the way they had been saved, or in the type of people who were saved.

- ***In Chapter 2,*** he emphasises that the preaching under which they were saved, and the teaching imparted once they were saved, did not reflect human wisdom. Both preaching and teaching found their source in divine wisdom, and were imparted in divine power. There was therefore no reason to glory in men in the matter.

- ***In Chapter 3,*** he emphasises that those who had been responsible for the establishment and development of the assembly at Corinth were simply servants (3: 5), executing their Master's interests with His wisdom and at His direction. They were directed and empowered by God whose work it was (3: 7). Again, therefore, there was no reason to glory in men in the matter. Hence, "Therefore let no man glory in men" (3: 21). It should be noted that Paul refers here to what was ***observable***.

- ***In Chapter 4***, he emphasises that the final and only assessment of service must be left to the Lord himself (4: 5). The men in whose wisdom they were boasting were responsible alone to the Master, whose **stewards** they were. The Corinthian believers could not assess service, and rank servants of God according to their assessment. It should be noted that Paul refers here to what was **not observable**: "the Lord...will bring to light the hidden things of darkness, and will make manifest the counsels of the heart". He alone knew the motives of His servants.

In any case, all ability was God-given, and therefore no credit was due to men. Hence, "what hast thou that thou didst not receive? now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it?" (4: 8).

To sum up, they had no reason whatsoever to "glory in men" (3: 21). Rather, "he that glorieth, let him glory in the Lord" (1: 31).

With this in mind, we can now address the current passage (1: 10-17), which may be divided as follows: **(1)** the avoidance of divisions (v.10); **(2)** the presence of divisions (vv.11-12); **(3)** the implications of divisions (v.13); **(4)** the safeguard against divisions (vv.14-17).

1) THE AVOIDANCE OF DIVISIONS, v. 10

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind, and in the same judgment". How sad! Having spoken of "the **fellowship**...of Jesus Christ our Lord" (v.9), Paul now speaks about "**divisions**". We must notice **(a)** how Paul approaches the problem; **(b)** how he addresses the problem.

a) Approaching the problem

"Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ..." Every word counts:

- In saying, "**Now** I beseech you, brethren...", Paul refers to what he had just said about them: "sanctified in Christ Jesus, called (to be) saints...called unto ('into', JND) the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord". Paul urges them to act in conformity with their calling. They were to face up to their responsibilities.

- In saying, "Now I **beseech** you, brethren...", Paul stresses the urgency of the matter. The word "beseech" (*parakaleo*) is stronger than 'ask' (*aiteo*). It is rendered 'intreated' (Luke 15: 28) and 'intreating' (Acts 9: 38, RV: 'desiring', AV). The centurion (Matt. 8: 5), the leper (Mark 1: 40), and Jairus (Mark 5: 23) all used the same word. There was urgency in each case. Assembly disunity is a matter of urgency.

- In saying, "Now I beseech you, **brethren**...", Paul stresses, not only the tenderness of his appeal, but his relationship with **all** the believers at Corinth, not just those who said "I am of Paul!". See also 1: 11 (where he says "my brethren"); 1: 26; 2: 1; 3: 1. Believers can refer to each other as "brethren" because of their relationship with the Lord Jesus, who is 'not ashamed to call us brethren' (Heb. 2: 11).

- In saying, "Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of **our** Lord Jesus Christ", Paul emphasises that "this one name stands over against all party names" (Leon Morris). See also vv.2 (JND), 7, 8. Note Paul's exact words in this connection: "Jesus Christ **our** Lord" (v.9). The very fact that we acknowledge His lordship should effectively preserve us from a party spirit. It should be a bulwark against sectarianism.

b) Addressing the problem

"That ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment". Paul uses the word translated "divisions" (*schisma*, meaning a cleft or rent) later in the epistle when he describes the way in which God has "tempered" (mixed or blended) the (human) body together, having given more abundant honour to that part which lacked: that there should be no **schism** in the body" (12: 25). Paul is not, therefore, appealing for **uniformity** in utterance or thought, but for **unity** as in the diversity yet unity of the body.

Paul's appeal in this way does not imply that they were to be regimented in word and thought to the extent that they all used exactly the same phraseology! He was deeply concerned, rather, that they should not divide into different 'schools of thought' ("I am of Paul; and I of Apollos...") with all the divisiveness that this brings. He is "appealing for doctrinal unity, the abandonment of the personality cult" (J.Hunter). This is very relevant to assembly life. How often believers group themselves around prominent teachers, instead of saying "What saith the scripture?" (Rom. 4: 3) in which we listen to

the Lord's voice. The Lord's people should speak with a united voice on all matters of doctrine and practice. There should be no "every one of you saith..." (v.12).

In saying, "that ye be **perfectly joined together** in the same mind and in the same judgment (see, for example, 5: 4)", Paul actually uses one word (from the verb *katartizo*) rendered 'perfected' (RV). It is used in the scriptures for mending nets (Matt. 4: 1; Mark 1: 19): it is translated "restore" in Galatians 6: 1. The word does not always have the sense of repairing damage, but may well do so here. In a marginal note, J.N.Darby explains its meaning as follows: a position "where all the members have each its own place, or make a whole: or, if broken, are restored to one complete and perfect whole". Paul later refers to himself and Apollos as examples of being 'perfectly joined together': "Now he that planteth and he that watereth are one..." (3: 8). That is, there was no rivalry between them. They were one in purpose and desire. The Corinthians were to recognise the necessity for this, and so deal with the divisive situation.

It might be helpful to point out that Paul uses a different word (*dichostasia*) in Romans 16: 17 ("Mark them which cause **divisions** among you). There, the word means 'a standing apart'. It is rendered "seditions" in Galatians 5: 20.

2) THE PRESENCE OF DIVISIONS, vv.11-12

"For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ". The words, "Now this I say" ('Now this I mean', RV), can be otherwise read as "I am now qualifying what I mean in saying that 'there are contentions among you'. I mean that 'every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ'".

Paul reveals the names of his informants. There is no question of tale-bearing or gossip. There is all the difference in the world between tittle-tattle, and the disclosure of information to a person who is spiritually competent to deal with problems that have arisen. Some people spread rumours, and others tell the truth from the wrong motive, but not so here. We know nothing further about "the house of Chloe". Presumably Chloe was known to the believers at Corinth. Perhaps she, with her household, was a member of the assembly there.

It is worth pointing out that what begins as "contentions" (*eris*, v.11: rendered "variance", Gal.5:20), meaning 'strife, quarrel, especially rivalry, contention, wrangling' (W.E.Vine), leads to "divisions" (*schisma*, v.10) meaning 'a cleft' or 'rent' (see Matt. 9: 16), which in turn leads to "heresies" or sects (1 Cor. 11: 19), which W.E.Vine calls "a division matured and established". 'Tall oaks from little acorns grow', and it is so important to deal with problems in their infancy.

We are only given the 'bare bones' of the situation: "every one of you saith, every I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ". But we need nothing further: as already noted, it was the big "I" of pride. Each faction felt superior to the other, and Paul therefore points out (vv.13-17) that:

- It was folly to say "I am" of any man, since their blessings did not derive from man, and did not become theirs through any man's power.

- It was folly for any one to say "I am of Christ", since every believer (see, for example, v.30) derives their blessings from Him.

Since we are not given the underlying reasons for which people were saying "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ", we can only conjecture, something we really ought not to do! However, it **might** be something like this:

- **"I am of Paul"**. This could refer to those who were present at the inception of the assembly. 'I have been here from the start'. Or to those who had a particular liking for logical argument.

- **"I am of Apollos"**. This could refer to those who were impressed with eloquence. See Acts 18: 24. They liked an impressive preacher! In the words of Leon Morris, 'Probably Apollos was more elaborate and rhetorical than Paul'. ('Paul is rather stodgy, you know').

- **"I am of Cephas"**. This could refer to Jewish element at Corinth. Or perhaps to those who were unimpressed by the eloquence of Apollos and preferred to listen to simpler people, to "unlearned and unlettered men". Or perhaps to people who might have said, 'We like to go back to the original twelve, you know!' Or, 'Peter (Cephas) is an older man, isn't he?' By the way, we don't know whether Peter ever went to Corinth!

- ***"I am of Christ"***. This could also refer to the Jewish party, which might have gloried in the nationality of the Messiah. It all sounded very spiritual, as if they were a cut above their brethren. But it was divisive none-the-less. It was, perhaps, the attitude which said 'you follow men - but we follow Christ'. It was sectarian all the same!

But enough of this speculation. What follows is of much more importance. We come therefore to:

3) THE IMPLICATIONS OF DIVISIONS, v. 13

"Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" The way in which the believers at Corinth were saying "I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ" was a total misrepresentation. It was a total misrepresentation of the Lord Jesus: "Is Christ divided?", and it was a total misrepresentation of Paul: "was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" In all, Paul asks three incisive questions.

The first question, "Is Christ divided?", is addressed the last faction, and the questions, "Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" are addressed to the first named of the three other factions. It is worth noting that Paul puts the interests of Christ first.

a) It misrepresented the Lord Jesus

As we have noted, Paul had spoken of "Jesus Christ **our** Lord (v.2) and "**our** Lord Jesus Christ" (vv.7, 8), but those who said "I am of Christ" were evidently under the impression that they had a special relationship with Him. Paul counters this with the question, "Is Christ divided?" Leon Morris is most helpful here in suggesting, bearing in mind that the verb is likely to be passive, that this means 'Has Christ been apportioned?' (that is, to one of conflicting groups)...or 'Has Christ been divided up'. He cites Moffatt here: 'Has Christ been parcelled out?' Leon Morris concludes, "Paul is envisaging an utter impossibility. Christ is one, and the church, which is his body must be one". This is well-supported by the fact that Paul uses the definite article: "Is *the* Christ divided?" (JND). The expression 'the Christ' refers to what has been called 'the mystical Christ', that is Christ united to the church, his body. See 1 Corinthians 12: 12, "For as the (human) body is one, and hath many members, and all the members of that one body, being many, are one body; so also is Christ ('so also is **the** Christ, JND)". As J.Hunter so rightly points out, "The presence of such divisions in the assembly at Corinth was a denial of the unity

of the whole body".

b) It misrepresented the work of Paul

"Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?" or "Have you been baptized unto the name of Paul" (JND). Here are the second and third of the three questions:

The second question, "Was Paul crucified for you?", also refers "to something unthinkable...None other than Christ could accomplish the crucial work of redemption" (Leon Morris). As J.Hunter says in confirmation, "How could they elevate a servant to the detriment of Christ? How could they forget the centrality of the cross where Christ accomplished the crucial work of redemption and laid the basis for such unity?"

The third question, "were ye baptized in (*eis*, 'into' or 'unto') the name of Paul?", reminded them of the significance of their baptism. "They had been baptized into Christ, not unto any man. Their allegiance accordingly was to Christ alone" (Leon Morris). To say "I am of Paul" was utterly false. Paul does not say how wrong it was to follow men, but how wrong it was to follow **him**!

4) THE SAFEGUARD AGAINST DIVISIONS, vv.14-17

"I thank God that I baptized none of you but Crispus and Gaius; lest any should say that I baptized in my own name. And I baptized also the household of Stephanas; besides, I know not whether I baptized any other. For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect".

These verses need little comment. Paul makes the point that the fact that he baptized so few at Corinth emphasised that he made no attempt to bind converts to him personally. In his own words, "I baptized none of you but Crispus (Acts 18: 8) and Gaius (Rom. 16: 23; thought to be 'Justus', Acts 18: 7) lest any should say that I baptized in my own name. Very clearly, he did not keep a list of those he baptized: "I baptized also the household of Stephanas (see 16: 15, 17)); besides, I know not whether I baptized any other". Had he kept a list, it might have been construed that he had particular affinity with them, leading them to say "I am of Paul". For this he thanked God, which suggests that this was providentially overruled.

J.Hunter makes the valid comment that "Paul did not do everything himself, but was happy to let others do what they could. Again, it was not because baptism was unimportant to him, but its validity was not impaired if performed by one other than an apostle". Once again we must note the providential overruling of God in all this. Paul might not have visualised the party spirit which arose at Corinth, but the Lord did, and put Paul in a position beforehand to deal with the matter.

Paul evidently regarded preaching as his primary work. He was "separated unto the gospel of God" (Rom. 1: 1) and 'separated from his mother's womb' to preach Christ "among the heathen" (Gal. 1: 15-16). But God also appointed the way in which he was to preach: "not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect". Leon Morris is splendid here: "Some at least of the Corinthians were setting too high a value on human wisdom and human eloquence in line with the typical Greek admiration of rhetoric and philosophical studies. In the face of this Paul insists the preaching with *wisdom of words* was no part of his commission. That kind of preaching would draw men to the preacher. It would nullify the cross of Christ. The faithful preaching of the cross results in men ceasing to put their trust in any human device, and relying rather on God's work in Christ. A reliance on rhetoric would cause men to trust in men, the very antithesis of what the preaching of the cross is meant to effect".

In summary, Paul made no attempt to 'hog the limelight', either by both preaching and baptizing (doing everything), or by employing "excellency of speech or of wisdom" (2: 4-5). He 'walked humbly with God' (Micah 6: 8). Men like that are not responsible for divisions! It is an effective safeguard against them.

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