

FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST NOT MEN
(Unity)
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The Apostle Paul in I Corinthians wrote that the Christians in that church were dividing into camps.

Some were claiming allegiance to Paul while others claimed allegiance to Apollos, or Peter or some other leader.

Not only were they claiming allegiance to one but they were apparently speaking disparagingly of other leaders.

And the Christians were arguing about which leader in the church was the better one and worthy of following.

Please notice that Peter, Paul, and Apollos didn't have trouble with each other - it was their "supposed" followers who had the trouble with each other.

And they were dividing into camps.

I thought to myself, "How does this apply to us at Southern Gables?"

Maybe they exist but I haven't noticed any political placards printed with: "Bob Knapp for Senior Pastor".

I haven't heard any Adult Congregations chanting "No More Nel-son".

I haven't seen lapel pins or straw hats imprinted with "Fritz Dale in 96".

I thank God this church has not divided into camps with a Monday night "Charles Swindoll study group" and a Tuesday night "John MacArthur study group" and a Wednesday night "James Dobson support group" and a Thursday "speaking in tongues group" and a Friday "Calvinist think tank".

No, I don't think such divisions exist.

But I wondered in what more subtle ways are the seeds of such divisions being manifested even here and even in me and you.

Have you ever been in a situation where you refused to listen to a preacher because you knew he was a charismatic?

How about you who call yourself charismatic, have you ever refused to listen to a preacher because you heard he doesn't believe in tongues or some of the other spiritual gifts?

How about it, have you ever been listening to a preacher or teacher and thought to yourself when you heard him say something - "I sure don't agree with that -

that isn't what Chuck Swindoll teaches, or John MacArthur teaches" or whatever name you put in there, the one you choose as your authority on truth?

Have you ever felt yourself and your favorite pastor, preacher or teacher threatened when someone spoke favorably of their favorite pastor, preacher or teacher?

After their glowing statements about their favorite pastor you felt compelled to defend yourself and speak on behalf of your pastor - as if you and the other person or the pastors were in competition?

We've actually had people state that when they come to church and a certain pastor is speaking they just don't listen.

Or others who call the office mid-week and ask "Who is preaching?" and then based on what answer is given they tell the secretaries they then are or are not planning to come.

And when we, on staff, hear that people are willing to volunteer this kind of information to secretaries and pastors, we suspect they are probably not shy about volunteering their assessments of the preachers and pastors and teachers to others.

Do you find yourself totally discrediting a writer or speaker because he or she is an Arminian or a Calvinist or a dispensationalist, or an amillennialist, or because they believe in infant baptism or because they don't?

In what subtle or not so subtle ways do we contribute to dividing the church?

Or in what ways do we create a climate where such divisions could easily occur?

In I Corinthians 3 God instructs us, even commands us, through the Apostle Paul, not to divide into camps.

Not to line up behind or pledge allegiance to, or listen to or blindly follow one leader to the exclusion of others.

I noted last week that I found it interesting that Paul would spend so much time on the issue of unity in the church at the beginning of this letter to Corinth.

In much of the remainder of the letter he will draw their attention to several very volatile topics:

Church discipline,
marriage, divorce and remarriage,
sexual morality and immorality,
the role of women in public worship,
spiritual gifts and their use in worship, and others.

History teaches us that such issues have divided churches down through the centuries.

Wait a minute, is that true?
Was it truly the issues that divided the churches?
Or was it people?

"Well," you say, "of course it was people but around issues."

Yes, but the point I'm making is that issues don't usually divide unless people are willing to make the issues "tests of fellowship" - if you believe that way or don't believe this way then I and we can have nothing to do with you.

And furthermore, the issues don't really become volatile until people begin lining up behind one spokesperson or another in opposition to the others.

And I think most would agree that when we disagree on issues it isn't long before what we are defending or opposing is not a certain issue but people - ourselves and our spokespersons.

As I've said in previous weeks, I'm convinced that most divisions in the church are not so much issue driven as personality driven.

It is when Christians divide into camps, listening only to those who support their prejudices and refusing to listen to those who disagree, that division occurs.

I think it is for those reasons, probably among others, that Paul speaks so forcefully against Christians showing favoritism toward some leaders and excluding others.

Look with me please at chapter 3 and let's follow his line of reasoning.

In verses 1-4 Paul states the problem he has with that church: READ

He calls them "brothers".

Yes, he refers to them as "infants" but "infants in Christ".

These are Christians to whom he's addressing himself.

And what is the charge against them?

I wanted to address you as "spiritual" as characterized by the Spirit but you were "worldly" and you are still "worldly".

It has been at least three years since they became Christians and they are still acting "worldly".

What does "Worldly" mean? It means, characterized by the world.
Acting like they didn't even have the Spirit of God.
Acting as if the Spirit of God in them makes no difference in their attitudes and conduct.

They are acting just as Paul would expect non-Christians to act.

What is the evidence Paul presents to support his charge that they are living like they don't have the Spirit of God?

Verse 3, I know you are acting like non-Christians because there "is jealousy and quarreling among you".

And what is the jealousy and quarreling about?

Verse 4, you are dividing over leaders, showing favoritism toward some and excluding others.

They were discrediting each others' leaders and each others' spiritual gifts - they had no appreciation for the contributions others could make to their lives.

Now remember the charge:

When you divide from each other over Christian leaders, when you turn Christianity into a personality contest you are acting as if you are not even a Christian, as if you do not even have the Spirit of God.

Clearly this attitude of favoritism and exclusion, this factionalism, this separation from each other based on who your favorite spiritual guru is, or what pet doctrine you and your favorite spiritual leader hold in common - this attitude is seriously wrong -

it doesn't demonstrate spiritual maturity.

Spiritual maturity is what most who divide like to think they possess - that they have a superior knowledge and that their advanced spiritual understanding means they must divide.

But God says such division, such separation is not evidence of spiritual maturity but the exact opposite: worldliness - not following the Spirit's influence.

From verse 5 on, I believe the Apostle shows us four ways in which factionalism, favoritism is wrong.

He shows us how these divisions over leaders are a demonstration of worldliness - the exact opposite of what God wants.

The first of these ways is given in verses 5-15.

Lining up behind certain Christian leaders to the exclusion of others is wrong because it focuses on the leaders instead of on God.

Now I get that from the two analogies Paul makes in verses 5-15.

Please notice in verses 5-9 Paul is using the analogy of growing some plants.

Maybe it's a field of grain, maybe it's a vineyard - he doesn't specify.

What he does say, verse 5, is that the very leaders from whom you would choose one as superior to another are in fact all servants.

And verse 5, all servants of the Lord - "As the Lord has assigned to each his task."

Look at verse 6 - Yes, leaders have different functions (one plants, one waters. But very importantly in verse 7 we are told:

Don't go judging the one who plants as somehow greater or more important than the one who waters.

Verse 8: The one who waters and the one who plants have one and the same purpose.

They are servants of the Lord obeying His assignment.

Now in all four of these verses - who is the only one to whom special honor is due? God is the one who makes it grow.

Leaders are servants - don't elevate them to the position that belongs to God alone.

When you make a human leader your spiritual guru - you have put them in the place that belongs to God

In this analogy of plant life we learn that:

Spiritual leaders in the church are servants - God is the master.

And the servants have a variety of functions but it's God who produces.

Keep your focus on God not on the human leader.

In the second analogy which you will find in the last part of verse 9 through verse 15 you will see another reason why Paul says don't focus on leaders rather than God.

Not only are leaders servants of God but they are also being held accountable by God for their work.

He uses the analogy of a building and the builders to make his point.

IN verses 10 & 11 Paul writes in essence that when he was with them in Corinth he preached the good news of Jesus Christ and the cross to them - a foundation was laid - they became a real Christian church.

But he also says at the end of verse 10 that anyone who comes after him, those who lead that church had better be careful how they build on the foundation.

Why? Because in verses 14-15 it says that those builders will be held accountable and they will be held accountable by God.

With the two analogies together then we see Paul's first point:
Don't focus on the leaders in the church focus on God.
Because the leaders are the servants of God but God makes the church grow.
And because the leaders will be held accountable and God is the judge who will hold them accountable.
So focus on God not on the leaders.

Now as I studied this second analogy, the one about the building and builders, I began to get the sense that Paul completes one thought and starts another within the same analogy.

And I find here a second reason why Paul says showing favoritism to some leaders to the exclusion of others is wrong.

By including verses 12 & 13 he not only makes the point that the builders will be held accountable but he begins to point out that some builders will do it right and some will do it very wrong.

He says that some builders will build with the kinds of materials (gold, silver and costly stones) that will prove to be the real thing when Jesus comes again.
While others will build with the kinds of materials that when tested will prove to be worthless - wood hay or straw.

What do these materials represent in the analogy?
What are the gold and silver or the wood and hay?

I think it is important to remember the context of these words.
Paul is still talking about divisions in the church.

It seems to me that it is safest to assume that Paul is talking about the difference between those leaders in the church who try to build their camp of followers by appealing to the very favoritism and divisions that Paul is here condemning in contrast to those who build unity.

These are the leaders who play on people's fears or pride and help deepen the divisions between Christians.

Their sanctimonious criticism of other Christians,
their "I know better than anyone else" interpretation of Scripture, their covert demands for expressions of loyalty,
and their favors disbursed so others would owe them -
all combined to build their camp of followers - rather than followers of Jesus.

Folks this doesn't happen just among the cults this happens in otherwise good churches where a pastor or a Sunday School teacher or some other leader builds their own following.

My belief that this is what Paul is talking about is confirmed when I get to verses 16-17. READ

Paul is saying that the church in Corinth is the temple of God.

God, the Spirit, has chosen to take up residence in that church.

In chapter 6 Paul will talk about your own body as the temple of the Holy Spirit, but here he is talking about the church collectively - that church in Corinth or this one here called Southern Gables.

What you have in these verses is a fairly clear expression of how strongly God feels about Christian leaders who would divide his church.

I don't know what it means when it says God will "destroy" the one who destroys his church but I do know it is serious.

And I do know that God considers divisions in his church as destructive of his church.

That makes sense because Jesus said that by our love for each other the world would know we are Christians and

by our love for each other the world would know and believe that God the Father sent God the Son and that he loves them.

To divide the church is to work directly against God.

To divide the church is to destroy what God's Son came to build.

God's curse will be on those who try to build their own church by destroying His.

But I think it fair to take the application further.

God's curse will be on any of us who contribute to that division.

I said earlier I believe that in these verses the Apostle shows us four ways in which factionalism, favoritism is wrong.

The first was that lining up behind certain Christian leaders to the exclusion of others is wrong because it focuses on the leaders instead of on God.

The second is that fictionalizing around leaders destroys the very unity that Christ came to build.

Now the third is given to us in verses 18-21a. READ

It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking that dividing on certain issues is o.k. or even necessary because we value the wrong things.

It is easy to deceive ourselves into thinking it is right to line up behind one spiritual leader as opposed to another because we are thinking like the world thinks.

The "standards of this age" as Paul calls it in v18, the values of this world are power, prestige, knowledge, cleverness, success, independence.

When leaders exhibit those qualities and on top of that when they confirm our prejudices we are ready to follow them anywhere.

But God says in verse 19 the "wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight."

God has a whole different value system by which he judges leadership:

It's humility, it's dependence on God and each other, it's service, it's love, it's striving for unity.

Even in the church we begin to select our favorite leaders on the wrong bases:

Just like the world we parade the powerful when God chooses the weak.

We are impressed with rhetoric and sophistication when God prizes truth and humility.

We adopt the world's attitudes:

My theologian can whip your theologian.

My pastor is better than your pastor.

My favorite author has it all put together.

Paul calls on us to stop thinking the way the world thinks about leaders.

And stop boasting about men.

Now last in verses 21-23 Paul says stop showing favoritism among Spiritual leaders because when you select some and exclude others you cut yourself off from what you need.

To use the analogy from earlier: you don't just need planting you also need watering.

To use the other analogy you don't just need a foundation you need the superstructure as well.

Or to use the human body analogy Paul uses later in chapter 12, it would be a poor church if all it had were ears - we need the whole body.

Paul writes in verse 21 that "all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Peter or anything else."

All truth about the Christian life is yours and if you fasten yourself exclusively to Paul you will miss out on what else God has for you.

And if we fasten ourselves rather exclusively to one pastor or one teacher or one writer we will reduce Christianity to what that one can provide - and that impoverishes us.

It depreciates how much we have to learn from others.

It distresses me when people say they don't come to Sunday School when so and so isn't teaching or they don't come to the worship services if so and so isn't leading or preaching.

It distresses me when we become so doctrinally tight that we won't listen to others.

As if Anglicans, and charismatics, and Catholics and Baptists and Calvinists and Wesleyans have nothing to teach us.

It is so easy to fall into a religious bigotry -

an intolerance anyone who doesn't agree with us on all points.

Paul has taught us in this chapter that factionalism around spiritual leaders, an exclusive favoritism toward some leaders displays a worldliness that is unacceptable to God.

For such favoritism focuses on leaders rather than on God.

It destroys the unity of the church Christ came to build.

It is based on the world's value system rather than God's wisdom.

And it impoverishes the church - cutting them off from what they need.

Now having said all of this I can't help but think that some of you have been thinking that my teaching today is a bit naive.

You are saying to yourself, "of course we will have favorites because some leaders are just more mature or more competent than others."

Any of us who are leaders and teachers recognize there are others who are smarter, more spiritually mature, just all-around more competent.

Even in this text Paul intentionally points out there are differences in leaders.

The issue is not the differences but how we as followers respond to those differences.

Yes, based on our own maturity, our own personality, our own situation in life we will identify with some leaders more closely than with others.

But our preferences cross the line into factionalism when

1. we pre-judge other leaders, excluding them because of their age, their doctrinal differences, their background, their appearance, their deportment, etc.

Secondly, it is factionalism when we begin to judge right and wrong, good and bad based on what our favorite pastor, leader or writer says rather than on what God says - we are focusing on the leader rather than on God.

Thirdly, it is factionalism when our allegiance to a leader is so high we would defend that leader even if it meant dividing the church.

Fourthly, it is factionalism when our preferences cut us off from the value God has for us through other leaders and teachers.

To quote the Apostle from verse 21 "So then, no more boasting about men."

I want to do something a bit unusual next Sunday morning.

Chapter 4 of this book finishes up this subject of disunity in the church at Corinth.

I would like to look at that briefly,

I want to come back to chapter 3 again and deal with what I believe is an incorrect interpretation of some of these verses that produces the "carnal" Christian view that is so popular among some Christians.

And last I want to attempt to answer questions on these first four chapters.

I have raised lots of issues that beg for more application than I have been able to give in these messages.

It would be very helpful if you could get your questions to me sometime this week but I will take questions that morning as well.