

Great Questions of the Bible: “Is Christ Divided?”

As we continue our series on *Great Questions of the Bible*, we come today to a question that is so timely in today’s age of religious division and confusion. The apostle Paul rhetorically posed the question to the quarrelling church in Corinth in his first letter to them.

I Corinthians 1:10-13 “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. 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. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were ye baptized in the name of Paul?”

Paul goes on to answer his own question with an emphatic, “NO.” But I wonder, if he could survey today’s religious landscape and see Christendom segmented into hundreds of sects and denominations, as we have today, would he ask this same question of us: *Is Christ divided?*

The church at Corinth was fraught with many problems. Idolatry and rank immorality were two of the things addressed by Paul when he wrote to this worldly church, but even before he turned his attention to those sins, Paul addressed another error that was prevalent in the Corinthian church: the sin of division. This fractured congregation was filled with jealousy, competition, pride and pettiness. The spirit of Christ was not evident, but rather, a worldly attitude dominated this group of people. Referring to their divisions later in this letter, Paul said this:

I Corinthians 3:3 “For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men?”

Paul is saying that they essentially remained unconverted and living for self and in sin. Anytime you see a church that is filled with petty bickering, personality clashes, strife and division, where people put their own will and agendas before the welfare of others, you’re looking at people who are not spiritually minded. Instead, they mind the flesh and the things of this world. They look out for themselves and not for the cause of Christ. They don’t have the cause of Christ and the welfare of others at heart. The fruit of the spirit is described by Paul in **Galatians 5** as the very opposite of the things that we read about taking place in the ancient church at Corinth.

Yet, the sin of religious division is somehow seen as a respectable sin in our day. In fact, it’s what we might call a ‘white collar sin’ as opposed to the rank and vile sins of immorality, at which we recoil. But God doesn’t make that distinction. He condemns division, right alongside the dark sins of fornication, adultery, drunkenness and idolatry.

Yes, division has been institutionalized in Christianity, and even glorified. People will even thank God in their prayers for the many denominations that exist, as though they are pleasing to Christ and are taught somewhere in the word of God. I can assure you that the way it is today doesn’t glorify God. It

has rather stymied the message of salvation and made religion a laughing stock in the eyes of the skeptic. Can you imagine the unbridled power if Christianity consisted of one united voice, contending for the same faith before an unbelieving world? Do you suppose that's one reason the first century church was able to turn the world upside down for the Lord Jesus Christ and take the gospel to the whole world within forty years? The unity of the first generation church was remarkable, but it didn't last. Paul had to warn the elders of the church in Ephesus, as soon as **Acts 20** to beware of those causing division.

Acts 20:29-30 "For I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock. Also of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them."

Now, when he wrote his first letter to Corinth, this was taking place in the church there. Look back at our text.

I Corinthians 1:11-12 "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."

Later in that letter, Paul would say this.

I Corinthians 11:18-19 "For first of all, when ye come together in the church, I hear that there be divisions among you; and I partly believe it."

You see, what was happening in Corinth was a precursor to what would follow, and to what we now see today in Christendom. The supposed Christian religion has been fractured into so many pieces that it is nearly impossible to count them. We have a maze of conflicting sects and denominations that each follow their own peculiar doctrine or practice, or some man, theologian or reformer. In fact, we could merely substitute names in the Ecclesiastical history books with the names that Paul cited in our text. Just as he condemned what he heard was taking place in ancient Corinth, I am convinced beyond a shadow of a doubt that he would condemn what he sees today.

So, what exactly was happening at Corinth? What was Paul addressing? The schisms that were described by Paul were some of the first examples of sectarianism and partisanship in the church. These shallow and carnally minded Christians were aligning themselves after men instead of Christ. A family reported to Paul that the congregation was splintered, divided into parties claiming to follow different teachers. There were some who were claiming Paul as their leader; others were saying they were of Apollos. Yet others were pointing to Cephas or Peter and saying that he was the one they saw as their teacher and they were following him. Paul had planted the church at Corinth on one of his missionary journeys, but some of the Judaizers came along and denied that Paul was an apostle, trying to discredit him. But there were those who rallied to his defense, so much so that they then claimed to be his followers. Now, if anybody would've had a right besides Jesus Christ to claim a group of followers, surely it would've been the apostle Paul. But he makes it abundantly clear that he doesn't want them naming themselves after him, or following after him. He wanted them following after the Lord Jesus.

Apollos was a notable man in the scriptures, described in other places as an eloquent and persuasive speaker. He became popular among the Corinthian church and a group sprang up claiming him as their spiritual leader. Yet others looked to Peter as their teacher. Being one of the apostles and a primary leader of the church in Jerusalem, he had had great influence throughout Judea and was now gaining influence among the Gentile church Corinth. Some had formed a group claiming allegiance to him.

Then there were those who were solely committed to following Christ, as Paul was. I don't believe that Paul was condemning those who said, "*I am of Christ*," as being a sect or a party; rather, some commentators believe that that phrase at the end of our text is a corrective phrase. William Barclay punctuated the verse like this: "*I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, I am of Cephas, but I belong to Christ.*" I think that's probably correct. All of them should have been merely followers of Christ. That's what a Christian IS: he is a disciple of Christ, nothing more and nothing less. The apostles were the ambassadors of the Lord Jesus, and were bestowed with authority, but even they turned men toward Christ and not themselves.

I Corinthians 11:1 "Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ."

Paul wasn't trying to establish a sect. He wasn't telling them to follow him instead of Christ. He was telling them that he was *leading* them to Christ, and he could say that because he was inspired by the Holy Spirit and was one of Christ's representatives or ambassadors on earth. Men cannot say that today. Elders, teachers and preachers all serve their place in the work of the church, and may well influence people by their teaching and their leadership, but only in so much as they are teaching what has already been revealed in the scriptures. When people begin to align themselves after the man doing the preaching instead of the one the man is preaching about, then you have sinful sectarianism and division.

What if ALL supposed church leaders and preachers preached ONLY Jesus Christ and ONLY the doctrine that Christ taught through His apostles? If that were the case, would we have thousands of denominations as we do today? Where would they come from? Doesn't the fact that there are so many conflicting religious bodies and so many confusing divisions tell us that something or someone else besides Christ Jesus and His simple doctrine is being preached? Would hundreds of conflicting churches exist if man had never departed from the teachings of the apostles in faith and practice? There is simply no other way to account for it. Where would they have come from?

So, again I ask with Paul, is Christ divided? I think the real question for you and me today is, are we content to remain at odds over even some basic Bible doctrines that pertain to those things we should share in common, and not work toward unity and agreement? Some people confuse unity with union. The ecumenical union movements of our day say that we should simply ignore differences—not study and work to resolve them, but ignore them, and seek unity. But, friend, that's not necessarily unity. It may be union, but it's not unity. An old preacher used to say, "You can take two cats and tie their tails together and throw them over a clothesline, and you'll have union, but you certainly won't have unity." There IS a difference.

I am not so naïve to think that there will ever come a time when every single believer will be in perfect agreement on every subject and every question that may arise. I realize that's wishful thinking. Even the

early church didn't enjoy that type of theological utopia. The apostle Paul urged believers to have patience with one another as they grew in the knowledge of Christ. The early church was a convergence of people from all kinds of backgrounds: some Jewish, some pagan, and these differences created significant tensions among the first century church that had to be confronted and worked out. **Romans 14** is one passage where Paul urged those who were stronger and more knowledgeable in the faith to forbear with the weaker and those who had not learned all of the truth.

Let me say this: no matter who we are, no matter what our background or how long we may have been studying the scriptures or how much we think we know about the Bible, we should ALL, without exception, have an humble, patient attitude with sincere people who are seeking to learn and live according to the truth. But get this: to say that does NOT mean that we may dismiss truth as our objective. The apostle John said that our fellowship is based in the truth of Christ.

I John 1:7 "But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin."

The fact is, Paul enjoined true unity upon believers in our text.

I Corinthians 1:10 "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."

Listen to what Paul is saying: *no divisions among you. I want you speaking the same thing, I want you to be of the same mind and in the same judgment.* Oh, that's a far cry from the 'stand for very little, abandon doctrine' plea of the ecumenicals of today! Listen carefully to Paul:

Ephesians 4:1-6 "I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called, with all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love; Endeavoring to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; One Lord, one faith, one baptism, One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

Paul says we are to "*endeavor*" to maintain the unity that is found in those things revealed by the Spirit, and to thus abide together in peace. May I ask: does the Christian community today possess that kind of unity? I suggest it does not. I don't know how anybody could suggest that it does. In fact, we're not even trying to achieve it. Christendom is divided into warring sects and factions. Sometimes people attempt to justify these divisions by saying, *in spirit and in theory, we are one; we just differ in belief and practice.* But that is not what Paul says here. He goes on to express the fact that our unity is founded upon our theology. He lists seven things of which there are ONE. First, he says there is one body. The body is the church of the Lord Jesus Christ, of which there is only one, not thousands.

Colossians 1:18 "And He is the head of the body, the church..."

Not one on every corner that preaches a different doctrine and worships a different way and wears a different name that's segregated from the next one. Paul says there's ONE. Someone says, *that means there is one spiritual body, of which there are many denominations*. But, friend, if we're speaking the same thing and joined together in the same mind and judgment, why are there denominations? Shouldn't we be ONE?

I Corinthians 4:17 “...who shall bring you into remembrance of my ways which be in Christ, as I teach everywhere in every church.”

Now, there were churches all over the known world of the first century that were planted by the apostles and the early believers as they were scattered throughout the world to spread the gospel. But Paul says that he taught the same thing from one church to the next. You won't find one single hint of sectarianism in the New Testament, or of denominationalism. You won't find a hint of one of the apostles or the Lord Himself ever condoning thousands of different denominations that all teach conflicting doctrines, but somehow we're all right and headed to heaven. Paul doesn't suggest many churches and many denominations. He suggests that the same faith is preached in every church, that we are of ONE body. The many congregations of Christ's church in the first century enjoyed unity of doctrine, practice and purpose.

Paul also told the Ephesians that there is one Spirit, one hope that we share, one Lord over us all, the Lord Jesus Christ; one faith (the word *faith* being used objectively to refer to what is believed. Jude referred to it in **Jude 3** as “*the faith which was once delivered unto the saints*.” It is that body of truth that has been given to the church to believe and to practice.) Paul also says there is one baptism, the baptism that Christ commanded of all believers in **Mark 16:16, Acts 2:38**. Baptism into Christ and for the remission of sins, as it's described in various places in the New Testament. Finally, he says there is one God.

Now, can't we see the breakdown already? What I mean by that is this: Most would agree there is one God and one Lord. They'll agree that there is only one Holy Spirit. I personally don't know of any preachers going around saying there are five of them or a dozen of them. We agree on that. But somehow the train runs off the tracks when you suggest that there is one faith. That's when people say, *oh no, there are MANY faiths*. They will speak of people coming together from all faiths, or they'll meet one another and say, *what faith are you?* But Paul says there is one faith. Jude says there is one faith that we are to contend for.

People won't agree that there is one baptism. They'll agree that there is one God, one Lord, one Spirit, but they won't agree that there is one baptism because you have some over here that argue that you have to be baptized in the Holy Spirit, or some will contend that we are to be baptized with fire, although that was not something to be desired, according to John the Baptist's preaching.

You see, we're not even making much of an attempt to do what Paul required of the Ephesians. We dismiss those differences, saying, *well, that's what they believe, and that's all right. We'll believe what we want to believe*. But friend, the truth is in there somewhere, and I believe that truth matters. Sadly, we're just content to say, *doctrine doesn't matter; one belief is just as good as the next*. We've

contented ourselves to accept the segregated state of Christianity today, and to call ourselves after every name, except that of Christ; whether it be the name of a reformer who founded one of these denominations we see, or some peculiar pet practice or doctrine. My friend, that is NOT the unity that Paul pled for and that Christ prayed for, or our Lord died for.

Well, where do these divisions come from? Do they not come from the doctrines and practices of men that you can't read about in the Bible? Would we not move a lot closer to the ideal of unity for which Christ prayed and the apostles commanded, if we would just in simple faith resolve to lay aside the human creeds, councils, conventions and catechisms, taking instead simply what we read in the scriptures? Could we not strike hands and hearts upon the word of God and ONLY the word of God? That's what the restoration of New Testament Christianity is all about.

I'll tell you where you and I can start: are you a member of the one body of Christ that traces its existence all the way back to Pentecost? Do you wear the name of Christ and only the name of Christ? Can you read about your worship in the scriptures? Or are you practicing and contending for those things that produce division and discord because they are the product of subjective and divisive thinking and the will of men?

Is Christ divided? Are we Christians and Christians ONLY? Friend, that is my desire and I hope that it's yours as well. Can we not strike hands and hearts upon that resolve? To go back to the Bible in all matters of faith and practice, and let it form the perfect unity that the Lord Jesus prayed for and the apostle enjoined upon us.