

**Sermon:** Divided We Stand (Apart)

**Series:** Christ and His Church

**Bible Passage:** 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:10-17

Good morning, if you have a Bible, I invite you to turn with me to the book of 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians Chapter 1. We're going to study versus 10-17. I'd like to read this for us, and then invite us to pray once again to ask God, once again, to teach us.

“<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.<sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.<sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.”<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.) <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

*Heavenly Father, we tackle, here, one of the many problems Christians and non-Christians ask of you. If Christianity is real, God if you are a real, why are there so many divisions. And so we pray Father, as we consider Christ and His Church, the church that Christ came to pay for with His blood, bought with His own blood, redeemed by His own blood, by dying on the cross and rising again, we pray that you would help us understand this crucial question. Maybe not in the way that we think, but the way that you want us to understand Your word. Help us Father, especially for those of us who are unbelievers this morning. And Lord, if we're believers, maybe we wonder about this and struggle with this. Edify us, encourage us, challenge us, we pray by the power of Your word. Amen.*

This fall is a historic moment in the city of Boston because we have a new mayor for the first time in a hundred years. As we consider voting for a new mayor, the Chinatown community is thinking about vocalizing. One of the Chinatown committees that I'm a part of, the Chinatown Coalition, is trying to do a Chinatown agenda for the new mayor. This committee is also trying to get the Chinatown people to come together and talk about what we'd like as a community from the mayor. The reason why that is important is because Chinatown is historically fragmented.

If you're someone running for office, you kind of don't have to pay attention to Chinatown. It might be the fact that many of the people here are English Language Learners so they may not read the ballot as well or the fact that the ballot is split anyway. Regardless, there's a big push for the new mayor to come around new issues. It's really important that we think about that. The whole idea of division weakens

communities and nations. In this example with the Chinatown community, the political unrest in Syria, and even sports teams, this importance of unity versus division is apparent.

One of the biggest thing we hear in the church is, “Why can’t we be more united?” especially in a church as big as BCEC with our various worship services. I always have the question, “What do you mean by more united?” To be honest, I don’t have a clue, even as to what I mean. Does that mean everyone agrees with me? Does that mean everyone agrees with our senior pastor? Does that mean we all know each other’s names, hold hands, and can greet everyone directly and personally? In the fall, we have students and people coming in and out of Boston and every weekend some major group is gone at a retreat or something. How do we think about unity and division?

The first thing Paul addresses to this church in Corinth is this issue of division and unity. I believe it’s relevant for everybody. If you’re not a believer, I believe it’s very relevant to you because you’ve probably asked, “Why are there so many divisions among Christians? Even in this church, why don’t you all worship in the same service? Why don’t you do everything together? Why are there men’s groups and women’s groups?” If you’re a believer, Paul has chosen, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to discuss this topic which will actually last for many chapters.

Lord willing, we will consider three points I believe the passage teaches about the divisions in the church:

- 1. What are the danger s of divisions of the church?**
- 2. How do we deal with the dangers that come from the divisions of the church?**
- 3. Why should we deal with the dangers that come from the divisions of the church?**

#### **1. What are the true dangers of a divided church?**

And it may not be what most of think. Let’s take a look at versus 10 again and I want you to see some of the divisions and some of the name dropping that they do here.

“<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.”

Now, Paul does a positive and negative positive. Paul says something along the lines of: I beg of you, some of the translators say, that there be no divisions, you be united in the same mind and judgment, and that you agree. The literal translation says “say the same thing”. Now, before we go anywhere, most

people are thinking, “That what he’s talking about! That we have the same doctrinal beliefs and the same exact philosophy and direction of ministry.” Now, all those things are important, all those things are valid, and I believe some of those things are really worth fighting for. However, that is not what Paul is talking about. Unfortunately, or maybe even fortunately, he’s not actually addressing doctrinal differences. I don’t even think he’s addressing philosophical differences. He’s going after something much deeper that affects every believer and unbeliever. Let’s illustrate this by what he says in verses 10-12:

“<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers,<sup>[a]</sup> by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.<sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers.<sup>12</sup> What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.””

He’s saying that we’re saying we all follow someone. To help us understand this, we need to understand what we know about Corinth and what we’re only speculating. There are a lot of great theories commentaries that you can read that try to explain what’s going on, but I think the best interpretation is what they would know. Remember, who is this letter written to? To the Corinthian Church. They’re sitting there, maybe gathered as a church, hearing Paul say this. When they’re saying, ““I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,”” they’re saying that Cephas, also known as Peter, Apollos, or Paul represent different versions of Christianity.

Let’s understand who Paul is. He says later on, “I came to you in weakness with a lack of eloquence and very unimpressive.” Paul comes as everyone’s working man. The interesting thing though, is that Paul comes from a very elite Jewish pedigree and a high education, worthy of the highest accolades. This guy comes in, not only without eloquence, but as a laborer, a working class person. He actually, in Corinth, refuses to take money from them. He comes in as a scruffy looking guy who wouldn’t take money from the church, and that actually might have offended some people. Some people probably liked the fact that Paul is this hard working, kind of scruffy, direct, not eloquent, preacher.

Some of them say “I follow Apollos”. Now, Apollos is an impressive guy. We understand that he’s Alexandrian educated, which is like saying he grew up in the nice areas of Boston and went to good Boston schools (fill in the blanks with whatever you want). Apollos had an impeccable pedigree, had great words of eloquence, was learned in rhetoric, and could speak powerfully and compellingly.

And then there’s Cephas. The interesting thing about Cephas is, if it’s Peter, and as we piece together other parts of the Bible where Peter visited Corinth, it is possible that Peter visited Corinth with his wife. If Peter was to visit, he would bring his spouse.

Imagine the kinds of leaders you see here: we've got Paul, the church planner, the discipler, the hard working, pay-your-own-way-there kind of guy. We've got Apollos, the highly educated, refined person. We've got Peter, coming along with his wife to minister among us.

What is the real danger in divisions? It is not dealing, yet, with doctrinal differences. It is not dealing yet, with philosophical differences. It is not dealing yet, with even personality differences. You know what it's dealing with? It's dealing with this: the danger of putting ones ultimate identity in something other than Jesus. These Christians have fallen into the trap that I and many other Christians have fallen into. We think that we have put our identity in the Lord, but we've put it in something other than Christ.

We've seen this great video about RightNowMedia, and what I've learned about how to become a famous preacher is this: you have to move your hands emphatically. These brothers and sisters we've shown on the screen are faithful and I'm not trying to mock them. However, what has happened to the Corinthian church is, although they're Christians and believers, there are divisions because deep down, they identify with a style, a personality of Christianity. They're not identifying with Christ. If you put it that way, you understand the deeper root for those divisions. It's not doctrinal; it really comes down to the personality of the preacher.

I've worked a lot with Christian leaders in the city and around the area. It's funny. When you drop names of famous Christians, some people have really strong reactions. If I say a name like "John Piper" and I said John Piper was going to preach next week at BCEC, some of you would say, "Aw yes!", some of you would say, "who?", and some of you would say, "I don't like that guy." If I say a name like "Mark Driscoll", some of you would say, "That's so exciting!" some of you would say, "who?", and some of you would say, "Oh no, I really don't like that guy." If I say a name like "Tim Keller", many of you would say, "Oh I know who that is and I like that guy!" Very few people dislike Tim Keller, except Presbyterians ironically.

The point is this: if you've entered Christianity and you identify Christianity with a certain economic level, with a certain education status, with a certain lifestyle that is beyond scripture, it is easy to wrap our identities in that version of Christianity that is not Jesus Christ.

Let me give you a couple classic examples and then we'll move on.

The most classic example is our favorite preacher. Let's confess, whether you're Christian or not (in fact, my non-believer friends have no problem saying, "that's my favorite preacher at your church"), we all have our favorite preacher. We look in the bulletin and see title, scripture, name... and we say, "Aw! And I brought my friend this week!" or "Aw man, I brought my parents!" Some of you look down at your bulletin and say, "Oh next week, I'm going to invite my friend." A lot of the Christian marketing is

around speakers. Did we not just talk about Christian name dropping? We associate, very much so, with certain Christian leaders.

The challenge is that many of these Christians, hopefully not often, fail us, morally or doctrinally. This is particularly sensitive when you grow up in a church and you appreciate the leadership, your small group leaders, your counselors, your Bible study leaders, your Sunday school leaders, but then Lord has you move. You move out for school or work and you sit there, going to a new church, and you say, “I don’t like this church as much. The speaker or preacher isn’t as good as the one I’m used to.”

There is a danger that is more present than doctrinal differences, and that is a very real danger. There is a danger that is more deeply entrenched in the life of people than even philosophical differences about what we should do as a church. There is this idea of the cult of the personality. This is not new; this is ancient. In the book of 2<sup>nd</sup> Corinthians chapter 8, Paul says to the Corinthian church, “I’m going to send you a preacher. In fact, you know him. He’s the most famous preacher of all the churches.” The idea that this is the age of the celebrity Christian is a little bit not historically accurate. The Bible says that there is a famous preacher and Paul sends him to preach.

The point is: how much do we identify with a certain Christian, pastor, or leader? If you’re not a Christian, this is especially important because often times how you come to Christ is through a human agent—through a friend that led you to Christ, through a parent that led you to Christ, through book you read that was so helpful you ended up reading every single thing he or she [the author] wrote, through a preacher who spoke a sermon you loved. There are pastors or leaders who you like so much that you timed your baptism so you could get baptized by your favorite pastor. I appreciate that and I understand that, but that goes back to point #1.

What is the real danger in the divisions in the church? It’s the fact that we’re drawn to a personality-based Christianity rather than a Christ-based personality, where the person becomes more important to us. So now that we know this, how do we deal with it?

## **2. How do we deal with the dangers that come from the divisions of the church?**

You downplay the person. Let’s take baptism for instance. I’m not critiquing the practice; I just want to show you what Paul does. People say, “I was baptized by Paul! The man Paul! The right-half-of-the-New-Testament Paul!” Here’s what Paul says about the incredible moment when he baptized you:

“<sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. <sup>16</sup> (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)”

If you come to me, fifteen years later after I baptized you, and you say “Do you remember me?!” I’m going to obey Paul and say, “No, I don’t remember you. What’s your name?” If you get mad at me, I’ll just say, “1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians chapter 1”.

Paul is not wasting ink or breath. He is doing this very intentionally. He’s basically saying, “I don’t even remember who I baptized because, in the end, it’s not that important! As long as they are baptized in the name of Christ, our Lord and Savior, who died on the cross and rose from death, defeating our sin, shame, and death and giving us new hope and new life.”

This is the Christian way about how to deal with the danger of our Christian identity being wrapped around some Christian person who was particularly helpful or a Christian style that particularly resonates with us. There’s nothing wrong with having a favorite style or having a favorite preacher or author. Paul isn’t trying to debunk any of that. He’s just saying this: at the end of your life, it really doesn’t matter who the preacher you heard preach the most was or who baptized you; it doesn’t really matter who visited you in your time of need. All that glory and honor goes to Christ.

### **3. Why should we deal with the dangers that come from the divisions of the church?**

Ultimately, all the glory, all the honor, all the thanks, all the credit, should go to Jesus. Let’s take a look at verse 17:

“<sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.”

Paul is basically saying, “I didn’t come to baptize a bunch of people. I came to preach so everyone would know Jesus, get their sins forgiven, and be saved!” That’s the point. One of my friends and professors back in seminary asked me about the concept of wrapping ones identity in something. Christians and non-Christians are similar in our tendencies. We need to ask ourselves: where do we find our identity? Where do we put our self-worth?

The Christian answer is: I’m a Christian now, so I put my identity in God. However, there is still the way our hearts and our human flesh are wired, and that way is putting our identity in another person, place, or thing—even if we’re Christians. For some of us it might be our job, our spouse, or even our church.

What Paul is saying is, “be careful”. Is your Christian identity overly wrapped up in people that have taught you? Is your Christian identity overly wrapped up in the church you attended? Is your Christian identity overly wrapped up in the parents who loved you and brought you to church? If you’re not a Christian, is your pre-Christian identity already wrapped up in a human other than Jesus Christ. It comes back to the same thing.

Whatever you put your identity in, ask yourself two things: 1) Do you lose it when you die? and 2) Does it get better when you die? If you're a non-believer, these are great questions. Whatever you're living for, say it's a spouse or a career, firstly, ask yourself this: this thing that I'm pouring my soul and life into, can it be taken away when I die? Most things, pretty much everything, can. Secondly, ask yourself: does it get better when I die? Whatever you put your life into, make sure it's something that cannot be taken away from you and gets better once you kick the bucket—when you die.

This is what Paul is saying: people have their favorite preacher, leader, or missionary and their lives are a little too wrapped into them.

Imagine if you go back years from now to the pastor who baptized you and you asked, "Do you remember me?" and he said "...Joe?" and you exclaimed in response, "No! Stephanie!" They don't remember you. On one hand, it's disappointing, but, on the other hand, it's jolting, potentially, in a good way.

Friends, our identity, whether you're a Christian or not, should not be in the church—although the church is a precious part of Christian life. It should not be in your Christian leader—although he or she is a vital part of your Christian life. It should not be in those Christian authors whom God has anointed with a greater realm of influence—although they have helped us so much. Our identity is not to be wrapped up in any of those things. Downplay them and downplay them often!

When people come up to me and say, "Wow, that was a great sermon!" I just say "awesome, thank you". I've found that the best way to downplay things is to take it, receive it, and let it go after that. Direct the attention back to the Lord. You can do that in your daily life.

I hope, as Christians, we are all being that kind of positive influence to other people. If you think about it, every Christian in this room is not looking up at a Christian role model. I hope that every Christian in this room, whether he or she realizes it or not, God is calling to have that influence. You can be that person that other Christians wrap their identity into; isn't that astounding? You're the missionary that visited that country and the American that shared the gospel and prayed with someone. They think about you. You know that because if you struggle, they get really disappointed.

If you're going to have the life of influence and impact on the people that Christ wants, you're the perfect target for someone to wrap their identity in you. Maybe they're your kids. Maybe they're your spouse. Maybe they're your friends. Maybe they're the people at this church. That's the challenge. If no one wants to put their identity in you, you're probably not being impactful as a Christian and a leader.

If you're not a believer and you're scoffing at all the divisions in the church, I agree with you. However, maybe the scoffing goes deeper because you and I, believers and non-believers, have the tendency to

wrap our identity in something other than Christ. Jesus tells us not to do it and to downplay it because all the glory goes to God. That's how Christ works in His church.

Another way to ask this is this: pick a Christian somewhere out there. Say you picked up a newspaper and found out that this Christian was proven to have committed moral failure: they stole money from an organization, they slept around, or they did something terrible. If your faith is discouraged, that's probably normal. If your faith is crushed, so much so that you want to give up your Christian faith, then what Jesus says is this: "Don't put your faith in them. Put your faith in me. Don't put so much hope in them. It's appropriate to be thankful and grateful. Don't put your faith in them. Put your faith in me." Here's that call.

This great danger of the divisions in the Corinthian church is wrapping their identity in a famous person. So what about you? Who is that person? Is it a parent? Is it a friend? Is it a mentor? Is it a spouse? If they fell, it wouldn't just discourage you, it would destroy your faith. Jesus is asking, "Where is your faith? Where is your faith being placed into? Put your faith in me." Paul says, "I didn't come here to baptize. I came here to preach the gospel, so people may know Christ."

Ironically, if you're a Christian, this is a great opportunity. This is Christ and His church, His identity, His glory, His value. If you're not a Christian, this isn't about the preacher being compelling; this is not about the small group being welcoming— although these are great things. It's about your need and my need for a savior, a savior who no one can take from you and, in fact, gets better after you and I die. That's Christ and this is His church.

I invite us to bow our heads as we consider this.

*Our gracious Father, I struggle with this. I think my identity is wrapped in Christ, but I think it's more wrapped up in BCEC because you've given this church an incredible reputation, especially among the Boston churches, the Asian heritage churches, and the Chinese heritage churches along the east coast nationally. Lord, there are a lot of great things you've done here and I know my struggle is identifying too much with this church. One day that might make me boast in something other than Christ. One day that might make me not want to leave this church, even though you've called me to be somewhere else.*

*Lord, I wonder if I'm alone in that. I wonder if we can relate to the idea of putting too much faith, too much stock, too much of our worth, in some person, maybe Christian who has been very impactful and very used by you in our lives. Lord, maybe we've actually had the experience when such a person committed a failure and it just hit us so deeply. We were so disappointed and so jaded. Maybe that's why some of us today are sitting in this room worshiping here but we're not Christians. Maybe that's*

*what we tell ourselves that we don't have to be a Christian or follow Jesus because someone let us down.*

*Lord, would you woo us. Would you gently, but firmly remind us that our faith is not in Paul, not in Apollos, and not in Cephas, but our faith is in the savior that died for us. If we feel far from you, help us to come back and put our identity in you. Help us to find our worth in you. Help us downplay other people, not disparagingly, but respectfully, recognizing that it doesn't matter who is on stage or who is in front, but to give you all the glory.*

*People in this city, in this room, don't need another celebrity, we need a savior. Move our hearts. Helps us to not be that person that people idolize, but help us to downplay us. Help us to decrease, so that Christ may increase.*