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Splits and Division in the Church at Corinth

1: 10-17

Splits and division in the Church at Corinth DIG: What tensions threatened this church? Who was Apollos? What might each group have found to boast about their favorite teacher? How does Paul address these divisions? What facts about Yeshua are important for a church facing internal problems? How is the cross of Messiah divisive in our world today? How is it a stumbling block and foolishness for people today?

REFLECT: Why do you think divisions have always been a problem among God's people? What does it mean to be "called to be God's holy people?" How should this work against divisions in the church? Can you detect any splits or divisions in your place of worship? What are you doing personally to make the place where you worship warmer and loving? Who has been a "hero" of the faith for you? What from his or her life do you want to build into your own?

We are all responsible to protect the unity of the Church.



As if the believers in **Corinth** didn't face enough challenges *outside* the church, it wasn't long before the problems *inside* the church started to rear their ugly heads. This was a church in crisis. A war was going on for its very soul. Its very existence was threatened, so much so that its founder and first pastor, **Paul**, wrote three letters to correct and confront the compromises and corruptions within. Two of these have been preserved in **his** two

letters to **the Corinthians**. The first issue that **Paul** confronted head-on had devastated this young church. **He** addressed the age-old problem of divisions in the church. **Paul** did not randomly decide to tackle this one first. **He** understood the principle that, in spiritual warfare, just as in military warfare, “united we stand; divided we fall.” There was no way this young church could withstand the cultural corruptions assailing it from the outside if the church members were not united on the inside.²⁴

The Plea (A common purpose and common love): Nevertheless, brothers, I call on you in the name of our Lord Yeshua the Messiah to agree, all of you, in what you say, and not to let yourselves remain split into factions but be restored to having a common mind and a common purpose (1:10). This is the tenth reference to **Messiah** in the first ten verses, leaving no doubt as to **the One Paul** believed should be the source of **Corinthian** unity. **His** plea was for harmony, not the elimination of diversity. **He** desired a unity of all the parts, like a quilt of various colors blended together in a balanced whole.²⁵ So, what was the problem being addressed here? A careful reading indicates that at least **four issues** were involved.

1. There was **quarreling and divisiveness** among **them**, with various teachers as rallying points. This is evidenced by several explicit statements (**1:10-12, 3:3-4 and 21**), plus some indirect statements (**3:5-9 and 4:1-2**) as to how they should regard these teachers. At the same time, however, there is not the slightest hint that the teachers were **quarreling** among themselves. Indeed, the fact that **Paul** twice commends **Apollos** at the beginning of **his** letter (**3:5-9**) and at the end (**16:12**) suggests the exact opposite. They were no longer speaking with one voice. Their core values had changed.
2. This **quarreling** was in some way carried out in the name of **wisdom**. The Greek word group sophia/sophos (wisdom/wise) dominates the discussion throughout **Chapters 1-3**. Those words are used in a disapproving sense would indicate that this was the **Corinthian** way of speaking and not **Paul’s**.
3. Related to these first two issues are the repeated references to the **Corinthians** **boasting** (**1:29-32, 3:21 and 4:7**) and being **arrogant** (**4:6 and 18-19**). **Their** **quarrels** took the form of **boasting** in mere humans, apparently in the name of **wisdom** (**3:18-21 and 4:6**). The problem, however, probably went much deeper than that because their view of **their** teachers of wisdom really spoke of **their** own ego. Yes, **they boasted** about their great teachers, but in reality, only to **boast** about **themselves**.

4. Paul was being attacked by some members of the **Corinthian** congregation. **He** is seen defending not only **his** own past ministry among **them** (1:16-17, 2:1 to 3:4), but also **his** present relationship to **them**, since **Paul was being judged by them** (4:1-21). Given the clear statement that some were angry with **Paul** when **he didn't come to visit** (4:18), plus **proudly taking the side of one leader** (apparently **Apollos** in 4:6) **against another** (probably **Paul**), it seems likely that the **quarreling** over their leaders was not just *for* **Apollos** or **Peter**, but decidedly *against* **Paul** at the same time.²⁶

The Parties (Loyalty to Men): But instead of unity, the fabric of this church was coming apart at the seams. **Chloe's household has made it known to me, my brothers, that there are quarrels among you. Chloe's household** was probably a prominent family in the church who wrote to Paul or visited him in **Ephesus** with the troubling news. **I say this because one of you says, "I follow Sha'ul"; another says, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Kefa (Peter)"; while still another says, "I follow the Messiah" (1:11-12)!** The Good News had been perverted into a cult of "fan clubs," rather than clearly defined doctrinal differences. The tone in **First Corinthians** is quite different from that in **Galatians** where **Paul** opposes the Judaizers (see the commentary on **Galatians Ag - Who Were the Judaizers?**).

Human nature enjoys following human leaders. Instead of emphasizing *the message* of the Word, the **Corinthians** emphasized *the messenger*.²⁷ These were the great teachers of the early congregations of **God**, around whom people gathered, and through whom they were given the Good News. People clung to the man who had evangelized and taught them, and then pitted their "fan club" against the "fan clubs" loyal to the other leaders.²⁸

Paul had ministered in **Corinth** for a **year-and-a-half (Acts 18:11)**. Therefore, the **Paul** group felt very special because they had been converted under the preaching of **the apostle himself**. And those whom **he** had baptized wore that fact as a badge of distinction. They probably formed to counter the other groups who were judging **him**. They affirmed **his** special role as father, planter, and builder of the community.

When **Paul** left for **Ephesus**, **he** sent **Apollos** to be the second pastor. Those of the **Apollos** group were probably drawn to **his** powerful preaching (see the commentary on **Acts Cf - Priscilla and Aquila Teach Apollos**). **He** was a learned Jew from Alexandria, Egypt. Founded by Alexander the Great, Alexandria had a strong Greek culture. Thus, **his** background was very different from **Paul's**, and many of the **Corinthians** probably felt more comfortable around **him**. It is important to note that **Paul** does not criticize **Apollos**;

but instead, takes the **Corinthians** to task for their causing dissension within the church.

Evidently a group of Jews had been saved under **Peter's (Kefa's)** ministry. There is no indication that **Peter** ever visited **Corinth**; however, **he** was undoubtedly looked up to by these Jewish believers because of his identity with the Messianic congregation in Jerusalem. Members of this group were not likely to be comfortable with the church members who had been converted out of paganism and who paid no attention to Jewish customs.²⁹

A fourth "fan club," probably the most self-righteous, seemed to think that they were more spiritual than the others and had a special claim on **Messiah**. They had the right name, but it is clear from **Paul's** accusation that they didn't have the right spirit. Perhaps, like some "Messiah only fan clubs" today, they felt they had no need for human teaching - despite **the Lord's** specific provision and appointment of human preachers, teachers, and other leaders in **His Body (First Corinthians 1:1, 12:28; Ephesians 4:11; Second Timothy 1:11, etc)**.

The inevitable result of these "fan clubs" is contention, **quarrels**, wrangling, and disputes - a divided church. It is natural to have special affection for the person who led us to **Messiah**, for a Messianic rabbi or pastor who fed us from the Word for many years, for a capable Shabbat school or Sunday school teacher, or for an elder or deacon who has counseled and consoled us. But such affection becomes misguided and carnal when it is allowed to segregate us from others where we worship, or to poison our loyalty to the other leaders.³⁰

The Principle (Oneness in Messiah): Paul's indignation explodes in a series of questions: **Has the Messiah been split in pieces? Was it Sha'ul who was put to death on a stake for you? Paul** reminds **his** followers that **he** didn't die for **them**. Nor were **they** immersed in **his** name. **Were you immersed into the name of Sha'ul (1:13)?** The B'rit Chadashah makes it plain that **immersion** is performed in the name of **the Trinity (Matthew 28:19)**. This formula was often abbreviated as **immersion in the name of Yeshua Messiah (Acts 2:39 and 19:5)**. Nowhere in the B'rit Chadashah is anyone **immersed** in the name of an apostle or church leader.³¹ The central principle of **Paul's argument** is that believers are one in **Messiah** and should never do anything that disrupts or destroys that unity. No human leader, no matter how gifted and effective, should have the loyalty that belongs only to **the Lord**.³²

The Priority (Preaching the Good News): The mention of **immersion** seems to distract **Paul** momentarily from the issue of splits and division in the church at **Corinth**. **He** gives **thanks** that **he** immersed none of **them** except some of **his** early converts. Until the

church grew, **Paul** did some of the **immersing**. **I thank God that I didn't immerse any of you except Crispus (Acts 18:8) and Gaius (Acts 19:29, 20:4; Romans 16:23)**. Just as **Yeshua** didn't **immerse** people (**John 4:1-2**), so both **Peter (Acts 10:48)** and **Paul** allowed **their** associates to **immerse** new converts. **Paul** does not belittle **immersion** as something unimportant, but downplays the role of the one who performs it. **He** realized the danger of **his** creating a cult from those he personally **immersed**, **"Otherwise, someone might say that you were indeed immersed into my name" (1:14-15)**. It is wrong to identify anyone's **name** with your **immersion** other than the name of **Yeshua Messiah**. Given **Paul's** year-and-a-half in **Corinth**, one could not expect **him** to **remember** all of the specific details about what **he** did. But **Paul** suddenly **remembered**, **"Oh yes, I did also immerse Stephanas (16:15-17) and his household; beyond that, I can't remember whether I immersed anyone else" (1:16)**. This comment gives an interesting insight into the inspiration of Scripture. As an **apostle** writing the Word of **God**, **Paul** made no errors; but **he** was not omniscient. **YHVH** protected **His** **apostles** from error in order to protect **His** Word from error. But **Paul** didn't know everything about **God**, or even about **himself**, and was careful never to make such a claim. **He** knew what **ADONAI** revealed - things **he** had no way of knowing on **his** own. What **he** could know on **his** own, **he** was prone to forget. **He** was one of us.³³

Another reason for **Paul's** **immersing** so few converts was that **his** primary calling lay elsewhere: **For the Messiah did not send me to immerse but to proclaim the Good News - and to do it without relying on "wisdom" that consists of mere rhetoric, so as not to rob the Messiah's cross of its power (1:17)**. **He** was not sent to start a cult of people **immersed** by **him**. **Yeshua** had personally called **him**, **"For this purpose I have appeared to you, to appoint you as a servant and a witness not only to the things in which you have seen Me, but also to the things in which I will appear to you, rescuing you from the Jewish people and from the Gentiles, to whom I am sending you, to open their eyes so that they may turn from darkness to light, and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who have been sanctified by faith in Me" (Acts 26:16b-18)**.

We need to focus on what we have in common, not our differences. **Paul** tells us: **So then, let us pursue the things that make for shalom and mutual upbuilding (Rom 14:19)**. As believers, we share one **Lord**, one **Body**, one purpose, one **Father**, one **Spirit**, one hope, one faith, one baptism, and one **love (Romans 12:4-5)**. We share the same salvation, the same life, and the same future - factors far more important than any differences we could number. There are the issues, not our personal differences, that we should concentrate on.

We must remember that it was **ADONAI** who chose to give us different personalities, backgrounds, races, and preferences, so we should value and enjoy those differences, not merely tolerate them. **YHVH** wants unity, not uniformity. But for unity's sake we must never let differences divide us. We must stay focused on what matters most - learning to **love** each other as **Messiah** has **loved** us, and fulfilling **God's** purposes for each of us and **His** Church. Conflict is usually a sign that the focus has shifted to less important issues, things that the Bible calls **arguments over opinions (Romans 14:1)**. When we focus on personalities, preferences, interpretations, styles, or methods, division is inevitable. But if we concentrate on loving each other and fulfilling **God's** purposes, harmony results.³⁴

*Dear Awesome Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** for **Your** great **love** which welcomes all who follow you into **Your** family. Thank **You** that **You** do not make some of us slaves and some **Your** children, but rather **You** call all who **love** and follow **You** **Your** children (**John 1:12**). Praise **Your** gracious chesed **love** which you extend to all no matter their looks nor the color of skin, nor amount of money they have. **For you are all sons of God through trusting in Messiah Yeshua - there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female - for you are all one in Messiah Yeshua (Gal 3:26 and 28)**. What matters is the heart of **love** for **You** as **Lord** and **Savior (Rom 10:9-10)**.*

*May all who follow **You** as their **Lord**, seek to bless the one unified Body which **Messiah** has created (**Ephesians 2:15**) and which is a temple of the one and true living **God**. Let unity be more important than pride which causes division, for we are all members together of one Body. **In Him the whole building, being fitted together, is growing into a holy temple for the Lord. In Him, you also are being built together into God's dwelling place in the Ruach (Ephesians 2:21-22)**. In **Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen*