

SERMON NOTES
I Corinthians 1-3
“Confronting Divisive Issues”

Intro:

- **Imagine a church wracked by divisions**
- ***Influential leaders within the church and Christian leaders at a national level all have their band of loyal followers within the church***
- **One of the church leaders is having an affair, and the church refuses to take any disciplinary action in spite of a stubborn lack of repentance**
- ***When believers cannot settle financial or legal disputes with one another, they sue one another in secular courts***
- **Several couples are living together or having sexual relations outside of marriage – *and this is tolerated as normal for the culture and day and age***
- **Some believers drink alcohol to excess – other believers react against that by declaring that all alcohol use is sinful**
- ***There are serious disagreements within the church as to the role of women in ministry and worship and family life***
- **There are doctrinal problems: Some church members believe in the immortality of the soul, but have doubts about the reality of the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ and the future bodily resurrection of believers**
- ***There are controversies and disagreements over spiritual gifts: Some of the spiritual gifts are being misused, and the congregation is deeply divided over the proper role and function of certain spiritual gifts in the life and worship of the church***
- **Spiritual pride is rampant in the church body – with believers on both sides of these divisive issues convinced that their side is more spiritual and more closely aligned with God’s will**

- **Many of these problems are found in some churches today – *all of these problems were present in the Corinthian church of Paul’s day***

- ***How did Paul deal with these controversial and divisive issues in the churches he founded? How does that compare with how we deal with controversial and divisive issues in our day? How can we bring our practices into better alignment with Scripture in working toward a biblical unity?***

I. WHAT WERE THE DIVISIVE ISSUES IN THE CORINTHIAN CHURCH?

- Of all the issues dividing the Corinthian church, there were two that seem to be the most central and serious: (1) *rival factions within the church*; and (2) *controversies concerning the use of certain spiritual gifts in the church*

1 Corinthians 1:10-13 ¹⁰Now, dear brothers and sisters, I appeal to you by the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ to stop arguing among yourselves. Let there be real harmony so there won't be divisions in the church. I plead with you to be of one mind, united in thought and purpose. ¹¹For some members of Chloe's household have told me about your arguments, dear brothers and sisters. ¹²Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ." ¹³Can Christ be divided into pieces? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul?

- *Church members were quarrelling because they were aligning themselves with different Christian leaders*
- There is little or no evidence that Paul, Peter and Apollos were at odds with each other – *but apparently each had a loyal following among the Corinthian believers and this was producing factions within the church*
- We are not told the specifics of these rivalries within the church – only that there were these different factions dividing the church
- The situation is not much different among Christians today:
- *"I follow Luther" // "I follow Wesley" // "I follow Calvin" // "I follow the Pope" // "I follow Moody" // "I follow John MacArthur" // "I follow Bill Hybels or Rick Warren or James McDonald or Rob Bell or John Wimber or David Jeremiah or John Piper or Kay Arthur"*
- It is not enough today simply to be part of a church that preaches the Gospel and teaches the Bible and makes disciples and cares for people's needs and reaches out to others and has helped you to come to Christ or grow in Christ
- *Americans love to flock to the newest, hottest church or pastor or youth leader or worship band or cutting edge ministry or distinctive theology*
- Americans will drive past a dozen good churches that proclaim Christ and develop fully devoted followers of Jesus in order to attend that one special church with that one special pastor or youth leader
- *Some Christian leaders have a loyal following without seeking or desiring it – but some leaders intentionally cultivate such a loyal following to their personal ministry and teaching – God knows their hearts, we don't*
- **Paul, on the other hand, was deeply distressed by such factional loyalties to human leaders**

- The other huge problem that was dividing the Corinthian church was the misuse of and different views on certain spiritual gifts – especially the so-called “charismatic” or “miraculous” gifts such as prophecy and tongues
- *Some Corinthian believers were puffed up with spiritual pride and a sense of spiritual superiority because they could speak in tongues or prophecy or communicate a word from the Lord or heal the sick or cast out demons or perform other miracles*
- Some Corinthian believers were overly eager to exhibit their special gifts and draw attention to their spirituality in worship services to the point of causing chaos and bedlam and disorder
- *Some Corinthian believers were exalting certain spiritual gifts while devaluing other gifts – and the people with those gifts*
- Other Corinthian believers felt like they had nothing useful to contribute to the church because they did not have more impressive gifts and abilities
- *Many Corinthian believers tended to be more accepting of others with similar gifts as theirs while being more stand-offish toward those with very different kinds of gifts*
- Some Corinthian believers were using their spiritual gifts primarily to give themselves a spiritual high rather than to build up the rest of the body
- *Some believers regarded certain spiritual gifts as marks of special favor with God or special status in the church or special spiritual maturity*
- All of these unhealthy attitudes and misuses and controversies over spiritual gifts were causing strife and dissension and disunity within the church body
- *And, of course, many of these unhealthy attitudes and misuses and controversies continue to divide the church of Jesus Christ today*
- It would be fairly accurate to say that the two greatest causes of division among evangelical, Bible-believing, born-again Christians today are race and spiritual gifts
- *There are black Baptist churches and white Baptist churches – but very few well-integrated, racially-mixed, ethnically-diverse Baptist churches*
- And there are charismatic churches and non-charismatic churches // Assembly of God churches and Baptist churches – *but very few hybrid churches where believers with different views on spiritual gifts are able to worship and fellowship and serve Christ together*
- Charismatic and non-charismatic Christians have the same beliefs about all the core truths of the Christian faith:

- *The Trinity and the Deity of Christ, the message of the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus and salvation by grace through faith, the necessity of a personal relationship with Jesus, the authority of Scripture as the Word of God, the importance of living a holy life, the importance of evangelism and missions, and an eager longing for the Second Coming of Christ – as well as the same convictions about the sanctity of human life and the sanctity of marriage as the union of a man and a woman*
- *Yet we are often divided into separate congregations – unable to worship and pray and fellowship and serve together in one church body – because of different views and practices of the spiritual gifts*
- *2000 years after Pentecost – the issue of spiritual gifts is still dividing born-again, Bible-believing Christians into separate camps – contrary to the will of God and contrary to the NT vision of the church as the body of Christ*

II. WHAT APPROACHES DID PAUL NOT USE?

- *What are some methods of dealing with controversial and divisive issues that we commonly use today that Paul rejected in his day?*

Show picture of Ostrich with head in the sand

(1) The Ostrich method

- *This method is well-loved and much-used in many churches: if we stick our heads in the sand and don't acknowledge our differences and problems – then maybe we can enjoy good unity*

Stop showing picture

(2) The mute button method

- *A conspiracy of silence is the best way to maintain unity*
- *This is based on the belief that talking about our differences leads to deeper divisions – so let's just press the mute button and follow the unwritten rule that it is impolite to discuss our differences with one another*
- *Many married couples try this same approach: if we don't talk about our problems and differences, maybe they will just go away – or solve themselves*

- Many couples trying that method of conflict-resolution are now formerly married couples – or couples with minimal intimacy in their marriages

Show picture of birds on a branch

(3) *The “birds of a feather” method*

- The best way to deal with our differences and maintain unity is by associating only with people who think like us, worship like us, look like us, vote like us, and agree with us about spiritual gifts
- *Let’s just agree to disagree – in separate churches*
- Charismatic believers should go to charismatic churches and exercise their charismatic gifts there – and non-charismatic believers should go to non-charismatic churches and exercise their non-charismatic gifts there
- *Church unity is a lot easier if we segregate ourselves from believers with different views and practices than ours*
- And if someone can’t take the hint – like this odd bird in the picture – just nudge him or her off the perch – let her fellowship with her own kind

Stop showing picture

(4) *The “you can join us as long as you do things our way” method*

- This “my way or the highway” approach appears more inclusive than the “birds of a feather” method – but ends up with a similar result
- *Believers with different gifts and different views can join us – as long as they do things our way and conform their use of their gifts to our expectations, our traditions and our comfort zones*

(5) *The Mafia or Nazi method*

- The best way to solve a problem is by eliminating the problem
- *If certain spiritual gifts are controversial and divisive and causing problems in the church – then let’s just eliminate them*
- The best way to deal with problematic gifts is by forbidding them or silencing them or declaring them to be unreal or unbiblical or obsolete
- The Apostle Paul would have nothing to do with any of these or similar methods
- *Rather than hiding his head in the sand or pressing the mute button – Paul confronted each of the controversial and divisive issues*

- That is essentially what I Corinthians is all about – Paul’s letter to a church confronting a series of problems and controversies in the church – head-on
- *He devotes 3 whole chapters to the controversial subject of spiritual gifts*
- And no matter how serious the differences or disagreements – Paul absolutely steadfastly refused to resolve the problems by splitting into separate churches
- *Paul devoted much of his life to keeping Jewish and Gentile believers together in the same congregations in spite of all their many differences*
- It was absolutely unthinkable to Paul that Christians would divide into separate churches based on race or worship style or different views of the spiritual gifts

1 Corinthians 1:13 ¹³Can Christ be divided into pieces?

- *How can you divide up the body of Christ into pieces based on different spiritual gifts?*
- How can you put the hands and feet and eyes and ears and noses into one church – and then put the internal organs into another church?
- *What kind of body would you have??*
- Neither church would be a complete, fully functioning body
- *The internal organs need the external senses – and the external limbs need the internal organs*
- *Charismatic believers are incomplete without non-charismatic believers – and non-charismatic believers are incomplete without charismatic believers*

1 Corinthians 12:17-22 ¹⁷Suppose the whole body were an eye—then how would you hear? Or if your whole body were just one big ear, how could you smell anything?

¹⁸But God made our bodies with many parts, and he has put each part just where he wants it. ¹⁹What a strange thing a body would be if it had only one part! ²⁰Yes, there are many parts, but only one body. ²¹The eye can never say to the hand, “I don’t need you.” The head can’t say to the feet, “I don’t need you.” ²²In fact, some of the parts that seem weakest and least important are really the most necessary.

- *We need each other – and we especially need those members of the body whose gifts are different from ours*
- The eye may feel more comfortable with another eye and with the ears – but the eye really needs the stomach and the heart and the liver
- *The stomach may feel more comfortable hanging out with the colon – but really needs the eyes and nose and mouth and hands*

- **We cannot create Christian unity by fracturing the body of Christ into pieces**
- *Of what good is unity between the stomach and colon and liver when they are separated from the eyes and ears and hands and feet?*

III. HOW DID PAUL DEAL WITH THE DIVISIVE ISSUES?

- The church in Corinth was wracked by divisions
- *Many of those divisions were caused by problems with certain spiritual gifts – especially problematic was the gift of speaking in tongues*
- Misuse of that gift was producing spiritual pride // conflicts between members // chaos and disorder in public worship services // a poor testimony to outsiders and unbelievers visiting their worship services – *and many other problems in the church*
- The gift of speaking in tongues is still controversial and divisive and problematic today
- *As are other so-called charismatic or miraculous gifts such as prophecy and healing and words of knowledge and discerning of spirits*
- How do many churches – including many Baptist churches – deal with these problematic spiritual gifts?
- *They are banned or suppressed or silenced or neglected or ignored or closeted*
- How did Paul deal with these potentially problematic gifts?
- ***He thanked God for them***

1 Corinthians 1:4-7 ⁴I can never stop thanking God for all the generous gifts he has given you, now that you belong to Christ Jesus. ⁵He has enriched your church with the gifts of eloquence and every kind of knowledge. ⁶This shows that what I told you about Christ is true. ⁷Now you have every spiritual gift you need as you eagerly wait for the return of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- ***That is amazing!***
- **Paul gives thanks for their spiritual gifts even though those gifts were a source of strife in the church**
- Why?

- *Because Paul understood that even though some believers were misusing some of the gifts – thereby causing unity problems – nevertheless the church body was also being enriched and empowered by those gifts*
- *Say whatever you want to disparage the church in Corinth – the fact remains that this church was spiritually alive and abundantly fruitful*
- ***The Presence and Activity and Power of the Spirit was very evident in the life of this church***
- *Prostitutes, homosexuals, thieves and drunkards were being set free from bondage to sin and Satan by the witness and ministry of these Spirit-filled believers*
- *Those kinds of conversions require the Presence and Activity of the Holy Spirit being unleashed through Spirit-filled believers*
- *Those kinds of transformed lives are the result of all the gifts of the Spirit being exercised to enable the body of Christ to carry on the ministry of Christ in setting captives free*
- ***Paul valued and thanked God for every spiritual gift – giving thanks that the Corinthian church did not lack any spiritual gift – praying that they would faithfully exercise all their gifts until the Lord Jesus Christ returns at the Second Coming***
- *No hint here in verse 7 that any of the gifts were temporary and would cease in a few years with the death of the apostles or the completion of the NT*
- *Former Dallas Seminary professor Jack Deere: “No one ever just picked up a Bible, started reading, and then came to the conclusion that God was not doing signs and wonders anymore and that the gifts of the Holy Spirit had passed away... Not one specific text of Scripture teaches that miracles or spiritual gifts were confined to the New Testament period.”*
- *Paul gave thanks for every spiritual gift in Corinth because these gifts were enriching and empowering the church to be spiritually alive and fruitful*
- *And when Paul did address the problems associated with the controversial and divisive and problematic gift of speaking in tongues – what was his concluding instruction following three chapters of teaching?*

1 Corinthians 14:39 - 40 (NIV) ³⁹Therefore, my brothers, be eager to prophesy, and do not forbid speaking in tongues. ⁴⁰But everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way.

- *The Pauline solution to misuse is not banning or suppressing the gift – the solution to misuse is proper use so that the body functions in a fitting and orderly way*
- *When some churches and mission organizations attempt to solve the problems associated with certain spiritual gifts by prohibiting their use – they are parting company with the Apostle Paul – they are substituting human wisdom for the Word of God*
- *Some Christians come close to inferring that some spiritual gifts are bad in themselves and should be avoided because they are controversial and divisive*
- **Does God give bad gifts?**
- *Are we wiser than God in knowing which gifts are good and useful in the body of Christ – and which gifts are not?*
- *Did God make a mistake by giving the church certain gifts that are harmful to the body?*
- *Forbidding charismatic gifts is not the biblical solution to unity problems*
- *Nor is splitting the body of Christ into charismatic churches and non-charismatic churches the biblical solution to unity problems*
- *How, then, did Paul deal with these divisive issues in the Corinthian church?*
- *By focusing on the Cross as the basis of Christian unity*
- *By careful teaching on the nature and function of the church as the body of Christ and the temple of the Holy Spirit – and the roles of church leaders and spiritual gifts in building up the church*
- *And most of all – by inserting into the middle of his teaching on spiritual gifts the great love chapter – I Corinthians 13*
- **Unity problems are not caused by gifts of the Holy Spirit – not even by controversial gifts**
- *Paul pinpoints the problem in I Corinthians 3*

1 Corinthians 3:1-3 Dear brothers, I have been talking to you as though you were still just babies in the Christian life who are not following the Lord but your own desires; I cannot talk to you as I would to healthy Christians who are filled with the Spirit. ²I have had to feed you with milk and not with solid food because you couldn't digest anything stronger. And even now you still have to be fed on milk. ³For you are still only baby Christians, controlled by your own desires, not God's. When you are jealous of one another and divide up into quarreling groups, doesn't that prove you are still babies,

wanting your own way? In fact, you are acting like people who don't belong to the Lord at all.

- *Unity problems are not caused by spiritual gifts*
- **Unity problems are caused by spiritual immaturity // by spiritual pride // by a carnal, worldly spiritual condition // by jealousy and selfishness // by demanding one's own way // by not accepting God-given differences // by an inadequate understanding of the body of Christ // and most of all – by a lack of godly love one for another**
- **Biblical unity is not the result of segregation or church splits or excluding believers with unfamiliar gifts that make some people uncomfortable**
- *Biblical unity is the result of walking in the Spirit rather than in the flesh, and aligning our thinking with biblical truth, and living out the reality of being one body with many parts, and walking humbly with our God, and staying close to the Cross of Christ, and loving and accepting one another as Christ has loved and accepted us*

IV. WHAT ARE SOME BIBLICAL TRUTHS AND PRACTICES THAT BUILD CHURCH UNITY?

- **What is the first theme that Paul focuses on after mentioning the problem of factions in the church?**

1 Corinthians 1:18 (NIV) ¹⁸For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

1 Corinthians 1:23 (NIV) ²³ We preach Christ crucified: a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles,

1 Corinthians 2:1-5 ¹Dear brothers and sisters, when I first came to you I didn't use lofty words and brilliant ideas to tell you God's message. ²For I decided to concentrate only on Jesus Christ and his death on the cross. ³I came to you in weakness—timid and trembling. ⁴And my message and my preaching were very plain. I did not use wise and persuasive speeches, but the Holy Spirit was powerful among you. ⁵I did this so that you might trust the power of God rather than human wisdom.

- *The message of the Cross is the great leveler of the Christian faith*
- **Some Christians think they are more spiritual than others // Some think they are more biblical // Some think they have more of the Spirit's fullness // Others think they have better doctrines and theology // Some pride**

themselves on their freedom and openness to the Spirit // others pride themselves on their orderliness and faithfulness to the Scriptures //

- **But there is no place for boasting at the Cross – except in Jesus Christ who is our Wisdom and Righteousness and Holiness and Redemption**
- *We come to the Cross humbly – or not at all*
- **The ground is level at the foot of the Cross**

- *And there is only One Cross for all who desire to be saved*
- **It's a free country – you are free to choose to associate only with believers who are much like you – and to avoid worshiping and fellowshiping and serving with believers of a different race or a different socio-economic class or a different theological persuasion or with different spiritual gifts**
- *But there is only one door to the kingdom of heaven – namely, the Cross*
- **So when believers gather at the Cross – like it or not – they will be rubbing shoulders with believers of different colors and languages and cultures and traditions and worship preferences and political convictions – and different views and practices of the gifts of the Spirit**

- *All the walls and barriers that we use to segregate ourselves from one another have been destroyed by the Cross of Jesus Christ*

Ephesians 2: 14-16 ¹⁴For Christ himself is our way of peace. He has made peace between us Jews and you Gentiles by making us all one family, breaking down the wall of contempt that used to separate us. ¹⁵By his death he ended the angry resentment between us, caused by the Jewish laws that favored the Jews and excluded the Gentiles, for he died to annul that whole system of Jewish laws. Then he took the two groups that had been opposed to each other and made them parts of himself; thus he fused us together to become one new person, and at last there was peace. ¹⁶As parts of the same body, our anger against each other has disappeared, for both of us have been reconciled to God. And so the feud ended at last at the cross.

- *In place of Jews and Gentiles, substitute any other two groups: blacks and whites // conservatives and liberals // charismatics and non-charismatics // Protestants and Catholics // Reformed and Pentecostal // rich and poor*
- **Jesus died to make us one in Him**

- *Sometimes Christians justify separating themselves from other born-again, Bible-believing Christians on the basis of standing for truth*
- **There is no higher truth in the Bible than the message of the Cross – and the message of the Cross declares that Jesus broke down all the walls and**

barriers that separate people in order to create one new family – one new humanity – one new body with many different parts

- *Paul devoted his entire ministry to upholding that central truth of the message of the Cross*
- **He refused to compromise that truth by allowing the body of Christ to be divided into pieces – with a Jewish church over here and a Gentile church over there // a charismatic church over here and a non-charismatic church over there // a black church over here and a white church over there // a church following this famous leader over here and a church following that popular leader over there**
- *Dividing Christ into pieces is not the Gospel way of dealing with divisive issues in the church*
- *Birds of a feather flocking together is not the Gospel way of maintaining the unity of the Spirit*
- *Denying or contradicting or compromising the reconciling power of the Cross is not the way to advance the cause of Christ*
- **To be faithful to the message of the Cross – and to experience the fullness of Christ in our churches, and to represent Christ in his fullness to the world – we need every different kind of believer and every spiritual gift**
- *Jews and Gentiles need each other // blacks and whites need each other // rich and poor need each other // charismatics and non-charismatics need each other in order to become complete and mature in Christ*

1 Corinthians 3:16-17 ¹⁶Don't you realize that all of you together are the temple of God and that the Spirit of God lives in you? ¹⁷God will bring ruin upon anyone who ruins this temple. For God's temple is holy, and you Christians are that temple.

- *Together we are the Temple of God where God dwells by His Spirit*
- **It is true that the bodies of individual believers are also called the Temple of the Holy Spirit and therefore we should honor God with our bodies**
- *But this Scripture is teaching that the people of the church together are the Temple of the Holy Spirit – and therefore we should be careful to build up the church body with our works and our service – and we should be careful to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace*
- **How?**

Ephesians 4:2 (NIV) ²Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.

- *Focusing on the message of the Cross and staying close to the Cross keeps us humble – and humility builds unity*
- *Bearing with one another's differences and shortcomings and accepting one another in love builds our unity*
- *Embracing the truth that there is one body with many different parts and many different gifts, and that we belong to each other and need each other helps to build unity*
- *Giving one another the freedom to become who Christ has called and gifted us to be helps to build unity*
- *Putting the common good of the body ahead of personal interests and desires helps to build unity*

- **May God help us to make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.**
- *May Cornerstone be a church that pursues a biblical vision of the church as one body with many parts – a church that is enriched in every way – not lacking any spiritual gift needed to fulfill Christ's vision for our church – as we eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed.*

- *May our confidence be in this promise:*

1 Corinthians 1:8 - 9 (NIV) ⁸He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful.

Prayer

Hymn # 284 "They'll Know We Are Christians by Our Love"