

CONTENTION OR CHRIST?

I Corinthians 1:10-17

After his general introduction, Paul commenced his letter by dealing with a matter concerning which he had received careful information from the household of Chloe. A careful account of the prevailing conditions in the church at Corinth had been given to him. Paul was not dealing with rumors, but with facts about which there were no doubts. Paul knew exactly what was taking place there, and with that knowledge in mind he approached the subject of contentions in the church. They not only had differences of opinion, but their differences had degenerated into wranglings and quarrels. Members of the church were spending their time in quarreling.

Paul made a very earnest appeal to the Corinthians. There is something very urgent and touching in the way he put it, in view of the fact which he had written, that God is faithful, and that He had called them into the fellowship of His Son. He said, "Now I beseech you, brethren." The word beseech is one that signifies appeal and argument. It is a word that is pregnant with meaning. Paul appealed to them in the name of the One through Whom they had received grace and peace, the Lord Jesus Christ.

What was the gist of Paul's appeal? It was to the effect "that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment." His appeal, "that ye all speak the same thing," suggests unity of testimony based upon a common knowledge, acceptance and acknowledgment of the truth. The apostle exhorted them in the name of their Lord to give the same testimony. He wanted them to have the mind and judgment of Christ, thus avoiding the tragic blunder of having various views upon which they insisted, and thereby causing these wranglings. He was anxious for them to be united in their thinking and outlook. To these Christians he made an impassioned plea that they might be unanimous in their faith. He knew full well that unity would prevail provided they recognized the leadership of Christ and surrendered to the influences of the Holy Spirit.

In 1877 the celebrated musician, Leopold Damrosch, organized a music festival in New York. For this festival he trained groups of singers in such separated places as New York, Brooklyn, Newark, Philadelphia and Albany. All were drilled separately to concert perfection and when they came together for the festival, they sang in perfect harmony, all because they had been trained by the same leader. Unity may be achieved out of diversity if Christians will allow Christ to direct their lives to the pitch of God's will.

You may look at things one way and I may look at them differently, but if we have the mind of Christ we are not going to argue and quarrel, but will get along in happy fellowship considering one another and praying for each other. Considering the relation in which Christians stand to each other as followers of Christ, dissensions among them are as inconsistent with their character as conflict between the members of the human body.

What unity was Paul requesting of them? It was the unity of mind and of mouth. He longed for them to have unity of mind, the mind of Christ, and all together speaking only that which expressed the mind of Christ. "That ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment." This involves unity of sympathy and aim. Of such unity Christ alone is the center.

Sad to say, but nevertheless true, contentions, wrangling, strife, divisions and schisms were rife and rampant in the church at Corinth. The unity which should have characterized the church was destroyed or imperilled by the spirit of schism. In Mark 2:21 schism is the word which is used for a rent in a piece of cloth. It was as if the fair garment of the church at Corinth were being rent in pieces. There ought not to be any rent in a church. If there be one, it ought to be repaired and adjusted without delay. There should

be a unity among the members of a church both in general mental disposition and in their judgments of particular things, and there will be if Christ is given His rightful place as Lord. He is the One who can unite the hearts of people, whereas Satan can cause contention, strife and division. Havoc is always wrought with the work of the Lord when Satan creates contention and wrangling in a church. The basis of unity in a church is Christ. As the spokes of a wheel get close to the hub, they get closer to each other. So the closer that church members get to Christ the sweeter and better will be their fellowship in the church. How beautiful it is for Christians to dwell together in unity. "By this shall all men know that ye are My disciples, if ye have love one to another."

Because the church at Corinth was bleeding from her wounds, inflicted by her own members and not by her enemies on the outside, Paul applied himself to the healing of this rent by his exhortation to unity.

Only when a church is possessed of harmony can it be used and blessed of God. Oneness of mind and judgment equips for effective testimony and service for Christ.

Contentious strife and selfish wrangling are a blight on Christianity and should be shunned as carefully as hypocrisy and apostasy. It is not the giant critic from without but the little contender from within that constitutes the major peril to the assault a church should make against the forces of unrighteousness. It is ever Satan's purpose to cause contention, wrangling, quarreling and strife in a church, thereby breaking up and scattering, if possible, that which the Lord is gathering and uniting together in one. Ever be on guard against those who cause strife and divisions. They are influenced by Satan and grow worse with the passing of the years.

What was the matter with the contentious members of the church at Corinth? What caused their wranglings and quarrels? It was carnality. They were not spiritual, but they were carnal. They had descended to the lower level and were living in the fleshly realm. There are the two levels--the flesh and the spirit, and every person lives on the one level or the other. One may be mastered by the lower side of his nature, the fleshly, or he may be controlled by the Spirit of God and live on a far higher level. The Corinthians had degenerated to the lower level of living. They were not motivated by spiritual values and outlooks, but by fleshly or carnal desires. That was the real cause of their trouble, and some of them were rather well-pleased because of the contention and strife. But all such were strangers to the blessedness of true Christian fellowship.

Paul did not waste any time in coming to the things that troubled the Corinthian church. Questions of doctrine and discipline had better be settled as quickly as possible. There must never be any weakening of doctrinal convictions and standards. An emasculated gospel will never help anybody.

In the church at Corinth there were contentions and divisions over preachers. Among these factions were the Paulites. No doubt they felt justified in clinging to him. After all, he had brought the gospel to them, and through his instrumentality they had been saved. He was to them in a real sense their father in the gospel. Naturally they held him in very high esteem. He suited them and they became more zealous for him because others criticized and discounted him by their comparison with others. It is conceivable that this group listened carefully to other preachers, with a view to finding fault, and if the preacher did not say it just like Paul did, they would shake their heads and say, "It cannot be. Paul never said it that way." Such were the Paulites.

Another group gathered around Paul's successor at Corinth. This eloquent preacher, Apollos, visited Corinth after Paul left and preached. He came from Alexandria. His sentences were stately, his periods well-rounded, his language ornate, his voice resonant, his gestures graceful, his presence imposing and his manner impressive. He had a flare for the spectacular. It seemed that by his eloquence and oratory he could literally lift people out of their seats when he spoke to them. Many of the Corinthians were simply

captivated by his persuasive power, and an undertone could be heard in the church, "That's our man." He was their kind of a preacher and they went into ecstasies over him. They sang the praises of Apollos.

Another faction rallied around Simon Peter. He was one of the twelve. By virtue of this he was held in high regard by some who seemed to feel that he had more standing and authority than the Apostle Paul. The Corinthians had never seen him, but certain brethren had come over from Judea and told them about him, his pent-up emotion which burst over in his preaching and moved people to tears. He was their kind of preacher and they sang his praises. They reminded others that he was the one who preached on the day of Pentecost.

The "Christ" party may have been under a leader or leaders who claimed superiority over those who attached themselves to Paul especially, using for party purposes a professed attachment to Christ as an exclusive right. But to bring Christ into competition with Paul, Apollos and Peter was to place the Master and His servants on the same level. But Christ is above all others. Perhaps the members of this latter party were the most arrogant of all. They claimed that they would not submit to any human teachers.

It is to be remembered that it was not the Lord who divided His people into these various groups. It is the work of Satan in the flesh of believers that causes them to separate one from another into different companies.

All such contentions and divisions have certain evil features:

1. They exalt that which is subordinate and accidental at the expense of the vital and supreme
2. They engender mutual animosities which are destructive of Christian fellowship.
3. They dissipate energies that ought to be devoted to active service in the Lord's kingdom.
4. They cause the decay of spiritual life.
5. They bring public dishonor on the name of Christ.
His name is the symbol of a divine reconciliation--the reconciliation of man to God and man to man. The wicked rejoice when church members wrangle.
6. They are a stumbling-block to weak believers.
7. They are a terrible hindrance to unbelievers.
Contention in a church often causes unbelievers to continue in their unbelief. The strait gate is often blocked by contentious, bickering and quarreling Christians. A crucified Christ invites the sinner, but a wrangling church repels him. Men seeking peace hesitate to cast their lot with those who are flying at one another's throats. Men can find plenty of contention, hate and division in the world without going into any church to find it.

How are such conditions to be dealt with? In a spirit of meekness always. Paul said, "I beseech you," not "I command you." Arrogance would only have widened the breach. They are to be dealt with in love also. Paul called them, "brethren."

Paul certainly did not encourage his partisans. He rebuked all factions. He rebuked all of them and objected to each party. To rebuke our own followers for following us unduly and contentiously is indeed a sign of grace and heavenly wisdom and courage in the heart. Paul refused to do anything to foster division. In his condemnation of their spirit and conduct, he reprimanded his own party first by ridiculing the very idea of the undue exaltation of himself. He said, "Was Paul crucified for you?" What an arresting question! Were you purchased by his blood so as to belong to him? If not, then you are not his. The

crucifixion of Christ was the foundation of their Christianity and not that of Paul.

God always destroys the influence and usefulness of any person who divides a church. And what the Lord does is done forever. Nobody can ever change that.

"Is Christ divided?" Is He cut up and parceled out among you? The very thought is strange, ridiculous and absurd. Paul taught the Corinthians that whether it was hearing the gospel, believing the gospel or being baptized, it was all wrapped up in the person of Christ, and that is exactly as it should be.