

Paul immediately launches into an issue that needed correction. They were becoming divided. He had learned this through a report he received from a household headed by a believer named Chloe. He names his source, a good and godly practice that disarms one who likes to anonymously gossip about others. We ought to beware of anonymous reports and those not backed up independently, but we should not ignore well founded reports which come to us, even if we wish someone else would handle the problem. If the Lord allows it to come to us it is no accident, as he has equipped us to handle it wisely and scripturally.

As we go further into this letter to the Corinthians we will see there were some things that might be considered much more serious than a few contentions and groupings of believers within the assembly. But our thoughts are not God's thoughts. We should not minimize the seriousness of the assembly becoming divided and beginning to follow individuals as leaders for whatever reason. This issue is by no means limited to Paul's epistle to the Corinthians but is plainly and forcefully presented in most, if not all, of his epistles, as well as those of other New Testament writers and the Lord Himself. Our recent studies of Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians and Galatians all treated the need for unity very seriously. Why is this so important? Isn't it gloriously wonderful enough to have been saved and enjoy a personal relationship with the Lord and walk with Him doing His will here on earth awaiting His return for us while representing Him as He gifted us and sent us to do? Yes that is wonderful!!!! But there is More! Much More! The Lord promised Peter that "upon this rock (Peter's confession of Christ) He would build His Church. The better translation of the Greek word [*ekklesia*] the Lord Jesus used is "Assembly", but even that does not covey the full meaning of the word. It means "a called out group or company of individuals" and is so used throughout the New Testament for the believers together, as well as incidently for other groups of people "called out" or "gathered out" from something or for something. So it is also used for a riotous mob of unbelievers in Acts and of the nation of Israel in the wilderness (1Corinthians 10). It is not a "sacred" word as such but it is used very consistently throughout the New Testament when speaking of the believers together (collectively) one Body, as the House of God and the Bride of Christ, and the Temple of God. We have seen all of these discussed in Ephesians and Colossians particularly, which we have already studied together. With this in mind we can remind ourselves of what the Corinthians had undoubtedly been taught by Paul during the year and a half he lived there with them. Christ died for the Assembly (Ephesians 5:25), not just it's members individually; God purchased the Assembly with the blood of His own [Son](Acts 20:28); Christ died to break down the middle wall of partition that separated the

Jews and the Gentiles (Ephesians 2). In fact the primary reason we are saved at all is to enable God to place us where He wants to in the Assembly, the Body of Christ. To forget and neglect this great founding principle of our faith is most serious indeed. So serious it comes very first in the epistle. Another possible reason he treats this issue first is that while they remained in a state of prideful disunity they would be unable to act in unity regarding the serious immorality now openly practiced in their midst.

They evidently were dividing up into sects within the local assembly by gathering about certain gifted leaders and at the same time ignoring, if not rejecting, ministry of other gifted men. Perhaps they even traveled across town to meet with those who they preferred (or to avoid some they disliked). Even though the Assembly at Corinth is considered to be one body (ch. 12:27) they probably met in various homes around the city convenient to them. The principle in scripture seems to be that only physical limitations warrant gatherings of believers separate from each other. Examples include size of available meeting places and geography (where distance made attendance inconvenient for a number who could instead gather with others close by). Of course that distance is not fixed in scripture as it depends upon the speed and reliability of local transportation. Cars are faster than walking and local gatherings in this country today can often include believers from much greater distances than they could in other places or times. Nonetheless we today should be very cautious about our motives if we customarily attend a local gathering further away from home (distance-wise or time-wise etc.) than the nearest. We need to beware that we are not subconsciously, or intentionally, following (or avoiding) certain men or situations within the assembly. There could be valid reasons to go somewhere further away but personal preferences regarding certain men is not one of them. Paul clearly tells us this right here. (Of course visits to other gatherings anywhere on earth are certainly acceptable and even to be encouraged for mutual edification. We are given letters of commendation to facilitate this in an orderly and scriptural manner.)

In light of these verses now before us we need to be very zealous to preserve and nourish the unity of the assembly and to be alert to any tendency or trend that might lead to formation of sects or divisions within the assembly. This is crucial to our charge to preserve the testimony of the One Body that **CHRIST DIED TO CREATE and SENT THE HOLY SPIRIT TO FORM, LEAD AND PRESERVE** on this earth until Christ returns for it.

Looking inward, we can see that as an assembly grows in size there are many pressures to divide it. We need to be vigilant that this does not occur for reasons other than mentioned above. For instance we might honestly ask ourselves which direction our dividing up into classes for our Wednesday evening Bible Study is leading us. We

might ask the same questions about our Sunday school and about other Bible study groups now prospering amongst us. Clearly, studying the scriptures together should be encouraged, not discouraged. There is no doubt about that! But we may need to recheck our intents once in a while. For instance, let's each make sure we are not purposely avoiding ministry of certain men by breaking up into groups. Also be sure we are not degenerating into cliques. On the other hand, we may be approaching a size where we are beginning to outgrow our meeting hall. If we do we may need to consider splitting geographically this time. Now isn't that a wonderful "problem" to have?

Now looking outward, at some point in our Christian lives we each realize that there are many different gatherings of professing Christian believers even when we look around at our own community (City of Ramsey where our current meeting place is located) and surrounding area. Most of these are divided from one another for one reason or another, (not just geographical either). Why is this? Is it pleasing to God? Was it His original intent? What does Paul say in 1Corinthians 1 about it? Obviously it was neither God's original intent nor is it pleasing or honoring Him. Then why is it that way now? It's because men did not heed the entreaty of Paul to the Corinthians and to others throughout scripture and have allowed things to fester that eventually divided us. My, haven't we Christians failed in this down through the centuries since this was written! And how strong the tendencies are still today to repeat history and take that same dangerous path Paul warned our distant forefathers against. Beware! Let us search and try our ways and turn again to the Lord (Lam. 3:40).

Hopefully all of us gathered out unto the name of the Lord at Trott Brook have knowingly sought to obey and honor God by seeking the path of return to the original principles of gathering as revealed in God's word. In so doing we have had to occasionally cleanse out immoral practices and to refuse some who have brought unscriptural, (and even Anti-Christian error) to our doors or to our activities, seeking to fellowship with us to various degrees. These are **scriptural separations**, one of which is laid down in chapter 5 of the very epistle we are studying. These are some God-honoring reasons why we are separated from other Christian gatherings or "churches" in the area, some of which include many true born again believers. Why? Because they do not attempt to keep themselves holy morally, doctrinally, or by avoiding being associated with others that do not keep their testimony pure. We as believers are prone to drift off the path to either side. And one side has just as serious consequences as the other. We can roll our SUV just as easily in the left ditch as the right. We destroy the testimony by unscripturally dividing along sectarian lines as Paul warns us here, or destroy it by refusing to put away iniquity as he commands in chapter 5. The path is clear. The hazzards well marked out in

scripture. Proceed with caution.

In chapter 4 we learn that they weren't really following different apostles such as Paul or Peter. He just uses his name and Peters to avoid publicizing the names of strong, gifted local leaders, perhaps innocently enough, being followed by some. There seems to have even been one party of believers that really (proudly) claimed to be the only ones that followed Christ. We need to beware of that pitfall as well. But we certainly do not need to apologize for earnestly desiring to follow Christ and genuinely attempting to do so. We ought to! We MUST! But we must NEVER pride ourselves that we attempt to. It is only by His grace we are saved and God has put within our hearts to will and to do His good pleasure. There is nothing evil about having strong convictions and knowing they are according to scripture, and living and acting accordingly. God forbid that we not know what is right or not faithfully pursue the path we know is right. Scripture is not particularly tolerant of those who know to do right and refuse to attempt to do it, with God's help of course.

We will learn later too that there were some men who were actively seeking leadership roles in the assembly for the wrong reasons, and actually belittling Paul and his lack of skill in oratory, putting him down in order to build themselves up. So we see in Corinth the early signs of what degenerated into the clergy/laity relationship, and the multi-denominational situation we see in the world of what is called Christian today. Paul early on in this epistle utterly refutes all of this, and the fleshly attitudes that led to it. May we heed the warning, for we are not immune to these same thoughts and attitudes arising from within our own hearts. Then there are the pressures from without to conform to the world's religious ways. God preserve us from the traps and pitfalls the evil one carefully contrives and places in our way. For he has made it his objective to destroy any work of Christ on the earth, whether it be the creation, marriage, family, Israel or the Assembly.

Baptism is mentioned now. It is the scriptural means of publically announcing one's faith upon being saved. Yet they seemed to be placing unwarranted importance upon who had baptized them. In this we see the beginnings of a move toward baptism becoming the means of becoming a "member of the church" or of a denomination, and even as a means of salvation itself. Paul debunks these errors completely here. Yet he clearly endorses baptism as a valid and necessary component of the newborn Christian's obedience and witness experience. If you have received salvation by grace through faith in the shed blood of Christ on the cross, you should be promptly baptized.

By Ron Canner, September 25, 2002