

THE CHALLENGES OF MEMBERSHIP¹

INTRO:

In 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, after encouraging the Corinthians based on the evidences of God’s grace he saw in them, Paul begins to address an issue of utmost importance in the Corinthian church:

¹⁰ Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and *that* there be no divisions among you; but *that* ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹ For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them *which are of the house* of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. ¹² Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. ¹³ Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were ye baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you, but Crispus and Gaius; ¹⁵ Lest any should say that I had baptized in mine own name. ¹⁶ And I baptized also the household of Stephanas: besides, I know not whether I baptized any other.

¹⁷ For Christ sent me not to baptize, but to preach the gospel: not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of none effect.

Every member of the church is called to overcome divisions and pursue unity in the church in order to reflect the church’s union with Christ.

1. What does Paul appeal to the Corinthians to do (v. 10)?

In verse 10, Paul appeals to the Corinthians to agree with each other, to do away with all divisions, and to be united in the same mind and judgment.

2. How many ways does he state his appeal (v. 10)? What does this tell us about how important this issue of divisions in the church was to Paul?

Paul states this appeal three different ways: “that ye all speak the same thing”; “that there be no divisions”; “that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment” (v. 10). This tells us that this is of utmost importance to him.

3. What was reported to Paul about the Corinthian church (v. 11)? What specific examples of this does Paul give (v. 12)?

Paul has received reports that divisions exist in the Corinthian church (v. 11). Specifically, it has been reported to Paul that the Corinthians are identifying with certain teachers over against others, apparently forming factions in the church based on which teacher they liked best.

4. *What attitude does the statement “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos” express? What’s wrong with this attitude toward Christian leaders? (Hint: See verse 17 for one reason why the Corinthians may have been aligning themselves with some leaders over others.)*

The attitude which the statement “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos” expresses is pride and exclusivism. This is not merely a loving affection for a leader, but is a divisive devotion to one leader as opposed to another leader and the Christians who follow him. What’s wrong with this attitude is that it gives human leaders a kind of exclusive loyalty we should only give to God, and it results in divisions within the church. Further, based on Paul’s veiled reference in verse 17, it seems that the Corinthians were attaching themselves to teachers not based on the soundness of their teaching (all the men Paul lists were sound teachers), but based on whose rhetorical style most pleased them.

5. *What’s Paul’s first response to these divisions in the church (v. 13)?*

Paul’s very first response is to ask, “Is Christ divided?” (v. 13).

6. *Why does Paul ask, “Is Christ divided?” What does this teach us about the nature of the church and why unity in the church is so important? (Hint: See also 1 Corinthians 12, especially verses 12 and 13.)*

Paul asks, “Is Christ divided?” because he knows that the church is the body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:12–13). The church is intimately identified with Christ (Acts 9:4). Christ is *not* divided, and so the church shouldn’t be either. This teaches us that unity in the church is important because it reflects the very unity of Christ and the unity we have with him and in him. The church’s unity witnesses to the world about who Christ is.

Just as Paul insists that the church must be united because it is the body of Christ, and Christ is not divided, so he reminds the Corinthians that it was not *Paul* who was crucified for them, and they were not baptized into the name of Paul (vv. 13–15). Rather, *Christ* was crucified for them, and they were baptized into *his* name. They belong to him, they are saved by him, they are one body in him, and so they should live in a way that expresses that unity.

7. *The Corinthians were wrongly attaching themselves to one Christian leader or another at the expense of the church’s unity. What are some of the right ways we should relate to leaders in the church? (See Phil. 1:15–18; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:7, 17; 3 John 5–8)*

According to the rest of the New Testament, we should:

Respect and esteem our leaders (1 Thess. 5:12–13)

Closely study their way of life and imitate their faith (Heb. 13:7)

Submit to them in a way that makes it a joy for them to lead us (Heb. 13:17)

Be prepared to rejoice whenever the gospel is preached, no matter who's preaching it (Phil. 1:15–18)

Be prepared to sacrificially support all those who preach the true gospel, even if we have no personal connection to them (3 John 5–8)

8. How do these biblical ways of relating to local church leaders help build the church's unity?

These biblical ways of relating to local church leaders help build the church's unity because they lead us to submit to such leaders yet remember that that we ultimately are to submit to the Lord. Further, these biblical ways of relating to leaders teach us to respect and support all those who preach the true gospel, rather than creating factions and divisions around personality or style. And within the local church, we should submit to and respect all the leaders God has appointed, rather than playing one against the others.

9. What are some sources of division in the church that you've experienced? How do you think the apostle Paul would respond to each of these divisions?

Personal experiences of different sources of division in the church will vary. Components of the apostle Paul's response would include:

How the church images Christ and the gospel. Did the division smear Christ's image to the world?

Reflecting on the unity we have in Christ

Allowing for liberty of conscience on matters that God's Word doesn't explicitly address (Romans 14; 1 Cor. 8–10)

Urging us to pursue humility and consider others more important than ourselves (Phil. 2:1–11)

10. How does church membership help to foster unity in the face of these challenges?

Here are several possible answers. Church membership fosters unity because:

It ensures that all those who belong to the church have committed to the same faith.

It creates a mutual commitment between everyone in the church—we can't just walk away when things get tough.

It acts as a continual reminder of the unity we actually share as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Every member of the church is called to overcome divisions and pursue unity in the church in order to reflect the church's union with Christ.