

**SERIES:** Great Church Fights  
**SERMON:** *Divisive Politics in the Church*  
**SCRIPTURE:** 1 Cor. 1:10-17  
**SPEAKER:** Michael P. Andrus  
**DATE:** September 23, 2007

The old proverb says, “When the cat’s away, the mice will play.” The meaning, of course, is that when people find themselves without proper supervision they often conduct themselves without proper decorum. This is exactly what was happening in the church at Corinth. The Apostle Paul founded the church there while on his second of three missionary journey, and he remained their pastor for approximately 18 months. But other cities needed churches too, and being a church planter at heart, he left the core of believers at Corinth in the hands of the elders he had trained and moved his evangelistic tent across the Aegean Sea, from Greece to Turkey, and began to establish a new church in Ephesus.

The time seemed right to move on. After all, not only was there a huge need in the pagan city of Ephesus, but Paul felt the Christians in Corinth were growing spiritually; they were solid on the basic doctrines; and they were fervent in spirit, serving the Lord. Yet the Apostle hadn’t been absent long before problems began erupting in Corinth like a small volcano. So he writes this letter which we call the First Epistle to the Corinthians, from Ephesus, to encourage the believers but also to chide them, and at times even to rebuke them severely.

Corinth was a city of about 600,000 inhabitants (about twice the size of Wichita), located 50 miles southwest of Athens. It was a city of great commerce because boats traveling from Italy to Asia Minor had to stop there to move their cargo from the Adriatic Sea to the Aegean. But it was also a city of sin. The term “to Corinthianize” was a popular euphemism for “go to the Devil.” Ray Stedman, who pastored for decades on the Left Coast of the United States, referred to the book of 1 Corinthians as “First Californians,” because Corinth was more like San Francisco than any city of the ancient world—saturated with and driven by materialism, relativism, humanism, and sin.

Now we here in the Midwest are sheltered somewhat from the extremes of American culture (thank God!), but even here in Wichita this letter of First Corinthians is very relevant. There’s hardly an issue addressed in this letter that hasn’t at some point been an issue here at First Free since this church was founded in 1950.

The particular theme I want to address from the first chapter is divisive politics in the church, a problem that has the potential of occurring in any local fellowship. I invite you to turn in your Bibles to 1 Cor. 1:10-17. If you don’t have a Bible there is one in the pew rack in front of you, and this passage is found on page 869. If you don’t own a Bible, that one is yours *if* you will read it.

*I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas "; still another, "I follow Christ."*

*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no*

*one can say that you were baptized into my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. This is the Word of the Lord.*

Now I want to read this passage again, this time from *The Message*. Some of you don't like paraphrases of Scripture, but I do. I don't study from them but I like to read them. I think they can provide a fresh perspective. Listen to Eugene Peterson's version:

*I have a serious concern to bring up with you, my friends, using the authority of Jesus, our Master. I'll put it as urgently as I can: You must get along with each other. You must learn to be considerate of one another, cultivating a life in common.*

*I bring this up because some from Chloe's family brought a most disturbing report to my attention—that you're fighting among yourselves! I'll tell you exactly what I was told: You're all picking sides, going around saying, "I'm on Paul's side," or "I'm for Apollos," or "Peter is my man," or "I'm in the Messiah group."*

*I ask you, "Has the Messiah been chopped up in little pieces so we can each have a relic all our own? Was Paul crucified for you? Was a single one of you baptized in Paul's name?" I was not involved with any of your baptisms—except for Crispus and Gaius—and on getting this report, I'm sure glad I wasn't. At least no one can go around saying he was baptized in my name. (Come to think of it, I also baptized Stephanas's family, but as far as I can recall, that's it.)*

*God didn't send me out to collect a following for myself, but to preach the Message of what he has done, collecting a following for him. And he didn't send me to do it with a lot of fancy rhetoric of my own, lest the powerful action at the center—Christ on the Cross—be trivialized into mere words.*

### **The curse of divisive politics in the Church**

I used to enjoy political conventions. In recent years they have been pretty boring, but they used to be exciting. There were some true knock-down, drag-out fights back 30-40 years ago. Who needed the World Wrestling Federation (WWF) back in 1968 when you could just watch the Democratic Convention in Chicago. But what used to be *fun* to watch at a political convention is very *sad* when it comes into the church. In a few short years the Corinthian believers had managed to turn the marvel that is the Church into a mess. There was division, schism, party spirit, and an overwhelming sense of politics in the Body of Christ.

What happens when this curse infects the Church? I want to suggest four inevitable results:

**It dishonors the name of Christ.** We bear the name of Jesus when we call ourselves "Christians." Do we bear it as a badge of honor, or do we sully it by the way we act? The story is told about a young soldier in Alexander the Great's army who was caught retreating when his unit commander had ordered an advance in a particularly bloody battle. He was brought before the commander-in-chief, and Alexander asked him, "Soldier, what is your name?" Meekly he replied, "My name is Alexander." The bold and courageous leader of the Greek Empire stood in

rage and shouted at the young man, “Soldier, either change your behavior or change your name.”

Alexander the Great couldn't stand the thought of someone bearing his name and behaving in such a cowardly fashion. I suspect Jesus likewise feels dishonored when we allow divisive politics to infect His church. Church splits and church fights are a reproach to His name.

**It delights the enemies of Christ.** There's almost nothing that invites the disdain but also the delight of the watching world like fighting among Christians. It was just a few short years ago that Greek Orthodox priests and Roman Catholic Franciscans engaged in a bottle-throwing brawl over control of the birthplace of the Prince of Peace in Bethlehem on Christmas Eve. News reporters played up the scandal to the hilt.

When the Southern Baptist Convention split over the control of their seminaries, the press loved it and the enemies of the church cheered on the victims (in their minds almost always the liberal element) and denounced the perpetrators (almost always the conservatives). When Immanuel Baptist Church split two years ago, the Wichita Eagle tried desperately to get various factions in the church to hang their dirty laundry out in public. Thankfully, relatively few did, but the Eagle printed all it could find.

Friends, when Christians spend more time ridiculing one another, and writing books denouncing one another, than they do fighting the Enemy of our souls, they play right into the hands of the enemies of Christ.

**It discourages the servants of Christ.** I don't know how many have dropped out of ministry or how many believers have vacated the pew because of politics in the Body of Christ, but I do know the number is large. Some churches have more former living members than they have current members, and it's not because of deaths or job transfers.

I served for twelve years on the Board of Ministerial Standing for the Evangelical Free Church of America, which is the credentialing and disciplinary board for nearly 5,000 pastors. During that time I witnessed some of the sorriest sagas of divisiveness you would ever want to hear about—some generated by dysfunctional, deceived, or even ungodly pastors, and some by laymen of similar character. Every year several dozen of our EFCA pastors hang it up and start selling insurance—often because of church politics. And There are plenty of lay leaders who have given up on church altogether for the same reason. Believe me, divisive politics discourages the servants of Christ.

**It disappoints the Spirit of Christ.** This is the saddest thing of all. If we as believers sometimes get discouraged at what we see happening within the Body of Christ, how do you think the Holy Spirit reacts? He is the Spirit of Truth, the Gentle Spirit of God, and He has established unity among us in the bond of peace, a unity which all we have to do is maintain. He must indeed be disappointed when He sees conflict in His Body.

## **The cause of divisive politics in the Church**

We saw last Sunday from the book of James that the general cause of conflict in the church is that believers are at war with each other because believers are at war with themselves because believers are at war with God. But I believe it is possible to identify from our text in 1 Corinthians 1 two additional causes of dissension in the Body of Christ.

**The strategy of Satan.** I am personally convinced that Satan is behind much of the conflict we see in the Church today. He is very clever, you know. He generally attacks us at our point of greatest weakness. But I have come to realize that if he finds our guard up at our points of weakness, he is not at all averse to attacking us at our points of strength. He doesn't care *how* he trips us up, just so he trips us up.

In 2 Cor. 2:11 we find a very interesting phrase: “. . . in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.” Let me tell you what is happening here in this chapter. The Apostle is rebuking the church for failure to forgive a member who has repented of very serious sin. Back in verse 6 we find these words: “The punishment inflicted on this man by the majority is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. I urge you, therefore, to reaffirm your love for him.”

I am of the strong opinion that the person about whom Paul is speaking here is the same man who is discussed at length in 1 Cor. 5, a man guilty of gross immorality. In the earlier passage the Apostle rebuked the Church strongly for not disciplining this man when he was living in open sin. But now he has to rebuke them just as strongly for not forgiving him and not receiving him back into the fellowship once he has repented. You see, Satan doesn't care whether you're too easy on sin or too hard on the sinner. Either way it undermines the cause of Christ.

But Satan shouldn't be blamed for every problem in the Church There's another major cause for Division in the Body of Christ besides him.

**The stupidity of some Christians.** Someone has said the Church is the only army that shoots its own wounded. I think that's a bit harsh, but history reveals that the Church has a notorious reputation for directing its anger and criticism inward rather than outward at the enemy. Among the tragic tendencies of some Christians are these:

**1. Turning convictions into contentions.** I admire people of conviction. If there's anything I can't stand, it's someone who's mealy-mouthed and changes color like a chameleon depending upon who or what's around him. Furthermore the Scriptures teach that convictions are not only to be held, but they are also to be contended for. In the third verse of his short epistle, Jude writes, “Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to *contend* for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.” Unfortunately there seem to be many Christians who don't understand the difference between contending *for* the Faith and being contentious *about* the Faith. I'm sorry, but Fred Phelps is not contending for the faith, no matter what he claims.

**2. Making mountains out of molehills.** This was in part the problem at Corinth. Some in the church were elevating baptism to the level of a fundamental of the faith. Now I would never call the issue of baptism a molehill; I think it is much more important than that. But the issue of *who* baptizes *whom* is certainly a molehill, and that seems to be what the believers in Corinth were getting hung up on. Our first hint of it is found at the end of verse 13: “Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.”

Apparently what had happened is that some individuals were considering themselves more spiritual than others because they were baptized by Paul instead of by just an ordinary pastor or even a lay elder. In chapter 3:4-9 others were basing their spirituality on the issue of “who led whom to Christ.” It’s as though a person were to say, “I was baptized by Chuck Smith or Charles Stanley,” or “I got saved at a Billy Graham Crusade,” as if that earned him an extra crown or two in Heaven. In essence Paul’s response is, “You’re making mountains out of molehills. It’s totally irrelevant who baptized you or who led you to Christ.” It’s a personal molehill made into a theological mountain.

Paul actually expresses some relief that he personally had not done many baptisms, because otherwise some might give him honor that was due only to Christ. Nothing should be allowed to interfere with the priority of the Cross. Listen to v. 17 again: “For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.” I

Some make the gift of tongues into a mountain, either by advocating the gift for everyone, or by denying it to anyone. Some make minor prophetic details into major issues. If you’re not dispensational, premillennial, and pre-tribulational, then you’re out to lunch and perhaps even out of the fellowship. Others become dogmatic about Calvinism, Arminianism, eternal security, Elder rule, 24-hour Creation days, and any number of other issues. In every case I think to some degree they are making mountains out of molehills.

**3. Elevating personalities into parties.** This was a widespread problem at Corinth. Paul says in verse 12: “What I mean is this: One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas (i.e. Peter); still another, ‘I follow Christ.’” How do you think this problem of party spirit got so widespread? I think it was almost inevitable, for when politics enters a church everyone feels forced to take a side.

Let’s examine for a moment these specific personality cults that invaded the Corinthian church. First there was the Paul Party. This group probably represented the charter members of the Church—those who were the original core group established by Paul, the first pastor. I can just hear some of them crying ruefully, “We’ll never have another pastor like dear old brother Paul. Would that the good ole’ days would return!” Of course, they failed to remember how often they were upset with that ugly little Jew and his cantankerous ways. We do have short memories, don’t we?

During my first pastorate here there was a particular family that gave me a fair amount of grief. In numerous and not so subtle ways they let me know that the church had never been the same since Pastor Jones left (that was his real name, by the way, and his predecessor was Pastor Smith). Some time later I happened to see Pastor Jones at a District Conference and sought his advice about how to deal with this family. I said, "I need your help because you obviously had an excellent relationship with this family." He laughed. "Where did you hear that?" he asked, "they were on my case for the entire eight years I was there." I eventually concluded that the only way to become popular with that family was to leave and wait until their anger was redirected at the next pastor.

Opposing the Paul party was a second group known as the Apollos Party. Apollos was an Alexandrian Jew, an eloquent preacher, a skillful defender of the faith, and apparently the second pastor of the Corinthian church. Apollos was mentored and discipled by Paul, but he had a very different personality and style. While Paul was a teacher, Apollos a gifted preacher. While Paul was a very analytical thinker, it is thought by most scholars that Apollos was more of a synthetic, allegorical or even mystical thinker.

To put this in modern terms, I suppose the difference between Paul and Apollos might be similar to the difference between John MacArthur and Max Lucado. These two men have both made a tremendous contribution to the Christian Church over the past several decades, but MacArthur is very analytical and tends to be dogmatic, while Lucado is more synthetic, irenic, and relationship-oriented. MacArthur majors on doctrine, Lucado on application. MacArthur speaks to the mind, while Lucado speaks more to the heart. Now neither of these approaches is wrong. They're just different and they're suited for different groups and different purposes. Unfortunately at Corinth these differences resulted in divisive conflict between those whose allegiance was to the former pastor and those whose allegiance was to the present pastor.

Then there was the Peter Party. Apparently Peter never visited Corinth, but his name was well-known in Christian circles everywhere, since he was one of Christ's three closest companions. I suspect the issue at stake here may have been traditionalism or legalism. In Galatians 2 we read about a heavyweight bout between Paul and Peter (which incidentally is going to be our text next Lord's Day). Paul denounced Peter for hypocritically kowtowing to the Jewish legalists in the church. It may very well be that due to that incident Peter acquired a reputation as a champion for the traditionalists, as opposed to Paul's emphasis upon Christian liberty. I wouldn't even be surprised if Peter favored the grand old hymns of the faith as opposed to those silly worship choruses the young people were always trying to bring into the church.

There have always been legalists in the church. They are often known for the things they don't do or the things they try to prohibit others from doing. As a kid growing up I saw division come into churches over many legalistic issues—movies, hair length, drinking, women wearing makeup or slacks in church, *ad infinitum*, *ad nauseum*. There were people in our church who wouldn't be caught dead in a bowling alley or reading the comics on Sunday. I don't ever want to go back to those days. May God spare us from the Peter party.

Then there was the Christ party. They were the ones who could *really* turn your stomachs, because they were the super-spiritual ones. Though this group had the best name, they probably had the worst attitude. I'm reminded of a lady I worked with at a company in Dallas in the late sixties. I overheard her talking one day about church, so I asked her, "Where is your church?" She responded, "I don't have a church." "Oh, pardon me," I said, "I thought you were talking about your church." "No," she answered, "I don't have a church; I go to the Church of Christ." I felt like saying, "Well, bully for you," but I didn't.

There is a spiritual pride in many Christians that causes them to say, "My denomination is the true church and if anyone else gets saved, it's only by the grace of God." Well, I've got news for you—if anyone gets saved in *any* denomination, including the Evangelical Free Church, it's only by the grace of God. God doesn't save *because of* denominations, but rather *in spite of* them. I've mentioned before the little girl who told her playmate she was a Baptist and then asked, "What abomination do you belong to?"

The total effect of these political parties was serious division in the Body of Christ. But strangely behind this 4-way battle were no real doctrinal heresies. Had there been, Paul would surely have denounced it as he did in Gal. 1:8, when he said, "But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!" He would never have urged unity with apostates or heretics. No, the whole problem was wrong attitudes and political divisiveness.

Let me stop here and ask, "Is this a problem at First Free?" Consider the fact that we have five preaching pastors, although I have the privilege of doing the bulk of the preaching. All of our pastors preach the Word and handle the text effectively. Yet I know some people who check the schedule regularly and if their favorite pastor isn't preaching they find somewhere else to go or something else to do. Of course, it probably doesn't do any good to complain about it this morning because those people probably aren't here today!

I trust there is no doubt in your minds that divisive politics in the church is a curse. We have also discussed the cause. But the most important issue is the cure. How do we prevent conflict, or resolve it once it appears? We asked and answered this question last week from James 4 by saying we need to take God seriously, take Satan seriously, take sin seriously, and take prayer seriously. That's all still true. But in regard to the specific issue of political division we see Paul taking several tactics that are designed to cure the specific conflicts stirred up by church politics.

### **The cure for divisive politics in the Church**

**1. Honest confrontation** (11). Look at v. 11: "My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you." Paul doesn't mince words. He lays out the facts and even identifies the source of his information.<sup>1</sup> So often we're tempted to hide under the guise of anonymous informants. The words, "someone told me but I can't tell you who," or "many of us believe . . ." are often a coverup for deception. Paul practiced honesty,

even at the risk of creating a bit of discomfort for Chloe back home.

I have found over the years that the best way to deal with an informant is often to say, “My, that’s really serious! What did the person do about it when you went to talk to them?” Generally I find the informant hasn’t bothered to follow the biblical mandate to go to the person first. So then I like to say, “Well, why don’t you and I go and talk to him right now.” Often I get the response, “Oh no, I just wanted you to know so you could pray about it and do whatever you feel the Lord wants you to do, but please don’t tell them where you got your information.” And then I have to tell them that God’s Word does not allow me to handle problems that way.

**2. Root problem identification (3:3).** You know, it’s possible to waste an awful lot of time treating symptoms rather than root problems. I like the way Paul identifies the root problem causing all the division in the church. Look at 3:3: “Since there is jealousy and quarreling among you, are you not worldly? Are you not acting like mere men? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not mere men?” Eugene Peterson grasps the real meaning of that last phrase as he translates it, “Aren’t you being totally infantile?” That was the root problem!

**3. Pointed interrogation (13).** In verse 13 Paul employs some very cutting questions as he does surgery on the church at Corinth. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?” We might ask similar questions today when we see the same party spirit: Is Chuck Swindoll your Creator? Is Charles Stanley the one who sanctified you? Did Beth Moore die for your sins? Was Calvin or Arminius resurrected from the dead for your justification?

The answer to all of these absurd rhetorical questions is, “Of course not!” Then why are these personalities getting the kind of attention in the church that belongs only to the person of Christ? In chapter 3 Paul will ask, “Who in the world is Apollos and who in the world is Paul? Merely slaves of Christ, through whom you believed.” Who ever thought of putting a slave on a pedestal?

**4. Bold exhortation.** Look back at the first verse of today’s text: “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.” Paul’s appeal is based on the authority of Christ, and the content of his exhortation is threefold:

1. that all of you agree with one another
2. that there be no division
3. that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought

It would be hard to state the need for unity any stronger, wouldn’t it?

But what does he mean? Is he asking that everyone in the Church agree on everything? Is he saying that if some person in the church disagrees on some minor theological issue he should be run out of the church? That all the votes taken at church business meetings need to be unanimous? That we should all dress alike, follow the same lifestyle, and never ask questions?

That sounds a lot like the fundamentalism I grew up in back in the 50's!

No, of course not. Paul actually believed strongly in diversity in the church. In chapter 12 he will stress that there are varieties of gifts, varieties of ministries, and varieties of results. And later he states specifically that “the Body is not one member but many.” What the Apostle is seeking is not group-think in the church; he's not suggesting that we should all be clones of one another. Rather he's seeking a united testimony and inward harmony. There can clearly be legitimate difference of opinion and difference of view-point and even difference of practice without treating those with whom we disagree as enemies.

The picture is that of a mosaic, a jig-saw puzzle. There is no piece absolutely perfect nor any piece exactly like any other piece. But when each piece is put in its proper place, the whole is seen to be beautiful and unified.

**5. Eventual isolation.** Unfortunately, not every case of conflict in the Church can be resolved with these methods Paul employs. There are certain people so committed to divisiveness that the only solution is isolation from them. In Romans 16:17 the same Apostle writes, “I urge you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions . . . Keep away from them.” In 2 Thes. 3:14,15 we read similar instructions in a somewhat parallel situation: “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.”

In Titus 3:10 Paul's language is even stronger: “Warn a divisive person once, and then warn him a second time. After that, have nothing to do with him. You may be sure that such a man is warped and sinful; he is self-condemned.” Once in a great while a church has to excommunicate a person who is a hard-core antagonist. But those situations will be very few and far between if we practice Paul's first four tactics:

- Honest confrontation
- Root problem identification
- Pointed interrogation
- And bold exhortation

**Conclusion:** Friends, please remember that it is not our job to *create* unity in the church. In Eph. 4:3 we are told, “Make every effort to *keep* the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace.” The Holy Spirit has created unity among us—all we need to do is preserve it. And one very important step in that process is renouncing politics in the Church. Quit turning convictions into contentions, stop making mountains out of molehills, and reject elevating personalities into parties.

May I add one more thing? If you are here this morning as an unbeliever, then you need peace with God more than you need peace with others. But thankfully you don't have to *make* peace with Him either. If anyone has ever suggested that you better make your peace with God, they may have meant well, but they're wrong. He has already made peace with you. All you need to

do is to sign the peace treaty, which amounts to an unconditional surrender of your life to Jesus Christ.

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i. Some have suggested that Paul stooped pretty low to give credence to this town gossip named Chloe. But that is an unnecessarily harsh judgment upon her. As a matter of fact, she was not even the one who informed Paul, but rather it was members of her household. If early church tradition is correct, Chloe was a Christian business woman who had customers in both Corinth and Ephesus. Apparently someone close to her, while on a trip to Ephesus, told Paul about the division back in the Corinthian church. I am impressed by Paul's willingness here to identify the source of his information.