

Superior Religion **1 Corinthians 1:10-17**

Have you ever come across one of those superior people – the sort of person who just oozes superiority out of their very pores so you end up with the impression that even the blood flowing in their veins is superior to yours?

- The very cut of their clothes makes your \$300 suit look like your grandfather's hand-me-down.
- Every hair on their head's exactly where it should be, whereas yours blows around in the wind.
- The way they hold their head erect and manage to look down at you even though you're 10cm taller than them.
- Their eyes somehow convey the message that they don't think you should be in the same country as them, let alone the same building.

You're quite sure everyone looking at you thinks of the pair of you as the Odd Couple – and they're not thinking that you're Felix.

How easy is it to build a relationship with such a person? Perhaps if you offered to be their slave it might work, but in terms of becoming friends – not very likely. The expression a snowball's chance in hell comes to mind.

Have you ever come across people like that in church? Perhaps not to that extreme -

- someone like that would only join a church that included royalty
- even God may have trouble joining their church

But a similar attitude can be there at a lesser level. There are people in churches who think they're superior:

- Sometimes it's a class thing – they think they're

socially superior to others in the church.

- Sometimes it's a doctrinal thing – nobody in the church has as pure a doctrine as they.
- Sometimes it's an experiential thing – they've had better spiritual experiences than anyone else round here, or they have better spiritual gifts.
- Sometimes it's a commitment thing – they outdo everyone else in the number of meetings they go to and the length of their attendance at the church.

Sometimes it's a ... – well you can fill in the rest of the blanks. Our human ingenuity at finding ways to demonstrate our superiority to one another seems to know no bounds.

"Divisions" in Corinth

I think it's something like that going on in Corinth. I say *I think* because I'm not totally sure. The overall thrust of this passage is fairly clear; however, the specific details remain somewhat elusive. For example:

- It's quite clear there were divisions of some kind in the Corinthian church – but just how did these divisions come about?
- It's quite clear there were various "parties" in the Corinthian church – but just exactly what was the basis for these "parties"?

I think it had to do with attitudes of superiority: that different people and different groups in the church thought they were better than other people and other groups – but not everyone agrees with that, and Paul isn't totally clear about what's going on. Paul knew exactly what he was talking about, and the Corinthians knew what he was talking about – but we're a little bit less sure about the details. So what can we say?

First, there are divisions of some sort within the church. That's quite apparent from Paul's opening statement in verse 10:

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.

In verse 11, he refers to there being *quarrels* among them. And in verse 12 he states:

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".

How big are these divisions? It's hard to tell. It doesn't look like the church had split – because Paul still addresses them as one church and not several different churches. Some people suggest the word *divisions* is itself too strong a translation in the overall context of the letter – and that may well be the case. However, there's a significant problem of some sort. It's certainly causing disagreements in the church – we're just not sure how strong those disagreements were.

Secondly, Paul thinks it's important to deal with these *divisions* first – before he deals with questions they've raised themselves. The Corinthians sent Paul a letter in which they raised several questions. Look at 7:1

Now for the matters you wrote about

From chapter 7 onwards, Paul answers those *matters*. But before he gets to those issues – issues important to the Corinthians themselves – he feels he must deal with this other issue first. Thus, Paul thinks the divisions sufficiently serious and significant to launch straight into them. He doesn't think it's a minor thing that'll simply

sort itself out given enough time.

Thirdly, Paul indicates he got his information about these divisions from Chloe's people (v.11). That is, this information wasn't in the letter the Corinthians sent him. Who was Chloe? We don't know. Was she part of the Corinthian church? Most people think that isn't likely. One common suggestion is that she's a trader of some sort, based in Ephesus, who did business with people in Corinth. It's suggested some of Chloe's employees were Christians and visited the church at Corinth while trading there. They brought back reports to Ephesus. That's a distinct possibility – but we don't know. The important point is Paul has this information, and it didn't come from the letter written by the Corinthian church.

Fourthly, the disagreements relate to various leader-figures: Paul, Apollos, Cephas and Christ. People claim to follow each of these four figures in a personal way. It may not even be an organised group thing – Paul uses the singular: *I follow Paul, I follow Apollos*; not the plural: *we follow Paul, we follow Apollos*. However, in some sense, people attach themselves to these four figures.

- One says: "I attach myself to Paul in a way I don't attach myself to Apollos".
- Another says: "I attach myself to Apollos in a way I don't attach myself to Cephas".

They claim something about their leader-figure – that their leader-figure is in some way superior to the others and worth being attached to.

It's very unlikely any of these four leaders personally encouraged this sort of thing. Paul certainly didn't – he writes strongly against it when he hears about it. It's not

something he personally initiated. And how Paul writes about Apollos certainly indicates Paul doesn't think he's guilty of encouraging this sort of thing either. These leaders didn't encourage these sorts of "parties" to form; rather, it's something the Corinthians initiated.

Fifthly, what are the claims about? This is where people disagree. Some people want to do a character study on each of the four leaders to find out the different emphases of their ministries. They then want to work backwards from there to what these groups probably said about their leaders. And so some people think:

- The Paul group emphasised the Gentiles and all the theology that went with the mission to the Gentiles;
- The Apollos group focused on eloquent speech and the philosophical theology of Alexandria;
- The Cephas group had a Jewish emphasis and the tendency to champion the law; and
- The Christ group stressed spiritual experiences.

I think there are several problems with that approach:

- It tends to highlight supposed differences between the four leaders at a doctrinal level. Now, while it's true they each had different personalities, and it's true you can show from the New Testament itself that Paul's ministry focused on Gentiles while Peter focused on Jews, at the doctrinal level their message is the same. This approach tends to suggest divisions where they didn't exist.
- Also, in dealing with *this* issue in this letter, Paul raises no questions of doctrine or differences in teaching. That strongly suggests there are no divisions based on different doctrinal teachings. Paul would address any issues of doctrine involved.

- Further, this approach doesn't really pay attention to the context. It searches for an answer outside the context and reads it back into what Paul writes. Now, sometimes that's the only approach open to us – but I don't think that's the case here.

We need to ask whether there's anything else in the context that gives us a clue as to what these divisions are about? That clue, I think, is in verse 17 and the paragraphs that follow.

- Verse 17 reads:

For Christ did not send me to baptise, but to preach the gospel – not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

I think that's significant – the emphasis on human wisdom – especially when that's the subject that follows in the next few paragraphs.

- It's important to recognise this issue about divisions doesn't finish at the end of verse 17. Turn to 3:1

Brothers, I could not address you as spiritual but as worldly – mere infants in Christ. I gave you milk, not solid food, for you were not yet ready for it. Indeed, you are still not ready. You are still worldly. For since there is jealousy and quarrelling 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?

In chapter 3, Paul still deals with the same issue. That indicates he doesn't change subjects at the end of verse 17: the rest of chapter 1 and all of chapter 2 are still part of his answer to these divisions in the church.

Some people treat this marvellous passage about the cross

and God's wisdom and human wisdom as if it's a totally new subject Paul introduces – but it's not. This passage is part of Paul's answer to their divisions. It's closely connected to verse 17 -

- both by the connective word, translated *for* in the NIV; and
- by continuing on with the same subject matter.

Now, we aren't going to deal with that part of the passage this week – that's the next couple of weeks. However, it's important to remember the connection:

- We aren't at the end of the issue this week – the way I divided the passage for these talks means we cover this issue over several weeks, because four chapters of the New Testament is a bit much to cover in one sermon.
- Next week, when we come to that well-known passage about God's wisdom and the foolishness of human wisdom, it's important to remember it's still part of Paul's answer to their divisions.

All that, of course, still leaves the question of how wisdom's connected with the different groups within the church – and that isn't an easy question to answer with complete confidence. In verse 17 and in the passage that follows, Paul draws a contrast between this wisdom and the message of the cross.

- For Paul, the message of the cross itself is the important thing. That message is the gospel. That message is what saves people. That message is the power of God and the wisdom of God.
- In contrast, the Corinthians seem to emphasise human wisdom and human cleverness of speech. They seem to import into the church human categories of wisdom. In particular, they seem to eval-

uate their preachers by the standards of Greek philosophy and rhetoric.

It's not that they actually deny the message of the cross; rather, they emphasise the clever way that message is presented.

- Is it presented using all the clever devices of travelling Greek speakers?
- Is it presented with eloquence and better wisdom?
- Is it a polished oration that would be appreciated by the philosophers of Corinth because of the grand style in which it's given?

The way the message is presented became more important than the message itself. And, as they look at the preachers they hear, so they align themselves with one or another: one thinks Paul's better; another thinks Apollos is. This leads to boasting about their teachers and about themselves. They consider themselves wise – in a worldly manner.

What about those following Christ? Had they themselves heard Jesus speak? Probably not. More likely, some are sick of the disputes of the others and proclaim they're better than all of them – they don't follow mere men, they simply follow Jesus Himself. In itself, of course, that's a good thing; but, if it's said with a superior attitude, it's the same problem as the others. They too show their own brand of spiritual elitism.

Sixthly – and yes it's been a long time since the fifthly – one other thing in the context may give us a clue to the nature of these groups: the matter of baptism. In verse 13, Paul asks:

Were you baptised into the name of Paul?

And then in verses 14 to 16 he provides a list of the small number of people he actually baptised in Corinth.

- Now, it may be that's an aside as his train of thought follows the end of the third question he asks in verse 13.
- Or, it may further indicate that the problem in Corinth relates to people's personal allegiance to these various leaders. Perhaps people particularly identify with the leader under whom they're converted, or baptised, or something like that.

Seventhly, Paul doesn't automatically say the Paul group is right. Nor does he say the Christ group is right. This again suggests the problem isn't doctrinal. Neither does he point the finger at any of the groups in particular and say: "You guys need to fix up your act; you're worse than the rest." Rather, he points the finger at them all and tells them all to straighten this problem out. They're all causing the problem of divisions and quarrels by their attitudes to their leaders.

What can we conclude? There's still a lot we don't know of the details. However, I think there's considerable evidence to suggest the problem is that people attached themselves to one leader or another in such a way that they implied they're better than those attaching themselves to other leaders. It isn't the preference for one particular leader in itself that's wrong; it's the attitude of superiority that's the problem. That attitude of superiority leads to a divisive spirit forming within the church as a whole.

Are all "Divisions" Wrong?

Now, why did I go into such detail to try to get to the heart of this matter? Because it's important to have as

good an understanding of the context as is possible. Verse 10 states:

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.

That sounds quite a general statement, doesn't it? I want you to agree and get along with one another. I don't want you to have divisions in the church. I want you to get over these quarrels you've got and become united again.

Is it really that simple? For example, how does Paul expect them to go about being united?

- Does he expect each group will compromise a little and they'll work out some consensus somewhere in the middle?
- Does he expect they'll recognise one of the groups is right and all the other groups need to give up their wrong ideas and join the right group?
- Does he expect all the groups will recognise they're wrong and come to another position altogether?
- Does he think they should appoint an arbitrator?

Paul doesn't actually say, does he?

And would Paul's view of how they should approach the situation differ depending on what the issue causing the divisions is? I think it would.

- For example, if there's a doctrinal issue involved (especially one that goes to the heart of the gospel), I think Paul would be very much arguing for a right position and rejecting all the wrong positions. It would **not** be a matter of consensus or compromise; it would be a matter of everyone needing to realise the true position and conforming their thinking to

that. Some of Paul's letters reflect that approach where there is a doctrinal issue going to the heart of the gospel involved. For example, the letter to the Galatians: Paul doesn't seek to compromise and reach a consensual unity with the false teaching coming into the Galatian churches – he simply tells them straight out they're wrong and need to turn back to the truth.

- On the other hand, in Philippians, where it isn't a doctrinal issue that goes to the heart of the gospel, and may not even be a doctrinal issue at all, he urges both sides to put aside their differences. Instead, they need to work on humility and love.

I think it's similar here. The divisions come – not from theology or doctrine – but from wrong attitudes. These wrong attitudes characterise all parties to their quarrels, and so he tells them all to get their act together. They all need to work at agreeing and becoming united.

Occasionally you come across people misusing verse 10. Perhaps you have some quarrel with them, and in the course of the quarrel they quote this verse at you. What do they mean by that? My impression is that usually, they mean:

I'm right. You're wrong. You need to work at your attitude towards me, because Paul says we're to agree with one another and be united in mind.

It may get the verse right in terms of the actual words, but it misses the whole thrust of the passage. It's very hard, if not impossible, to quote this verse at someone in the middle of a dispute without communicating a superior attitude – and that falls foul of the overall passage.

Paul highlights the silliness of the attitude amongst the Corinthian Christians. They boast about their different leaders in a way which leads to quarrels and upsets. Paul simply asks three questions to provide the correct focus:

- Is Christ divided?
- Was Paul crucified for you?
- Were you baptised into the name of Paul?

The answer's obvious isn't it?

Does this mean people can't have any preferences about church leaders? No, we'll all have preferences. That's simply part of life. It's to do with a wide variety of things: personality, style, character type, nationality, culture, and so on. As in all areas of life, you simply click with some people. So with church leaders. Each of us has our own personal preferences. But we must not let those preferences cause divisions among us. Our preferences must never be elevated to the same level as the truth of the gospel. Nor should they be elevated above our Christian unity. That's where the Corinthians failed.

This attitude of superiority is always wrong. The very nature of the gospel should teach us that. For the gospel reminds us we deserve death and judgment, but instead God shows us grace and mercy and love and gives us life and blessing. And when I come to church and compare myself to the person sitting next to me, I find we're both in exactly the same position:

- He/she is a forgiven rebel.
- I'm a forgiven rebel.

Neither of us is superior to the other. The great blessings we both have in the church come simply as God's gift. They don't come because I deserve them in any way. And that's the same no matter what my position in the

church: whether I'm a leader or a follower, still I'm a forgiven rebel.

Thus, the attitude of superiority is always wrong – as is the attitude of inferiority. We're to resist anything that stems from a superior attitude – for that attitude inevitably leads to quarrels and divisions and disunity. Instead, we're to work at unity and agreement. It's not that there won't be differences among us, but that those differences aren't permitted to undermine our underlying unity.

The challenge is to think through our own attitudes. Do I somehow think I'm superior because of my theological understanding or level of commitment or growth in godliness or standing in the community or money in the bank or whatever? It can be a worldly thing that leads to the attitude; it can be a godly quality. It doesn't matter. The attitude is still wrong – no matter what its source. I'm always a sinner saved by God's grace – and it's the same with everyone else in the church – nothing less, nothing more. With God's help, I must guard my heart against this attitude creeping in. To that end, the four points at the end of this morning's talk are instructive.