

CONFLICT AS A RESULT OF DIVISION AMONG THE BELIEVERS: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17

Rosa John

Dynamic Theological Seminary, Kwale, Delta State, Nigeria

Affiliated to Harvest Bible University, USA
rosaandrew1978@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper deals with an issue that has become a problem in the church of God today. People always look down on each other, especially those that are well to do in terms of materialism favour themselves more than those that are poor. Some of the issues that this paper addresses looking at the Corinthian churches as a case study, is the problem of division. Some people at times like the *Kamwe* people in Adamawa state do show differences between the commoners and the black smith. They don't even marry each other. Also, even in the church of God, those that are up to do are been favoured more than the poor which even lead to a change in the sermon when such caliber of people appears in the church. It is with deep concern that the researcher writes on this to address some of these issues.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of division is a great concern in the church of God today. Some church leaders favour their tribes, relations, Politicians etc. more than the other people. Because of these, this work will look at what Paul says about division according to 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, and also the way forward.

BACKGROUND OF CORINTH

Corinth was an important city. This was because different people from different places go there to trade. This place is the capital city of Achaia. In Paul's time, people pulled some boats across from one place to the other. Porters carried goods from large boats to the other side. They put the goods on the different boat. The journey would otherwise have been over two hundred miles round a very dangerous part of the sea.

As it was a busy center for trade, Paul sees it as a good place for the gospel since it has different people with different beliefs. Merchants and travelers would hear the message and take it with them. There were many different people in Corinth since it was a center of trade. Because people from different places and locations went there to trade, and probably only those that came from the same places or of the same tribe buy things between themselves so that may be the reason why Paul see that center as good for evangelism to tell them that they should not show differences among themselves.

In Corinth, there was a Temple called the Aphrodite, and because of that, thousands of prostitutes gathered there in the city. Many of them belonged to the temple. Corinth became well known for bad sexual behaviour because of the caliber of people that it has gathered. Also, there was a game that was played there and so, many players from different places go there to play the games. Because of these things, Corinth was known all over and that was why may be Paul sees

it as a place for evangelism. In playing a game, only those from the same team come together to advise themselves on what to do. So, in Christendom, we are one and we are our brother's keeper. We ought to advise each other on what to do without showing differences.

MESSAGE FOR THE BELIEVERS

In 1 Corinthians when Paul was in Ephesus, he received a message about what is happening in the church at Corinth. This message was from Chloes family according to 1 Corinthians 1:11.

Probably, the members of her family maybe in Ephesus and they accidentally met with Paul. That may be when they told Paul about what is going on in Corinth. A latter also came from the Christians in Corinth asking for Paul's advice about various problems that occur in Corinth. While in verses 10-11 Paul uses the word 'brothers' twice and because of that usage, they too should equally love each other as he has loved them, because they are Christian brothers and sisters¹.

According to verse 12, there four group that Paul speaks about them. Paul probably saw himself as an apostle to Gentiles. For Jesus said, in him there is no Jew or Gentile. They were perhaps using Paul's teaching about Christian freedom as an excuse to behave badly. One group liked Paul. But another group opposed him. The second group are those that used Apollos's name, the third groups are

¹ 1Corinthians 1:10 The Greek word for brothers and sisters (*adelphoi*) refers here to believers, both men and women, as part of God's family; also, in verses 11 and 26; and in 2:1; 3:1; 4:6; 6:8; 7:24, 29; 10:1; 11:33; 12:1; 14:6,20,26,39; 15:1,6,50,58; 16:15,20.

those that used Peter's name, while the fourth groups are those that used Christ's name. These people that probably used Christ name said that they were the only real Christians in Corinth.

In verses 13-16, Paul uses the word of 'Christ'. He wants to make the Christians at Corinth understand about the Church. It is like Christ's body in the world. The Church cannot act as Christ's body if there are divisions among them. In Christ, we are one because he is our master and all the worship and honour should be ascribed to him alone.

Only a few people could say that Paul had baptized them. As he wrote, Paul remembered Stephanas because he was the first person to become a Christian when Paul came to Corinth according to 1 Corinthians 16:15, 17. Paul continued to say that he is grateful that he has not baptized anyone of them except Crispus and Gaius. Apart from these two people, Paul says that it was the household of Stephanas that he baptized. Why is Paul not grateful for not baptizing anyone apart from those people? The reason is because he doesn't want people to exalt him more than Christ. Rather, they should exalt Christ who gave him the power to preach his word to the people. But nowadays, some pastors are proud to include in their yearly report the number of the people that they have baptized in a year which to them serve as spiritual growth of the Church. But here Paul's concern is to lead people to Christ.

UNDERSTANDING DIVISION

If I may ask what is division? this question may seem funny but everyone his/her own way of understanding it in a different context. Here I will like to define it as differences or disagreement between two or more groups, typically producing tension. Here this is what Paul is faced with and that is why he pleaded with the Corinthians that they should all be in agreement with one another. Why? Because there are divisions among them for some say I follow Paul, another, I follow Apollos, another, I follow Cephas, still another, I follow Christ. That is why he said, is Christ divided? Was anyone of us crucified for you? This means that all preaching and teachings are to be centered on Christ not human being.

Verse 10 is a concern for Paul and that is why he started with a sentence “ I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters”. I understand the word appeal to be a request. Here Paul was requesting the brethren in Corinth by authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, not his authority to be in harmony. His reason here was that there is a faction among the believers. And because of this he asserts that believers in Christ are not to be divided because Christ is not divided. From the opening of verse 10, he used the word authority of our Lord Jesus Christ. He did not say authority of our lords, but our Lord. Here he is referring to that Lord to be Christ and since he is the body and all the believers are the parts, then why should there be divisions among them? Each or rather all the parts are joined to the body and so there is no part that will say I belong to the body alone, for all the parts are joined to the

whole body. And these parts have their functions to play differently even though they are jointed with the body. This is what Paul is trying to tell the believers that Christ is not divided but one.

He also admonished them to be one minded, united in thought and purpose. The purpose of every believer in Jesus Christ is to get eternal life and this is what Paul is addressing here. Paul saw the believers like the players who wear the same uniform but play different positions. Based on the report that he has received from the Chloe's household that the believers are divided by saying that I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Peter and others I follow Christ, He addressed this situation by telling them that Christ is not divided. He continued by saying that it is only Christ that was crucified for the sake of believers and no other person for all of them that were baptized in the name of Christ.

Furthermore, this division means to fight over a position. Probably, each preacher was trying to draw the attention of the people to himself and that may be the reason why they said I belong to this person or that. But whatever position someone holds in the house of the Lord he/she should do his/her work faithfully. Each believer is to focus on one goal which is Jesus Christ. What a believer is supposed to do is to strive a harmony and not a position. Believers in the church of God are supposed to think about the better way of building the church of Christ, and how they should be united together. But some of the issues that brought about

this division is pointing fingers at each one and trying to make you better than another person. People cannot be the same even as our fingers are not the same.

In the Corinthian church, the believers favoured different preachers. Since there were no written documents for them yet, believers solely depended on the preaching and teaching for spiritual understanding of the word of God. So, because of this, believers put their trust in their leaders. Paul, Apollos and Peter preached the same message of the cross, but their followers may have seen something unique in them whereby each says I belong this or that person. But unless God gave his word to the people, they may not preach Christs is one and that all preaching should be centred on him.

In verse 14, Paul was appreciating God for not baptizing anyone of them except Crispus and Gaius. Even though he later remembered that he has baptized the household of Stephanas. But nowadays, some preachers look at the number of people they baptize each year not minding their spiritual growth. But for Paul he said that he was sent to preach the gods news. Even though in Mathew 28:19, Christ told his disciples to go into the world and make disciples of all nations baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

In the same vine, if our contemporary preachers do not come together and preach Christ centered message, followers may be divided by saying our preacher is better than your own, he is vibrant and can talk boldly. But the real message may not be there. And if that happens again to believers, then the division may equally

take place which can cause friction in the church. Christ is not divided neither do Christians use different bible to preach. The Bible that is used in United States is the same with Bible that is used here in Nigeria and that it carries the same message. Christ is not divided and his true followers should not be divided. Let them not allow anything to cause division among them. Because by the time they will allow such division to happen between them, the enemy will have chance to cause differences between them. In Paul's message, he does not preach what the ears of the people is itching them to hear but he preached the real message of the cross. But in some parts of the world today, reverse is the case. Many preachers do not preach Christ centred message so as not to lose their members, rather they preach what the members want to hear so as to go with crowd. Paul used a word "clever speech in verse 17" according to New Living Translation version, which means to my understanding as using or a convincing word so as to have many members. To me Paul does not border himself with crowd, but he wants to go on with the few that are ready to listen to the true message of the cross. Likewise, today's preachers equally imitate Paul by preaching the real message of the cross. Let the truth be preached. In doing this, if a preacher points out someone's sin to him and that person refused to repent rather change his denomination, if he goes to other denomination, and after knowing it, he should tell the person the truth to repent. If this action is taken in the Christendom, the work of Christ will be propagated. But by the time someone left his/her denomination to the other because he doesn't want to repent over his/her sins and the pastor that is there

welcomed him without finding out the reason he left his former denomination, then the good news of the message of Christ is been defeated.

Christian ministry should be a team effort. If preachers are united together to do their work harmoniously, there will be no division in the church. Each preacher has his/ her gift, and each person should use the gift for the propagation of the gospel.

Paul is after those who speak the true word of God² not those that use big-big vocabulary to draw the attention of people to themselves. Let people be impressed by the story of the word of God not by the word the preacher think they know.

In our context and to be specific in EYN church today, the issue of division is a great concerned. Some people are divided based on their tribes. Especially if it comes to the issue of leadership, all that matters to some is have somebody from their tribe in leadership position, without considering whether that person is capable of handling that position or not. So, the issue of tribalism has crippled into the church of God and EYN Church of the Brethren is faced with this problem. For example, some people in other side of the country do look down on others because of their social class. E.g., *Kamwe* people, Fali and Margi do show differences between the black smith and the commoners. Some of these groups of people do not marry the black smith. Even among the pastors, some don't eat

² Thick Nhat Hanh: Creating True Peace. Ending Violence in yourself, your family, your community, and the world. New-York: Toronto, 2003.

their food. Looking at this, it is clear that people are divided in the church in the sense that except someone is their tribe or of the same social class, they won't associate with them. This usually causes conflict which takes only the grace of God before it can be resolved.

Furthermore, when I was working at the EYN headquarters before the Boko Haram displaced us, I used to host many of the EYN Pastors in my house since I have a very big compound when they came for their minister's conference. So, there was a time when we were discussing with some of them and to my dismay, they said; during the next election of the national leaders of EYN, they have their candidate. And I asked them, when did politics entered the church of God? Is this how the election supposed to be done? Why then do you deceive us in the church to pray for God to elect those that he wants to use since you people have already made up your mind on whom to elect? With all these questions, we argued at length with them. It was very hard for me to convince some of them since they have already made up their minds towards who to elect. Here we can say that division has crippled the church of God. And what causes these divisions as I have mentioned above is tribalism and self-centeredness. Some of the *Kamwe* people will always say except *Kamwe* man is ruling the church, we will not support the person that is on the throne of leadership. It is also the same with Bura people, Chibok people, *Margi* People, *Kilba* people, *Fali* people, *Gwoza* people etc.

Knowing is half the battle, simple awareness may help to prevent church conflicts in the early stages. It is best to stop the dispute quickly. “The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out” (Pr. 17:14). Below, I have listed seven critical causes of church conflict. Becoming aware may help the church leaders adjust expectations and make strides to prevent or resolve conflict.

1. Pride: People often behave with self-centeredness, ego, and pride. When you feel that life is about you, you take things personally. Self-centeredness causes one to experience hurt feelings easily. James observed, “What causes quarrels and what causes fights among you? Is it not this, that your passions are at war within you?” (James 4:1). Solomon wrote, “By insolence comes nothing but strife, but with those who take advice is wisdom” (Proverbs 13:10). Get the focus off of yourself and onto Jesus Christ!

Value others above yourself. Make sure people in your church know that you care about their needs. When you feel that you have allowed pride to influence your relationship negatively, admit your failure. Say, “I apologize. I let pride get in the way.” The Bible says, “Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves” (Philippians 2:3). People prevent and resolve church conflicts when they implement this teaching.

2. Spiritual and Emotional Immaturity: Maturity helps a person understand that differences in perspective broaden understanding. Mature people learn to disagree without being distressed. Mature people are self-aware and seek to improve their weaknesses.

Immature individuals have not learned to avoid disputes over a person's personality or style. Likewise, maturation helps a person understand the futility of fighting over things that cannot be controlled. "Brothers, do not be children in your thinking. Be infants in evil, but in your thinking, be mature" (1 Corinthians 14:20). Believers must learn to think, behave, and communicate with maturity.

3. Change and Inflexibility: In reality, change is the norm. When policies or priorities change in the church, misunderstandings and stresses are likely to occur. When pastors and church leaders make strategic decisions, an effective process of communicating these new directives and norms is crucial. Even so, some church members may struggle to accommodate the changes.

Some people have a greater propensity to resist change than others. In times of change, one may benefit from evaluating emotional responses to change. Often change leads to feelings of powerlessness or insecurity because one may trust the status quo at church instead of trusting God for security and

peace. “The fear of man lays a snare, but whoever trusts in the Lord is safe” (Proverbs 29:25). Only God provides security in a changing world!

Wise believers look for the benefits of change. Change can lead to a more biblical church and to a church that is following the Great Commission. James wrote, “The wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (Jas. 3:17-18). Wisdom is being “open to reason” and “impartial.” This wisdom is difficult to put into practice. However, wisdom looks for the positive.

4. Abuses of Power: Power is the influence a person has on his or her environment, relationships, or self. Shifts in power may create gains or losses. Power is the ability and means to get things done. Conflict expert Dudley Weeks wrote, “People choose how they use power and whether they allow it to be corrupt. We can use power negatively or positively. The severely damaging seesaw power approach creates the illusion that you are more powerful when you make the other party less powerful.” Thus, people must have a healthy view of power to prevent conflict.

Jesus, the Son of God, used his power to serve others and to look out for those who were disadvantaged or in need. “For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many”

(Mark 10:45). Jesus' use of power is a model for a person of influence. God forbid that anyone would use power to abuse or hurt someone! Likewise, power and influence in the church should ultimately be directed to Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the church.

5. Church Politics: Factions in the church may intentionally or unintentionally engage in political maneuvering and posturing that leads to conflict. For instance, senior church members may favour proven methods, while younger members desire to change. Factions may attempt to increase their power and recruit others to their side. A person may be challenged to resolve the situation without offending the other individuals and groups involved in the conflict. For believers in Christ, this takes extreme caution and integrity.

The Bible addresses politics among factions. The Apostle Paul dealt with factions in the Corinthian church. “For you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says, ‘I follow Paul,’ and another, ‘I follow Apollos,’ are you not being merely human?” (1 Corinthians 3:3-4). One group in the Corinthian church claimed to be following only Christ (1 Corinthians 1:12). One may find it interesting that Paul did not commend those who followed him (“I follow Paul”) but condemned each of the

factions. Paul identified these political factions in Corinth as distractions from the mission of the church and selfish in motivation.

6. Unclear Authority: Conflicts arise among church staff and members when authority is unclear. When lines of authority are unclear, church volunteers and leaders sometimes exercise authority out of the realm of their responsibility. Such conflicts may become worse in times of crisis. A biblical example of the lack of clarity and authority was during the transition between Kings Saul and David in Israel (1 Samuel 16-31). Severe and complicated relational difficulties erupted among those in authority and the citizens of Israel. The Israelites could not understand Saul and David's relationship. Eventually, a physical conflict erupted. Saul's pride, which led to his suicide, provided David with opportunities to prove his integrity amid the confusion (1 Samuel 31).

7. Personality Differences: The real or perceived differences among your congregation play underlying roles in communication and conflict. Remembering why others talk and act as they do may prevent misunderstandings and false assumptions. The time-honored "DISC Profile System" may help church staff and committee members understand their differences. The four basic personalities or communication profiles are Dominant, Influencer, Steady, and Conscientious. When people discover and discuss their personality styles, healthy communication may result.

More importantly, biblical fellowship among people is the best way for people to understand one another and grow together (Acts 2:46).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, understanding Paul's view is clear that the gospel should be centered on Christ. Why? Prof. Pandang Yamsat noted that preaching should "be centered on Christ because no preacher or Church leader was crucified in place of the members"³. Standing on the original meaning of the scripture is what is intended for the leaders to do. We should not bring our own meanings into the scripture but let's understand the scripture in its original meaning before we apply it. Finally, let the leaders teach the members to be united for all Christians belong to one father and we are all waiting for the crown of life. One day, we will all sit at the feet of Jesus Christ.

³ Yamsat, Pandang. "An Exposition of 1 Corinthians for today". Koinonia Bible commentary series. Kaduna: Barack Press (2004), 44-45.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Arnett, Ronald C. *Conflict Viewed from Peace Tradition*; in the ‘Brethren life and Thought’. Jos: Stream Christian publisher, 1978.

Ronald S. Crybill etal. *Peace Skills: A Manual for Community Mediators*. Jossey-Bass: 2001.

Thich Nhat Hanh. *Creating True Peace: Ending Violence in yourself, your family, your community, and the World*. New-York: Toronto, 2003.

Yamsat, Rev. Pandang. “*An Exposition of 1 Corinthians for Today*”. A publication of Koinonia Bible Commentary Series (KBCS), 2004.

INTERVIEWS

Dali, Samuel. Interviewed; Michika, 14th July, 2022.

Thomas, Asabe. Interviewed; Mubi, 18th July, 2023.

Zakariya, Andrew. Interviewed; Mubi, 17th January, 2024.