



# Appropriate Focus

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### 1<sup>st</sup> Corinthians 1:10-17

Unity is a difficult concept and objective for our lives. There are so many disparate claims for our attention. We are encouraged to make our own way as individuals, make personal choices, and address life from a rather individualistic and self-centered standpoint. We are encouraged to make our own way, our own decisions, even our own definitions of truth. Varied personal experiences color our perceptions of reality and lead us down competing paths of life. We celebrate diversity and individuality. In the process we learn little about moving beyond our individual frames of reference to live united in community. How can we be united when we will never see eye to eye? How can we focus all of our individual frames of reference into a common path and united purpose?

Corinth was a port city and received a constant influx of ideas, cultures, visitors, and languages that influenced life from so many directions. It was a hub of competing ideas, philosophies, and religious influences. The constant influx of visitors continually stirred the pot, creating an atmosphere of constant change and often conflict. Considering the context in which it lived, it is not very surprising that the church in Corinth was a mess.

Of all the churches we know in that day, Corinth seems to have suffered the most from so many competing ideas. Paul apparently wrote three letters to Corinth, trying to get to the bottom of the issues of unity at hand and resolve the problems. We seem either to have lost one of those letters or it has been fused into the one we call First Corinthians. Regardless, we know that the fractious state of the believers in Corinth clamored for Paul's attention and he was concerned to deal with the situation.

Paul was not willing to allow the status quo to proceed. There was too much at stake, and there were too many issues distracting believers from the getting on with the priority tasks of the gospel. Paul mentions several of these issues in the letter, beginning with leadership concerns that were creating factions in the body. He goes on to deal with other issues, but today's text highlights division over who people claimed to follow.

There were seemingly four different factions in the one church, perhaps more. Some claimed to follow Paul, others Apollo, others Peter, and still others Christ Jesus. If any church was splintered and divided over leadership concerns, this was it. Four or five groups were circling the wagons under a banner of following one or another church leader, even though none of those leaders were even present in Corinth!

That's right. It was not a question of division initiated by said Christian figures. This division began among the body and was projected onto the various leaders used to identify emerging brands of Christianity within the church body. Neither Paul, nor Apollo, nor Peter, nor Christ was stirring up the division in the church. They were being used as political poster children by groups and individuals in the church who had competing agendas. These claims to allegiance to one or another leader were being used to promote the status or spirituality of the various factions. At heart, it had little to do with the actual leaders in question, for their leadership was not being followed.

There is no telling who was behind the factious spirit in Corinth, especially as we have so few names of the church members and even less information about them. The specific identity does not really matter. Even Paul does not attempt to call our individuals stirring up the conflict. After all, the

issue was far greater than the personal attitudes and actions of one, two, or more individuals. A single individual can polarize and lead the formation of a church faction. Developing five different factions requires the actions of more than just one or two. It was not a case of singling out an offending church member, but addressing a systemic problem.

Corinth was a mess. They had brought into the life of the church attitudes they had learned in the pagan marketplace and in the halls of politics. They had learned how to foment intrigue, how to stir up emotions, how to manipulate others and applied that to church life for the same aims and objectives these tactics were used in the larger society. The players used these tactics for issues of personal advancement, power, and status. They claimed to be following one or another Christian leader, yet at heart they used those very claims to press forward their own personal agendas.

Paul's initial response was very simple: "Christ is not divided!" He went on to follow that up by reminding them that he did not go to Corinth to baptize a following for himself. He went to preach Christ Jesus. He wanted no one and authorized no one to use his name as a placard to rally a following and create a faction or party in the church. He called them rather to focus on Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus alone.

Either Christ and the gospel of Christ are sufficient for the church, or Christ and the gospel are worthless. Paul considered the factions arising around Christ and various leaders nothing less than tools to rip apart the church and take its focus off of the gospel and work of Christ Jesus. He wanted nothing to do with such factions and saw them as inimical to Christ Jesus.

Paul had not gone to Corinth to amass a following for himself. Paul had not gone to seek disciples of his own, but there were those in Corinth who could not seem to grasp the purpose of his call and actions. He had not preached in order that people would follow him, baptized followers for himself, or sought to work for his own advancement. He had gone to preach Christ Jesus and call others to follow Christ even as he sought to follow Christ. He had set aside his any personal interests in order to make Jesus Christ foremost in all he said and did. The faction using his name was working against the very principles and motives of his own ministry and more so against Christ Jesus as Lord.

Unwittingly, those behind the factions in Corinth had exchanged the gospel of Christ Jesus for something else. They had pitted individuals and groups against one another, rather than encouraged them to work for a united purpose in seeking to make Christ Jesus supreme in their lives.

Paul attempted to call them back to the actual gospel of Christ Jesus. In such a gospel we are not called to work for our own advancement. We are not called to rally a following to our particular cause or emphasis. We are not encouraged by Christ to defend causes, emphases, or anything else that pits one against another. Drama of that kind does nothing to advance Christ Jesus. It is rather designed to advance ourselves.

Paul called the Corinthian church to a different, higher purpose. He called them to set aside the party banners that separated them into various camps. He called them to remember that none of their emphases was sufficient before the cross of Christ. At the cross they paled.

What is the focus of our actions in the body of Christ? Any emphasis that distracts us from Christ Jesus is not simply a waste of time; it is a barrier to the proper focus of our lives. If our efforts in life do not lift up Christ Jesus consistently, they destroy what Christ died to achieve. The gospel is not about personalities, but about Christ Jesus. When will we focus our attention appropriately on Him alone?

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