

Everybody Follows Somebody

“Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?”
1 Corinthians 1:13.

We know more about the Corinthian church than any other group in the New Covenant. Paul had spent a year and a half there personally establishing the church (Acts 18:11) and had come to know them well. He shared his faith there diligently, and even shared his profession as a tentmaker with some of them. God had many of his elect in Corinth, and I'm sure Paul enjoyed much of their company, and the verbal assurance of peace and safety from God that he was to stay there and preach, Acts 18:10. Many commentators have called it a miracle that there ever even was a church in Corinth, Greece. It was after all an ancient Las Vegas on steroids. The church had a lot of issues. Paul's letters address their issues. This is partly why I believe the Bible to be true. It addresses real people, in real history, having real issues, with real truth. We have two letters written to this church from St. Paul. They're really his second and fourth letters to them. God did not wish us to have all four letters.

In chapter one of 1 Corinthians we see divisions among the saints there that were almost certainly regarding the Apostles, and Jesus himself. They were dividing themselves under a supposed allegiance to the Apostles and/or the Lord. It may have been that the people were dividing over themselves as teachers, and not the Apostles, but I believe that the divisions being made can be traced to apostolic headship. Even if the divisions were just among the Corinthian laity, Paul relates it to the Apostles in 4:6 to clearly address the issue. For various reasons there were factions forming among the saints in Corinth. Think of it like people picking football team favorites. The people were saying, “I'm a 49ers fan”. Others, “I'm a Browns fan”, and others were claiming other teams. They were dividing over Paul, Apollos, Peter (Cephas), and even Jesus himself. Each group undoubtedly made claims in the Faith as to why they felt their allegiances were the most correct, but it was all wrong. Paul's instructions to them on the matter made it clear that the Apostles were only representatives of Jesus. That Jesus had sent them to preach *the same gospel*, and that they did so. Since the messengers all had the same message, and that message was Jesus' message, it led to Paul's threefold rhetorical in 1:13 as cited above: “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” The Apostles were not divided either in Christ as their commissioning source, or in their message. Therefore, to divide them as they were was pointless. I would say that their divisions were symptomatic of other, deeper reasons, but the text doesn't go into specifics. The Apostles were all of the same Spirit with the same gospel. Dividing the indivisible is bad, however, are all divisions bad? My answer is a definite no, and it's why I'm writing this. I'm writing this letter because I believe that God calls us to divide at times.

Today, even just in America, there are so many denominations. I'm not talking religions right now. I'm talking denominations. Denominations are distinguishable views still united under something higher like our states under the federal government. All Christian denominations are subgroups of the Christian religion if they hold to what could be defined as the Faith's “core doctrines”. Those doctrines have been developed over time. Christianity is a religion based on a proper relationship with a person whose name is Jesus and whose title is “the Christ”. How we

understand some key aspects of Jesus and his message makes or breaks us. People were called “Christians” very early on in history (Acts 11:26) after first being called “Followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2; 19:9, 23; 24:14, 22). “Christian” is not a derogatory term. A Christian is “like Christ”. While Christians vary greatly on many things they will all agree on topics like 1) the inspiration of Scripture’s 66 books, 2) the Doctrine of the Trinity, 3) a justification wholly by faith *alone*, 4) Jesus’ bodily Resurrection, 5) Jesus’ sinlessness, 6) Jesus’ virgin birth, 7) Jesus’ exclusivity as the only way to heaven, and 8) that we must be born again which will change us in relation to our sin. This means that we won’t love it or make excuses for it in our lives. These eight truths stand alone and yet they also stand together. To divide teachers who truly affirm these truths based on secondary reasons is almost always very wrong. It would be like what the Corinthians were doing among Jesus and the Apostles.

I have always been struck by the truth found in statements like the following. This one’s from Charles Spurgeon: “I bless God that there are so many denominations. If there were not men who differed a little in their creeds, we should never get as much gospel as we do...God has sent different men to defend different kinds of truth...” Amen. *I find great value in our varying convictions, but only when it’s firmly understood that denominationalism is not the same as religious pluralism.* I honestly believe that God is setting up believers for some of the sweetest fellowship the church has ever seen as a result of it all. It will be a unity and sweetness of truth and fellowship therein. Paul, Peter, Apollos and all of us non-apostles since all differ a little in our creeds. We can see clearly that even under inspiration, the Apostles were led to stress different aspects in the Faith. James and Paul’s complimentary focus on works and faith is a stroke of God’s genius as he focused their inspired words to reflect multiple facets of the same saving (grace and faith alone) truth. We would not have such a robust understanding of grace and its fruit without our distinct focuses. This is true in good and bad theology, really. We all see fit to stress what the other does not when we love Jesus even today in our sermons. Like instruments in one grand symphony, the body performs its various and distinct functions to create one sound under the composer...even in chaotic musical evolutions. There is one Lord, one Faith, and one baptism with each generation having both the advantages and disadvantages of the last ones. The Apostles received the fullness of the revelation, and we affirm it both in its parts and in its entirety in varying ways. In every culture those of the same Lord will have to live among non-believers, and we will all always have to offer our apologetics. We should not deny the God who unites us in this. How could we? Could a sister’s denial of her brother’s idiosyncrasies actually change their DNA? No, they’re siblings. In the Holy Spirit we are one in Christ. This is a spiritual reality. We are united in Christ, not first by creed, but by the Holy Spirit into whom we’ve all been baptized. This was happening in Christ from the very first day before most of us in the church could even read it or write it down. From this (and this only) comes our unity in written beliefs and practices throughout the centuries. Christians are of the same household. If that is true then God, from his word, is our collective teacher and we cannot (will not) deny him. In the certainty of God’s caring leadership we dare not be so arrogant as to assume that we need to “reinvent the wheel” in every generation. We should learn from those who’ve gone before us because they learned from those who served before them, and so on, and so on with Jesus as our head and our ultimate teacher. It is in the underlying knowledge of a unity first in the Spirit that I find divisions in truth godly as needed.

To divide Peter, Paul and Apollos, or any Apostle from Jesus is not a valid division. It is not warranted either by Spirit or creed. However, here’s my question, what if it’s Paul and a

Judaizer with an accursed gospel in Galatians 1:8-9? Paul said he wished their castration in 5:12 he was so angry at these heretics for perverting the gospel. They did not preach his message because they were not sent from Jesus. He names none of these Judaizers, but let's name one of their chief advocates "Gatsby". What if Gatsby's heretical teaching was actually being defended by some teachers in the church in Corinth? What if then we read statements like: "I'm of Paul and not of Gatsby"? Would it have been wrong of some to say, "I am of Paul" or, "I am of Apollos", etc., against Gatsby, in such an instance? Would it be wrong to distance themselves from Gatsby and his followers? Would that be wrong? No. It would not be wrong; it would be wise. It would be necessary. It would be godly. Gatsby should actually be ejected eventually if he does not repent. Names and titles can help us, as they have from the beginning, to align ourselves where we ought to be aligned. Paul told the Romans to "...note those who cause divisions and offenses, contrary to the doctrine which you learned, and avoid them." Romans 16:17. Division should represent complete spiritual division when it's required to. This is not only wise, but commanded in Scripture.

Yes, it can be silly. Yes, some councils in history have been complete shams. Yes, people have divided in churches over whether or not the stage flooring should be of wood or concrete. Yes, having flowers or not in the sanctuary have made some "lesser saints" part ways. If such issues were discussed in first century house churches we'd see such issues in Scripture, but we don't because they weren't. I'm not talking about dividing over our puny selves. That's not what Paul has in mind in that church in Romans 16:17 either. I'm talking now about the validity of divisions over Christ and his truth. There's a difference. Sometimes less is more.

If a messenger carries a false message we're not dividing Christ or his truth when we divide from them. John writes: "If anyone comes to you and does not bring this teaching, do not receive him into *your* house, and do not give him a greeting." 2 John 9. Paul repeatedly told the Galatians: "But even if we, or an angel from heaven, preach any other gospel to you than what we have preached to you, let him be accursed," Galatians 1:8. This is a worthy division because it's over the truth of Jesus. If a Judaizer was found in a Galatian church after this letter they were to divide from him sharply. Each man's responsibility was to say "I'm of Paul, and *not* that guy" until the matter was resolved. This would be true in Rome, Galatia, Corinth, or anywhere else. In that same book, Galatians, Paul literally got up in Peter's face. He writes: "Now when Peter had come to Antioch, I withstood him...before *them* all...to his [hypocritical] face...when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel..." This is a mixing/condensing of Galatians 2:11-14a. Was this wrong of Paul? What if someone watching had leaned over to a buddy and said, "I'm with Paul on this one"? Here we have two men with the same Lord and the same gospel, but one, at this point, according to the other, is being a hypocrite. Are they "divided"? The answer is no. Friend, while this was not a "comfortable dispute" it was a necessary one. God brought Peter correction through Paul, and Peter later wonderfully endorsed Paul in his own letter, even as Paul loved Peter and never denounced him or called for division against him after this point. Peter responded right. Paul saw it as a point worth addressing, he addressed it, and it was over. It would appear that Peter conceded as we have no more facts than this, and we never hear of it affecting the churches again. Correction is not necessarily division.

Now on to the main point. None of us reading this, with near 100% certainty, picked up a Bible one day on our own and became a believer. We were all taught by a pastor, a parent, a friend, or, as in my case mainly at the start, a video or MP3 audio file. We all learned from someone. Everybody follows somebody. If those someones were indeed right then siding with

them against so many others who are not right is not bad. In fact, we have to do it. So, it's either Paul or Gatsby, Athanasius or Arius, Justin Martyr or his Trypho, Augustine or Pelagius, Luther or Eck (either one). In these examples we see that taking sides is not only *not* wrong, but wise. If you know the history of the debate and you're debating with a Pelagian it's of great advantage to be able to simply say "I'm of Augustine" on the matter. Who, knowing their Bibles and God the Spirit does not choose Luther's side over Eck on the matter of justification? Forget what the masters in Paris thought. Saying "I'm of Luther" on the matter of imputation saves a lot of time. This must be understood. Denominations, originally at least, may all be said to be born from such things. In denominations we have differences over a great many things, but this does not mean that we're divided. Knowing where Luther, Zwingli or Calvin stood on the Lord's Supper, for example, may allow me to pick a side with a "I'm with Zwingli" statement, but that doesn't mean that I'm anathematizing Calvin or Luther because of their views. I shouldn't. Luther may carve in the toppled table while Zwingli's talking, but that does not have to cut the truth apart entirely. We should learn this from them. My point is that differences in secondary things, and our known association with them, can help and it's not "division" in any negative sense of the word. We have lost the ability to debate in the church today because we're a bunch of unlearned wimps for the most part who spend 9 of every 15 minutes apologizing for our apologetics, the next three dealing with our offense that others disagree, one more explaining that it's always "just our opinion," and the last two throwing out texts at each other like a textual tennis match. We should be able to vehemently debate secondary things and still not divide, or feel that we must. We should be able to fight, walk away from the table for a moment in anger, return to the table, call each other fools for our opinions on this or that, and at the end of that time praise God that he saves us both!

Catholics, Mormons, Seventh Day Adventists, The Orthodox Church, United Pentecostals, Word Faith gurus, today's life coaches, Jehovah's Witnesses, The Church of Christ (left wing) and more, all claim to be Christians. They claim it, but in doctrine or practice, as all of these systems currently stand today, they are not Christian. They all either deny the true God, or the gospel, or both. We are thus required to divide from them all. It's us and them. All of these groups, at times in history, have been represented by certain debaters. They all presented their heresies. If anyone were to claim the side of a Christian in those debates it would not be the kind of foolish division that we see addressed by Paul in Corinth. It is not unwarranted. It would instead be as Paul later advised them a "Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord. Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you" 2 Corinthians 6:17 situation. We must claim a side when claiming a side is good. When it expresses needed division for truth. If the sides are clearly represented at any point in history by certain people, then choosing a person as a side would be wholly appropriate.

Coming inside the Faith, every denomination today, without exception, is born from exactly such things. There are no Protestant denominations that were not at some point first established by an individual or group of individuals. Yes, even non-denominationalism in its various flavors could indeed be traced to someone or a small group of someones. Even if one is unaware of it, to claim membership in any group is to align with those someones. If you're a Baptist, for example, you line up with someones in history. John Smyth formed the first Baptist church in Amsterdam in the early 17th century. Despite any issues with Smyth's theology, a Baptist can trace at least part of his denominational lineage back to him. A Presbyterian traces his to John Calvin. Lutherans to Luther. Methodists to John Wesley. Each will make their

varying claims to historic Christianity before the Reformation, but it's from the Reformation that our modern denominations descend without exception.

No one is an island...especially for two thousand years now since Jesus has been building his church post his Ascension! *Everyone follows someone*. There is a huge modern anti-intellectualism/anti-church-institutionalism that says things like, "I don't follow any man; I just follow Jesus." This is not true. It's also, however, contrary to the goal of every solid denomination. Every denomination's founder(s), without exception, would desire their followers to be directly seeking Jesus Christ as their principle head. Saying "I follow John Calvin" is no different than saying "I follow Jesus" if both you and John Calvin follow Jesus by Calvin's teaching. Saying, "I believe like my buddy Mike" is not denying Jesus as your principle teacher. Maybe Mike's just a lot smarter than you are. Maybe he has written things that enthrall you. Maybe Mike knows Greek and you don't. Maybe Stephanie knows Hebrew. Scriptures says that God "Himself gave some *to be* apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ," Ephesians 4:11-12. We'd be fools to think that some of those pastors, teachers and evangelists aren't used in a multigenerational manner where their words have been recorded.

Saying "I follow Paul" is not a denial that one follows Jesus directly. There are I would argue three levels of authority with two that I call "reflexive authority". You could also call these last two "vested authority". I'm sure it's been called by other titles in history. To rightly follow Jesus directly is actually accomplished at all three levels simultaneously in the Holy Spirit. There is the authority of God himself, the authority given to the Apostles, and the authority given to every believer. God's authority needs no definition; it is utterly supreme. Let's call God's authority a level three authority. The last two are the two levels we'll look at. The authority given to the Apostles in every generation in the foresight of God is such that it extends to what they wrote. Their words are inspired words, or God breathed words, 2 Timothy 3:16. The apostolic writings come through the minds of the Apostles like pens in God's hands. They knew the Old Covenant or Old Testament well and by the regenerative work of salvation they understood and taught what came to be called the New Covenant or New Testament. Let's call the Apostle's level a level two authority. What does it look like? It's not that St. Peter himself is infallible at level two, but that his writings are. Now, Peter would not speak heretically in his life or receive the revelation via automatic writing, but not everything he said, in and of himself, was infallible. Peter may have said that Aristotle was the finest philosopher in ancient Greece when in fact it was his predecessor Plato, or his successor Alexander. When Peter wrote on the Faith, however, his words were perfect. His will is superintended in a way that calls for my trust in an infallible text. Peter has an authority as God's special ambassador. He was directly commissioned by Jesus post his Resurrection as one of the Apostles. Their names are written in heaven, and in the strictest sense there are only twelve of these forever. No one since speaks like they did. When they (roughly nine of them) wrote the 27 letters we read today called the New Testament, those truths are binding on you whether you come from Ohio or Afghanistan. *Their words are God's words*. Their words carry no less weight than God's...because they're actually God's words, 2 Timothy 3:16 again. We believe this as a vested authority. The Apostles are not God. To worship them would be evil. They simply speak *for* God. They are the pens in his hand. Jesus told his first twelve Apostles/disciples (see Matthew 10:24-26 to see them also called disciples): "He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me", Matthew 10:40. To deny the message of these disciples is denying Jesus himself. To deny

the message of the disciples is also to deny the men we know as Jesus' disciples. Paul said, "If anyone thinks himself to be a prophet or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things which I write to you are the commandments of the Lord" in 1 Corinthians 14:37. His words here were in direct relation to specific truths regarding men and women in the church, but the same truth is in place over all of Paul's words. They are Scripture. The next level of vested authority is that which all Christians receive. It reflects apostolic authority, but is not equal to it. If we speak in agreement with the words of the Apostles then to deny us is to deny them, and to deny them is to deny God. Therefore, to deny us is to deny God as well so long as we are certain of apostolic truth in the Scripture. There are degrees of certainty and weight in our various doctrines. There is adiaphora, or things disputable. The level of certainty with which we can be certain we speak in line with the Apostles determines the level of the certainty of the claim that to deny us is to deny God. So, to prove reflexive authority at level one, our level, with an example, let's look to 1 Corinthians 15:14: "And if Christ is not risen, then our preaching *is* empty and your faith *is* also empty." In 1 Corinthians 15's 58 verses, Paul hangs absolutely everything on Jesus' physical Resurrection. *If there is no physical Resurrection, pay Christianity no attention he says because it's useless.* He says this in numerous redundant certainties. This authority is from level two when he declares it and thus level three also. If I at level one say to my friend on the Blackhawk, "Jesus physically rose again from the dead" and he says, "No he did not" then his denial *of me* is actually a denial of God. I can and must say this because Paul's teaching on the certainty of Jesus' physical Resurrection is unquestionably clear. Since I know that they speak in line with God's level three authority then I dare not take lightly my study of their writings. What a responsibility I have then as an ambassador of God to get things right, 2 Corinthians 5:20-21. Peter writes to the church: "If anyone speaks, *let him speak* as the oracles of God..." 1 Peter 4:11a. We can't therefore always get away with a "now this is just my opinion" kind of thing. Not when we're talking about God. Do you speak about God as a mouthpiece or oracle of God? 2 Timothy 2:15.

Every Christian gets every single bit of spiritual revelation he or she receives directly from God. It is God the Holy Spirit who truly reveals the Son of God and all his truth to the hearts of his elect. Only he can! It is not really men, their books, works, or sermons that ultimately do so. However, since God has chosen the verbal message preached to save sinners and the verbal message preached to edify believers we cannot refuse our authority at level one. Paul writes of civil government that "...there is no authority except from God" in Romans 13:1. Are we to assume that the church has no authority? See Psalm 149:6. Paul ordered Timothy to preach to others in 2 Timothy 4:2. This is verbal. To Titus, Paul says that God, "...has in due time manifested His word through preaching" throughout history in Titus 1:3. Jesus gave his first Apostles and prophets to every generation in their inscripturated descriptive and prescriptive roles, and his evangelists and pastor/teachers to every generation, Ephesians 4:11; Luke 11:49; 1 Corinthians 12:28. We have an authority many are frankly too cowardly to assume. We can't be. We must humbly take hold of the cross. The cowardly are damned, Revelation 21:8.

Every denomination functions corporately at level one every day. Ministers in every denomination are charged with faithfully discharging their duties as teachers. Pastors will answer to God for how they pastored their own. Pastors are teachers. Teachers always incur stricter judgments, James 3:1. We all follow someone without exception. We are all part of one church that is now two thousand years old. None of us "goes straight to God" and yet, through each other, and the Apostles, that's precisely what God's designed for the church to do. We have a

Bible. It has come to us through men from God. We men now go to God through it. Let us know why we do. Let us ask questions and go to the Bible alone as our sole authority for the sides we must claim. Let us divide when it's right and unite when it's right. Let us remember that claiming sides can be bad, but that it can also be very good. Jesus says, "He who is not with Me is against Me, and he who does not gather with Me scatters" in Luke 11:23. There are scatterers, and there always have been. 2 Peter 2:1. If the church today keeps pretending that it's job isn't to help each other distinguish gatherers from scatterers then our kids will be in even more trouble than we are. We all follow someone. In fact, we all follow a whole lot of someones. Who do you follow? Does that someone follow Jesus?

Thank you for your attention to this letter.