

## **BE A FOLLOWER OF CHRIST NOT OF YOUR CHURCH**

**Today's Text: 1 Cor. 1: 1- 17**

### **Extracts:**

*Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe's household, that there are contentions among you. Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*  
[1 Cor. 1: 10-16]

*I first heard this story during my visit to Dublin, Republic of Ireland, in April 1989. A rich young Muslim student from an Arab country once found himself in the same class with two Irish students in a British university. He soon discovered that they were not on speaking terms with each other, even though each of them was helpful to him. One day, he invited both of them out. Over dinner, he asked them why they seemed quite hostile to each other whereas they were very warm to him, a foreigner from a different culture and religion. One of them replied that it was because he was Catholic while the other man was Protestant (Catholics and Protestants were political enemies in that part of the UK). Confused, the young Muslim retorted, "But you are both Christians, aren't you?"*

*Yes, they were both Christians, supposedly the followers of Jesus Christ. But they saw themselves as followers of their denominations, a phenomenon popularly referred to as churchianity. If you think that that cannot happen to you, think again! For example, many believers in our various churches would rather believe what their leaders tell them than what they read in the Bible. Some claim that their leaders cannot err, that the tradition of their denomination is superior to the word of God in the Scriptures. Some have been brainwashed to believe that only members of their denomination will go to heaven! Within each denomination, there are even cliques and factions.*

*Such contentions are hardly new. They were also in the early church. In this week's Bible verses, Paul was confronted with divisions in the Corinthian church where believers claimed to be followers of Christ's disciples rather than of Christ Himself. Are you a follower of your church or denomination or of Christ? Let us find out from this week's challenging study.*

## 1. Background: The true follower of Christ

On one occasion, John the beloved disciple of Jesus came to Him and said, “Teacher, we saw someone who does not follow us casting out demons in Your name, and we forbade him because he does not follow us.” Jesus replied, “Do not forbid him, for *no one who works a miracle in My name can soon afterward speak evil of Me, for he who is not against us is on our side*” [Mk 9: 38-40].

The problem is that only God (who sees the heart) knows those who are for Him. Looking at the spectrum of churches and denominations that we see around the world, it is increasingly more difficult to us humans to know who is for Christ or who is against Him. Writing on a vision of the coming kingdom, Isaiah said, “And in that day, seven women shall take hold of one man, saying, ‘We will eat our own food and wear our own apparel; only let us be called by your name, to take away our reproach’” [Is. 4: 1]. Jesus is the groom and the bride of Christ is the church [Eph. 5: 24-25; Rev. 19: 7]. Are denominations now trying to “seduce” Him by merely answering His name but not actually following Him?

That is what Paul felt when he wrote his first letter to the Corinthian church. The information that he had received from those of the household of Chloe was not that edifying. Sectarianism had eaten deep into the fabric of the church and there was need to set the records straight as to who, indeed, were the true followers of Christ. Paul’s arguments can be summarised as follows:

### a) *The Church of Christ is a body of believers, not of buildings*

Paul’s epistle was written “To the church of God which is at Corinth, to *those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord*, both theirs and ours” [1 Cor. 1: 2]. Clearly, Paul was not writing to all the worshippers that congregated in the church at Corinth but only to those among them who were truly born-again and set apart as true followers of Christ. Therefore, the Church of Christ is a body of believers, not of buildings.

That is the Lord’s clear message in response to John’s question that we had mentioned earlier. John, like most of us, looked at the church as a “building” (“does not follow us”) but Jesus looked at it as a “body” (“is on our side”). As sociologists would say, the definition of a situation is real in its consequences. When you define the church as a building, then it is only those who come to that building that you will regard as your brothers and sisters in Christ. On the other hand, when you see church as the body of Christ, then whoever accepts Jesus as Lord and Saviour and practises same you will see as brethren in Christ. ***Churchianity breeds religion; Christianity produces true worship and true love.***

### b) *Christ is the Head of the Church, not individuals*

Paul wrote, “Now, I plead with you, brethren, *by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*, that you *speak the same thing*, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the *same mind* and in the *same judgment*” [v. 10]. He added, “For it has been declared to me concerning you... that there are contentions among you... that each of you says, ‘I am of Paul,’ or ‘I am of Apollos,’ or ‘I am of Cephas,’ or ‘I am of Christ’” [vv. 11-12]. Some believers saw themselves as followers of Christ’s disciples, such as Paul, Apollos and Cephas (Peter); and just a fraction saw themselves as followers of Christ.

The situation has got worse over time. To give you a good view of the situation, here is a profile of modern churches that you may have come across:<sup>1</sup>

- Exclusive clubs

Churches have become exclusive clubs, segregated by race or ethnicity, location or class. In fact, people may work together in the city from Monday to Friday but separate into enclaves on Sunday. Some go to church on Saturday while others go on Sunday and many others several times each week.

We all may use the same Bible but there are as many versions as there are denominations! For example, the Roman Catholic Bible has some books that you will not find in the Protestant bibles. *Denominational rules and regulations* dictate whether we close or open our eyes, or stand, kneel or sit when we pray, how to confess our sins, on what days and at what times to come for service, or what constitutes “good conduct.” In some denominations, you have to repeat your water baptism before they regard you as their member! On one street in any Christian district, you can count so many different churches and yet, they are exclusive clubs to their members!

The church at Corinth experienced contentions because some claimed to be followers of Paul or Apollos or Peter or Christ. Paul had to remind them that only Christ was crucified on the cross [**1 Cor. 1: 10-13**]! Paul also wrote to the Ephesians, “There is one body, and one Spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling; one Lord, one faith, one baptism” [**Eph. 4: 4-5**].

- Superiority complex

---

<sup>1</sup> This section is taken from “Churchianity at war with Christianity,” *Weekly Bible Study Series*, Vol. 4 No 6: 9 March 2003;  
[http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume\\_4/PDFs/6\\_ChurchianityatwarwithChristianity.pdf](http://www.bibleresourcecentre.com/Volume_4/PDFs/6_ChurchianityatwarwithChristianity.pdf)

Those who have had the privilege to worship in several denominations [orthodox, gospel/Pentecostal or spiritual churches] will discover that they all share one thing in common: ***each one feels and behaves as if it is superior to everyone else!*** Whoever worships God anywhere else will not go to heaven! Their own interpretation of the word of God is the only true version. We measure church growth by the number of new members that we can draw away from other denominations, especially those that we consider keen rivals!

- Absence of Christian love or life  
Paul used the word, “contentions,” to describe the situation in the church at Corinth [1 Cor. 1: 11]. In the modern church, the discontent within each congregation may even amaze you. Divisions due to immorality, mismanagement, backbiting, doctrinal error, etc., are preferably swept under the carpet than resolved. Outside of the walls of the church, there may be no social relations among members due to greed and envy. ***In the absence of the Holy Spirit to make Jesus real in our daily living, pretended piety becomes the banner, and “Thou shalt not be caught” becomes the only commandment that members obey! How can you spread love to non-believers when even believers are love-starved?***

It is only when we realize that the head of the church is not our pastor but Jesus Christ that we can become His true followers.

c) *Therefore, the Church is subordinate to Christ and to God*

The reported contentions in the Corinthian church got Paul worried and he asked them. “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” [1 Cor. 1: 13]. The answer to each of those questions is an unequivocal “No!” Therefore, Jesus the Christ is the Head of the Church as God is the Head of Christ [Eph. 5:23; 1 Cor. 11: 3].

***In sum, Paul has challenged true Christians, true followers of Christ, to give up religion and work on their relationship with Him.*** When Jesus was once told that His mother and brothers were outside seeking Him, He replied, “Who is My mother, or My brothers?” Then, looking around in a circle at those who sat listening to Him, He answered His own question, “Here are My mother and My brothers! For ***whoever does the will of God is My brother and My sister and mother***” [Mk 3: 31-35].

Nevertheless, God is a God of variety. There are over six billion people on earth but each one has a distinct finger print! When human beings were one, spoke one language and desired to live in one city so as not to be scattered “abroad over the

face of the earth,” God confused “their language, that they [might] not understand one another’s speech” [Gen. 11: 1-7]. That is why from the rising of the sun to its going down, the Lord’s name is to be praised [Ps. 113; 3] – with dance, timbrel and harp and loud singing [Ps. 149: 1-6]. Therefore, the God of variety loves the organ music piped from Westminster Abbey in the UK as well as the melodies of talking drums from African spiritual churches. So, *the call for uniformity of Christian faith is not the same thing as uniformity in the modes of Christian worship*. What Paul is advocating is that believers should focus on Jesus, not on their church leaders. But can you do that?

## 2. Let us return to Christianity!

Let us restate the obvious: *a Christian is the true follower of Christ* “for other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” [1 Cor. 3: 11]. Therefore, *any denominational foundations that take Christians away from focusing on Jesus, the author and finisher of their faith, are misleading them to sectarianism and error*.

In order to return to the “good old days” of true Christianity, believers in *every denomination* should endeavour to do the following:

### a) *Promote communication with all fellow believers*

*Communication can break down walls of ignorance*. Many missionaries have gone from Europe and America to Africa to teach the “backward peoples” about Jesus only to come back humbled by the high level of spiritual development there. In like manner, it is when Christians of different denominations interact and fellowship together that they can come to appreciate that we have more things in common than divide us.

### b) *Behave wisely, not gullibly!*

A gullible mind has nothing in it. Therefore, junk can be swept into it and the owner will not notice! *Any belief or practice that you cannot find in or that contradicts the word of God is junk*. A renewed mind, on the other hand, is very knowledgeable and alert. It does not allow junk to settle down but is ready to accept whatever is better than is currently there. That is called behaving wisely. *True Christians should behave wisely, not gullibly*. That is why God told Joshua to meditate on the word of God day and night [Josh. 1: 8]. Those who delight in the law of God and meditate on it day and night are “like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, ... and whatsoever [they do] shall prosper” [Ps. 1: 2-3]. Only a transformed mind can prove the will of God, what is that good, acceptable and perfect [Rom. 12:2].

### c) *Love all at all times*

The word of God says, “In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins. Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. *No man has seen God at any time. If we love one another, God abides in us, and His love has been perfected in us*” [1 Jn 4: 10-12]. The early church exhibited genuine love and exemplary Christian conduct. The believers “continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and *fellowship*, and in the breaking of bread and in prayers... All that believed were together, and *had all things in common, ... continuing daily with one accord, ... with gladness and singleness of heart.*” As a result, they found favour with God and “all the people” and “the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved” [Acts 2: 42-47]. The disciples, that is, the followers of Christ, exhibited such qualities before the Gentiles in Antioch and they called them “Christians” [Acts 11:26].

*There is only one fold and one Shepherd, the Lord Jesus Christ [Jn 10: 14-16]. There is only one faith and one baptism from the one Lord Jesus who has through His Church [in different denominations and locations] distributed duties to us as apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers [Eph. 4: 5,6,11]. Anything else is junk. God loves variety but hates confusion. That is Paul’s message in this week’s study.*

### 3. Conclusion: Only Jesus can lead you to His Father!

Thomas, one of the twelve apostles, once asked Jesus, “Lord, we do not know where You are going, and how can we know the way?” Jesus replied, “I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through Me” [Jn 14: 5-6]. When the same Thomas was told after Jesus had risen from the dead that He had been seen by the other disciples, he said, “Unless I see in His hands the print of the nails, and put my finger into the print of the nails, and put my hand into His side, I will not believe.” But when the Lord showed Himself later and challenged Thomas to have the empirical evidence he was clamouring for, Thomas with humility replied, “My Lord and my God!” [Jn 20: 24-28].

How many believers today can search for Jesus with such a level of scrutiny to be sure that their faith is anchored on irrefutable truth? Can your zeal for Jesus take you over and above pastor- worship that seems to pervade the modern church? Can you be a true follower of Christ and not of your church or denomination?

I dare you!