

## Jason Upchurch - 1 Corinthians 3:16-4:5 - Why We Don't Divide

Okay we are getting to the more complicated part of Paul's argument here and my goal is just to simply smooth this out for you this morning. We're going to see some repeated themes as well as some new points but the big takeaway here is simply: Stop dividing over your favorite teacher.

Before we dive in to the specifics let me just say that there is a reason Paul goes on for 4 chapters about division in the church. This has always been a problem. Whether in the book of Acts or Corinth or Galatia or churches of Asia Minor in Revelation. Part of our sinful human nature is to find ridiculous things to divide over. People divide over Bible versions, views on spiritual gifts, end times positions, type of music, favorite teacher.

And part of the sin that's in us is that we try to justify in our minds and to others that what we're dividing over is legitimate. Are there times to divide? Of course. If a church won't deal with sin or if they stray from the gospel or they don't know what a man or woman is or if they don't know what marriage is. There are times to divide. But for the most part what we see throughout the Bible is encouragement to unity and grace and patience with each other as we work things out.

One of beautiful things we see in Paul's life is his unimaginable patience with churches as they try to work things out. And here Paul is patient as he seeks to guide the church toward unity. He doesn't just simply say "stop dividing over your favorite leader" - he actually gives us 4 theological reasons as to why we should stop dividing over our favorite leader.

Stop dividing because we are the Temple of God.

Stop dividing because God will destroy those who destroy his temple.

Stop dividing because your leaders are actually your servants.

And stop dividing because your leaders will stand before God in judgement.

So let's dive in.

### 1) Stop dividing because we are the Temple of God. Read 13-17

So Paul is using all kinds of metaphors and illustrations and he expects us to keep up with him. The illustration he's using here is that we are the Temple of the living God. The local church collectively is the house of God. God lives in us and we should treat one another like God's Temple.

Remember we saw last time that we can build on the Temple with gold, silver, or precious stones - things that are eternal and spiritual and good. Or we can build on each other with things that are trivial and menial and worthless - wood, hay and straw. These things aren't sinful, but they don't matter in the long run and will be burned off in the judgement.

But, sadly, there's something else that can happen to God's Temple: it can be attacked and destroyed. When people attack Christians, when professing believers attack each other, when divisions are created over trivial matters we are proverbially tearing down the Temple of God.

And this isn't talking about persecution from the outside. This is when professing believers attack each other and divide they are tearing down the place where God resides. God resides in his people and if we tear down God's people then we're taking a wrecking ball to God's Temple.

Now, to be fair, we really don't really understand just how sacred temples were in ancient times. In America we just don't have that kind of history. When we lived in the Tri Cities there was a break in at one of the older churches in Richland and some vandals came in and tore up the church. They spray painted the walls and pews, they cut things up. And I think in the end they did about \$50k in damage in a matter of minutes. And rightly, there was a collective outrage because this is a building that is for worship. It made the news and people were upset. But even then, we don't have a sense of just how absolutely revered temples were in ancient times.

Corinth specifically had many temples in the city to all kinds of false gods. And the temple buildings were elaborate and beautiful. In fact, many of the temple structures can still be seen today - at least their pillars can. People spent a lot of money and a lot of effort on temples to their false gods.

The Temple that would have come to mind for the church at Corinth would have been the Jewish Temple. And even though there was still an amazing Temple in Jerusalem when Paul wrote, the Temple every Israelite considered to be the be-all end-all was Solomon's Temple. And I want to spend a few minutes talking about how amazing Solomon's Temple was so we get a feel for what Paul's trying to help us understand. **Turn to 2 Chronicles 3** for a minute.

Now remember the initial building that Israel made to worship God in was the Tabernacle. That was sort of the mobile home for God. It was made out of leather and cloth and could be set up and taken down and moved around. That was made in the time of Moses and operated for almost 500 years until the time of Solomon. Solomon then constructed his Temple which knew no equal on the planet. If you remember that when the Queen of Sheba toured Jerusalem and saw all that Solomon had built including the Temple she had no more breath.

Fast forward 400-500 years and Solomon's Temple was destroyed by Babylon because Israel had fallen into sin. God sent in Nebuchadnezzar to destroy Jerusalem and the Temple and take the Jews captive to Babylon. They were in captivity in Babylon for 70 years and God graciously let them come back to the land of Israel. When they came back they rebuilt the Temple - called Zerubbabel's Temple because he was the guy who headed up the effort. But Zerubbabel's Temple paled in comparison to Solomon's Temple. It was just nowhere near as glorious.

Fast forward a few hundred years again and Herod the Great decided to take on a rebuilding project to win favor with the Jews. So he began a massive building campaign to recreate the Temple in all of its glory. It was called Herod's Temple and this was the Temple that Jesus worshipped in. In terms of size and structure it was absolutely amazing. But it never had the glory or prestige that Solomon's Temple had. Solomon's Temple and reign are always looked to as the golden age of Israel's Kingdom.

So there was the Tabernacle, Solomon's Temple, Zerubbabel's Temple and Herod's Temple. Herod's Temple was destroyed in 70AD when Rome leveled it brick by brick. And now there is no more Temple because God resides in his people - we are the Temple of the living God. Not just individually, but collectively as the body of Christ.

But to understand Paul's analogy I think we need to see what he's talking about in terms of the glory of Solomon's Temple. So here we have a description of the Temple in its glory. **Read 1-9**

By the way, a talent of gold is 75 pounds. So that's 45,000lbs of gold - 3 dump trucks full of gold. And in today's dollars, that's \$1.2billion in gold alone just for the walls of one part of the Temple. **Read 3:10-5:1**

This was God's house, God's Temple in the OT. And it was a golden temple filled with gold and silver. Absolutely no expense was spared and it was jaw dropping. Every aspect of the Temple was constructed with the greatest care, down to the nails they used. Did you catch that? The nails in the Temple were made with gold - almost a pound and a half of gold for each nail. The most menial thing was given the greatest care. Pots, shovels, everything was made to be the best and to last forever. If there was any wood used, it was overlaid with precious metal. Everything was amazing because this was God's house. They only used the very best things.

The physical reality in the OT gives way to the bigger spiritual reality in the NT where through faith in Jesus we become the Temple of God. The glory of the Triune God lives in us through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. This is Paul's illustration back in **1 Cor. 3**.

So this is where we take all that information about the OT Temple and start connecting things here. The Church is God's holy, sacred, blood-bought Temple. And this is the cool part about that. There's a sense in which every individual person who is a believer in the Lord Jesus is a Temple to God. But there's also an aspect where corporately - the people in the local church - are the Temple of God.

So in **Chapter 6** he'll say that we should not go sleep with prostitutes because our bodies are the Temple of God. So there's an individual aspect. In **Ephesians 2:21** Paul says we are all being built up into a Temple of God together - so there's a corporate aspect too.

So we are this sacred building, sacred home of God and we should be tearing God's home apart. We should be building it up.

Paul gives us a second reason to not divide:

2) Don't divide because God will destroy those who destroy his Temple. **Read 16-17**

Now, I don't know about you, but if I walked into my home after church and someone had been in there and trashed the place I wouldn't be too happy. And if that person was still in the home when I got back I don't think they'd be too happy either.

When I was a kid someone broke into my mom's house and I remember my step dad being absolutely outraged. He is not a believer and I remember the most colorful array of profanity and death threats ever. Vietnam vets have a special way of communicating death threats. But even unbelievers know you just don't go through someone's house and tear it up - there are consequences.

There are consequences when self-professed believers start tearing down God's house. That's what he's talking about here. He's not talking about outside persecution. He's not talking about the unbelieving Jews or the Roman soldiers. He's talking about the people in the church who are siding with their favorite apostle and causing division. They are actually destroying one another - and therefore destroying the house of God - by dividing over their favorite leader. Notice the flow of his argument. **Read 18-23**

Now, I don't know about you, but when I read this initially I thought: this is an odd transition. But the reason he starts talking about Apollos and Cephas again is because what they are doing when they divide and argue over their favorite leaders is tearing down the Temple of God. It's like they're going into God's house with dynamite and blowing it up. Not good. God's house - his people - are to be built up and protected at all costs.

Paul says "You destroy God's Temple, God destroys you." Bottom line. There is absolutely no place in the local church for frivolous division. There is nothing that God takes more personally than frivolous division because it's like taking a wrecking ball to his house.

Now, Paul leaves this open a little bit. The word he uses for destroy is not one that usually means eternal damnation. He's not saying that division is the unpardonable sin. He's warning the Corinthians after all in hopes that they will repent. But this is a personal vengeance that God will pour out on any who attacks his home.

And I think we all need to step back and consider how we treat each other. Are building each other up or are we tearing each other down. I don't have anything specific in mind, but I will say how we treat each other and talk to and about each other is very important to God.

It's easy to criticize and critique people who don't have all their stuff together. It's easy to want to simply divide because we're fed up with people. We need to be very very cautious how we talk about God's home, his people. Every word we speak about God's people will be on the table for judgment. And every frivolous or divisive word against his people is an attack on him.

So we don't divide because we are God's Temple. We don't divide because God will destroy those who destroy his home.

3) Stop dividing because church leaders are actually just servants. **Read 18-23**

If you remember from back in chapter 2, Paul has been contrasting worldly wisdom with godly wisdom. And the 2 are opposites. God confounds worldly wisdom. God's wisdom is completely contrary to the world. The Kingdom of God is an upside down Kingdom and that is seen in the way leaders are viewed in the Church.

Here, the wisdom of the world says “let’s side with our favorite leaders to get ahead.” And if we side with our favorite people the gospel will be advanced faster!

That’s a deception. It’s lying to ourselves to think that somehow if we create division it actually furthers the gospel. It can’t happen. Division is the worst kind of cancer in the church and - maybe ironically - the Bible says to amputate those who cause division. Get rid of them.

**Titus 3:10** says that for someone who stirs up division, you warn them once and then twice and then have nothing else to do with them because they are warped and sinful and self-condemned.

Causing division is the worst. It’s a stain on the gospel and threatens the mission of the church. The caveat, as we mentioned earlier, is when the truth of the gospel is on the line. But for the most part we do everything we possibly can to stay unified.

Dividing over ridiculous things like our favorite teacher is deception. We’re lying to ourselves if we think we’re preserving the truth while dividing over people. There’s no wisdom in that. There’s no truth. Only lies. And God will find out what’s really in our hearts. That’s the point of 19-20. **Read 19-20**

Paul grabs 2 quotes from the OT to show that boasting in certain people in order to “advance the gospel” will never pan out. God will hold us accountable if we try that.

Interestingly, he quotes Eliphaz from the book of Job: he will catch the wise in their craftiness. Eliphaz did say a few things right.

And he also quotes **Psalms 94** where the Psalmist talks about God taking retribution on those who attack God’s people: the thoughts of the wise are futile.

Here’s the thing we need to understand here: people very often try to justify division. They try to justify their devotion to a man or a cause or even a pastor.

Well, MacArthur said this. Wesley said that. Piper this. Sprout that. Tozer, Lewis, Luther, Calvin. Apollos, Peter. But these are all fallen men. They have all had very good things to say, and God has even used them for great things for his church. But we don’t stand or fall on men and we don’t boast in men. We stand or fall on the gospel and we boast in Jesus. **Read 21-23**

So this is where it all comes together. In God’s economy leaders are designed to serve - that’s **Vss. 21-23**. This is called servant leadership.

Jesus said in **Matt. 20:25**: you know that the rulers of the gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant and whoever would be first among you must be your slave.

This is where we get the term servant leadership. The Corinthians want to put themselves under ownership of the apostles. And Paul is saying, that’s not how our leadership works. We don’t lord our authority over people. We’re servants, slaves.

This is pretty clever actually. They had been saying “I belong to Paul” or “I belong to Apollos.” Paul says that’s absolutely backwards. You don’t belong to them, actually they belong to you.

In the church, everyone - including leaders - are designed by God to serve one another. You serve me and I serve you. You serve each other. There’s no hierarchy amongst us. The only hierarchy that exists is that Jesus is the head of us all.

We are servants of one another. We have different roles, but God has designed all of our roles to serve each other.

I mean it'd be weird if we were talking about yard work and someone said "I belong to lawn mower" and "I belong to shovel" and "I belong to weed eater." What do you mean you belong to the weed eater? The weed-eater is yours, it belongs to you. It serves you. Well, maybe your parents make you mow the lawn, in which case maybe you are of lawn mower. But the point is that these are tools that belong to us to get a specific job done.

That's how we all are in the church. Every single person who has been saved by grace through faith in Jesus has become a servant of every other person who has been saved by grace through faith in Jesus. Leaders included. Apostles included. Pastors included. The newest person in the faith included.

This is actually the amazing truth of the gospel: That when you were saved by Christ you became a child of God in the truest sense and now there is a sense in which everything in the world will one day belong to us. And in some measure it even belongs to us now. I mean, if God owns everything in creation, and we inherit everything from God, then we own everything in creation.

And the believer next to us can claim that exact same thing. And you might think that's a contradiction or just semantics. But when you're talking about our attitude toward each other there's a world of difference in saying "I'm willing to serve you in whatever you need" versus saying "This person is my master."

This is servant leadership. **Read 4:1-2**

So again Paul emphasizes he is just a servant of Jesus. That's all he is. The word itself here is interesting. It's *hypēretas*. Originally a *hypēretas* was a rower on a galley ship. You know those huge ships that had oars sticking out the sides and slaves would row all day long to keep the ship moving? That's what the word originally meant. It came to just mean generically a servant, someone who had no standing before anyone.

That's what Paul says. Your leaders that you're clamoring over are just rowers at the bottom of a ship. No glory. Stop dividing over rowers.

4) Last reason to stop dividing: Your leaders will be judged by God. **Read 3-5**

Paul doesn't care how the Corinthians view him. Or how anyone views him. Why? Because the only thing that really matters is how God views him.

And he says something pretty profound. He says, "I don't think I'm doing anything wrong or unfaithful in ministry" - he honestly doesn't know where he might be intentionally messing up. But that doesn't mean he's perfect. God will ultimately decide.

He's not talking about sin here, he's talking about faithfulness in ministry. Everyone is different. Some people are going to approach ministry different than others. Paul and Cephas and Apollos all had strengths and weaknesses and preferences. But ultimately God would judge how faithful they were.

So he says don't start judging your leaders before the judgment day. And for that matter, don't judge each other before the judgment day. Unless someone is in out and out sin, we are all just doing what we think God has called us to do in the way we can do it best.

God will sort it all out in the end. God will judge in complete fairness and complete righteousness. He calls balls balls and strikes strikes. And he will reward appropriately.

Until then, we strive for completely unity in the church, the Temple of God, for the glory of God. **Pray**