

Letters from Paul – Session Seven

Dear Corinthians: A House Divided

1 Corinthians 1:1-25

Divisions. Disunity. Two words that pretty much describe today's America. Have we, in our history, ever been this divided? Possibly, but it seems we have hit the outer edges of this not-so-positive reality. Obviously, we all have differing opinions on many things, and that's OK, especially if we deal with our differences in productive and respectful ways.

Try being a college football fan in the South. Even worse, try being a college football fan in the state of Alabama. Since I grew up there and have experienced it firsthand, I will say it is the single most polarizing issue in the state. Literal violence has occurred over the outcome of a single football game. Parents have skipped their children's wedding because it was scheduled during a football game. And sadly, this division has affected churches. And this is football. Toss in a political argument and it gets worse.

The church in Corinth did not have to deal with S.E.C. football or American politics but their issues were, nonetheless, pernicious, and the future of the church was compromised. Their issues centered on persons in leadership and theology. Paul dealt with their division-issues head on and in the usual forceful Paul manner.

The Issue(s)

"Where to start?" Paul must have faced this dilemma as he set out to address the questions and issues plaguing the struggling church in Corinth. Disunity is a root disease that over time can literally destroy both the vitality and function of a church. Possibly no other single issue can impact the life and health of a fellowship of believers as this one can. New Testament churches are to be unified in purpose, thought and love, projecting their "togetherness" to an already fractionalized world. Divided churches are their own worst enemies. How many

“yet-to-be reached” people actually want to add to the chaos of their lives by linking with a fractured church?

The Corinthian Symptom

“Now I appeal to you my brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.” (1 Cor 1:10).

Modern day Republicans and Democrats have nothing on the mid-first century Christians in Corinth when it comes to partisan politics. For a small, relatively new group, these Christians were divided into an amazing number of camps. The biblical ideal is to be of “one mind” as Paul writes, but in reality, there were multiple minds and opinions in play.

In Corinth there was a natural state of unease between Gentiles and Jewish converts. It was not uncommon in the first century church for Hebrew believers to view Gentiles as spiritually inferior. There is no doubt that the Gentile Christians lacked the historical and traditional faith experience enjoyed by Hebrew believers. However, this friction was not the worst display of disunity within this church. Paul’s focus was on the splitting up into parties of preference based on the leadership of actual persons. “There were four parties or rival factions in the Corinthian Church – a Paul Party, an Apollos party, a Cephas (Peter) party and a Christ Party”.

Anyone who has ever played kickball knows that dividing up into teams is a natural part of life. The church, however, is the one facet of life where any such division is counterproductive, even pernicious. Failure is the common result for a divided church and that was the probable looming destiny for the Corinthians if their disunity remained or progressed.

Parties & Factions

The church had lapsed into taking sides by person - some opting for Paul, others for Apollos, Peter or Jesus. We will never know the exact reasons for these splits of preference. They existed and seemed to be firmly entrenched to the point of creating distinct camps within the church. It is possible that those who opted for Paul had viewed his labor in the founding of the church or had heard of his miraculous salvation experience. The Apollos group was likely drawn by Apollos's oratory skills and intelligence (Acts: 18:21). The Peter reference is uniquely puzzling since there is no conclusive evidence that he served in Corinth. He was known to have traveled with his wife and could have visited Corinth at some point. It is also possible that his service with Jesus and success at Pentecost led to a form of fame among early believers.

The Christ group most likely represented those who saw themselves as "super spiritual" due to special blessings or unique insight. It was common for those who had seen Jesus in person to cite superiority in belief, faith and relationship. This was especially true of Hebrew Christians who accepted Jesus' Messiahship during his earthly ministry. It's easy to see how the self-centered views of this group could have led to discord and division within the church.

Teaching the Corinthians How to be Wise

Paul's approach to these divisions within the Corinthian church was to begin with the issue of wisdom. The root problem in the church was not their preference of leader or personality; rather it was their lack of supernatural wisdom. The Corinthians had been greatly influenced by classic, rational Greek thought. They were naturally inquisitive, logical thinkers who sought proof on all issues of consequence. This was also true of many Hebrews who had become very Greek-like in thought and action due to time spent in Greece and elsewhere in the Roman Empire.

Paul goes on the defensive by simultaneously utilizing and then destroying the use of logic and reason applied to faith in Christ. "Has Christ been divided?" was an illogical picture that forced the Corinthians to see their error in intellectual

ways. For a rational, logical thinker, the very thought of a divided person would be ludicrous, which was, of course, Paul's intent from the beginning. Even the Corinthian Christians were familiar with the unique link between the One Christ and the church. Beginning with Christ and extending through Pentecost, the theme of oneness and unity was prevalent. Just as one Christ could not be divided, neither should the church bearing his name be divided. In essence, they are one and the same in all ways spiritual.

The grounds of our allegiance to Christ, are first, that He is the Christ, the Son of the Living God; second, that He has redeemed us; third, that we are consecrated to Him in baptism. All these grounds are unique to Christ. To no other being in the universe do believers stand in the relationship that they all sustain to their common Lord. As, therefore, there is but one Christ, one Redeemer, one Baptism, Christ cannot be divided without violating the bond that binds them to Christ and to one another.

Paul goes on to ask, "was Paul crucified for you?" No doubt by this second question the Corinthians were saying, "No more, we give up, we get the point!" This question would, however, quickly strike at the center of misplaced priorities. Jesus the Messiah was crucified. Paul the supreme church planter and evangelist was merely a messenger. By invoking the crucifixion of Jesus, Paul reinforced the true uniqueness of Jesus Christ.

The Cure

No epidemic has ever been eradicated without first knowing the source of infection. Find the source and you have an opportunity to create a cure or, at the very least, to stop the spread of infection. The same line of thought could be applied to the Corinthian disease. The symptoms were manifested by disunity, but the source was clearly inferior spirituality. They were far too human in the ways they approached wisdom and faith. They attempted to apply natural wisdom to supernatural issues. God however, had turned natural wisdom upside down through Jesus and the cross.

In v. 23-24 Paul cites, *“Christ crucified as a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles.”* The Jews had hoped for a Messiah on the order of David. They sought a Messiah of power and might to lead them against Rome in ways both political and military. The Gentiles saw Jesus’ death on the cross as extreme weakness and the resurrection as impossibility. Simply put, only rank criminals die on crosses, and they do not come back to life. So, while Paul was describing Jews and Gentiles who were still dismissing Jesus as Messiah, he correctly described their overall tendencies of relying on traditional logic and rational thought.

The Fix

Step 1: The first step in overcoming disunity is to move away from finite natural wisdom and utilize the gift of supernatural wisdom supplied by the Holy Spirit. James described the two types of wisdom in 3:13-16.

“Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come from heaven but is earthy, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

James goes on to say that supernatural wisdom is pure and is of God. So, we have both Paul and James drawing a line between natural human wisdom and that provided by God through the Holy Spirit. The differences are clear. Faith fueled by natural wisdom will lead to dysfunction; supernatural wisdom leads to righteousness. This distinction is clear and is consistently taught throughout the New Testament.

C.K. Barrett sees Paul's wisdom as "more than a wise plan; wisdom is not merely the plan but the 'stuff of salvation'". So, the wisdom provided by God through the Holy Spirit is central to all of our faith thoughts and practices. It becomes the lens through which all else is viewed. It is difficult to default back to natural wisdom when viewing life through the lens of salvation and God's purposes.

Step 2: The subsequent next step is to practice unity. It's obvious that humankind isn't naturally prone to unity. In fact, the exact opposite would be closer to reality. It is possible, however, for Christians to unify and be like-minded. A word study reveals that Paul seeks unity on the big issues of faith. Barrett writes, "that you may all be agreed in what you say means literally, '*that you may all say the same thing*'".

The divisive issues were squarely major faith issues. Paul stresses the need to "think" alike on the major issues of faith. Another approach would be that there are certain absolutes integral to Christianity. Christians especially those within a church, must be like-minded in regard to these absolute beliefs they are to move in God's appointed direction. It's obvious that Christians will not agree on all aspects of faith. Paul knew this and only expected the Corinthians to agree on the absolutes.

Takeaways:

As you will note from your journey through 1 & 2 Corinthians, there is a great deal to be learned from the dysfunction and error of the church of Corinth. Chapter 1 provides insight into two potential problems that continue to plague churches.

First, we must focus on Jesus and not on the personality delivering the message. Far too many churches have seen the destructive result of people worshipping the messenger rather than the central focus of the message. Christ crucified, risen and ascended, that is the foundation for our existence as Christians. If believers move away from that single focus, dysfunction will certainly follow. If on his best

day Paul was merely a messenger, then all preachers and teachers should only aspire to the same goal.

Second, believers must tap into supernatural wisdom if God's will and purposes are to be known. There is very little room within the life of a Christian for conventional, natural wisdom. That approach to decision making is flawed, temporal and finite. It is only through the gift of spirit-wisdom that one can know what God purposes for life. Spirit-wisdom is the path to righteousness; natural wisdom is the slippery slope to all sorts of dysfunction, including disunity on a grand scale.

Third, it's our calling to be unique and different. If the rest of the world is lacking in unity the church must portray the extreme opposite. The church must be inclusive and together. The church cannot devolve into petty, unproductive camps that mirror flawed, human reasoning and logic. We are called and equipped to live above the fray. *Above the fray* is where non-faith persons can best see our genuine spirituality. *Above the fray* is where most people want to land. We know the way there. Let's lead.

Amen and Amen

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