

“Church Division and Multiplication”

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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Well, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) got underway this weekend with the election of our new Moderators and, as an elected commissioner from Pittsburgh Presbytery, I'll be making decisions that affect every church within our denomination. However, due to the coronavirus, we find ourselves casting votes in front of our computer screens within the confines and safety of our own homes instead of a large convention center in downtown Baltimore as was originally planned. Because it is an abbreviated assembly with discussion of all social and theological matters postponed till the NEXT GA--two years from now--it promises to be fairly orderly and peaceful. However, in the past, there have been some rancorous and fractured General Assemblies. A hundred and fifty years ago, with the outbreak of the Civil War, the church split in half over the issue of slavery- incidentally, a General Assembly that met in the sanctuary of a church I pastored in Syracuse, NY. It wasn't until the GA of 1983, over 120 years LATER, that the northern Presbyterians and the southern Presbyterians finally laid aside their differences and reunited. Paradoxically, while we were separated we called ourselves the “United Presbyterian Church,” but once we came together again, we removed the word “united” from our title and became just the “Presbyterian Church USA.”

But we weren't through yet- a hundred years ago, the denomination split again over what constituted the fundamentals of the Christian faith, and then a mere decade ago, we became divided once more over the ordination of homosexuals and allowing gay marriages to take place in our churches. The final resolution of those issues was extremely painful and in the process, we lost a number of members and a great deal of financial support over them. However, I felt the decisions we arrived at were the RIGHT ones and they made me extremely proud to be a Presbyterian. RIGHT NOW, the Methodist Church is wrestling with the SAME issues and has resolved next year to split into TWO SEPARATE denominations- one traditional and conservative, and the other progressive and more attuned to the changes going on in society. The reality is that churches, like democracy and human beings themselves, are not all sweetness and light as we'd like to believe. Rather, they're messy institutions which, on the whole, remain deeply conflicted with few answers as to how to achieve common consensus.

The Apostle Paul retained no such illusions about the Church and was continually having to contend with all sorts of problems and factions within her. We like to think of the church--the Body of Christ--as a “home” for God's people- as a “haven of rest” where people come to find tolerance, acceptance, and love. Yet, as we discover in the opening verses of his letter, it can often be anything BUT a loving and peaceful place! Paul was deeply troubled about the divisions he had heard of within the Corinthian congregation. Parties had been formed attaching themselves to different figures in the church so that some saw themselves as disciples of Paul, some of Apollos, while others were aligned with Peter and with Christ. Then there were sexual

improprieties going on that the leaders were turning their heads from. Finally, there was a quarrelsome spirit in that body whereby some were suing other members in court. His epistle is an attempt to set them straight and to help them achieve the kind of unity that Christ desired for them.

The divisions in the Corinthian church seem small when compared with the divided state of Christianity today. Open up the Yellow Pages and you'll find well over a hundred different congregations of varying denominations right here in southwestern Pennsylvania alone. The ecumenical movement has produced SOME organizational unity, yet there are probably more denominations, non-denominations, and Christian sects today than when the ecumenical movement began just after the Second World War. Even the Charismatic movement began with the hope that it would unite different church groups through a renewing work of the Spirit, but even among IT there are different factions. We too easily separate ourselves on the basis of doctrine, worship style, and denominational ties; we distinguish ourselves on the basis of race, class and ethnicity, although we are said to be of one body- the Body of Christ. This fracturing reflects more our own human weakness than it does God's activity among us. Dr. Martin Luther King rightly said, "The most segregated hour in America is at 11:00 on a Sunday morning."

The importance of unity has to be a Christian concern- it is a theme reiterated throughout the Bible. Think of the exhortation by Jesus to his followers to be one even as their Father in heaven is one with the Son and the Spirit in his High Priestly prayer from John 17. Through their unity, the world would then come to recognize the reality of the Godhead. Jesus was saying there that if we are truly united in love for each other, then we become the greatest proof there is to the existence of God. However, if we continue to remain a body beset by conflict and petty squabbles, we then become the most powerful proof to the COUNTER-argument- that there is no God, that for two thousand years, it has been a grand and elaborate fiction foisted upon the world. The Bible tells us that his disciples never DID become one until the day of Pentecost, when a hundred and twenty were assembled in one accord in the Upper Room. Only THEN did Christ bestow upon them his personal presence through the gift of his Holy Spirit; only after THAT did they begin "turning the world upside down" for the glory of God. Without that unity of mind and heart and spirit, the Church could NEVER have become the tremendous historical force it has throughout the ages.

But that unity is not the same as "uniformity." There are infinite differences among individuals- just as no two plants are the same and every tree is unique, so too is the HUMAN species. Every one of us has our own character, our own temperament, our own unique personality. We all come from different geographical locales with an array of different experiences, educational backgrounds, and occupations. Some of us are male while others of us are female; many of us are Caucasian and others may be oriental or Afro-American; some are Republicans and others are Democrats or Libertarians. In human society, as in the material world, variety and the power of variation is the principle of life while fixity and absolute uniformity is only found in death.

Christianity has always recognized these differences and it has attributed them to the fact

that our Divine Creator is a God of infinite variety and permutation. God is an artist and he paints from a palate of countless colors. What a boring and uninteresting place this world would be if everyone looked the same, talked the same, and believed the same things. However, amid all the diversity with which God has imbued the creation, there is another, EQUALLY fundamental principle at work. Beneath all the differentiation, there remains an underlying unity- one that is not imposed from without but arises from deep within; a unity that is not the result of some form of organizational or doctrinal enforcement but a spiritual motivation that compels us from the heart.

St. Paul spoke of that unity in the midst of diversity a few chapters later in this same epistle to the Corinthians when he instructs them about the Holy Spirit. He stresses that it IS possible for them to lay aside their many differences and to become one because in spite of the varieties of races and tongues and class and character and mental abilities that make up the Body of Christ, they are held together by a DEEPER principle and force- the presence of the Divine life in their midst. It is the unity of the Spirit who creates and holds together the Church. This is why in discussing it, he could say, “there are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operation, but it is the same God who works all in all.” We may not all think the same or feel the same or even worship the same, but regardless, it is the same God who works in us and through us, animating us!

For all the differences among us which we too often allow to divide us, there is an underlying need to abide together in relationship with one another, to live in community with each other. We are created by God to live in fellowship, and when we allow our differences to override our need for fellowship, then we fail to fulfill God’s purpose for our lives; we fail to achieve the true ends for which we were created. Paul knew better than ANYBODY that humanity’s deepest need is a genuine sense of community and he never stops stressing this enough throughout his writings. In Colossians chapter 3, he tells them that because they have been chosen of God and are therefore holy and beloved, they are to put on a heart of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. They are to bear with one another, forgiving each other even as Christ has forgiven THEM. These virtues are then to be crowned with the most IMPORTANT one of all- LOVE, which is the perfect bond of unity. The idea here is that love is the manifestation of the new life in Christ and what leads to maturity and unity in his body. Such love removes all feelings of anger, hatred, or an unforgiving spirit. It is the binding power which holds the whole Christian body together. The different members are not to strive against themselves but to assist each other and work for the good of the WHOLE body as well as for the good of each other. It is like the keystone of an arch which both completes the structure and holds all the other stones in place. Paul says this because he knows that the tendency of ANY body of people is sooner or later to fly apart. Love is the ONLY thing which will hold all persons together in an unbreakable fellowship.

And yet, if as Paul says LOVE is the main force, the glue that causes us to adhere to one another in SPITE of our many differences, then why is it so hard for us to REALIZE this goal in our daily lives. We call the Church the “Body of Christ” and yet it is divided into a great VARIETY of “bodies,” often ranged over against each other, separated and even estranged from

one another with each side claiming to be right and the other wrong. We are told there is no longer Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free, and yet we let our own prejudices dictate whether we're going to attend a particular church or not. And even when we find one we DO like and feel comfortable enough to join, we then create within it our own little SUBGROUPS, our own little "church within a church" with whom we socialize with, one often drawn along social or economic or racial lines. The sad fact is that if people are reluctant to even believe there IS a God much less listen to the message the church proclaims, maybe it is because they see in us so LITTLE unity, because we lack TRUE oneness that could only be created by the bond of love. Churches filled with conflict and dissension undermine the very purpose for which they were created; they justify the claim by many non-believers that they are nothing more than hypocrites—saying one thing while doing another--and thus are no different than any other group or organization.

In C. S. Lewis's *The Screwtape Letters*, the Devil in hell is giving advice to one of his agents on the earth assigned to keep a man from becoming a real Christian. The intended victim has joined the church and now the Devil's agent is worried. But Screwtape gives this assurance: "There is no need to despair as WE (unlike this man) see her (the Church) spread out through all time and space and rooted in eternity, terrible as an army with banners. That, I confess, is a spectacle which makes our boldest tempters uneasy." In other words, the Devil has a greater understanding and respect for what the Church in the world is than what we ourselves—the MEMBERS of the Church—do. Screwtape knows all-too-well that the Church is first and foremost the Body of Jesus Christ, God's personal representatives, the greatest moral and spiritual force the world has ever seen marching over the earth and through history like a great army. It is something that he and his minions have every RIGHT to fear!

WE, on the other hand, seem to regard the church as little more than A SMALL BRIGADE than a vast army. We see it as just another option for our lives- as one more association competing against the likes of so many other social organizations like the Lions Club, the Elks Club, the Exchange Club, the Kiwanis or Rotary Clubs, with the exception that ours has organ music and theirs do not. To others, we are nothing more than the religious arm of the local country club, the chamber of commerce, or of a political party at prayer. Few of us see the Church as God, or the Devil, or even as St. Cyprian, the 3rd century Bishop of Carthage, saw it when he wrote to a friend:

This seems a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden, under the shadow of these vines. But if I climbed some great mountain and looked out over the wide lands, you know very well what I would see. Brigands on the high roads, pirates on the seas, in the amphitheaters men murdered to please the applauding crowds, under all roofs misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, an incredibly bad world. Yet in the midst of it I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of this sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They have OVERCOME the world. These people, Donatus, are the Christians—and I am one of them.

Three hundred years ago, Isaac Watts said it best when he penned those immortal lines:

*When I survey the wondrous cross
On which the Prince of Glory died,
My richest gain I count but loss,
And pour contempt on all my pride.*

When we “survey the wondrous cross,” when we in see in it not just a secular instrument of execution but the ultimate demonstration of a selfless and sacrificial act of divine love, we then find ourselves able to lay aside our many differences so as to enjoy the GREATER good of true union with each other and thus become a REAL community. The Church of Jesus Christ is an enormous tent, one that accommodates young and old, male and female, rich and poor, black and white, slave and bond slave, gay and straight, conservative and liberal, Republican and Democrat, for as children of God, we are bound together by a much STRONGER bond, an immeasurably GREATER union which transcends even those differences of ethnicity, race, or political loyalty. It is the knowledge of being loved and cared for by One who has promised that NOTHING will ever separate us from either his presence or his love.

Therefore, we as the Body of Christ CAN learn to lay aside our differences in light of the surpassing gift we have received through the life, death and resurrection of the Son of God. This is why we gather together here for worship on Sunday mornings- to remind ourselves of the wondrous gift that has been set before us. For it is HERE we receive words of grace declaring you and me to be cleansed of all our sins and forgiven for all our faults. It is HERE we are made children of God for all eternity. It is HERE we receive the nourishment provided by his Spirit as it fills us and transforms us into his image beginning from deep within. And it is HERE we enjoy the fellowship, the true unity of sisters and brothers who though once STRANGERS to each other now enjoy an intimacy through him never before known. We are one because CHRIST is here in our midst. May his love remain the cord, the binding that keeps us unified, that keeps us one IN SPITE of our many differences and disagreements, IN SPITE of our divisions and disappointments for we are never stronger than when we are together. Let us pray...

Precious Jesus, we thank you for our sisters and brothers both within our own faith community and throughout your world. We are a kingdom of different makes and models, and you have given us the ability to appreciate and celebrate those differences among us. Thank you for your unity in the midst of all this beautiful, challenging diversity. We pray for peace and tolerance, even when we disagree with each other's theology or political opinions, and for wisdom and insight to maintain that unity without demanding uniformity, to celebrate our diversity instead of making it a cause for division. In Christ's name we pray, Amen.