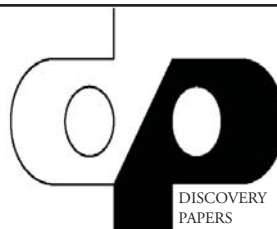


THE DANGER OF DIVISIVENESS

SERIES: MOVING ON TO MATURITY



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Corinthians 1:1-17
1st Message
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I have lately been in the close company of a baby learning to crawl. This is an important milestone—the first experience of choosing one’s own course in life. But, like other such transitions, capability often precedes maturity. “Now that I can crawl I now can knock ornaments off the Christmas tree, mess with my sister’s stuff, stick a finger in an electrical socket.” Power to act requires the wisdom to set boundaries.

Conversion to Christ presents a similar challenge. We are transferred from the kingdom of darkness to the kingdom of light. We are adopted as children of God, indwelt by the Spirit, gifted to speak eternal truths, destined for glory. This abundance of grace often arrives suddenly, with no warning labels—like being given a fast car with no driver’s education. How do we fully embrace abundant life without spinning out of control?

The Corinthian church we encounter in the New Testament was in need of driver’s education. It was a community of both vibrant faith and obvious immaturity. In this message we will begin a series on the opening chapters of 1 Corinthians, a letter with important warnings and corrections written by the apostle Paul to a church that he loves deeply. He writes as a model of mature leadership and challenges pseudo leaders in Corinth who are using God’s gifts for childish, self centered purposes.

Corinth and California

Before we turn to the text, let me draw some parallels between Roman-era Corinth and the contemporary Bay Area.

Corinth was set in a geographically important location. It was situated at a crossroads. The road connecting Macedonia in the north and Achaia in the south was routed past the city. The Aegean Sea was to the east and the Adriatic to west and traded goods from nearby ports also passed through Corinth. Once destroyed and then rebuilt by the Romans, Corinth was a ‘new place,’ without rigid patterns and enduring aristocracies. Wealth and status could be seized by the aggressive and the ruthless. Like the Bay Area it was a place with a wide range of ethnicities, religions, and cultures, and was well known for its immoralities.

A final word of introduction: the letters to Christians in Corinth in the New Testament are difficult to interpret in the same way that hearing one side of a telephone conversation is difficult. Other letters, now lost to us, had been exchanged between the apostle and this congregation. There are times when it appears that a question is being answered, but we can’t be sure what it is. At other points Paul may be quoting from a letter of theirs or referring to a familiar incident that is unknown to us. But, whatever the difficulties, we will surely find that our efforts to understand these texts are worth the effort.

1 Corinthians 1:1-9:

¹Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes,

²To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours:

³Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. ⁵For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—⁶God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. ⁷Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. ⁸He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁹God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

The word ‘calling’ is prominent in these verses. Paul introduces himself as one ‘called’ to be an apostle. Jesus delegated unique authority to the first apostles, authority to declare the gospel truly; to record Jesus’ history and accurate interpretation of this history for every believing person in every generation to follow. It is the apostles who wrote (or oversaw the writing of) the final words of sacred Scripture

—the documents of the New Testament. Paul speaks with apostolic authority, but he also knows that his calling does not lead to personal privilege. As with Jesus, it leads to both deprivation and suffering.

The notion of calling is applied to the Corinthians in v.2 (and later in v.9). In common with all other believers, they are called to holiness. Two challenges emerge here. Like the baby who now can crawl the young-in-faith Corinthians did not want to restrict impulsive behavior and needed this reminder to live within the boundaries of holiness. Also, the mention of faith they shared with others challenged their sense of superiority and proneness to competition.

The church in Corinth majored in self-celebration. They reveled in dramatic experience and energetic expression with little interest in moral boundaries or wise counsel. They got drunk at communion services, shouted words of challenge to one another during worship, winked at sexual sin in their midst. The call to holiness is an important starting point in this letter. Further, in v.9 Paul says we are called into fellowship with his Son—we honor him instead of making much of ourselves.

In verses 5-9 we note that Paul sees his readers as genuine believers for whom he is thankful to God. He acknowledges their gifts, appreciates their faith, and expresses confidence in their future. His expressions of concern flow from a father's heart of love. Indeed, he challenges immaturity because he loves them.

1 Corinthians 1:10-12:

¹⁰I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. ¹¹My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. ¹²What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

The Corinthians imported a culture of factions and jealousy from the world around them into the church and Paul insists that they turn from division (a Greek word from which we get the English word schism) to unity in Christ,

It is almost fundamental to fallen humanity that we attempt to gain status in competition with rival groups. Business professionals and politicians, entertainers and

athletes; teachers and coaches all thrive by promoting themselves and putting down rivals.

Some years ago I traveled to Australia and stayed with a family whose ten year old son was crazy about cricket—a game with which I have only passing acquaintance. The young man's enthusiasm was infectious, however, and by the end of our stay I was rooting hard for the Aussies in a crucial test match, even to the point of feeling outrage at underhanded tactics (which I didn't understand) and boastful posturing of the opposition. I was emotionally invested in an event I had only recently become aware of and understood only barely.

Our hearts are easily swayed to rivalry and (sadly) this fact is frequently evident among Christians. We have favorite books and teachers, favorite music styles and theological enthusiasms. Our efforts to appear superior keep us from seeing the beautiful presence of God in folks who are different from us. In Corinth the schisms stemmed from groups who cheered for favorite Bible teachers. Rival 'schools of thought' led to diminished thinking on all sides.

In addition to schisms, that there are "quarrels among you" (v.11) as well. In quarreling the lack of unity becomes personal—individuals treat one another badly. Haughty speech and hurt feelings cause separation among believers. Quarrels and factions, of course, are mutually reinforcing and thrive in immature communities like the church in Corinth. Young Christians who were lifted from obscurity by believing the gospel became proud. They spoke too much and listened too little.

"Is Christ divided?" Verse 13 asks the crucial question that motivates Paul's deep concern.

1 Corinthians 1:13-17:

¹³Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) ¹⁷For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Paul's argument here does not suggest that baptism itself is unimportant—just that the question of 'who baptized who' should not lead to pride and division. It is significant that the apostle directly challenges those who cheer for him

“I am more Pauline than you”) as their champion. Jesus’ name and sacrifice must not be diminished by foolish self-promotion in the church.

Divisions in the body keep us from blessings we might receive from fellow Christians, but of greater concern are the wounds inflicted on the Lord. ‘Dividing Christ’ wounds the One who gave his life for us. Further, it renders the cross powerless. Jesus’ awful suffering for our sins is dishonored among outsiders if its message does not bring unity among those who believe.

Conclusion

Divisions in the church are unseemly and keep us from seeing the best in each other. They are sure signs of immaturity. But something much more serious is at stake. When we focus on ourselves we diminish the honor that belongs to Jesus. Our boasting breaks his heart and empties the cross of its power.

The way forward is to remember the love of Christ that first drew us to faith. Honesty about our failure makes us cling to the cross instead of devaluing it. A community that is nourished by heart-felt worship will turn from quarrels to love.