

FOUR WAYS TO PROMOTE CHURCH UNITY

1 Corinthians 1:10,21-31; 3:9-10,16-17

Years ago there was a great deal of emphasis by some companies that their employees be uniformly dressed. The desired look was a blue two-piece suit, white shirt and striped tie. Differences were not allowed. I can remember a time when having a beard was not “appropriate” if you worked at certain companies. Things changed and people started to promote diversity. It was then OK to dress differently, to have a beard or even long hair or wear earrings or whatever. We started recognizing that everyone is different - it was even recognized that some were “more different” than others. What is great is when we recognize that differences can be beneficial if we can learn to apply the strengths of the differences to help accomplish the overall goal. When we can recognize that we are different for a purpose, then people can better deal with their differences. It is a great tragedy when our differences produce division that actually hinders getting the job done and causes people to discriminate based on differences.

The issue of differences came up in the church at Corinth and this issue caused a lot of problems since it was causing division and the various factions were tearing down the church rather than building it up. We will look at four ways to avoid division and promote unity that we can discover from Paul’s first letter to the church of the Corinthians.

Focus on Agreement

¹⁰Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment. 1 Corinthians 1:10 (NASB95)

The purpose of the church is to work for the advancement of the cause of Christ. This above everything else ought to be the unifying factor that holds us together in whatever conflict that might arise. There are some basic principles that are foundational on which we all can (or should be able to) agree. If these foundational issues are recognized for the importance that they have, then these will be the glue that holds us together. This is the starting point if we are to be “perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment.” There may be some issues on which we cannot agree -- the color of the carpet, the picture in the baptistry, the height of the steeple -- but these things really do not matter. Selfish interests can tear a church (a home, a business) apart. Most of the time we need help in overcoming our own selfish concerns. That help is available in Jesus: without Him we can do nothing, with Him we can do all things.

You have to admire Paul for not just ignoring the problem that had been brought to his attention. We need to learn to deal with conflict in a church or any other group of people. Many times we think that if we ignore it, it will go away. Not usually! It gets worse rather than better. The particular problem that was causing division in the Corinthian church was an exclusiveness built around what we might call a personality cult. The church had divided itself according to the person that had led them to Christ. This division was making the church ineffective and Paul didn't want to be a part of the “personality cult mentality.”

When we divide the church into labeled compartments, then we are dividing up Christ. Paul rightly asks the question, “Is Christ divided?” The central figure in the church is Jesus Christ. He is the One that was crucified for our salvation. He is the One that rose from the dead. He is the One that sent the Holy Spirit to live in us. It wasn't Paul or Apollos or anybody else.

Focus on Truth

²¹ For since in the wisdom of God the world through its wisdom did not *come to* know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe. ²² For indeed Jews ask for signs and Greeks search for wisdom; ²³ but we preach Christ crucified, to Jews a stumbling block and to Gentiles foolishness, ²⁴ but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. ²⁵ Because the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 1 Cor 1:21-25 (NASB95)

There are many philosophies in the world that address the question of how do we live and how do we prepare for eternity. The major religions of the world address these specific issues. Even atheists address the question of eternity by denying that it is there.

Mankind in his lostness wants to live by his wits, to figure it out for himself, to come up with his own solution. In the natural, physical world, we get what we work for. Therefore, it would logically follow that to accomplish union with God, we must work for it. This leads to self-improvement programs where we get better by degrees. The humanists teach that through our efforts to educate people that mankind will progress and get better and better. Education is good and it makes us more knowledgeable but it does not make us more righteous. Some religions have different levels to which the followers try to attain, going up higher and higher. Some of the Eastern religions see a progression to higher and higher levels by living good lives and eventually becoming totally good. These are all themes that are captured in the story of the Tower of Babel where people were going to build a structure that would go higher and higher until they reached God. Even the Jews had developed a system that stressed the "keeping of the law" as a means of pleasing God. These were the philosophies that the early Church encountered as they took out a different message.

The message of God through the Church was that you don't have to earn "right standing" with God, in fact, you can't! This message was completely counter to what people had seen in the natural realm and what they had been taught all their lives. To them it was foolishness. The explanation of what God had done in Christ by His death on the cross (the preaching of the cross) did not fit the prevailing paradigm -- this was more radical than trying to convince people that the world was round when everyone "knew" and could "see" it was flat.

Into a world that was convinced that we had to earn everything, God came to tell us of an unselfish love that did not need to be earned. Into a world that was enslaved to sin and doomed by the penalty of sin, God came to "buy" us out of that slavery. Just as a slave had no money to buy his own freedom, we had no power in ourselves (good works, keeping the law, etc.) to break the bond of slavery to sin. The price He paid was His own shed blood -- this is the work of the cross. Radical, redeeming love just did not compute in a world of "looking out for number one."

The Jews were a very practical minded people who did not see a lot of sense in intellectual debates about various philosophies, but wanted to see some proof. When they escaped from Egypt, the sea parted, there was a pillar of fire by night and a pillar of cloud by day to guide them, and God fed them with manna from heaven. That was practical evidence or a sign and yet they still refused to fully trust God. The Greeks (Gentiles) tended to intellectual discussions using the logic of the day to debate the merits of various philosophies. Along comes this story that God came to earth as a little baby, grew up and lived a sinless life, was falsely condemned and sentenced to die on a Roman cross, was buried, rose from the dead and ascending into heaven was more than they could believe.

The Jews already had their mind made up about the Messiah. He was going to be a political and military person that would free them from domination by the Romans. They believed that anyone who was "hanged on a tree" was accursed and they "stumbled" over the idea that this Jesus who was crucified could be God's Messiah. It did not fit their wisdom. To the Greek mind, the idea of "grace" which is the unmerited favor of God did not make any sense.

In other words, it was foolishness. On the other hand, for those that are not locked into cultural paradigms and are open to learn, they can see a higher wisdom in what God did. They can see that what the world thought was foolishness is really superior wisdom. They can see that the death of Christ on the cross (which appears to be weakness and defeat) was actually the very means by which Satan's bond on the world was broken.

Focus on God's Work

²⁶ For consider your calling, brethren, that there were not many wise according to the flesh, not many mighty, not many noble; ²⁷ but God has chosen the foolish things of the world to shame the wise, and God has chosen the weak things of the world to shame the things which are strong, ²⁸ and the base things of the world and the despised God has chosen, the things that are not, so that He may nullify the things that are, ²⁹ so that no man may boast before God. ³⁰ But by His doing you are in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption, ³¹ so that, just as it is written, "LET HIM WHO BOASTS, BOAST IN THE LORD." 1 Cor 1:26-31 (NASB95)

Paul appealed to the people of Corinth to look at their own situation as proof of what he was saying. These Christians were just ordinary normal people, they were not the intelligentsia and yet they could see what God had done. The great philosophers of that day were confounded by the message of the cross. These Christians of Corinth were not the rich and powerful of their region and yet they were participating in the riches of God's grace. They were not the cream of the society and yet God did not reject them. God's salvation in Christ is not just for the super smart, the rich, the powerful, and/or the highly moral but is for everyone. To those that believe, Christ becomes our wisdom, our richness, our power, and our righteousness. It is by nothing that we do, but by everything that He has done. Therefore, the credit and the glory belong to Him.

Focus on the Church's Best

⁹ For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰ According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building on it. But each man must be careful how he builds on it. 1 Cor 3:9-10 (NASB95)

¹⁶ Do you not know that you are a temple of God and *that* the Spirit of God dwells in you? ¹⁷ If any man destroys the temple of God, God will destroy him, for the temple of God is holy, and that is what you are. 1 Cor 3:16-17 (NASB95)

Paul had to deal with the problems people have when they fail to grow spiritually. Many times, a new Christian's behavior is somewhat similar to what it was before they were saved. As we study and learn what God has for us, then we start to change our way of thinking and acting and the spiritual truths that are revealed to us are worked out in the reality of our everyday lives. We typically find that we are a mixture of the old nature and the new nature – the carnal and the spiritual. If we have not grown spiritually, then the old nature will dominate our thinking and we will not be able to grasp or appreciate spiritual truths. The evidence of carnality (or the old nature) was the behavior of the people – envying, strife, division. These negatives showed up among the Corinthians in what is commonly called a "party spirit." Some were saying they were in the party of Apollos and some were associated with Paul. Paul used two examples to attempt to communicate the fact that Apollos and Paul were on the same team, and they were NOT competing with each other. The first was a gardening example and the second was a building construction example.

The building example fits in very well with the description of the Church (corporately) being the Temple of God and Christians (individually) being the Temple of God. In addressing the fact that we all have responsibility in getting the building job completed, Paul defined his responsibility of laying a good foundation upon which others were to build. The foundation is Christ Himself. It goes without saying that starting with the wrong or faulty foundation leads to

disaster when the building collapses due to the problems it may encounter. The other concern is that even if you have a perfect foundation that it is important what is used to build on that foundation. Not only must we use quality materials, but we also must use quality construction techniques. As Paul stated, “each man must be careful how he builds on it.”

Notice the emphasis that Paul places on the church and how the church is to be identified. If the church is made up of workers, then they are God’s workers. If the church is a field that is growing spiritual food, then it is God’s field. If the church is a building it is God’s building. If the church is the dwelling place for anything, it is a dwelling place for God’s Spirit. It is all about God and not about our individual wants and wishes. The best thing about the church is that it is all about God. If He is not our focus, then the church ceases to be the church and simply becomes a social network or a community club.

Since the church is of God, by God, and for God, then we should be able to focus our energies in the local church so that all we do and all that we stand for will exalt God and accomplish His purposes. If we direct our attention to the church being the temple of God’s Spirit, we should be able to come up with expectations that need to be met.

If we check on scriptural references related to this picture of the church we find in Ephesians 2:2 that we (all of us who are Christians) are (being) built together as a habitation of God through the Spirit. Much of the emphasis on teaching is with regard to each of us individually have the Spirit of God, but here we see that collectively we experience the fullness of the operation of the Spirit in the Church. The lesson is that we need each other.

The other truth we see from this reference is that “we are being built” rather than we are doing the building. This is an ongoing process and it is something that God is doing. If our focus is somewhere else, then we will hinder what He is doing in the church.

There is a stern warning with regard to how the temple of God is to be treated. Anyone who destroys God’s temple will be destroyed by God. Most of us have heard this verse applied to those who abuse their physical bodies with alcohol or tobacco and well-meaning friends will attempt to get them to stop drinking and smoking by quoting this verse to them. There are at least two misapplications involved here. The first and most obvious is that unless the person is a born-again believer then he is not the temple of God and if he is a believer, then he has the assurance of salvation and that does not include being destroyed. The second and, perhaps less obvious, is that this passage is specifically about the church. We need to then look for actions that would hurt the church. Such things might be false teachings, denying the truth of the Word of God, creating division and strife, using the church for principles that are contrary to the principles of the kingdom of God and being focused on a social agenda rather than on the plan of salvation.

We tend to think that such warnings against those who would try to destroy the church are for those who would infiltrate the church and harm the work of the church from inside the church. We are well aware of those who are external to the church and attempt to destroy the effectiveness of the church by ridicule, false representation of what the church is, and the literal killing of Christians. The warning would be for those also.