

MAINTAINING FOCUS IN TIMES OF CONFLICT

Have you ever tried to build a house of cards? You stack up cards alternately on the edge and flatwise and try to make the structure as high as you can. It only takes a little upset to cause the whole thing to fall apart. The "house" is unstable because the parts are not really joined together. If you were to put the cards together with glue, then it would be fairly strong even though it is made up of flimsy cards. The same thing could be said if we tried to build a wood frame house without using nails, bolts or other fasteners -- it would fall down at the slightest disturbance. In building relationships within organizations such as the church there will be upsets and disturbances. Conflict will arise. There will be differences of opinion. Whether the organization survives such conflicts will depend on the strength of the glue that holds it together. The Church at Corinth had its conflicts and Paul addressed the importance of their being united in handling differences.

I CORINTHIANS 1:10-13 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.

I CORINTHIANS 1:14-17 The winning of souls is very important; however, the most important thing about that is not who did the winning but to whom they were won. We may be instrumental in leading someone to Christ, and it is important that we do this; however, if they do not focus on Christ rather than on us, then it will be to no avail. Christ Jesus is the author and sustainer of a person's faith.

If a person genuinely accepts Christ as Lord and Savior, then that is the work of the Holy Spirit and it is not up to us to find the most convincing argument to talk a person into accepting Christ. If we are relying on our own wit and wisdom, then we are operating in our strength and not in God's strength.

Controversy and conflict over trivial things, worrying about who gets credit for what is done, and other such things that are driven by selfish interest should not be allowed to distract us from the mission of the church to advance the cause of Christ.