

3 September 2023

Church Divisions

1 Corinthians 1:11-15; 3:1-4

Paul's first letter to the church that he had planted at Corinth was sent in response to reports he had received from some of the people there. He starts right away with factionalism in the church. We begin by reading 1 Corinthians chapter 1, verses 10-15:

¹⁰Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. ¹¹For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

¹²What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ.' ¹³Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? ¹⁴I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵so that no one can say that you were baptized in my name.

Paul returns to the subject a couple of chapters later. We read chapter 3, verses 1-9:

³ And so, brothers and sisters, I could not speak to you as spiritual people, but rather as people of the flesh, as infants in Christ. ²I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for solid food. Even now you are still not ready, ³for you are still of the flesh. For as long as there is jealousy and quarrelling among you, are you not of the flesh, and behaving according to human inclinations? ⁴For when one says, 'I belong to Paul', and another, 'I belong to Apollos', are you not merely human? ⁵What then is Apollos? What is Paul? Servants through whom you came to believe, as the Lord assigned to each. ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷So neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸The one who plants and the one who waters have a common purpose, and each will receive wages according to the labor of each. ⁹For we are God's servants, working together; you are God's field, God's building.

Here's the background to this letter: Paul had started the church in Corinth several years earlier, during his second missionary journey. As usual, he started by preaching in the Jewish synagogue, but after being rejected by most of that congregation, he started a group that included both Jews and Gentiles. Eventually, Paul offended enough people in town that the church sent him away for his own safety, but not long after that, another Christian missionary arrived, named Apollos, who was noted for being an eloquent preacher and also seemed to have the gift of not offending people, because Apollos stayed with the young church for a long time. At some point, it even seems that Simon Peter, Jesus' former disciple and a key leader in the Jerusalem church, visited Corinth. Not a bad start for a church, really: having three strong leaders involved from the beginning. But then, in a development that will be surprising only to those who have never seen a church before, the congregation started taking sides. Some declared their primary loyalty to Paul, others to Apollos, others to "Cephas" – this may have been the Jewish faction, because that's the Aramaic form of Peter – and still others separated themselves from all the above and said they were the Jesus People. I'm sure that went over beautifully.

In the passages we read, Paul responds in at several ways. First, he reminds them who the church is actually about, Christ, and that Christ is not a separate group but the reason all of them are there. “Is Christ divided?” Paul demands. Answer: no. This is not the church of Paul, or Apollos: both are simply laborers in the field of the one God. The church is God’s work, not theirs. In other words, stop taking your identity from the help. You belong to Christ. Paul’s second response is to tell the Corinthians to grow up. (This may or may not have been helpful, but Paul, being Paul, said it anyway.) He says that by this time the Corinthians should have matured to the point where they would be putting Christ first without having to be reminded. And third, Paul reminds the church that as followers of Christ, they are supposed to look different from the rest of the world. But when they get into turf disputes between different factions, they look just like everyone else around them. Paul tells them, You’re not *supposed* to look like everybody else; you’re supposed to have higher aspirations than that.

Those Corinthians! So *immature*! It’s embarrassing! Aren’t you glad that the church has outgrown that sort of thing? Right?

And here we are, in the United Methodist Church, in the middle of a slow-motion split. To be fair, our dispute is not centered on rival leaders. That sort of factionalism still happens sometimes, especially in local congregations, but in the larger church world, our fights tend to revolve around different interpretations of scripture instead of personalities. On the surface, we are splitting over the issue of homosexuality, but as I’ve said before, if that disagreement were to be miraculously resolved tomorrow, we’d just transfer our core differences to something else. A deeper difference within Methodism is *how we read scripture at all*. Some of us want to take it quite literally, to treat the Bible as a book more or less directly from God, which must be obeyed word for word, in that spirit, while others of us want to take it as a book prompted by God and *containing* God’s revealed word, but which was also filtered through the mind and culture and historical limitations of its human writers. The literal approach appears much easier – just read what the Bible says and do it – but in practice, it becomes pretty random, because nobody takes *all* the Bible literally, so then you have to explain why you pick this verse to make literal and not that one. Meanwhile the historical approach is just hard. It takes a lot of work and never provides the same degree of certainty, but at least in theory it can be consistent.

None of this should be new to our long-time listeners; we’ve talked about this several times. But increasingly, I’m questioning whether scriptural interpretation really is the root of our division. About fifteen years ago, the great sociologist Robert Putnam published a study of religion in this country, called *American Grace*, and in that book he noted something new he was observing. As he went over the comprehensive survey results that go into a book of sociology, he saw that when people who had moved from a previous church were asked what they were looking for in a new one, they didn’t talk much about scripture, or theology, or even worship style. And they said *nothing* about denominational loyalty – that ship has sailed. No, the number one thing that 21st century church shoppers were looking for was a congregation of people who shared their political views.

Huh. That couldn’t be right, could it? That makes it sound as if politics matters more to us than faith. But I can’t think of anything that has happened since Putnam wrote that in 2010 to disprove it. Church does seem increasingly like an extension of politics. Some of you are already thinking about the wholehearted and uncritical embrace of President Trump and the Republican party by conservative evangelical churches, and that is definitely an example. But I would add that it works on both sides. I am on the email list of various mainline Christian organizations,

and I cannot for the life of me remember anything that I have ever read in any of those emails that varies from the Democratic party platform. I worry about any Christian group that appears to be a subset of a political party. In our churches and denominations, are we dividing up along cultural and political lines? That doesn't feel any more healthy than saying "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos."

So, going back to Paul's comments to the Corinthian church, let me ask a few questions. First, are we taking our identity as Christians from something other than Christ? Do our positions on key social issues matter more to us than Christ? What do we spend more of our time thinking about? How our political side is doing? Or our God? Second, are we seeking to grow in Christ, to become more mature in our faith? Or have we decided that we already know what we need to know? And third, do people look at us, the church of Jesus Christ, and see how we are different from the rest of the world? Or do they see us as political advocacy groups with cross decorations?

Now hear this: I am *not* saying that we should remove ourselves from all political questions – that would be impossible, since everything has become political. But we do need to follow the correct order of operations: we are first to set ourselves to follow Christ, and then our actions and positions in the political realm should arise from that. Not the other way around. To go to the obvious example, we are a church that has declared our support and full welcome for gay and lesbian people. But let us make sure that we hold that position because we believe it is what Christ has called us to, not because it's the position of our political tribe. We were not baptized into a political party; we were baptized into Christ.

* * *

The United Methodist Church is going to split. It's already begun. The Paul group and the Apollos group just couldn't see any way to be together without fighting, so we're dividing. And like it or not, one result of our split is that we are making it clear to outside observers that we are just like everyone else in our divided society. That'll message will take some time to undo. But as we approach the task of remaking the fractured church, let us remember again to put Christ at the center.