

Factions in the Church

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1 Corinthians 1:10-18
“*Has Christ been divided?*”

Walk with me into a room. It is a large room, with tables, chairs, and food; a basic high school cafeteria. Look, over in the far corner, on your right – and notice that you see a bunch of kids, dressed in kaki pants, polo shirts, and the girls in their clean, pressed skirts. Over in the other corner you can see the Goths – kids dressed in dark clothes, wearing black make-up, and a lot of religious jewelry. In another part of the room are the activists, vegetable eating people who are always looking for another cause to take up. Then in front of you are the drama and music kids, who just don’t fit into the mainstream, but always have the limelight in their mind. Of course the jocks are not far from the preppy kids on the right, throwing wads of paper at the drama and music kids, enjoying their place of Darwinian superiority as the fittest in the room. Who have we missed? The smart ones (nerds and geeks), the druggies, the slackers, the overachieving school spirit individuals, and the average ones are all gathered in their own separate groups in the room. And I have only scratched the surface. I have left out any ethnic groups, gangs, or other followings, which are a part of high school life. What I am describing are high school cliques; small, exclusive groups of people that will naturally form in any high school setting. The structure of cliques is a basic building block for every teenage movie, from *The Breakfast Club* to *She’s Gotta Have It*. Ask any high school student today, and they will tell you about the small groups, the cliques which exist in their school.

But cliques are not unique to high school. Whenever any gathering occurs, in a short amount of time small groups will form. If you have been watching any of the more popular reality shows like *Survivor* or *The Apprentice*, you know what I am talking about. You get a lot of people together in the beginning of the season, and they immediately look for the other people they can trust and count on. The only thing that keeps the cliques from getting too strong or overwhelming is the diminishing return of individuals each week due to the “voice of the council” or the mantra “your fired.” As the numbers dwindle, so do the groups.

Whenever you mix people up, stir people up, and allow them to settle, as the dust clears, individuals will form into groups. It is a part of our human condition, to gather with others, with whom we are like, or those with whom we feel comfortable with or any other similar characteristic. The post-modern philosopher and theologian, Kathryn Tanner, discusses the ways in which communities form around similar themes or ideals; commonality is the basic building block of a clique. There is a theme or an ideal that brings the people together, breaking the large group into smaller subgroups. Within every group, there will most often be a subgroup, or clique.

In the Corinthian community, which Paul was addressing in the passage of scripture read for today, the presence of smaller groups, or cliques, was a major problem. Can you imagine what this community was like? They were still new as a church, still trying to understand what it meant to be a Christian, and most of them only knew about Christ through second hand stories. There was this sense of searching, and seeking for this new group of believers. They were always being asked and asking themselves what they stood for, what they believed. They have had plenty of assistance and guidance. Paul taught them the message of Jesus Christ, and gave them direction. Apollos inspired them with his speeches and well rehearsed rhetoric fueling the Holy Spirit that bound them together as a community. It was a mix of different students, different believers, with different teachers, this Corinthian community, and they were expected to live, worship, and serve together as one church. But it wasn’t happening.

Have you ever read the book, *The Lord of the Flies*? In the beginning of the work, the children, stranded on an island with no direction and a diversity of backgrounds, manage to live and survive together as a community. But how long does it last? How long until attention wanes, distractions become ideas, and the children form different groups, factions and are at odds with each other? This is what was

happening with the Corinthian community. With no clear leader to act as the common focus, to be the glue of the group, with no Jesus to be with them each and every day, different groups formed based upon the personality and charisma of their individual teachers. Maybe someone who was leading prayer said something differently, sparking a debate. You know, saying something like “trespasses” instead of “debts” or “sins.” Maybe a difference in theology came up in passing conversation. Regardless, it was not long until cliques were formed based upon one’s origin of baptism. “Those taught and baptized by Apollos on one side, those by Paul on the other, and everyone else find a spot.” Like teams choosing captains, the Corinthian community was breaking apart; they were splitting into smaller groups, individual groups and growing in their own directions. The Biblical scholar, J. Paul Sampley, makes the point that the members of the Corinthian community were not even splitting over theological differences, like the Trinity, or original sin, but were attracted to personalities – the leaders of their groups. So the divisions were not even a question of one’s faith, or of doctrine, but became a popularity contest. How could this church survive with such division? How could the gospel of Jesus Christ be preached with the demand for allegiances complicating and distracting those who may be interested in joining this movement? Who would lead these people, who would unite them? The presence of cliques, or smaller groups, was a major problem in the Corinthian community.

Without the constant presence of Christ in the community as the leader, we are also at risk in forming our own cliques, groups, or subcultures in the church. “Wait a minute, pastor,” you may say, “you are a day late and a dollar short. Look at the division in the church. Look at the denominations, which can’t even worship together. Look at all the churches splitting again and again. Look at churches taking sides with leaders, and on issues.” It isn’t a question of when we will form our own cliques; it is a question of how often. Look at the Baptists as a great example. Each branch of the Baptist movement is an example of a group of people starting their own clique around a specific identity and understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Now I don’t want to spend all of our time looking at the divisions, which have happened, instead I want to ask “why.” Why is it that we have gone our separate ways again and again? Why is it that the Corinthian community went its separate ways? Like a business executive walking into a room full of chaos and madness, we ask, “Who’s in charge here?” and fingers point in every direction. Maybe that is the problem, a lack of leadership

Just as with the Corinthian community, our leadership comes from individuals, and so we have Lutherans (following Luther), Calvinists (following Calvin), and Baptists (following ourselves... we are too stubborn to follow any individual). It seems that without a leader guiding us, we are prone to wander in every direction, forming our own groups in the meantime. In the movie *Star Wars* (episode 4... *A New Hope*) R2D2 and C3PO are stranded on the desert planet of Tatooine, and not sure where to go. With no one to offer direction, C3PO heads one way, and R2D2 heads a different direction – neither being great, and both leading to trouble.

Have you ever felt that way, on your own or as a church? Have you ever felt like you weren’t sure which way to go with your faith, how best to act, as a Christian or the direction the church should head. Think about the question of worship. Do we stay traditional, do we go “contemporary,” or do we go “contemplative?” Each direction has pros and cons, and we could form three different churches with each direction. And what usually happens is people in the Christian movement become like a free flowing stream, going in whichever direction he or she sees fit, just as the water flows in each and every direction it can. The diversity of the community becomes a hindrance without a leader to guide us. Without the leader all we have to go with is what feels right based upon our own experience. It is the Kantian turn to the subject, what the theologian Lindbeck calls the emotive-expressive form of religion, or what Berger and Luckmann call the “deobjectification” of religion. What feels right is what is most likely best, and that is where the individual will head. Don’t think your pastor will solve the problem either. Half of the time spent in my office is trying to guess which direction may be best for this church, not wondering how we can be Christians with other churches, not considering how we can work together as a larger Christian movement. Do you know that there is a movement of church growth, which advocates each church looking for its “niche?” What kind of people are you trying to attract? This is the question we are supposed to ask, because it is assumed that churches cannot be diverse. It is assumed that church cannot be mixed ethnically, politically, theologically, liturgically, and demographically. It assumes that we are to gather under one specific banner and speak the same words, recite the same creed, read the Bible in the same way, and hold the same interpretation of the complex scriptures. So unless the movement and the church itself is completely homogeneous, unless we are all of the same mind and disposition, factions,

cliques, and groups will form in the church as we all try to understand Christ and be Christians, and the church will fail. Diversity is foolishness that leads to schism.

Part of the foolishness of this Christian movement is the audacity that we claim we can be one, unified movement. One of the characteristics of the Baptist movement is that it is an umbrella, without an identity or a stance. It is a movement that makes room for disagreement and dissension. Foolishness! It can't work; our humanity will not allow it unless we have a constant, present leader to keep us in line. Where is the banner, which we can gather around? Where is the slogan we are to chant? Where is the group we are to be angry at and hate? Where is our uniformity and where is our leader?

The moment we start looking for a leader we forget that Christ is already here. Christ is here with us. Christ as God is constantly present, guiding and leading our words and actions in a community in all that we do. Christ is guiding us in our worship; Christ is leading individuals, planting ideas, wooing you to love your neighbor. Christ is pleading with you to stand up for God's love, and calling you to hold true to the ideals of the Cross. Christ is constantly giving us a language to speak and actions to live. Karl Barth describes the community as one of a new ethic, an evangelical ethic that moves us away from the "no's" of the world and towards the "yes" for God. Yes, we can live in God's way. Yes, we can proclaim Christ as Lord. Yes, we can follow Jesus; we can let go of our desires and take up the desires of the cross. Yes, we can be a community. There will be diversity, but our unity will be found in those basic words, in those most simple statements claiming Christ as our head and leader: "I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." Through the presence of the Holy Spirit the words are placed upon our lips, and the simple profession of faith is what unites the Orthodox with the Presbyterian with the Catholics with the Methodists with the Baptists. "I believe in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior." Those are the words, which gather us together in this church, they are the words upon which this church is based, and those are the words, which will keep this church together. The simple words, the simple actions of love and peace overcome the factions and unite this movement following Christ.

But what of diversity, you ask? What of the many, many, many opinions, preferences and desires, which constantly move and shake the church? What of the denominations the associations and the churches which go their separate ways? Are we to move to one unified church, a bunch of robots believing the same exact thing and worshipping the same exact way? No, we are to have our diversity, but we must be careful that our differences do not lead to division, and we must continue to return to our key tenet of faith. Can we all still say that we believe in Christ as Lord and Savior? Are we all still opening our eyes and hearts to the presence of Christ? That is the key and that is the test. It is much like jazz. In any jazz tune there is the head, the melody which all starts with, and then each player is allowed to go his or her separate way, spinning and elaborating on the theme. Yet the musician must always stay within the boundaries of the main melody, he or she must always be able to come back to that melody and play it again. It is similar with Christianity. As a church we spin off, we improvise and elaborate on the theme, but we must be able to come back to that theme, to that call of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. We have our own style of playing, we have our own form of making the music, but the tune, the melody always remains – it is always the tune of Christ as Lord. We must be able to come back and say, Jesus is still in my heart and my life, leading me, guiding me and offering me grace.

Oh the Baptists need to remember this message most of all! We are a group of people who hold up the individual church and the individual believer. Yet there are those who are trying to homogenize the church, trying to force our step, and trying to control our understanding of what it means to be a Christian. Do you know how many people ask me what kind of church this is, looking for the litmus, the category? I answer, "This is a Christian church," but they find that answer unsatisfactory. We must be labeled so we can be categorized, homogenized, and purified of any dissenting views. But we are a Christian church proclaiming Christ, and that is enough. We are to trust that Christ will continue to guide us as a mother hen guides her chicks, and we are to continue to look to the mother hen, continuing to call to her, and allow others to do the same in their own way. We aren't to look to others for guidance, only to Christ. Can you hope, believe and trust that Christ is present. Can you believe that we are a people who are being led by Christ, who does have a leader, which does have direction? In your life, in the life of the church, in the story of the Christian movement, Christ is present, guiding and leading us in our words, and actions in all that we do.

This is part of the foolishness of the cross that a diverse group of people can worship in their own ways, be a part of smaller separate movements, and still be a part of the larger community of Christ in words and in actions. It is uncomfortable, it is scary, but so is the cross. So I refuse to listen and buy into

the church growth experts and the angry Bible beating preachers. I refuse to push for segregation of any kind, I refuse to allow a gospel of exclusion to exist on the smallest level, and I refuse to push this church into one category or another. I am willing to work a little harder, to challenge myself, and listen to other people's experience of Christ in this community. That is the "problem" of diversity, it takes work, it takes an effort, and it will challenge individuals. If we were smart, if we were savvy, we would look for our niche, we would strive to be one kind of church for one kind of people – but we aren't smart, we aren't wise, we are Christians. Let us return again and again to the cross and be reminded of the wisdom in our foolishness – it is to the ways of the world that Christ died, and the ways of God towards which Christ points.

So lets not do the smart thing, lets not do the wise thing, and lets strive to be a diverse community focused on and gathered by the call for Jesus Christ. Lets be uncomfortable, but still one. Lets be challenged but still welcomed. Lets be the one body of Christ reminding ourselves again and again what it is that brings us together – Lordship of Jesus Christ. Do you see what we are, a group of people in this church, with other churches marching to the same tune, but in our own style. Do you see what we can be – a church that doesn't make sense but that holds itself together by the bonds of Jesus Christ. Each month we end with that great Baptist communion hymn – and it holds true. With all of our diversity, with all of our differences, let us say no to factions and yes to Christ as one family as one church as one body of Christ.

*Blest be the tie that binds
Our hearts in Christian Love
The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above*