

Corinthian Arithmetic: Divisions and Factions
1 Corinthians 1:10-25
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The Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) was founded on the principal of Christian unity. Our founders—Thomas and Alexander Campbell, and Barton W. Stone—looked around at churches of their day, and saw fighting and brokenness, especially over creeds. They rejected the divisions in the church and called for unity. “Christian unity is our polar stone,” thundered Barton Stone.

Stone and the Campbells believed the path to Christian unity could be found in the earliest and purest expression of the church, the church of the New Testament. Restoration of New Testament Christianity became their battle cry. In our early days, we were known as the Restoration Movement.

But whenever I think about the Campbells and Stone insisting that the example of the New Testament church is the path to the unity of the church, I wish I could ask them, Did you **READ** First Corinthians? Because the Corinthian Church was a mess! They were fussing and fuming about everything. They fought over eating meat which had been offered to idols. They fought over sexual immorality. They fought over which spiritual gift was the best. They fought over what happens when a person dies. They fought over whose favorite old pastor was the best.

Their fights were never high-minded. They were personal, especially over their favorite pastor. For some Paul was “da man,” because he was the church’s organizing pastor and accepted Gentiles. Others swooned over the silver-tongued preacher Apollos, who hailed from the ancient world’s intellectual Mecca Alexandria. Still others took Peter as their hero because he preached meticulous observance of Jewish Law. There were the self-righteous Gnostics who thought they had an exclusive hotline to Jesus.

Little has changed today. We’ve got Baptists vs. Catholics, Liberal Protestants vs. Right Wing Conservatives, and Liturgical Churches vs. Charismatic Christians. We may not take sides on meat offered to idols, but we still have all kinds of “wedge issues” to incite tempers. Today the single loudest witness Christians make to those outside churches is our contentiousness. Forget any thought of unity or making peace!

This is why 1 Corinthians is as timely now as it was 1,950 years ago. Churches still do Corinthian arithmetic: excelling in divisions and factions rather than in adding disciples and multiplying good works for the gospel.

It’s like author C.S. Lewis’s character, the devious senior devil Screwtape trying to comfort his young nephew Wormwood on how to confound his “patient,” who has recently become a Christian:

I think I warned you before that if your patient can’t keep out of the Church, he ought at least to be violently attached to some party within it. I don’t mean on really doctrinal issues: about those, the

more lukewarm he is, the better....The real fun is working up hatred between those who *say* ‘mass’ and those who *say* ‘holy communion’ when neither party could possibly state the difference...in any form which would hold water for five minutes. And all the purely indifferent things—candles and clothes and what not—are admirable ground for our activities.¹

Screwtape understood only too well the truth about churches and Christians.

They are often embroiled in petty matters that don’t amount to a hill of beans and have nothing to do with the gospel. How Stone and the Campbells missed this about Corinth in their zeal for restoring New Testament Christianity is beyond comprehension.

Then again, they probably had in mind restoring Paul’s passion for unity. When so much partisanship exists within churches and denominations, and between Christians and between denominations, Paul’s call for unity remains as timely as ever.

But how do we get to such unity? What word does Paul have here?

Paul cuts right to the chase. He calls the Corinthians *adelphoi*, translated in the New Revised Standard Version “brothers and sisters.”

*“Now I appeal to you, **brothers and sisters**, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.”*

Paul’s use of *adelphoi* is intentional. In fact, Paul uses it 38 times in 1 Corinthians, more than twice as many times as in any other letter he writes.²

“By the very use of the word Paul does two things. First, he softens the

rebuke which is given, not as from a schoolmaster with a rod, but as from one who has no other emotion than love. Second, it should have shown them how wrong their dissensions and divisions were. They were sisters and brothers and they should be living in sisterly and brotherly love.³ Paul believes Christians can be reconciled to one another if they understand they aren't just cogs in an organization or an institution, but members of a family, of a "kin-dom," with emotional investment in one another.

Paul makes this clearer by a medical allusion he uses to urge them to be "united together." The proper translation here is "knit together," not like a woolen sweater; but like bones knit together that have been fractured or joining together a joint that has been dislocated. Division is unnatural to Paul. The only way to cure for the sake of the health of the body, Christ's church, is for them to be knit together like broken bones.⁴

The Corinthians' insistence on forming fan clubs and competing for status only further fractures these bones and leaves the Body of Christ wounded and divided. It isn't that Paul wants the Corinthians to march in lock-step with each other. He isn't demanding uniformity, but unity.

He also appeals to their good sense to recognize the absurdity of their fragmentation. He asks, "*Has Christ been divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*" The conclusion Paul hopes the Corinthians draw is, "Of course not!"

This is what makes Paul's call for unity so amazing! Paul doesn't hint in the slightest that unity is solely based upon any emotional connection the Corinthians might learn to have for one another. He doesn't suggest that "*eloquent wisdom*," will do as a way to solve their problem of disunity—even though Paul never dismisses a place for the mind in the faith.

Rather Paul appeals to Jesus' cross despite all of its paradoxes:

“Where is the one who is wise? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength!”

The cross, for Paul, is a symbol of humility, a commodity in short supply among the elbowing, status-seeking Corinthians. The cross, for Paul, is a symbol of weakness and an affront to the power-hungry Corinthians who have a bad habit of “lording it over” others. The cross makes no sense to the Jews because Jews understandably wanted a messiah in the image of David, a mighty leader who could subdue his opponents by sling shot or sword. The Jews looked for a sign not a cross.

Though Paul's letter isn't an exercise in anti-Judaism! His pen is pointed at the Gentiles too; i.e. the rest of humankind. Gentiles demanded a dispassionate God, not a compassionate God on a cross. Gentiles wanted a

philosopher-king-like God who could perform mental gymnastics, not a God of humble sacrifice.

Then, as now, the cross makes no obvious sense. It's abnormal. It's paradoxical. It's counter-cultural. It's mysterious.

It's like the story of a dinner for a minister upon his retirement. People stood up and offered tributes to the man and his ministry. As he rose to speak in response, his first words were: "I want to thank Jesus Christ for making me into the person I am. Without Jesus I might have been normal."⁵ Harvard preacher Peter Gomes says, "It is not natural to be a Christian. It is not normal to be a Christian. It is unnatural and abnormal to be Christian."⁶

Of course, we know what is natural and normal: power that divides people and perpetuates hostilities and wars; power that subtracts even more from the have-nots so the haves can have more. To such power the cross cries, "Foul" and "You, Fools!"

The church's task is to decide whether it will collaborate with such obvious power or join forces with Christ whose cross remains an unfathomable scandal, its ironic victory notwithstanding. Because make no mistake. The cross always exacts a cost. As noted Disciple Fred Craddock observes in a sermon titled "Why the Cross?" "Any church or any preacher who keeps preaching on the cross is not going to grow. The preacher will not be a success and the church will not grow, because in our culture what

we are interested in is success, not sacrifice. If you talk about sacrifice at your church, then you are going to sit there with your little huddle of people like a covey of quail while the other churches will be blooming all around and promising that if you give God a nickel, then God will give you back a dime.”⁷ But Craddock, like Jesus and like Paul, can say this because they know two ironic, albeit open secrets: *“Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.” “For God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God's weakness is stronger than human strength!”*

Think of it as God’s arithmetic, the arithmetic of the cross, not a minus sign but a plus sign: a sign of God’s unconquerable, unmerited, reconciling, love.

¹Fisk, “No Divisions Among You,” *First Corinthians Interpretation Bible Study*, John Knox Press, 2009

²J. Paul Sampley, “1 Corinthians 1:10-17 Commentary, *Intepretation Commentary*, p. 807

³William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, Phila: Westminster Press, 1977, p. 13.

⁴*Ibid.* p. 13.

⁵*Pulpit Resources*, p. 48.

⁶“When They Think You’re Crazy,” *Sermons on the Themes of Daily Life*

⁷*The Cherry Log Sermons*, p. 80.

SCRIPTURE HIGHLIGHTS @ CORINTH & 1 CORINTHIANS:

- An important Roman colony, that was strategically defensible, located on an isthmus that made it a convenient stop between the eastern Mediterranean basin and Rome. Lots of sailors used it as a port-of-call.
- Also known as “Sin city,” with a major temple atop the high hill overlooking the city. To “Corinthianize” meant to be corrupt someone, or be corrupted.
- Commercial & religious hub, known for its artisans’ products, e.g. bronzes, but also a thriving business in pottery & earthenware, still in evidence in curios shops near Corinth today. Known for having some wealthy population, which would effect the church, especially around issues regarding the Lord’s Supper.
- Paul visited by the year 50 C.E., wrote a now extinct letter to the Corinthians which was very cordial, making today’s letter actually the 2nd letter Paul wrote to Corinth, despite its name “1 Corinthians.” 1 Corinthians was written around 53 or 54 C.E.