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Reconciliation: Biblical Reflections

III. Paul's 1 Corinthians on Reconciliation in the Church: Promise and Pitfalls

Our goal in this Bible reflection is to look at Paul's ecclesiology in 1 Corinthians and lift up and explore its profound legacy to the Church's understanding of itself in the context of the dynamics of reconciliation. 1 Corinthians is Paul's fervent attempt to reunite a Church torn apart by factions. In that process the apostle draws upon contemporary political lore and commonplaces to paint what is perhaps the most eloquent call for ecclesial unity in the New Testament. At the same time, his strategy raises significant questions for contemporary Churches about the nature of compromise in the pursuit of concord, the extent of conformity required for unity, and the social and power dynamics involved in such negotiations. This dilemma is not one which Paul himself created, but it is the dilemma inherent in his call for unity in 1 Corinthians, which remains alive and well into this generation and beyond. The reason for this, as Paul understood so well, is that the Church is a social/political body which faces the same conundrum all such bodies face: how to form a unified group from varied, isolated individuals? This fundamental issue of human political theory and practice is also the fundamental issue of Christian practical ecclesiology.

Because the focus of 1 Corinthians is *internal* Church unity, we shall be looking at the phenomenon of reconciliation through that lens. I invite us all to think and imagine how our learnings from this text might apply to wider global, political contexts, and even smaller, personal contexts which require reconciliation.

AN OVERVIEW OF 1 CORINTHIANS

Sound exegesis demands that we first examine the historical context of this letter, asking when Paul wrote it and why. (My exegetical treat-

ment of 1 Corinthians depends throughout upon my detailed study, *Paul and the Rhetoric of Reconciliation* to which I refer the reader for full documentation [Mitchell, 1991].) From the outset of 1 Corinthians (1:10-13), it is clear that Paul wrote to address the problem of factions or divisions within the Church, a purpose which remains constant throughout the letter (see also, for instance, 3:4f.; 11:18; 12:25). Thus one immediate learning for us is that factions in the Church go back to the very beginning, to within twenty years of the death of Jesus (a fact which may both console us in our sense of decline, and worry us that contentiousness is our permanent birthright). Recent Pauline scholarship has concluded that there was likely a range of factors responsible for and contributing to the Corinthian divisions (not unlike most contemporary Church conflicts), including ethnic diversity, economic disparity, geographical, and sociological differences (separate house churches), disputes about gender roles, allegiances to different missionaries, and theological disputes.

Paul, who had founded the Church at Corinth (2:1-5; 3:6, 10) writes later from Ephesus in Asia Minor, where he has been the recipient of a remarkable number of Corinthian communiqués: oral reports from Chloe's people (1:1) as well as other unnamed oral reports (5:1; 11:18); a letter from some Corinthians (7:1); and a delegation of prominent Corinthian Christians (16:17-18). Why did all these Corinthians take the sea voyage across the Aegean to Ephesus, or the lengthy land-route via Macedonia to visit Paul? In my judgment the variety of contacts to Paul itself testifies to a divided Church, with representatives of different groups appealing to Paul to confirm that they are right on the various issues of contention. Thus Paul is in a box and his appointment calendar is filled—with Corinthians appealing for his support for their side of the conflict.

So, what is Paul the pastor to do? First, he is compelled to make a long-distance diagnosis of the situation. He comes to the decision that it is the spirit of divisiveness itself which is the main problem, more important than any single subject or practice which is in dispute. Based upon that diagnosis, he writes a letter which urges unity above all other considerations. Paul constructs that response, which we know as 1 Corinthians, with great care. The letter begins with a direct appeal in 1:10, which functions as the thesis statement to the whole letter: "I urge you, brothers and sisters, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to all say the same thing, and not let there be factions among you, but be reconciled in the same mind and the same opinion" (my translation). Paul's major appeal is for Christian unity in the single name of Jesus Christ (1:2, 10, 13) in opposition to any other name or banner which individual Corinthians might claim. The unity for which

Paul appeals is urgent and deep, expressed in four parallel and powerful locutions, positively and negatively: "say the same thing" (a metaphorical statement for "agree"), let there not be factions among you ("rips," "tears," a violent image of the Body of Christ being torn limb from limb [1:10, 13; 12:25]), but be reconciled (a medical term used to refer to the resetting of dislocated joints) in the same mind (a term which calls to mind the Greek word for political unity, *homonoia*) and the same opinion or judgment. The Christian unity Paul appeals for is organic, and holistic—in body, mind, name and judgment—and is rooted christologically, as he states again explicitly in 2:16: "We have the mind of Christ."

Paul follows up this thematic statement with four chapters centered on unity itself as a general consideration, before he turns to any of the things over which the Corinthians are contending. In this opening section (1:18–4:21) he is very careful always to award praise and assign blame to the entire Church as a whole, thus trying not to reify the factions by treating them separately. He is severe in his critique of factionalism, and warns that *anyone* who destroys God's temple (the Church, through divisive activity), will be destroyed by God (3:17). Only after this prelude does Paul venture to discuss the actual issues over which the Corinthians are divided (in chs. 5–15). He begins with boundary issues of the way the Church should and should not relate to the outside world and culture (chs. 5–10), then turns to internal Church issues related to worship and liturgy which has been the theatre of disputation (chs. 11–14), and lastly takes up the topic of resurrection of Christian dead, which has been questioned by some Corinthians (ch. 15). Because his goal is the reconciliation of the Church, Paul writes carefully on these specific problems, and tries to mediate between opposing positions as much as possible. For this reason his precise advice is hard to discern as, for instance, on eating meat sacrificed to pagan idols, where one cannot pin down a Pauline "yes" or "no." Instead his answer is a qualified and careful "it depends" (compare 8:1–13 and 10:14–11:1). Some have asked if he does not "waffle" in some of these sections, especially given his own voluntary self-characterization in 9:19–22: "I have been all things to all people." This is a description of his mediatorial role: above the factions he "is pleasing to all in everything, not seeking my own advantage, but that of the many, so that they might be saved" (10:33). These arguments and others which Paul uses to appeal for unity above all else are rooted in the Greco-Roman culture which Paul and the Corinthians share, for unity and factionalism are, of course, common political problems which had been given extensive attention.

SEVEN ARGUMENTS FOR RECONCILIATION
IN 1 CORINTHIANS

Paul cast his argument for Church unity in terms which would have been recognizable to the Corinthians from their wider culture, but he Christianized those arguments and gave them a specific application (or reapplication) to their Church situation. For our task—to analyze the dynamics of the appeal for reconciliation—we shall briefly examine seven arguments which Paul uses for unity in 1 Corinthians which are also found in other speeches and letters from Greco-Roman antiquity in which a philosopher or politician or teacher tries to convince a group to seek the course of unity over division. We shall briefly assess the positive and negative repercussions of each.

1. “*Ones*.” These are the things the group has in common. Paul tries to persuade the Corinthians to be unified by stressing the things which they share: one calling (1:24-26), one God (8:6), one Lord Jesus Christ (8:6), one Spirit (12:13), one confession of faith (12:3), one baptism (12:13), one Eucharistic celebration of one body of Christ (10:17), one common language (ch. 14), one set of common traditions (11:2; 15:1-3). The term *heis* (“one”) is used a remarkable 31 times in the letter.

Surely Paul is right, that anyone who tries to appeal for group unity must draw upon or create in that group a corporate consciousness, which must be rooted in the things which hold them together. A healthy, solidified group must know what it is that “makes them one,” and those “ones” must be things which truly matter. On the other hand, this leads us to ask some key questions: What are the limits to “oneness”? Must Christians wear the same clothes? Must they vote for the same politicians? Share the same lifestyle? Listen to the same music? Raise their children the same way? Pray the same way? Hold to the same doctrines? This dilemma is especially pointed in the language Paul uses in 1:10: “Say the same thing,” have the “same mind” and the “same opinion.” What are the limits to this? How does individuality fit in here? We can compare this with the different image of the chorus, in which each person sings a different note, tone or melody line, but it is in the *blending* of the different voices that a euphonious, harmonious sound is produced, one which is more beautiful than any single voice. If the emphasis is on “saying the same thing,” how does the Church decide when someone is “saying something so different” that they are a tear or rip in the body of the Church? What are the limits to oneness, to sameness? On the other hand, what are the limits to inclusivity? What happens to Christian identity when the “ones” get fewer and fewer?

2. *The social/political unit as a Body.* This is the most common appeal for concord in Greco-Roman antiquity, here in its Christianized transformation by Paul as "the body of Christ" (12:12-31; cf. 6:15). There is an old, famous fable of the Roman statesman Menenius Agrippa, who in a time of faction exhorted the plebs to end their sedition by telling them the parable of the body in which the hands refused to feed the belly, with the result that the entire body (hands included) died. (As the story goes, the plebs were convinced, and went back to work.) The customary points of the body metaphor for the political unit are that the whole body shares the same health, the same definition of advantage; there is a proper distribution of gifts and functions in the body with an inbuilt design for unity in diversity; and common "membership" in the body is defined by suffering and rejoicing in common. Paul's Christian version of the body metaphor in chapter 12 includes all of these elements and is incorporated in this letter explicitly to combat division: "God blended the body giving greater honor to the lesser member so that there might not be faction in the body" (12:24-25).

Paul's body of Christ is still today the most well-known and favorite ecclesiological image, for its richness, power, and the sense of belonging it instills and promotes. At the same time, the body metaphor is inherently hierarchical: Who is a head? Who is a fingernail? Remember, the plebs were the hands, but the senate was the belly which received the benefit of all their work! Further, it asserts divine legitimation of the social order (12:18), which Paul accepts. You are a fingernail, God intended you to be a fingernail, stay a fingernail. He acknowledges that there are weaker and stronger, and honorable and less honorable parts of the body, and he tries to relativize these categories by arguing that all are necessary to the body, and all share its collective honor. At least theoretically (and surely eschatologically [15:42f.]), God reverses the hierarchy (12:24). But does this adequately deal with the possible negative uses of the body metaphor to ordain the status quo? A second question we might ask about the body of Christ metaphor is about its inclusivity. One must recognize that it is a "boundary metaphor"; that is, it serves to separate the Church (the baptized [12:13]) off from outsiders. It is an insiders' image. Could this perhaps be a limitation in an ecumenical age? Do all who employ the body metaphor for its positive elements recognize these possible limitations?

3. *The Building as an example of Concord.* Paul's second image for the Church, as God's building, is found throughout 1 Corinthians (1:6-8; 3:9-17; 8:1; 10:23-11:1; 14:3-5, 12, 26; 15:58; 16:13; cf. Mk 3:24-25 and pars.). Here the Greco-Roman commonplace (which is nicely phrased in the Gospels in Mark 3:24-25: "a house divided against itself cannot

stand") is applied to the Church, God's building, which is also the temple of the Holy Spirit, on the firm foundation which is Christ. Paul's appropriation of this metaphor for the Church is especially striking when we remember that in the ancient Church, there were no actual church buildings. The consequences of this communal metaphor are that the members of the building must be strong, unwavering and unchanging, in order to build up the building, instead of allowing it to totter and fall, and ultimately be destroyed by inner division (15:58), i.e., structural damage.

What good is the Church to the world if it cannot stand on its own two feet? Surely stability remains absolutely crucial if the Church is to do its work in the world. Paul's architectural metaphor also makes way for new generations to "build on" to the work which has come before, and it has an active component in that very work, which can be more than maintenance of the inherited physical plant. And there is another important aspect of this architectural metaphor for the Church. In 3:12 Paul inventories the different kinds of building materials. All individuals bring different gifts, different lives, which are different construction materials for the church building. Yet all are not of the same quality, and all are not equally valuable in each place in the building. For example, silver and gold would make disastrous structural beams, while concrete doesn't do much for windows! Who is "the wise construction engineer" (3:10) who helps to deploy the Church's natural resources in a fair and commonly advantageous manner? On the other hand, there is the matter of taste. Which is prettier and more fitting to the building of the church: gold leaf or simple wood? The strongest buildings we have are concrete bomb shelters, prisons and hospitals—uniform and secure, yet boring and prefabricated, hardly expressive of the living human (let alone divine) spirit. And no one lives there! Are strength and unity the only considerations for an architect (or a pastor?). Surely the Church must be firm and secure, but can it also take some risks, make some architectural experiments, as it seeks to live out its destiny as the receptacle of the Holy Spirit?

4. *Love*. In I Corinthians Paul constantly appeals to love as the principle of social cohesion, the great unifier (4:21; 8:1; 12:31b–14:1a; 16:14, 24). Love throughout this letter is not a rapidly beating heart, but a concrete action for unity. It is the mortar between the bricks of the Christian building; it is the sinews in the body (to develop Paul's images beyond what he himself says, but in spirit with him). In fact, in 8:1, love is what "builds up." Love also seeks the common advantage, not its own (13:5; cf. 10:23f). Love is the antidote to factionalism for Paul (as it was for Hellenistic Jewish and Greco-Roman writers of his

time). We can see this in each of the epithets which are applied to love in the famous "hymn to love" in 13:4-8a. These are not random reflections or ruminations on love; they directly address the divided Corinthian situation, and counsel love as its remedy. We see this especially in Paul's final exhortation in the letter (16:14), which sums up his appeal for unity: "Let all things be yours in love."

Paul's insistence on the centrality of love for a Christian community seems enduringly, absolutely essential. If the Church is not characterized by love, could it possibly be living out its mandate, its call to love God and neighbor? If not for love, what does the Church stand for? But where is there room here for a love which uproots, shakes the rafters in the quest for faithfulness, does more than keep the peace? Has love at times been so domesticated by the Church that it becomes a codeword for passivity or compliance?

5. *The need to seek "the common advantage."* The root of factionalism, according to Greco-Roman political theory, is the propensity for individuals or subgroups to seek their own advantage or interest instead of the common advantage (that's why we call them "special interest groups"). Therefore the direct response to factionalism is a call to the contenders to put the common advantage over their own individual benefits. Paul employs this argument repeatedly in I Corinthians (6:12; 10:23-11:1; 12:7; 13:5). He urges the Corinthians to compromise voluntarily their right to do things which they can do for the sake of the common good and thus true freedom (esp. ch. 9; 10:23-11:1; ch. 14). Unity can only be achieved by the compromise of individual advantage for the sake of the common advantage (10:24, 33). The fourth-century church father John Chrysostom called this "the rule of the most perfect Christianity" (*Homily 25 on 1 Corinthians*): "seeking not my own advantage, but that of the many, so that they might be saved" (10:33).

Paul's emphasis on the common good over individual goods has great relevance and power for us today, as many think our own American culture is especially destitute in this regard. For instance, it is commonplace election year strategy among pollsters and spin doctors that voters will decide solely on the basis of the impact (anticipated or actual) of policies on their own pocketbooks. In the Church, too, people exhibit a consumer mentality, as they shop for the Church that will offer them the services they need, rather than for a community to join, to whose common purpose they wish to contribute. No Church can survive unless it is defined by a common advantage for which all work.

On the other hand, who decides and controls "the common advantage"? We know from our own political experience that "the common

advantage" can become mere propaganda for "the advantage of those who are in charge" (state socialism has had this charge laid against it, and it has played a key role in current anti-Washington polemical politics). Secondly, what are the limits of individual compromise? Paul describes the absolute extreme of the compromiser when he describes himself as "all things to all people" (9:22) and as "pleasing to all people in every way" (10:33), yet don't we distrust such people? Where is personal integrity in such a strategy? When must one do what doesn't please people for the sake of a larger, as-yet-unaccepted common good? What are the limits of the individual's need to compromise for the sake of the whole? When does "seeking the common advantage" mean "being taken advantage of"? When do such compromises become forms of oppression which must be named and overcome?

6. *Insider and Outsiders.* It is commonplace political wisdom that if you want to unify your country, start a war. One strategy for consolidating group loyalty is to stress the distinction between the political body itself and "outsiders," which is precisely what Paul does in 1 Corinthians 5:12–6:6 (using exactly this language). His argument to the Church is in essence that we must be unified because we are a bastion of truth in a hostile world. Such thinking is the basis of sectarian sociology and was indeed a large part of the social power of the early Church—the Church vs. the world (a view which reached its apex in gnostic Christianity). We can see it also in Paul's argument in 1:22–24 where Paul delimits the Church as a "third race," termed "the called ones" who are separate from Jews and Greeks (see also 10:32). Yet such a perspective can lead to the false assurance that evil is outside of the Church only and could render a Church incapable of recognizing and dealing with its own failures. It also may seek too soon to defuse and "resolve" conflicts as soon as they surface in such a way that the Church does not allow itself to be challenged, to change or to grow. Any impetus for change in the Church could be rebuffed by the claim to need to guard against the outside world at all costs. The other difficulty with this strategy for modern Christians is that it is becoming less and less compatible with modern pluralistic perspectives and religious (and non-religious) tolerance and mutual respect. A Church unity which is won at the cost of demonizing the rest of the world may result in an isolated and paranoid Church, cut off from any sense of place or mission in the larger culture and world. It raises the question: Unity for what?

7. *Maintain the status quo.* Arguments for unity are inherently conservative in ideology, for they incorporate a "don't rock the boat" men-

tality. It is often remarked that it is those who are in comfortable positions in the current social order who appeal for unity by maintaining the *status quo*, for they have the most to gain thereby and the most to lose in reconfigurations of the group. In 1 Corinthians there are three famous (or infamous) texts in which Paul uses such arguments in his quest to preserve group unity and stability: 7:17-24 (slaves should stay as they are); 11:2-16 (women should wear a headcovering in liturgical prayer or prophecy); and 14:33b-36 (women should be silenced in the assembly). This emphasis on retaining the status quo is consonant with Paul's use of the body metaphor, as we have seen, which views the social order as divinely ordained and legitimated, and which does not (cannot) make provision for status alteration. These passages also can be understood in the light of Paul's apocalyptic perspective (7:29, 31; 10:11). When one is sure that the world is about to end, there is no sense in fomenting revolution of the doomed and temporary social order.

What a fascinating paradox this man Paul was! He talked about the end of the world coming soon, but also about laying down a firm, enduring foundation for the Church! This paradox (to believe that life and history are in God's hands, but to live as though they were in ours) is one of the central tensions of modern Christian existence. Modern Christians, who less and less share Paul's apocalyptic view (unless replaced with a non-divine world-ending intervention) are perhaps less and less patient of such an acceptance of social structures which deprive classes, genders, or races of people from full participation in the benefits of life and society. At the same time, this leads us to recognize that efforts to change the social order in the name of justice must also realize and reckon with the fact that one casualty of those efforts may be unity within the Church. The burning question remains: When is unity the value to be pursued, and when justice, if we cannot have both? Both are important, but often we must choose. How do we make those choices?

CONCLUSION

We have examined seven elements of Paul's continuous argument for unity and reconciliation in 1 Corinthians: appealing to the "ones" which all Christians share; appealing to the Church as the Body of Christ; to the Church as God's Building/the Temple of the Holy Spirit; to the need to "seek the common advantage" instead of private advantage; stressing the distinction between insiders and outsiders to cement group solidarity; and appealing to the status quo (in the case of slaves and women) not to upset the applecart. Throughout the examination of these arguments, I have stressed that each has both positive

and negative possibilities for Christian ecclesiology in practice, for contemporary strategies of reconciliation. The dual legacy of 1 Corinthians, which signals the complexity of the quest for reconciliation itself, is: (1) 1 Corinthians is the most eloquent, moving and challenging call to unity within the Church which the tradition has produced, and its place in the canon rightly assures that it speaks with power to each new Christian generation of that important value of unity; (2) the urgent call for unity which Paul makes in 1 Corinthians is not without its cost: Unity must be bought at a price. At its best, this price may be mutual and just compromise; at its worst, it may entail conformity, mental or spiritual lockstep, or legitimization of an unjust social status quo. How shall we choose to embody this legacy?

REFERENCES

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