

The Third Alternative

Almost every Christian believer shares a deeply-held conviction in favour of Christian unity or, to put it another way, we all seem to share a profound regret at the shameful and repeated demonstration of apparent disunity which we exhibit to the rest of the world. It is visible at every level. Denominations proliferate and divide, whether on a global, ethnic, national or intensely local scale. We regret it but it continues.

We may gain some slight comfort from the fact that this is not a new phenomenon but we need to beware that such reassurance does not lull us into acceptance of a very ungodly *status quo*. The established and visible fact of disunity between believing Christians remains a major hindrance to both gospel credibility and spiritual growth. I am talking about splits, not just between nominal Christians and real born-again Christians, but divisions between genuine believing Christians.

Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of this visible division is that we now view it as inevitable. We have become so accustomed to divided loyalties that we view as impossible any thought of abandoning division in favour of real effective unity. "It can never happen" is a common theme.

The apostle Paul addressed the same situation as he wrote his first letter to the believers in Corinth¹ and Jesus had looked ahead to it as he prayed in the upper room before going out to Gethsemane.² Neither of them viewed Christian disunity as acceptable, so what can we learn from them?

Jesus was talking to his Father about "the men whom you gave me out of the world" and very specifically about their relationship **with** the rest of the world. He was concerned not merely for them: "*I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in me through their word; that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you sent me.*"³ So that's all of us who believe in him.

The words 'even as' are very significant. The Greek is *kathōs*, which means 'in exactly the same way as'. So Jesus is praying that we who believe in him may all be in Jesus and his Father and be one in exactly the same way that he is one with his Father – wow! And with the result that the world may believe that the Father sent Jesus – amazing!

I like the fact that we are to be one with each other in the same way. Jesus and the Father are one with each other, but they are not identical. I remember how I used to pray 'Lord' in a general sort of way, perhaps not **quite** sure who I was talking to. Then, as I grew a little and began to appreciate more of my inheritance in Jesus, I became more specific and started to pray 'Father', realising that he really was my Father and I could approach him direct *in the name of* the Lord Jesus. Sometimes it IS appropriate to address the Lord Jesus himself, but now the vast majority of my praying is *to* the Father and *in the name of* Jesus. I have gradually come to see that, although they are one, they are very definitely distinct from each other.

'In exactly the same way', we are to be one with each other. Totally united, 'on the same page' we might say, but distinct from each other. That's really good! We all cherish our individuality and that is not jeopardised at all by our unity as believers.

The proof of the reality of our unity is in the result that Jesus clearly said would follow: "so that the world may believe that you sent me." Does the world believe that? For the most part, the answer is NO! So has our being in Jesus and the Father and being united together been effective? Evidently not completely. So we have some way to go.

At this point, some will say "Give up now! We are never going to achieve unity." One thing is certain; with that approach, we never will. But are we prepared at least to look at the possibility of moving positively towards real working unity?

¹ 1 Corinthians chapters 1 and 3

² John 17

³ John 17:20-21

Let's be honest. The only place where we can see unity in practice is locally. No regional or national organisational arrangement is ever going to achieve more than perhaps giving a 'higher level' OK to local expressions of unity. For those with organisational loyalties, that may be useful and liberating, but effective unity can only be worked out on the ground on a very local, person-to-person basis.

Which is where Paul comes in! He was writing to the believers in Corinth, where he had gone and proclaimed the good news of Jesus.¹ It was because of him that the first of them had believed and, as he said, *"if you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."*² These were fellow-Christians with whom he had a very personal link and he was deeply troubled by the reports that had reached him.

He has heard via Chloe's household that there are 'quarrels' among the believers. The Greek word is used in a total of nine passages in the New Testament³ and is often translated 'strife'. In none of them is it a quiet disagreement! It is listed among the 'works of the flesh' in **Galatians 5:20**, alongside *"immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmities, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissensions, factions, envying, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these"*, to which Paul adds a solemn warning: *"of which I forewarn you, just as I have forewarned you, that **those who practise such things will not inherit the kingdom of God.**"*

As far as Paul is concerned, this is serious, something that threatens the life of the church in Corinth or anywhere else, so he sets about trying to steer the Corinthian believers well away from this dangerous territory.

What were they doing? They had started to form smaller sub-groups within the church, groups which had special loyalties to the teaching or personality of one particular person: Cephas (the Jewish version of 'Peter'), Apollos – and Paul himself. There were also some who said 'I belong to Christ', which sounded good but still received Paul's criticism. We'll come back to them shortly.

It's important to realise that Paul was not speaking against small groups within the church as a whole. Several times in his letters, he refers to 'the church in the house' of various people.⁴ That seems to refer to geographical locations, where believers lived or perhaps met regularly. No problem with that! What Paul was attacking was **separation** by divided loyalties.

What people were actually saying was "I'm Paul's", "I'm Apollos's", "I'm Peter's" or "I'm Christ's". They saw themselves as **belonging to** one of these names and therefore NOT belonging to the other names and separating from those who followed them. Now we can begin to see where the 'I belong to Christ' group were going wrong. If they had been saying to the others "don't be silly; we ALL belong to Christ", then they would have been OK. When they said "I am of Christ", what they were actually doing was setting themselves up as being the only ones who had the right loyalty and so were writing off the other groups.

Imagine, perhaps, what Paul would have faced if he had visited Corinth at this time. The 'I am of Paul' group would certainly have tried to get him on their side to endorse their position! "After all," they would argue, "we are the only ones who are truly following your teaching and example." The 'Cephas' and 'Apollos' groups might have accepted him grudgingly if at all, and would probably have wanted to 'correct' him where his teaching was not in line with theirs. The 'I am of Christ' group would probably have accepted, even welcomed him, just so long as none of the members of the other groups were allowed to join in!

And what would Paul's reaction have been? To judge by what he wrote to them, he would have insisted on dealing with the church in Corinth as one unit and would not have recognised these individual loyalty groups.

¹ Acts 18

² 1 Corinthians 4:15

³ Romans 1:29, 13:13, 1 Corinthians 1:11, 3:3, 2 Corinthians 12:20, Galatians 5:20, Philippians 1:15, 1 Timothy 6:4, Titus 3:9

⁴ Romans 16:5, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2

Listen to what he says: *“And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ. I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able. Indeed, even now you are not yet able, for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men? For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth.”*¹ He explains that what he, Peter or Apollos were doing was working according to what tasks and abilities God had given each of them and that “no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”²

“Are you not walking like mere men?” More literally, “aren’t you walking (i.e. behaving) *according to mankind?*” I.e. just behaving in a merely human way? Evidently, Paul expects something different from them; he had hoped that they would be ‘spiritual’. By the way, the word translated ‘men’ is not gender-specific; *anthropos* simply means ‘person’, ‘people’ or ‘mankind’. He equates the merely human way they are behaving with the behaviour of ‘infants in Christ’ and makes it clear that such infancy is not something which should, or needs to, continue.

If we take the time to carefully read and re-read the first three chapters of 1 Corinthians, we will find that Paul is really concerned to see that these believers become more spiritually mature. It seems that the news which he has received has alerted him to their dangerous immaturity – despite the fact that, on the surface, they might look like they are doing OK. When you read the first nine verses of chapter 1, it all looks excellent – until you come to verse 10!

What would he make of our own present-day situations? You can be sure that he would be pressing for spiritual growth, as he does in all his letters, but would he identify that spiritual immaturity is being exhibited by very similar divisions?

By saying “I am of Paul”, “I am of Peter” or “I am of Apollos”, the Corinthian believers were not only setting up their own loyalty groups but they were declaring that having those groups was OK. They were normalising the formation of separate companies of believers with distinguishing names. This is pretty much an exact definition of the process of ‘denomination’, which means ‘naming away’ or ‘separating by names’. A process which we foster or normalise at our peril !

This sort of behaviour and practice, says Paul, prevents me from treating you like spiritually mature people, because it demonstrates your immaturity and the fact that, instead of living ‘according to Christ’, you are living ‘according to man’.

Despite their apparent giftedness, there were several significant problems in the Corinthian church, including serious sexual immorality and court cases between believers, but the first issue which Paul tackles is this separation and division by names. In dealing with it, he goes right back to their foundation in Christ³ and emphasises that anyone who ‘builds’ on that foundation needs to do so with the proper materials which are not produced by merely human endeavour and which will withstand the test of the judgment of fire.⁴

This passage is sometimes applied differently but it is primarily about church building. Paul says that he laid the only foundation on which the Corinthian church (or any other) could be established – the Lord Jesus Christ himself – but he strongly implies that the ‘superstructure’ which is being built on that foundation is suspect and will not survive the judgment of fire. What superstructure is that? Their superstructure of separate named groups, of a merely human approach.

And then there is that small minority who see the wrongness of denomination and division and so set themselves up as being the ones who are non-denominational and refuse to have much to do

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:1-7

² 1 Corinthians 3:11

³ 1 Corinthians 3:10-11

⁴ 1 Corinthians 3:11-15

with those who **do** 'denominate'. So near, and yet so far! Saying "I am of Christ" instead of "all believers are of Christ". Although they can clearly see the wrongness of division and they stand against it, by taking such a stance they are in fact only accentuating it. We say 'they', but isn't it easy to feel that only our own group is **really** functioning as the church and that all the others are wrong? Even if we wouldn't admit it in words, isn't that the way we actually live?

But is there another way? Paul outlines the third alternative, but not before he has sounded a serious warning . . .

He has just been writing about building materials used to build the church, comparing with materials used to build a physical building. 'Gold, silver and valuable stones' are not only fire-proof but also **created by God** rather than being **produced by man**. The judgment of fire, as it is applied to the work of each 'builder', consumes the man-produced 'wood, hay and straw' so that the 'builder' is left empty-handed, though personally safe. Like someone who has escaped from their burning home, alive but having lost all their possessions in the blaze.

That's serious. 'Building' all our lives, only to find that our Father regards all or much of it as man-made and consumable by fire. Left standing safe, but with nothing to show for our life's work.

"Don't you know", says Paul, "that you (plural) are a temple/sanctuary of God and the Spirit of God makes his home in you (plural)? If anyone destroys/corrupts/depraves the temple/sanctuary of God, God will destroy/corrupt/deprave him, because the temple/sanctuary of God is holy/set apart, and that is what you (plural) are."¹

Paul is moving back from thinking about those like Peter, Apollos and himself, who need to be sure to use the right 'materials' for building the church – back to considering the practice of dividing by personal loyalties, which he equates with destroying, corrupting and depraving the church. Anyone who does that, he says, can be sure of God's judgment, because the church is **his**, set apart for him. God will treat them in the same way that they have treated his church.

And then he says "Don't try to get around that with clever human ideas! If you think you are clever like that, you need to become a fool, because God's wisdom is totally different; man-made wisdom is foolishness and completely useless."²

"So," he says, "this is the way to go: Not one of you is to boast about 'belonging' to any people! Why? Because you don't belong to them – **they belong to you!** Whether it's Paul, Apollos or Peter – or life, death, present life or future life! It's all yours! Who **do** you belong to? You are Christ's and he is God's."³ As we might say these days, "End of!" That's the end of the story.

Where does that leave us? Clearly we need to abandon **any** loyalty to any person, group or line of teaching. We don't belong to any of them. Not to reject them – quite the opposite – but to receive what they have to contribute. They are all 'ours', with the potential to help to build the church, 'planting' or 'watering' as Paul and Apollos did.

All of us who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ belong together, not in separate loyalty groups. As we start to see this and understand how upside-down our thinking has been in the past, there is hope for us to begin to experience and express the unity of the church. And, as each part functions as it is designed to do, to actually begin to grow together!⁴

Dave Taylor January 2021

Further copies can be downloaded from www.justonecandle.uk

¹ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

² 1 Corinthians 3:18-20 – very free paraphrase!

³ 1 Corinthians 3:21-23 – free paraphrase again.

⁴ Ephesians 4:14-16