

Divisions in the Church (and how Corinth traumatized Paul)

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The church at Corinth, which means a collection of house churches in Corinth, fell into divisions and factions. Some of their divisions were over Paul. It looks like some preferred Apollos and others Peter. Each faction knew it was right, and the others, especially Paul, were wrong. We need to describe that divisiveness, but I will do so with an eye on divisions in churches today. Many churches have suffered from a bout or two (or more) with divisiveness. The spirit of divisiveness remains consistent from group to group. What follows has been aided by more than a half dozen pastors who read the section, commented on it, and gave me feedback. One pastor who read this wrote me a note to say this sketch was prophetic in that it described to a T what occurred in his institution.

Two Notes

Briefly, two notes: disagreements over decisions made by leaders is not the same as division. Disagreements can become divisive. When discussion with the leader does not accomplish what a person wants to happen, a seed is sown that can lead to division. Learning to tolerate and process differences and disagreements is a mark of a healthy church. Uniformity from the leader throughout a church is not the same as unity. Uniformity is coerced and is top-down; unity is Spirit-prompted and celebrates diversity and difference.

Power, Status, Honor

First, in Corinth, the heartbeat of the divisive group was the quest for status and honor. It was a zero-sum game driven by a scarcity mindset. That is, if you got the glory, I didn't. In our world, that sense of honor comes to expression in the rarely stated desire for power, for authority, and for control. The dividers want to be in charge, and they use discord to pave their path to power. When power is understood, as it often is, as authority over and power over, the culture is set for divisiveness to appear. A desire to seize or work for power over a church often flows from a grievance or slight, an act of a leader making a decision the aggrieved didn't like, and a grudge forms that prompts the person to retaliate. One of the watchwords for the divisive is freedom, which is as Christian as it is American. The watchword of freedom usually gets an echo in a charge of authoritarianism on the part of those they think ought not to be in power. Behind closed doors the divisive will use terms like "autocrat," "tyrant," and "dictator." The plea by the divisive for freedom is their smokescreen for power. If they do win, as soon as the divisive gain power, they squash the freedom of those whom they fought against. Those who complain the most about unchecked power are those wanting the power for themselves. Nearly all of the divisive either diminish their participation or hide from accountability and responsibility for what they have done. Those who set the place on fire and then escape are not deemed heroes for escaping. Division and the power desired by the divisive are fleshly and unspiritual. Virtue and divisiveness cannot hold hands.

Clique and Coalition

Second, disagreement becomes divisive when discussion(s) with the leader or leaders does not lead to what the critic wants, a desire for power begins to build a coalition that turns into a clique of like-minded disrupters who go to battle against the leaders. A theme is the old adage: “an enemy of my enemy is a friend.” Friends in the tribe like this can be found by dropping little gossips into a conversation to see who might bite. Unlikely but very superficial relations form in these coalitions. People in the church need to become aware of the danger of passive participation in such groups. Not speaking up about the circle of division, when they are noticed, puts a person in the pocket. Hence, a pocket of division, a tribalism, occurs in a church when a disruptive group is formed. Often such a group creates a sense of chaos, discord, and disunity in the church, the sense that things are out of control. The church leadership will experience division as a struggle for power with others, and the leadership will often need to take action. Disunifiers are shaped by the flesh.

Politicizing Tension Points

Third, the tension points become politicized. They become zero-sum games. Far too often the tension points are minor issues depicted as major gospel problems. They then become determinative for the divisions. But a wedge can be pressed into service to divide groups over some point. Before long that point becomes THE point, regardless of its theological and practical importance. Sides are taken over the tension point. God is with them, God is against the pastor or leader (they want to dismiss). Everything then gets connected to the tension point. He chose – as the leader, as one with the institutional authority to do so, as one who thought he or she had good reasons for the decision – to release a staff member. Disagreement by the circle of division resorts to the language of “tyranny” or “dictatorship,” then tyranny becomes the rally cry. Or “heresy” or “false teacher” when the tension point is some truly minor issue in theology or Bible interpretation. What is truly minor and what is major often are confused in the faction of division. Malice and the desire for power drive politicizing these tensions points.

Leader of the Clique

Fourth, someone leads in nearly all divisions occur in a church. The person, since he or she wants power, often reveals signs of narcissism. Be warned: it’s easy to use the term but it’s a diagnosis that requires a professional. People with narcissistic tendencies are noted by selfishness, a sense of entitlement, a lack of empathy, bold and bald using of others, attracting sycophants, a hypersensitivity to criticism, and especially a desire for personal admiration and glory. When someone over them makes a decision they don’t like, the narcissist will diminish the person who made the decision. Remember, the leader of a circle of division wants power. His associates, which at times become nothing less than allegiance, want him or her to have power. Someone, or perhaps a small inner circle, steers the ship of division. Such persons degrade leaders in order to build themselves up. The leader and his inner circle need to be called out for leading the sins of arrogance and division. Opposing the leader of a division is right and good. Some divisive persons love disruption and destruction for no other reason than they love chaos and do not like to be in a system that contains them. The participants in the circle of division usually deny or diminish the very criticisms that describe them. They often then turn the same criticisms onto those who resist their divisiveness.

Words

Fifth, the primary modes of operation for the circle of division include gossip about leaders or others, arguing with the leaders, questioning the credentials and ability of the leaders, the desire to attract others in the church to their circle, creating a culture of complaining or sealioning (see below), backstabbing and degrading leaders, and labeling the leader with demeaning terms. Labels and names that ridicule often form in the circle of division for those on the outside. Often this circle of division will scapegoat one person or a few persons as the entire problem. Scapegoating, which is very much like canceling, leads to demonizing. None of these verbal habits emerge from the fruit of the Spirit.

End Justifies the Means

Sixth, the circle of division will work together against the leader(s) in order to dismantle authority, degrade the leader(s), and work to get the leader(s) dismissed. Following the procedures matter far less than the desired result of dismissal. For them the end justifies the means. When dismissed, the leaders in the circle of division, realizing the depth of their dirty work, often express sadness but internally delight in their victory. Their togetherness strengthens the divisive group's sense of being right. Togetherness does not make division right. Their togetherness means only that they are now a faction of the flesh. Good leaders will need to counter these activities to discover the nature and content of the division, and to counter the fleshly divisions.

Their Own Narrative

Seventh, in working together and thinking they are right, the circle of division tells itself a story: it forms its own narrative of the church or institution, claims the high road, refuses to admit their gossip, quotes the Bible for their viewpoints, and contends they are fighting for justice. The circle of division will nearly always tell some truths, those truths are usually exaggerated or distorted. Only an independent observer, someone marked by wisdom and social perception, can root out the most accurate narrative. Most of the time the dividers don't even know the deeper, more accurate narrative.

Grandstanding

Eighth, the circle of power, and especially its leader, participate in grandstanding, which is a desire to be perceived as virtuous prompted by publicly affirming their own virtues (see Tosi and Warmke, Grandstanding). They may host a dinner at one of their homes where they can affirm one another. They may even go to social media. What matters is that they want to be affirmed for the very moral claims they make while bragging about their actions. Here is a definition of grandstanding from the Tosi and Warmke study:

Grandstanders want to impress others with their moral qualities. We call this the Recognition Desire.

Grandstanders try to satisfy that desire by saying something in public moral discourse. We call this public display the Grandstanding Expression.

You can therefore think of grandstanding in terms of a simple formula:

Grandstanding = Recognition Desire + Grandstanding Expression

Grandstanders try to get others to think of them as morally respectable. Sometimes they want to be thought of as one of the gang. Other times, they want to be thought of as morally exceptional. Either way, they usually want to be seen as morally better than others (Tosi, Warmke, Grandstanding, 15).

When the circle of division, with its strong leaders guiding the circle, doesn't get its way, some leave, some continue to fight until they get what they want, and some learn the lesson that cliques deny the gospel itself.[1] The first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, not to ignore other passages in Paul's letters, can provide guidance for leaders facing factions in their church or organization.

I have assumed in the above that Paul was more or less on the side of the angels and that his opponents in Corinth were opposing what was good. At times a pocket forms that is itself the good culture. That pocket of tov (or goodness) opposes a toxic leader or leadership. However, how pockets of tov behave in comparison to a circle of division (a pocket of toxicity and powermongering) is completely different, even if resistance and dissidence and disagreements are common to both groups.