



TRUTH APPLICATIONS

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Corinth — Of Pride and Politics

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A previous article looked at the manner of Paul's response to the troubles in the Corinthian church (see "*This Was 'A Church of God'?*" *First Century Christian*, July 2000). His example was cited as a reminder of the need for patient directness in dealing with any who struggle with issues of doctrine or practice.

This article will focus on the reason for their troubles. While appreciating Paul's example of patient directness, we must not fail to appreciate the significance of the fact that they had problems which needed to be confronted. Remembering the nature of their difficulty is vital for learning to deal with similar issues which still challenge God's people.

The Corinthian Problem

Beginning students of 1 Corinthians soon learn the variety of troubles Paul confronts. There is the teaching on division, true wisdom, and fleshliness versus spirituality which forms the writing's first major section (1:10-4:21). Then there are the problems and questions which comprise the rest of the writing—the man who had his father's wife (5:1-13); believers taking brothers to court (6:1-8); the temptation to sexual license related to idolatry (6:12-20; 8:1-11:1); questions concerning marriage (7:1-40) and the appropriate roles of men and women (11:2-16); disruptions of the worship assemblies as various Christians sought primacy of place (11:17-14:40); and denial of the resurrection (15:1-58). It understates the matter to say that Corinth was a church with serious troubles. But even as we take note of the variety of issues Paul addressed, we are convinced that their troubles stemmed from just one main problem.

That problem was their division, or, to be more precise, the pride behind their division. Because of the emphasis on this problem in the first major section of the book (1:10-4:21), and the fact that most outlines of the writing present its topics as they do, it is easy to miss the recurring emphasis on this root issue. To be sure, we learn early that the factions involved allegiance to personalities (1:12); that there were evidently some who were overly enamored with their positions of prominence in the church, unlike what they had experienced prior to their conversion (1:26-31); that some were also too concerned with rhetorical wisdom (1:18-2:16); and that, at root, their problem stemmed from their fleshliness which displayed itself in an

arrogance which was the polar opposite of the servant spirit of Paul and Apollos, two of the men around whom their factions had formed (3:1-4:21).

But Paul does not end his treatment of pride-based division at 4:21. The same pride is the reason they failed to respond appropriately to the fornication in chapter 5. It doubtless lay at the root of the ease with which they took one another to court (6), their thinking that they could somehow combine Christianity with the practices of paganism (6, 8), and the willingness of some to eat meat which had been offered to idols regardless of the effect their practice might have on a brother in Christ (8, 10). There is little doubt that it was behind the factions which surrounded the Lord's Supper (11:17ff.) and the petty dispute over whose gifts were better (12:1-14:40). The Corinthians' fragmentation was not so much the result of doctrinal differences as attitudes grounded in pride rather than humility.¹ Because of the ease with which the temptation to pride can befall believers in any time and place, its nature in the Corinthian situation deserves more study.

A Politically Charged Climate

In 1987, L. L. Welborn wrote an article in which he focused on evidence which indicates that "Paul describes the situation in the church in terms like those used to characterize conflicts within city-states by Greco-Roman historians" ("On the Discord in Corinth: 1 Corinthians 1-4 and Ancient Politics," *Journal of Biblical Literature* [106/1: 85-111], 86). Welborn's research sheds light on both the original situation in Corinth and its application for current difficulties. For reasons of space, we'll summarize only his observations about 1:10-13.

In verse 10, Paul begins the body of the epistle with an urgent appeal "that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment" (NASB). Three terms are relevant to our theme. First, "that you all agree," literally, "that you all say the same [thing]" was used in classical Greek "of political communities which are free from factions, or of diff[erent] states which entertain friendly relations with each other" (J. B. Lightfoot, *Notes on Epistles of St. Paul*, in G. G. Findlay, *St. Paul's First Epistle to the Corinthians*, Expositor's Greek Testament II: 763). Second, the word translated "be made complete," the perfect passive participle *katērtismenoi*, is "suggestive of fitting together what is broken or rent (e.g., fishing nets, Matt 4:21). It is used in surgery for setting a joint (Galen), and in Greek politics for *composing factions*" (Archibald Robertson and Alfred Plummer, *The First Epistle of St. Paul to the Corinthians*, International Critical Commentary, 10; italics in original). Finally, the word "divisions" (*schismata*), also used in 11:18 and 12:25, was used literally of a rift or tear in a garment, but was also used metaphorically in extra-biblical sources to refer to splits in political consciousness. Welborn notes that "the clearest indication of the meaning of *schisma* in 1 Cor 1:10 is provided by the author of *1 Clement*. Applying the example of Paul and the parties to the 'abominable and unholy *stasis* [disputes, dissensions - see Arndt & Gingrich, *Lexicon*, 2nd Edition, 764]' in the church of his own day, he asks, 'Why are there quarrels and anger and dissension and divisions (*schismata*) and war among you?' (46:5). The terms with which *schisma* is associated make it clear that it is neither a religious heresy nor a harmless clique that the author has in mind, but factions engaged in a struggle for power" (Welborn, 86-87).

In verse 11, Paul announces that “Chloe’s people” have informed him that there are “*quarrels* among you.” This word (*eris*), used in 1 Corinthians 3:3 and in various vice lists (Romans 1:29, Galatians 5:20; Titus 3:9), means “strife, discord, contention, quarrels” and, in its adjective form, refers to a contentious or quarrelsome person. Significant for our study is that “it invariably appears in accounts of ancient political life the moment the pressure of circumstances, that is the approach of an enemy army or the election of mutually hostile consuls, draws the citizens into confused knots” (Welborn, 87).

Verse 12 identifies the parties in the Corinthian church. The names have been analyzed by different students in an attempt to discern the origins and particular emphases of these groups. Our concern here is with the form of the expressions. In Greek politics, it was personal adherence more than ideas and issues which held factions together. Thus, there were no party names like Democrat, Republican, etc. Rather, the parties are “named after *individuals* whose interests they served” (Welborn, 90; italics in original). Furthermore, there is evidence that these Greek parties utilized succinct slogans to rally their followers, slogans like “I am of Paul,” “I of Apollos,” etc.

In verse 13, Paul asks, “Has Christ been divided?” Welborn comments: “The translations fail to capture the political connotation that the verb undoubtedly had for its first readers. *Meris* is the customary term for ‘party’ in Greek, corresponding to the Latin *pars*. . . . We may gain in clarity if we paraphrase Paul’s question thus: ‘Has the body of Christ been split into parties?’” (Welborn, 87).

Conclusion and Application

The evidence of a connection between Paul’s words and the political terminology common to the first century Greek culture, coupled with his focus on the Corinthians’ pride and failure to realize that they too had been saved by grace, not position or merit (cf. 1:26-31), lead to the conclusion that their doctrinal problems were rooted in, if not disguised for, a love of power and prestige common in ancient politics.

What lesson can we learn from this conclusion? Simply this: since it is so easy for personalities and politics produced of pride to contribute to strife in the church, it is imperative that each one who seeks to see this action followed or that action checked examine his heart to be sure that his spirit is as pure as the Word he defends. Human nature being as it is—and the devil being as determined as he is (cf. 1 Peter 5:8)—we would be naive to assume that it was only the ancient Corinthians who were seduced by pride, that personalities and politics are never a factor in modern disagreements over matters of belief and practice.

We have a mandate to “walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which [we] have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love, being diligent to *preserve* the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Ephesians 4:1-3 NASB; my italics). God’s nature and revelation call us to unity. Let us examine ourselves to be sure that we are not at odds with His will in this area even as we boldly defend it in other matters.

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Notes

¹ This is not to say that doctrine was not any part of the problem. Beyond the obvious examples involving idolatry and the resurrection, it is probable that at least some of the rationale for the factions in Corinth involved some doctrinal issues. For example, some think that Paul uses Peter's Jewish name, Cephas, because of the way the Judaizers tried to use Peter's actions in Galatia for their purposes in challenging Paul. Doctrine was a problem in Corinth, but we can well question whether it was the cause of the problem or the face put forward to disguise the real issue.