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FOREWORD

Christian preaching founds a community whose self-understanding and organization reflect a radically new and different way of viewing reality.

The continuing existence of the church is dependent upon the church faithfully passing on its central message and its vision of all reality as interpreted through the Christian faith. This task has inevitably brought the church into contact with other truths and into conflict with other visions of reality. In time, post-Constantinian Christianity won victories; and as a result, Christian thought was ascribed a central role in medieval universities.

For good or ill, Christian thought no longer occupies a privileged position in western education, which increasingly is ignorant even of Christianity's historical role in western civilization.

These essays are presented toward the end of promoting reflection on the complex relationship between Christian thought and education--both within and outside the church.

Michael R. Weed, Editor

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THE COMMUNITY OF BELIEVERS IN I CORINTHIANS*

By Douglas L. Gragg

Sociologist Robert Bellah and a team of associates have recently reminded us in their bestseller, Habits of the Heart,[1] of the radically individualistic orientation of American culture and of the extent to which that orientation has led to the deterioration of many fundamental social institutions. The book is representative of a growing interest in our country (at least among many intellectuals) in searching for ways to rekindle the sense of commitment and acceptance of mutual obligation that stable and constructive social life requires but that radical individualism has eroded. Sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and many others are making important contributions in this regard from the standpoint of their respective disciplines.

American Christians have every reason to applaud this critical reassessment of radical individualism. Our own capitulation to the individualistic and privatistic forms of self-understanding characteristic of our culture has constituted a betrayal of

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our true identity and has seriously hindered realization of the communal implications of our convictions. In our quest for rehabilitation there is surely much we can learn from studies in the various humanistic disciplines that address the problem. It is essential, however, that our reflection on the meaning of community be above all a critical engagement with biblical theology and not simply a restatement in biblical language of some current trend in philosophy, sociology, or psychology. The latter happens far too often, not only at the level of academic theology but also in our churches, where discourse about community is sometimes informed primarily by popular psychology and group dynamics theory. The fundamental challenge for us as Christians is to rediscover the distinctive foundations of our own common life and to model before the world the kind of community that the gospel--when allowed to do its work--produces.

The task of discovering what the New Testament has to say about community has been made easier by the publication during the last several years of many important articles and books related to the topic.[2] My purpose in this paper, however, is not primarily to enter into conversation with secondary literature but to present briefly and straightforwardly what one New Testament text has to say about the foundations and meaning of Christian community. I have chosen Paul's first letter to the Corinthians because I believe it provides a wider range of relevant material for reflection on the topic than any other single New Testament document.

First Corinthians

It cannot be stressed often enough that the letters of Paul are not systematic doctrinal treatises but ad hoc compositions designed to address specific situations in the life of local churches. Because of this, for the most part, it is possible to discover the nature of Paul's idea of community only indirectly. It seems likely that one place we might find him saying something relevant to the topic would be in those instances where he is addressing the problem of division. The Corinthians' propensity for division (or, to borrow C. K. Barrett's euphemism, their "imperfectly Christianized contentiousness")[3] is surely one reason this letter has so much to say about community. In view of this, I propose to analyze briefly four passages in I Corinthians in which Paul deals specifically with some form of division in the Corinthian church, that is, some set of circumstances in which the realization of community has been jeopardized or blocked. After the series of analyses, I will provide a summary of the most important findings. Before turning to the four passages, though, a few remarks of a general nature about the Corinthian situation are necessary.

The city of Corinth in Paul's day was the capital of the senatorial province Achaia (Greece). Having been destroyed by the Romans in 146 B.C., it had been refounded by Julius Caesar as a Roman colony in 44 B.C. Situated at the Isthmus and controlling two harbors, the colony grew rapidly and flourished economically, becoming an important commercial city and attracting many socially

ambitious artisans. The earliest settlers, according to Strabo (Geography 8.6.23), were mostly Roman freedmen, but by Paul's time the population of the city was very diverse, both ethnically and socially.

This diversity was reflected in the church at Corinth, which Paul founded in the early fifties. With regard to ethnicity, we know that the church included both Jews and Gentiles, though it is not clear in what proportion. Also, if the names of the Corinthian Christians that we know are any indicator, there were among the members both indigenous Greeks and Roman settlers. Gerd Theissen has demonstrated that the church at Corinth was socially diverse as well.[4] While I Corinthians 1:26 makes it clear that the majority of the members did not enjoy a significant social status (there were "not many wise in a human sense, not many influential, not many of noble birth"), it allows for the presence of a minority who did. Using such criteria as references to offices held, houses owned, financial services rendered, and travel, Theissen has identified as representatives of this latter category Aquila and Priscilla, Crispus, Gaius, Stephanas, Erastus, Phoebe, Titius Justus, and possibly Sosthenes (who may not have been a Corinthian). The nature of the references to these persons in Paul's correspondence suggests that, though a minority, they were very influential in the Corinthian church.

With these general remarks in mind I turn now to four manifestations of division at Corinth, each of which was probably exacerbated to some extent by the diverse character of the

membership that we have noted. These manifestations of division are (1) the so-called "party strife" discussed in chapters 1-4, (2) the disagreement about eating meat dedicated to an idol in chapters 8-10, (3) the problems connected with the Lord's supper in chapter 11, and (4) the strife generated in association with the exercise of spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14. In each case I will identify as concisely as possible the nature of the problem and then analyze briefly Paul's response, noting primarily the theological bases of his appeals for unity. There are other examples of division in I Corinthians (such as the problem of lawsuits in chapter 6) that could also be fruitfully discussed, but these four will be sufficient for our purposes.

"Party Strife" (Chapters 1-4)

In I Corinthians 1:11,12 Paul writes,

> It has been reported to me concerning you, my brothers, by Chloe's people that there are contentions among you. Now I say this because each of you is saying, "I belong to Paul" or "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas" or "I belong to Christ."

It is not clear exactly what these slogans mean. Those involving Cephas and Christ are especially confusing since (1) there is no other evidence that Peter was ever in Corinth and (2) the slogan about Christ is subject to several possible interpretations. In Paul's subsequent discussion of the issue only Apollos is mentioned again, which may suggest that the problem concerned primarily unfavorable comparison by some of the Corinthians of Paul to Apollos, who had worked for some time in Corinth after

Paul's departure (Acts 18:24-19:1). It is easy to imagine, at any rate, that Apollos, who was noted for his eloquence, had cut a more impressive figure in Corinth than had Paul, who testifies to his own deliberate eschewal of the arts of rhetoric (2:1-5). Theissen may be correct when he suggests that the supporters of Apollos were probably some of the more educated and wealthy members, who had perhaps even made some financial contribution to his mission,[5] but it is hard to say. Whatever these slogans may mean, Paul regards the divisive, competitive spirit that they embody as a betrayal of the Corinthians' identity in Christ.

Paul identifies the heart of the problem as forgetfulness. In their disputes about the relative merits of their leaders, the contending parties have forgotten about the foundational story on the basis of which they were originally called together as a community. Paul reminds them that their viability as a church depends not on the wisdom or skills of any human leader but on faithfulness to "the word of the cross" (1:18ff.). Moreover, it is Christ, not Paul or anyone else, who was crucified for them (1:13).

Paul brings this point home by jogging their memory about the origins of their community. In 1:26-31 he reminds them that their original emergence as a church had nothing to do with any sophistication on their part since few of them were educated, influential, or well-placed in society. Clearly, it was only the powerful action of God that had brought them together in Christ. In 2:1-5 Paul reminds them further that the undeniable success of

his own ministry among them at the beginning can only be attributed to the power of the message about Christ crucified since, as they would have been quick to agree, his own manner among them had been decidedly unsophisticated.

On the basis of this kind of argumentation Paul is able to put the whole matter in perspective. In 3:5-7 he writes,

> What then is Apollos? What is Paul? They are servants through whom you came to believe, each working according to the Lord's assignment: I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So then, it is neither the one who plants nor the one who waters who is important, but only God who gives the growth.

Changing the metaphor, he continues in verses 10,11:

> According to the grace of God which was given to me, like a skilled master builder, I laid a foundation, and another man is building on it. But let each be careful how he builds. For no one can lay any other foundation than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

In verses 21-23, then, he concludes,

> So then, let no one boast in human beings. For all things are yours, whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas, whether world or life or death, whether things present or things to come--all are yours; and you are Christ's, and Christ is God's.

The story of what God accomplished in Christ is the source of the Corinthians' life together as a church. Transcending all other concerns and loyalties, it alone stands as the sufficient foundation of community.

One further point needs to be noted. Paul warns the Corinthians in 3:16,17 that violation of the church's unity is a serious offense:

> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that the Spirit of God dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's

> temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy, and that temple is what you are.

The community of believers that is formed on the basis of the word of the cross, Paul says, constitutes the dwelling place of the very Spirit of God (note that the "you" in the passage just cited is plural). The conviction that this is so serves, both positively (as inspiration) and negatively (as warning), to sustain community.

Consecrated Meat (Chapters 8-10)

According to chapters 8-10 another source of contention in the Corinthian church was disagreement about the matter of eating meat that had been dedicated to an idol, that is, meat that had been used in pagan worship. Some members of the church (identified as the "strong") considered this a matter of indifference in view of the knowledge revealed by the gospel that "an idol has no real existence" and that "there is no God but one" (8:4) and so ate such meat in good conscience. Others (identified as the "weak"), unable to disassociate the eating of such meat from its significance in the context of pagan worship, were scandalized by this.

Identifying the makeup of these two groups has long been a source of debate among scholars. Were the so-called "strong," Jews, and the so-called "weak," Gentiles, or was it the other way around? Was the division perhaps not along the lines of ethnic or religious background at all but rather, as Theissen has suggested, attributable to differences in social status?[6]

Answering this difficult question is less important for our purposes than noting how Paul responds to the problem.

First, Paul acknowledges the validity of the reasoning by which the "strong" justify their eating (8:4-6). Yet he admonishes them to temper their knowledge with love for those whose consciences may be compromised. "'Knowledge' puffs up," he warns, "but love builds up" (8:1). The expression of this love, however, is not understood to issue merely from common decency or sympathy for the situation of a fellow human being. Rather, it is rooted specifically in what we called earlier the community's foundational story, that is, the gospel. The "weak man" who is destroyed by the insensitivity of the "strong" is precisely "the brother for whom Christ died" (8:11). Paul does not hesitate to say that to sin against a brother in this way is to sin against Christ (8:12). The bond between Christians, which is based on their common indebtedness to Christ, sometimes calls, he argues, for the surrender of personal "rights" for the sake of a brother or sister. In chapter 9 Paul cites, by way of example, his own decision to surrender his right to receive financial support for his preaching and his desire to accommodate the concerns of others, concluding in verse 23, "I do all of this because of the gospel."

Paul does not leave the matter here, though. In chapter 10, still agreeing that an idol has no real existence and that there is nothing inherently wrong with eating consecrated meat, Paul nevertheless warns those who are doing so of the seductive power

of the pagan ceremonies in which they believe they are innnocently participating. Arguing that the real objects of pagan worship are demonic forces, Paul warns that uncritical participation in such festive occasions threatens to involve them in a kind of communion with demons and those who are devoted to them (verse 20). He explains what he means by reminding them of what happens in their own observance of the Lord's supper:

> The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion (koinonia) in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread (10:16,17).

Partaking of the blessed cup and broken bread signifies communion with Christ and with those who are devoted to him. The "enlightened" members of the Corinthian church, who are participating with such indifference in analogous festivities of their pagan neighbors are warned to be careful not to find themselves torn between two loyalties. One cannot eat both from the table of the Lord and from the table of demons (verse 21).

Paul's appeal here to the meaning of the Lord's supper is relevant to our investigation in that it points to the power of this symbolic action, performed regularly by the gathered church, to sustain community (note again verse 17: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread."). The symbolic action draws its power from the fact that it involves the community in a sort of corporate reenactment, or re-presentation, of its foundational story, as the reference to the body and blood of Christ suggests. The symbol can lose

its power to unite the community, though, if it becomes divorced from that story. That the latter had in fact occurred already in Corinth is clear from chapter 11, which presents a further case of division.

The Lord's Supper (Chapter 11)

Paul's reference to the problems surrounding observance of the Lord's supper at Corinth are so cryptic that it is difficult to determine exactly what was going on. It seems clear enough, though, that the friction is traceable to a great extent to differences of social status. Wealthy members were behaving without sufficient regard for their poorer brothers and sisters. It is the wealthier members with houses large enough to accommodate all the participants who would have hosted and provided the food for the church's meetings for worship and fellowship (note, e.g., the reference in Romans 16:23 to the fact that Gaius in Corinth was host to Paul "and to the whole church").[7] As Theissen has suggested, it is not unlikely that hosts of these meetings of the church in Corinth, in keeping with established social custom, were exercising some discrimination in the distribution of food, favoring guests who shared their own higher social status. Poorer members may have received very little to eat, perhaps little more that the consecrated bread and wine that was distributed to all at some point during the course of the meal.[8]

No matter how common or widely accepted such discrimination might have been in the general culture, Paul regards it as

completely unacceptable in the community of believers, whose commitments transcend social distinctions. As we have by now come to expect, Paul addresses the problem by invoking again the tradition upon which the community was originally founded. He writes in verses 23-26:

> I received from the Lord what I also passed on to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night he was betrayed took bread and, when he had given thanks, broke it and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in my memory." In the same way he took also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in my memory." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

The Lord's supper was originally intended to reinforce the bond between believers by reminding them of the sacrificial death of Christ to which they shared a common indebtedness. In Corinth it had become instead a source of division because some of the members had turned it into an occasion for the reinforcement of social distinctions. This kind of selfish disregard of others stands in stark contrast to the unselfish action of Christ that, according to the tradition, the celebration of the Lord's supper is supposed to recall. Such behavior amounts to a betrayal of the gospel, or as Paul says it even more strongly in verse 27, a "profanation of the body and blood of the Lord."

The guilty parties are in danger of God's judgment. Paul says in verse 29, "Anyone who eats and drinks without discerning the body eats and drinks judgment upon himself." The expression "discerning the body" surely has a double reference, both to the body of Christ himself (i.e., his sacrificial death, the

foundational significance of which the supper is designed to recall), and to the body of Christ, the church (whose common life the supper is designed to reinforce). This threat of judgment upon those who show disdain for their brothers and sisters recalls the passage noted earlier in 3:17--"If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him."

Spiritual Gifts (Chapters 12-14)

The last example of division in the church at Corinth that I want to examine concerns problems associated with the exercise of spiritual gifts in chapters 12-14. Paul describes the Corinthians in 14:12 as "eager for manifestations of the Spirit." It is clear that they were especially enthusiastic about some of the more spectacular manifestations such as ecstatic speech. As far as Paul is concerned, there is nothing wrong with this in itself. The problem in Corinth with regard to spiritual gifts is that some had misconstrued them as a means of self-promotion. This had in turn led to a competitive spirit, with those possessing externally impressive gifts becoming arrogant (12:21) and those without them feeling inferior (12:15,16).

Paul responds to this problem by challenging the Corinthians' individualistic orientation. The gifts distributed by the Spirit are intended to be used not for self-aggrandizement but "for the common good" (12:7), for "the edification of the church" (14:12,26). Measured by this standard, the gift of ecstatic speech, about which many of them were so enthusiastic, becomes

less important than a gift like prophecy, since the latter provides instruction and encouragement for the church (14:1-5).

In spite of his praise for the gift of prophecy in chapter 14, though, it is clear that Paul does not want to assign too much importance to any single gift. By God's own design there are many manifestations of the Spirit. Yet the diversity and variety of gifts is not intended to promote competition. This diversity exists within the framework of a larger unity, which finds expression in the common source of the gifts (God) as well as in their common function (promotion of the common good). As Paul expresses it in 12:4-7,

> There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; there are various forms of ministry, but the same Lord; there are various tasks to be done, but the same God who supplies the energy for them all. To each has been given some manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

As a means of clarifying the nature of this diversified unity Paul employs the metaphor of the body. He writes in 12:12,

> Just as a body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are still one body, so it is in Christ.

From this analogy Paul is able to draw two points about the church's unity in diversity that are especially relevant to the Corinthians' situation. First, he points out that in a body every member, even the one that seems least significant, plays an indispensible role. So in the body of Christ no person should feel inferior or be treated as such simply because his or her gift seems unspectacular (12:14ff.). What is important is that every gift be exercised for the common good. Second, and equally

important, Paul points out that in a body the members are interdependent. So the body of Christ ought to be characterized not by competitiveness or individualistic disregard for the other but by the kind of mutual concern that says, "If one member suffers, all the members suffer together; if one member is honored, all the members rejoice together" (12:26).

One final point needs to be noted about Paul's discussion of the diversified unity of the body of Christ in chapter 12. It has been noted that for Paul the diversity of spiritual gifts is divinely ordained. The same thing applies in a broader sense to the ethnic and social diversity that characterizes the community. Paul writes in verse 13,

> By one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and were all caused to drink of one Spirit.

The Spirit that distributes within the community diverse gifts to be employed for the common good is the same Spirit that calls diverse people into community in the first place. The reference to baptism here as the means by which each person enters the community is not at all surprising, since baptism, like the Lord's supper, represents a symbolic point of contact with the community's foundational story.

Conclusion

I conclude now with a brief organizing summary of what examination of these four passages from I Corinthians has revealed about some fundamental features of Paul's vision of community.

I will do this in four points.

First, Christian community as understood by Paul is not founded on some universal truth about human nature accessible to philosophical reflection, nor on a common ethnic identity or social status, nor on natural affection or mutual interests. Rather, it is based on what we have called a foundational story. Paul refers to this story in I Corinthians by various names, including "the gospel" (1:17; passim), "the word of the cross" (1:18), "the testimony about God" (2:1), the message about "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (2:2), and "the tradition(s)" (11:2; cf. 15:3). It is the story of how God acted in Christ to save those who believe. The proclamation of this story creates communities of faith, composed of diverse persons who share above all else a common indebtedness and commitment to God in Christ.[9]

Second, it is, according to Paul, the Spirit of God who, by means of the story about Christ, draws people into the community of faith. It is this same Spirit who dwells in the community and contributes to its well-being by distributing to each of its members gifts to be used for the common good. The conviction that the Spirit is present in the community serves both as a positive stimulus to unity and as a deterrent to any inclination to violate that unity on the basis of selfish interests.

Third, baptism and the Lord's supper reinforce community by serving as symbolic points of contact with the foundational story and as means of participating in it. In the waters of baptism, alienating distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free,

are obliterated. The baptized enter the one body in which they all drink of one Spirit. In the Lord's supper, the foundational story about Christ crucified is re-presented, and the unity of believers is both symbolized and reconstituted in the sharing of the one loaf.

Finally, the community of believers is represented by Paul as a unity in diversity. People from diverse ethnic and social backgrounds become one in a fellowship that transcends such distinctions. Members of the community exercise a diversity of gifts distributed by the one Spirit for the common good. Disagreements in the community are addressed in a spirit of love and willingness to relinquish personal freedoms on the basis of a common indebtedness to Christ. The metaphor of the body, which Paul uses to represent this diversified unity, is especially illuminating.

The specific problems and issues with which we wrestle in our own churches today are not the same as those the Corinthians faced. The vision of community that Paul set before them, though, is just as relevant now as it was then and has the potential, if taken seriously, for contributing greatly to the renewal of our life together.

NOTES

1 Robert N. Bellah and others, Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

2 Studies in social history have contributed to a better understanding of the larger social milieu within which--and often against which--early Christian forms of community emerged. See

especially Gerd Theissen, The Social Setting of Pauline Christianity, ed. and trans, John H. Schutz (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982); Abraham J. Malherbe, Social Aspects of Early Christianity, 2d ed. (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1983); and Wayne A. Meeks, The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul (New Haven: Yale University, 1983). Studies dealing more directly with community in the biblical tradition include Robert Banks, Paul's Idea of Community (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980: reprinted 1988); Gerhard Lohfink, Jesus and Community, trans. John P. Galvin (Philadelphia/New York: Fortress/Paulist, 1984); and Paul Hanson, The People Called: The Growth of Community in the Bible (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1986).

3 C. K. Barrett, The First Epistle to the Corinthians (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), 3.

4 Theissen, 69-119.

5 Ibid., 54-57.

6 Ibid., 121-143.

7 Carl R. Holladay, The First Letter of Paul to the Corinthians (Austin: Sweet, 1979), 144.

8 Theissen, 160ff.

9 The foundational role of narrative in the formation of Jewish and Christian identity has been increasingly recognized and emphasized in contemporary theology. Significant studies in this regard include Hans W. Frei, The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative (New Haven: Yale University, 1974) and The Identity of Jesus Christ (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975); Gabriel Fackre, The Christian Story (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978); George W. Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981); Michael Goldberg, Theology and Narrative: A Critical Introduction (Nashville: Abingdon, 1982); and Eberhard Jungel, God as the Mystery of the World, trans. D. L. Guder (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983). The role of narrative in the formation of community with distinctively Christian moral identity has been explored particularly by Stanley Hauerwas. See especially A Community of Character (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1981) and The Peaceable Kingdom: A Primer in Christian Ethics (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame, 1983).

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