

Unity as the Essential Ideal of the Church

Paul's Interactions with the Corinthian Community

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Introduction

The problem of mutual distrust resulting in disunity, dissent and hatred among tribes, clans, races, families and individuals has been the most persisting scourge that has affected humanity from time immemorial. Wars have been fought; blood has been shed; lives have been destroyed; and distances have been created, but dislike and hate have not given way for unity and harmony in society. In our own times not a day passes without some startling news of murder and destruction over longstanding feuds.

While human society in general is still conflict-ridden and is often labouring under the death pangs of divisiveness, the followers of Jesus Christ whose essential teaching was love have also been very much part of the scandal of division. Christian communities have not been an example of a happy fellowship. In our own regions parish communities have been acrimoniously divided on the basis of the age-old Indian evil known as caste. And it is deplorable that even the carefully nurtured and spiritually furnished leadership in our Christian communities, namely the clergy, have also behaved in a most unchristian manner thus aggravating the circumstances of division.

The above situations cannot easily be attended to with our own limited and often self motivated human devices. We do need to rely upon a superior and divine resource of strength like the Word of God. Do we find any specific instances in the biblical history where human divisions have been attended to applying God's wisdom? We do. The manner in which the great Apostle Paul undertook his ministry to settle the problems of division in the Corinthian Christian community and thus create a spirit of unity among them is a great model for us in our own ministry today. Paul's efforts and the principles he puts forward for the very existence and continuation of the Corinthian Church are the real challenges for our own times as to how a Christian community is to conduct itself in promoting unity which should be considered as the most shining ideal of the Church.

Corinth and its moral Fibre.

Corinth was a port city in the southern part of Greece. It was the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. There was a free flow of trade and commerce and hence the city became not only economically flourishing but also a hub for loose living and vulgarity. A huge marketplace, a number of temples for idol worship, theatres and baths did have their share in disturbing the religious, the social, and the moral ethos life of the people. The Isthmian games, almost the equivalent of the modern Olympics, did attract people from different quarters of Asia, which further contributed to the cultural dilapidation of the city (cf 1 Cor 9:24-26).

As far as sexual immorality was concerned prostitution as an integral part of worshipping Aphrodite, the goddess of love, was the order of the day. There were nearly a thousand sacred prostitutes attached to the Aphrodite temple. There were depressing references to the sexual depravity of this city with phrases like 'playing the Corinthian' or 'to be a Corinthian girl' (cf 1 Cor 5:1-13). And closely following upon the evil of luxury and immorality all in the name of liberty was the iniquity of a polytheistic worship.

Paul would have been quite bewildered over the evil of immorality that affected the Corinthian population in general. And he was thoroughly saddened that the Christians too had their own share of Corinthian abominations (1 Cor 5). And this depraved cultural situation of Corinth also resulted in several evils in the Christian community, the most predominant of which was their total lack of unity.

Christian Mission in Corinth and the Problem of Disunity.

Paul's mission of proclamation in Corinth was of the longest duration, lasting over a period of eighteen months (Acts 18:1-18). He did invest much of his care, concern and missionary endeavours in this highly commercialised city with all its consequent depravities. The missionary efforts of Paul did yield the fruit of conversion mostly among the gentiles. Besides Paul, Apollos a Greek scholar and rhetorician who had earlier received his Christian faith from Aquila and Priscilla, also preached in Corinth after Paul (Acts 19:1). Peter the Apostle referred to by the Aramaic name Cephas is also mentioned as one of the early preachers at Corinth (1 Cor 1:12). There are no records as to Peter's presence and missionary work at Corinth. But there could have been Christians of Jewish origin who would have emigrated to Corinth from Jerusalem after having received the Gospel message from Peter.

The Christian community of Corinth comprising of the gentile as well as the Jewish Christians should have really been an integrated and unified community. Their spirit of unity in the midst of their diversity would have been a great witness in the city of Corinth and thus played an extraordinarily role in as a singular group in this busy mercantile city. But the followers of Jesus Christ seemed to have succumbed to the despicable evils of materialism and immorality that characterized the social life of Corinth. The scandalizing situation of Corinth was the wisdom of the world which seems to have infiltrated the rank and file of the Christian community (cf 1 Cor 1:20). The Christian community mostly proletarian in nature did lend itself to the several characteristics of the commercialized Corinthian culture and it only served

them to inherit many an unhealthy value in their Christian lives². But what pained Paul deeply was that the Christians were a sharply divided community with all the backdrop of a bewildered socio-economic situation. Paul had special affection for the Christian community of Corinth due to his prolonged sojourn with them and hence he could not accept dissensions among them. Hence a sizeable portion of the first letter of Paul to the Corinthians dealt with the theme of unity to be required in a Christian community. This is one of the earliest contributions of Paul dealing with an essential prerequisite of the Church in general.

Corinthian Factions and their Cause

A common occurrence in the socio-political arena today is the leadership phenomenon. They set their own agenda ahead with their own political interests and divide people for their advantage. But in the case of the Corinthian Christians it is the people who caused divisions grouping themselves on the basis of the preachers, apparently their leaders in initiating their faith in Jesus. It is a strange reason for division but the cultural background of Corinth did have its role for such a turn of events. It is not so much a division based on leadership, but rather a dissension carefully contrived to suit an undercurrent of indulgence and dissipation which existed among them as Corinthian citizens. The cause of divisions could have been a spirit of affluence combined with immorality which deeply exposes a divided self in the very inner life of Christians. The accusation in the letter of James levelled against some Christians in his own sphere of mission, may rightly be attributed to the divided Christian community of Corinth as well. He rightly writes, "What causes wars, and what causes fighting among you? Is it not your passions that are at war in your members?" (4:1) The real cause of factions was certainly not the differences in the approach of their initial evangelizers or the fathers of their faith like Paul, Apollos, or Peter. It was their own tendencies of pride, inflated self-esteem, and immaturity thanks to their Corinthian environment. Their peripheral focus on the personalities who evangelized

them and their alleged allegiance to them to the extent of a disunity in the Christian community was simply a façade.

Paul's Proposals for an united Community

1. Source of Unity: the Crucified Christ as Divine Wisdom

Paul seems to have taken the divisions in the Corinthian community quite seriously. He was quite convinced that unity of mind and heart should be the most vital characteristic of the followers of Jesus Christ in a divided world. Hence his extraordinary efforts in his first communication with the Corinthians as to the need of unity and the means to achieve it. Paul's arguments do certainly suit not only the local Church of Corinth, but also the universal Church which was gradually emerging.

How does Paul deal with the problem of dissensions at Corinth? Paul is fully aware of the larger issues contained in the faction-ridden community. Hence he downplays the role of the evangelizers or their personal influence in the community. But he launches forthwith into giving them an authentic, convincing and a lasting answer which should help them to restrain their factions. It is a solution that would directly contradict the spirit of worldly wisdom which was the root cause of the divided Christian community at Corinth³. Paul's foremost and perhaps the most energetic solution is that they should go to the very basics of their Christian faith. And it is none other than the message of the Gospel and its essential feature, the cross of Christ. And contrasting with the misplaced ground realities at Corinth Paul calls the Cross of Christ "the power of God and the wisdom of God". And from a self-indulgent Corinthian viewpoint the crucified Christ may look totally foolish and utterly frail. The Jewish Christians of Corinth could have been influenced to hold on to a fundamentalist Jewish thought that the crucifixion of Christ did really disprove his divinity. A quote from the Book of Deuteronomy could have still haunted them: "He that is hanged is accursed by God" (21:23). And similarly the gentile Christians could have been still under the spell of a Greek Philosophy which asserted that God had no feelings and that a God

who suffered was a contradiction in terms⁴. But referring to the crucified Christ Paul firmly asserts that “the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (1 Cor 1:25).

2. God as the Master and Builder of the Community

After having proposed the Christ Crucified as the definitive way out of their divisions Paul takes up another solution somewhat wider in its perspective. He argues that it is God who should be given the prerogative of shaping a community, and not our whims and fancies. It is God who is the overall master and builder of the community.

The problem of divisions in the Corinthian Church, arising out of a troubled socio- moral life as well as their quest for a fake wisdom in such a context is further compounded by one pitiable characteristic in their life. Their day to day interests did not go beyond their downright low level physical life. They were all just people of the flesh (1 Cor 3:3). Paul addresses them as *sarkikoi*, that is , people dominated by the flesh with jealousy and strife as their natural offshoots. That means they went about with a spirit of total disregard to their Christian neighbour if his faith was from a different source. They were so self-dominated that they could not think of a power above, God, a Father figure, who would have provided them with a right motivation towards their fellow Christians. And in an ambience of a deplorable party spirit Paul presents them with an analogy of a garden where the caretakers play different roles from planting to watering. But they work for one master who oversees the happy growth of the garden. Paul would tell the faction-ridden Corinthians that they should be concerned more about the divine master who has an overall concern for their development rather than succumb to the grossly human affiliations.

Paul’s language is quite succinct: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gives the growth. So neither he who plants, nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth” (1 Cor 3:6-7). A little later Paul would describe the ministry of the apostle as that of a servant of Christ and steward

of God's mysteries (1 Cor 4:1-5). The agricultural symbols of planting and watering express the restricted mission of the human agents, whereas the aspect of "growth" is continuous and signifies the sense of yield which is most important⁵. The nurturing of faith is the work neither of preacher nor of hearer, but of God. The role played by God in the unity of Christians is firmly held by Paul in his statement, "For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building" (1 Cor 3:8). The reference to "God" three times in this brief verse suggests the relative importance of human instruments for human growth compared with God's total concern for the same purpose. Paul would like the faction-ridden Corinthian community to accept the crucified Christ as the source of their faith and then would advise them to accept God as the master gardener of their lives, and a chief builder of their community.

3. The Eucharist as a vital constituent of Unity

Paul continues with his theme of unity in Christian life with yet another crucial truth of our Christian faith, the Eucharist. There is a close link between the Eucharist and the Crucified Christ. It is the Eucharist which can continuously remind of the Crucified Christ. And the Eucharist linked with the Last Supper meal brings in a further dimension of food in human life.

Meal is vital to human life. In every culture the day to day meal has served not only to nourish human beings physically, but also nurture them morally by bringing about unity of mind and heart when there is a participation in a meal. Even Jesus Christ participated in meals during his ministry and certainly relished the sense of harmony and love resulting from such events. His meal with the tax collectors Matthew and Zachaeus brought about a significant rapport between Jesus and the marginalized ones of his time. His miracle of loaves and fish where a large number of people participated at a meal was not just satisfying their physical hunger but also bringing about an excellent harmony among themselves and with Jesus. The Last Supper of Jesus had its own noteworthy aspect of unity symbolizing the new covenant

established by Jesus, soon to be ratified by his shedding of blood on the cross. And the Eucharist which continues the Last Supper of Jesus is meant to bring about unity and harmony among the participants on a very profound level.

The early Church understood the meaningfulness of a meal incorporated it in their worship. And gradually the breaking of bread or the very Eucharist became the essential dimension of worship in the Christian community (Acts 2: 43-47). The Christian fellowship was richly enhanced by such pattern of worship. In the course of time these community meals integrated with the Eucharist came to be known as the *agape* or love feasts. Apparently the love feast followed the Eucharist and thus embellished the deeper meaning of this great sacrament⁶. People brought food from their own homes and shared it with others thus expressing their love and fellowship for one another. But certain selfish and indecent tendencies began to creep within these meal gatherings. As the letter of Jude mentions, the participants became selfish, "shamelessly seeing to their own needs" rather than to the need of a neighbour (Jude 12).

But in the Church at Corinth with its backdrop of a fully disoriented city, divisions were the order of the day in their *agape* meals. There was a blatant factionalism in the way they scrambled to seat themselves in the company suiting their status and need. The rich sought their elite counterparts to eat and drink even to the extent of getting drunk. The poor contented themselves with the poor as their company, while the very poor, possibly the slaves had to quit the place since none would accommodate them and share a morsel of bread with them. The *agape* meant for bringing people together and developing a loving fellowship became a contradiction in terms, and a source of humiliation and embarrassment for the people of a lower social status who had also just participated in the Eucharist. The daring vocabulary of Paul describes this situation appropriately. "For in eating, each one goes ahead with his own meal, and one is hungry and another is drunk. What! Do you not have houses to eat and drink in? Or do you despise the Church of God and humiliate those who have nothing?" (1 Cor 11:21-22).

Paul elaborates on the real meaning of the Eucharist and in the process provides us with the earliest liturgical formula in its celebration. The Last Supper of Jesus shared with his disciples is to be continued essentially as a worship of the Christian community. But it challenges the community with some fundamental notions for a meaningful Christian life like sacrifice and sharing which directly result from the very sacrificial death of Jesus Christ with his body broken and blood shed. The *agape* celebrations in the Corinthian Church were a travesty of the Eucharist.

The Christian communities all over the world still celebrate the Eucharist even on a daily basis. Perhaps it is this sacrament which is the greatest challenge for the unity of the Church. But human nature is fragile, and spirit of human discords is routine. Well, we do continue to celebrate the Eucharist with the hope that this sacrament may help us in our struggles for unity and harmony. Paul makes a special effort to centre the Eucharist as a memory of the death of Christ for the salvation of the entire humanity. And he insists on this unique truth of the Eucharist both for celebration as well as proclamation during the time that elapses between the historical death of Jesus and his glorious return (1 Cor 11:26)⁷.

The way Paul has attempted to relate the Eucharist to the life of the community is remarkable. Not only does he take pains to give the earliest liturgical formula of the Eucharist but also gives its significant challenge to our Christian life. Any behaviour of discord within the very context of the Eucharistic Meal is a great affront to the basic meaning of the sacrament. Discords need to be put right with the help of the Eucharist, and not be made part of the Eucharist. Disunity is un-Eucharistic and so un-Christlike⁸

The Body Analogy and Christian Unity

As Paul continues his animated message to the community of Christians at Corinth in a state of conflict and friction, he proposes another important rationale as to why they should recast their existing pattern of life and become united. He is seemingly appreciative of the variety of talents

and spiritual gifts that the Christians at Corinth possessed thanks to the cultural traditions which were part of the this sophisticated city. And it was also possible that these very gifts caused further rivalries and conflicts among them. After naming such gifts like faith, wisdom, healing, working miracles, being prophetic, speaking in tongues Paul speaks of their source as the Spirit of God. And he insists that these gifts have their value only in as much as they help to build up their community and not to press forward their egos, particularly in their religious assemblies (cf. 1 Cor 12:1-11).

And it is here that Paul proposes to the Corinthians an unique analogy to help them consider their unity of mind and heart in spite of their diversity in their talents. Paul uses the analogy of the body. The body has a great variety of limbs or members, but they all form one physical body. Different parts in a healthy body cooperate with one another to form one single functioning of the body. And Paul transfers this body analogy to the Christian community, the Church, where each person is a member of the community and all the members should act in such away that the community functions as a single unit. Each member has his or her own spiritual gifts and they must be at the disposal of the community as a whole for a prosperous and enriched manner of community functioning. And Paul consciously lauds such specific characters in the community such as apostles, prophets, teachers, miracle workers, healers, administrators, and those endowed with gift of tongues. The characteristics here referred to blend themselves for the building of an enlightened and enriched Church.

Paul's source for this superb analogy of the Church as a body could have been taken from the great Greek Philosopher Plato who had described certain parts of the human body with glowing terms. He referred to the head as the citadel, the neck as the isthmus between the head and the body, the heart as the fountain of the body, the pores as the lanes and the veins as the canals of the body⁹. Paul also provides the Corinthians with a supernatural motivation as to why we should stand together as a human body and make an united Church. And it is none other than the Holy Spirit received through

the one Baptism and one Eucharist which is received by every Corinthian Christian whatever his background as Jew or Greek, free or slave (1 Cor 12:13). They should accept their spiritual gifts as arising from the one Spirit and hence to make one body the Church. And Paul even goes further comparing the Church, the Christian community as the very body of Christ himself, and each individual Christian as a member of Christ's own body (1 Cor 12:27). Paul touches here the real pinnacle of his doctrine on Church unity.

Gift of Love and Prophetic Ministry to uphold Unity

As Paul reaches the end of his letter he adds a new facet to the theme of the Church as a body with differently gifted members. The gift which he considers as of utmost significance is love, a gift par excellence without which other gifts have no place at all. Paul considers love so momentous a feature for unifying a community that he gives a poetic form to his message and to stress the uniqueness of love. The source of this extremely praiseworthy gift is God himself who manifested it visibly in his son Jesus Christ. It is "the love of God in Christ – first descending vertically and implanted in the heart by the Spirit and then flowing out into the lives of others" ¹⁰

Paul's rhetoric on love intends to convince the Corinthians that the gifts they have been highly valuing like the gift of tongues, prophecy and knowledge all of which stimulated them with a feeling of self-elation, and even the divinely motivated gifts like faith and hope, will be of no consequence one day. They are totally earth-bound. And in Paul's considered opinion this supernatural gift of love alone is heaven-bound, but fully pertinent and appropriate for life here. It is poured out on each Christian in his Baptism and it should certainly subject them to a "law of the Spirit" and bring about their unity¹¹. Paul is extremely hopeful that the Corinthian factions can be overcome only with a divine intervention of making love as the real moral and spiritual fibre of Corinthian life.

Paul's preoccupation to make the Corinthian Church is so enthusiastic, that he makes just one last proposition pertaining to the assemblies of worship in Corinth. Apart from the Eucharistic assemblies with all their scandals of division and discrimination in the *agape* meals, the Corinthians also had other gatherings of worship with their own self-oriented twists and turns. It was a fashion for the Corinthians to make an exhibition of their capacity for the emotional gift of tongues. Such an exercise only promoted a sort of an achievement mindset with further aggravation to their spirit of division. Paul encourages them rather to get into a different mode of worship giving more importance to prophetic language of instruction and persuasion in the name of God which will help to encourage, console and thus build the community.

Conclusion

The Apostle Paul is certainly to be credited with the founding of several Christian communities in Asia Minor. He is only second to Jesus Christ in the way he initiated Christian life among the members of the early Church. He was also quick to note how human weakness could play havoc in the Christian community. And in his own times he witnessed with deep regret how a spirit of division and faction did damage Christian witness in a community with whom he shared a deep relationship of a founder. And hence his exceptional preoccupation with the problem of disunity in Corinth and his earnest effort to provide the Christians there with an excellent doctrine to help them to motivate themselves towards unity. Paul is at his best here on the theme of unity.

A theme most essential for the universal Church today is of unity. It would be even more so in the years to come with the spirit of globalization catching up as a culture of the entire world. The Church should earnestly read the signs of the times, and learn from the undesired effects of "a globalization of a particular economic culture, neo-liberal capitalism, and a thoroughly materialistic world-view based on the principle of the survival of the fittest, a culture that destroys other cultures and indigenous wisdom..."¹²

In such a fast emerging situation it is imperative that the Church has to take up its mission of promoting the Gospel values leading to an united universal Church which would stand as a challenge as well as a witness to the present deteriorating trends of division in the world in the name of globalization. Paul's clarion call for the Church of his times to be united in all aspects of life is never more relevant than it is for today. Just he did to the Church at Corinth Paul enlists series of significant ideals and ultimate principles towards unity in the Church at large: "one body and one spirit,one call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:4-5)

Endnotes

1. Guenther Bornkam, *Paul*, Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1971, p.68.
2. Alain Decaux, *Paul, Least of the Apostles*, Pauline Books & Media, 50, St.Paul's Avenue, Boston, 2003, p. 162 describes the busy life of people at Corinth as, "a colourful crowd, buzzing, always hurrying, rushing in from all the corners of Europe and Asia".
3. Guenther Bornkam, *cit.*, p.72 thinks of this secular wisdom of Corinth as being "bound up with its pagan past and its environment, and how it was not yet in a position to organize its life on assured valid standards derived from the power of faith".
4. William Barclay, *The Letters to the Corinthians*, The Saint Andrew Press, Edinburgh, 1975, p.18-19.
5. C.Vaughan & T.D.Lea, *1 Corinthians*, Lamplighter Books, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1983, p.41-42.
6. L. Legrand, *The New Community Bible*, St Pauls, The Bombay Saint Paul Society, 2008, p. 2059
7. Peter E. Ellis, *Seven Pauline Letters*, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Michigan, 1982, p.90.

8. L.Legrand, *cit.*, p. 2059
9. William Barclay, *cit.*, p 113.
10. F.F.Bruce, *Paul, Apostle of the Free Spirit*", Exeter – Pater Noster Press, 1977, p.142
11. *Ibidem*, p. 142.
12. Albert Nolan, *Jesus Today – A Spirituality of Radical Freedom*, Orbis Books, Maaryknoll, NY, 2006, p. 55.