



"He that falls in love with himself will have no rivals."
—Benjamin Franklin

21-Nov-08

Empirical Selfishness

Back in my college days, one of my roommates was continually bemused by the football fanatics who identified with their team so closely that they would speak in the first person. "We couldn't catch a pass to save our lives," they might cry, the "we" being—of course—the Kansas City Chiefs or the St. Louis Rams. "We should go for it—not punt!" another might call out, dressed to play yet sitting 200 miles from where the action was. My roommate thought it ludicrous that the armchair quarterbacks and futon linebackers would carry on like this, as if they were physically involved with what was happening on a distant field.

When their team won, they were elated. When their team lost, they were dejected, reacting as if a tragedy had affected them personally. Yet, as strange as it seemed to my roommate, these fans were simply speaking of their *empirical self*. They identified with their team, and thus their team became an extension of themselves. The empirical self, by way of definition, is all of the groupings of people (e.g., family, church, race, ethnicity, sports team) or objects (e.g., house, car, office) with which we identify closely enough that they become parts of our self-image.

This is a natural human tendency, though some—like sports fanatics—take it farther than others. But just as friction arises when one seeks his own interests *at the expense of others*, so also problems enter in when one becomes selfish—competitive, self-centered, egotistical, etc.—with one's empirical self. For example, in some parts of Europe, rugby and football (soccer) jerseys and colors are forbidden in certain establishments because of the tendency of fans to become overly enthusiastic and supportive of their team at the expense of the health and well-being of a rival team's fans. In America, rivalries between teams likewise extend far beyond the field, often including fights between fans—for no better reason than that they have personally identified with different teams and consider others outside their empirical selves to be foes. In their small universes, not enough room exists for anything other than what they identify with.

In his letter to the brethren in Corinth, Paul had to address this same empirical selfishness—though, as far as we know, fist fights were not involved:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord [Jesus Christ](#), that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, "I follow Paul," or "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Cephas," or "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank [God](#) that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. ([1 Corinthians 1:10-15](#), *English Standard Version*)

The Corinthians suffered from empirical selfishness by *competitively* making various church leaders extensions of themselves. Even in the case of those saying "I follow Christ," the implication is that they said this—and behaved—exclusively, as if they *alone* followed Christ. While it is natural and harmless to identify with a teacher that we hear each week, that identification should not be the source of friction or competition with others who identify with a different teacher. God has, after all, given apostles

(plural), prophets (plural), evangelists (plural), pastors (plural) and teachers (plural) for the edifying of the Body of Christ—all those who have the Spirit of God. Our universes should not be so small that there is not room for other teachers. As Paul exhorts, we should be united in the *same* mind and judgment, not being defensive or suspicious of others simply because they are not part of our empirical selves.

In like manner, Jesus' letters to the seven end-time churches is an inkblot test for us all. With which one do we identify? Which one do we see as part of us—or of which do we see ourselves as being a part? Why? In these times of judgment, it is common to identify with the letter written to the church in Philadelphia—the one with the highest praise, and barely any criticism—and to almost instinctively identify most others in the Body of Christ who are not "of us" as being [Laodicean](#). This verdict, like the divisive evaluations in Corinth, elevates the self in one's eyes and by necessity puts others down.

Yet, notice that at the end of each letter Christ concludes with, "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches"—plural. *If* we have a spiritual ear, we will identify with *all* of the words in Revelation 2 and 3, and not just those that make us feel good about ourselves and give us hope of physical protection and deliverance.

Because of the church's scattered condition, it is easy to identify with the corporate organization of which we are a part and thus include it in our empirical selves. This is not wrong of and by itself. But it is what happens at the edges that matters—whether we can also allow that God is working with the entire Body of Christ or whether we view anything that is "other" with suspicion, condescension, or even antagonism.

If our view is the former, it is because we rightly identify with God first, and with His human servants after that. But if our view is the latter, we may be in the same condition as the Corinthians or even the fighting football fanatics: suffering from empirical selfishness and causing those around us to suffer as well.

- David C. Grabbe

From the Archives: Featured Sermon

[Themes of I Corinthians \(Part 2\)](#)

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

The self-indulgent, immoral culture of Corinth parallels today's America and the current fractured state of the church. Paul, before he gives the Corinthians a corrective message on factions and party spirit, reminds them that they are sanctified members of Christ's body, which should not be divided by schism. He pleads with them to present a united front, all adhering to the same doctrines. Getting rid of pride and selfish ambition makes attaining unity as genuine Christians very difficult. Ironically, fractures or schisms in the church serve as a litmus test, distinguishing those faithful who really belong to Christ. Our ultimate responsibility is to zig and zag with Christ in faith, and not become deceived or distracted by human reason. A true, godly minister does not draw people to himself, but instead to Jesus Christ and the Father. Not placing Christ at the forefront will lead to carnal-mindedness and retardation of spiritual growth and maturity.

From the Archives: Featured Article

[God's Sovereignty and the Church's Condition \(Part Two\)](#)

by John W. Ritenbaugh

Having shown that God is involved in world affairs, John Ritenbaugh concludes by showing that God's hand was definitely involved in the scattering of the church. Our reaction needs to be positive: that, if He felt it needed to be done, we should respond by growing and preparing ourselves for His Kingdom.

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