

Unity And Division: The Blessing And The Curse (Part One)

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The tension between unity and division is prevalent throughout the Scriptures. Unity—and the peace it generates—is a central theme in Christ's prayer on the evening of His last Passover. Concerning His disciples and all the people who would come to know God through their preaching, He entreats

. . . that they may all be one, just as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You, that they also may be in us. . . . I in them and You in Me, that they may become perfectly one. . . .
(John 17:21, 23).¹

The Foundational Nature of Unity

Not merely a casual barracks camaraderie but a thoroughgoing unity is fundamental to Christianity. In fact, God facilitates the extraordinary peace that Christ has bequeathed us (John 14:27) by calling us into a unified body. Writing to the people of the Colossian church, Paul admonishes: "Also, let Christ's peace control you. God has *called* you into this peace by bringing you into one body" (Colossians 3:15, *God's WORD Translation* [GW]²; emphasis ours throughout). That is how tightly coupled Christ's gift of peace is to the unity for which He prayed.

As Christ anticipated in His prayer, there are many believers, all in one body. Paul elaborates:

For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and all were made to drink of one Spirit. For the body does not consist of one member but of many. . . . As it is, there are many parts, yet one body. (I Corinthians 12:12-14, 20)

Paul draws on the same analogy on the occasion of his comments to the people of God dwelling in Rome:

For as in one body we have many members, and the members do not all have the same function, so we, though many, are *one body* in Christ, and individually members one of another. (Romans 12:4-5)

Unity is a foundation supporting a plethora of counterparts, each one of them singularities basic to God's truth. Paul catalogs seven such singularities in his concluding remarks to God's people in Ephesus:

[I] urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit—just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call—one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. (Ephesians 4:1-6)

Unity, of course, implies a lack of friction or competition between the parts that make up a whole. Unity thus facilitates the peace that Christ established between Jews and Gentiles, as Paul explains earlier in his letter to the Ephesian church:

For he himself is our peace, who has made us both one and has broken down in his flesh the dividing wall of hostility, . . . that he might create in himself one new man in place of the two, so making peace, and might reconcile us both to God in one body through the cross, thereby killing the hostility. And he came and preached peace to you who were far off and peace to those who were near. For through him we both have access in one Spirit to the Father. (Ephesians 2:14-18)

Finally, but by no means least, Paul uses the incontrovertible fact of our unity as part of his argument against idolatry in writing to the Corinthian church:

Therefore, my beloved, flee from idolatry. . . . The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation 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. (I Corinthians 10:14, 16-17)

Division, the Result of Carnality in God's People

Contrasting the unity that Christ died to establish is the division sown by the Adversary as part of his “divide and conquer” strategy. Paul writes of factions (or divisions) in relation to the members of the Corinthian church of God:

For, in the first place, when you come together as a church, I hear that there are divisions [*schisma*] among you. And I believe it in part, for there must be factions [*hairesis*] among you in order that those who are genuine among you may be recognized. (I Corinthians 11:18-19)

In general, the nouns *schisma* and (to a lesser extent) *hairesis*³ receive pejorative treatment in the New Testament. The thrust of the apostle's comments on the topic of church factions is that they showcase the presence of human nature at work in Christians. Schisms are the result of carnality alive-and-kicking in the church. They emerge where God's people are not fully committed to living His way of life, where they deny God His rightful place as Sovereign Ruler of their lives. Axiomatically, the lack of unity in a congregation reflects a proportional lack of repentance on the part of its members.

Paul introduces the concept of division, using the same Greek word as he does in I Corinthians 11:18, *schisma*, in the book's first chapter:

I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions [*schisma*] 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. (I Corinthians 1:10-11)

Quarreling is a manifestation of the unity-dissolving “friction or competition” mentioned earlier.⁴

The apostle reiterates his appeal for unity in chapter 12, the same passage we reviewed earlier concerning Paul's use of the body as an analogy for the unity of the church.

. . . But God has so composed the body, giving greater honor to the part that lacked it, that there may be no division [*schisma*] in the body, but that the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together. (I Corinthians 12:24-26)

In Galatians 5:20, Paul lists divisions or sectarian thinking (*hairesis*)⁵ as one of the “works of the flesh.” The apostle Peter uses the same word to refer to the consequence of listening to false teachers:

But there were also *lying* prophets among the people then, just as there will be lying religious teachers among you. They'll smuggle in destructive divisions [*hairesis*], pitting you against each other—biting the hand of the One who gave them a chance to have their lives back! (II Peter 2:1-2, *The Message* [MSG])⁶

Without question, unity and division are as irreconcilable as day and night. Unity connotes order, harmony, and integrity, while division connotes opposite states like randomness (entropy), chaos, disorder, and confusion—a cosmos of *tohu* and *bohu* (see the Hebrew of Genesis 1:2). Personifying unity and division, respectively, are God and Satan.

But, frankly, it is not quite that black and white! There remains a species of division, which, though linked to the working of human nature, though prompted by human carnality, is clearly inspired by God and executed by Him. This divinely created division is the kind that invariably proceeds from His judgment.

Next month, we shall take a look at this important type of division in His church.

Endnotes

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³ The neuter noun translated “division” in verse 18 is *schisma* (Strong's Greek Concordance #4978), occurring eight times in the New Testament. The King James Version (KJV) translators render it as “division” (5x), “rent” (2x), and “schism” (1x). The first use of *schisma* is in Matthew 9:16, referring to a rent in a cloth. The English noun “schism” obviously derives from *schisma*. The noun “heresies” (or “factions”) in verse 19 is *hairesis* (Strong's #139), a feminine noun appearing nine times in the New Testament. It is rendered by the King James translators as “sect” (5x) and “heresy” (4x). *Hairesis* first appears in Acts 5:17, referring to the sect of the Sadducees. The English nouns “heresy” and “heretic” derive from *hairesis*.

⁴ The noun “quarreling” (“contention” in the KJV) is the Greek feminine noun *eris* (Strong’s #2045), which appears nine times in the New Testament. KJV translators render it as “strive” (4x), “debate” (2x), “contention” (2x), and “variance” (1x). The first use of *eris* is in Romans 1:29, where the KJV translators render it “debate.”

⁵ See End Note iii, above.

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