
Why Differences in the Church are Inevitable

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This is one of a series in which we invite contributors to offer an exposition with application of texts of contemporary importance for evangelical churches.

“No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval.” 1 Corinthians 11:19 NIV

To hear that a local church has been split and that a dissident group of members has set up a separate congregation meeting elsewhere is by no means uncommon today. The grounds for such schism may be various and do not need to be specified here. But schism is more than a local church problem. Whether we are prepared to accept a view of the catholicity of the visible church or base our convictions on what the old independents referred to as the “communion of the saints”, the practical isolationism of some local churches amounts to schism in the real body of Christ.

I wish to explore the way in which Paul’s comment on the differences in the church at Corinth is often wheeled out to justify such divisions as being inevitable and therefore to be accepted with no effort made to avoid, to minimise or to repair them. Can this use of the text be sustained?

There is a sense in which the maturity of the universal church “brought to complete unity” (John 17:23) lies in the future. “The radiant church without stain, wrinkle or other blemish” (Ephesians 5:27) awaits the *parousia*, for we are still in the flesh and are condemned to struggle with an inevitably imperfect holiness of the church which includes, as one aspect of it, inevitable divisions in the church. Regarding differences among Christians, John Owen remarks:

“Neither is it morally possible it should be otherwise, whilst in their judgment and profession they are left unto the ability of their own minds and liberty of their wills, under that great variety of the means of light and truth, with other circumstances, whereinto they are disposed by the holy, wise providence of God ... But their valuation of the matter of their union and agreement is purely spiritual, whereas their differences are usually influenced by carnal and secular considerations, which have for the most part, a sensible impression on the minds of poor mortals.”¹

But that is not the point the Apostle is making here. The immediate reference is to the Christians at Corinth coming together “as a church”, *en ekklesia*, note the absence of the article, almost equivalent to our expression “in church”. The context is his serious rebuke, using the authoritative term “directives” (v.17) to set right their unpraiseworthy meetings. Interesting, and

of contemporary relevance, is his remark in v.18 that what “I hear ... to some extent I believe”. Even Paul recognised that the reports he heard from Chloe’s household (1:11) or perhaps from the three representatives who so refreshed him (16:17-18) might be exaggerated. The tale so often becomes elaborated in the telling and credulity about the problems in other churches does nothing to improve the standing of our own church in the eyes of God, however we might be tempted to feel otherwise.

One preliminary point is to ask whether any distinction in meaning is to be made between the word *schismata* in v.18 and *haireseis* used in v.19. Hodge regards them as synonymous in the context. There is little doubt that although the second word is the Greek root of our English word “heresy”, used here by the AV, it is only in post-Apostolic ecclesiastical usage that it came to have the technical meaning of “opinion contrary to the orthodox doctrine of the Christian Church” (Concise Oxford Dictionary). The etymology of the word looks back to the idea of “choosing” but its NT use points to external division resting on internal opposition and doctrinal differences, as between Sadducees and Pharisees in Acts 5:17 and 15:5. Godet takes the word used in v.19 as more serious than that in v.18; *schismata* as simple rents in a piece of cloth and *haireseis* as rendings which remove the fragments entirely, breaking the unity of the whole piece. This would neatly reverse the NIV translation which has “differences” in v.19, usually regarded by us as less serious than “divisions” used in v.18! NASB has “factions” in v.19 which fits well with the NIV use of the same English word in Galatians 5:20 as one of the works of the flesh. What is clear, however, is that Paul has in mind such traumas as gravely threaten the God-given unity of the body of Christ at Corinth.

The major abuse of this text is to isolate the main clause, “there have to be differences” with all the strength of the verb “must be”, *dei*, from the subordinate clause “to show which of you have God’s approval”, introduced by the conjunction of purpose *hina*.

Berkouwer warns against construing the use of *dei* as implying cosmic necessity, what he calls “the neutral necessity of fate”.² He shows that this cannot be thought of apart from actual history and particularly the history of how God in his sovereignty can bring good out of evil. God has a purpose for everything he allows to happen to his people whether it is the sufferings of Job or the divisions at Corinth. Paul is distressed by what he hears. “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (1:10).

The key to understanding God’s purpose in allowing these differences is in what lies behind the expression “those who are approved” (NASB) *hoi dokimoi*. The NIV adds for clarification, “which of you have God’s approval”; although the word does not actually appear in the original. Now *dokimos* in the New Testament always means “approved after testing” based on the metaphor of metal being heated in a furnace to purge out dross, purify its substance and demonstrate its worth. Even in NT times, and perhaps especially in the moral confusions which had arisen at Corinth, not all who

were members of the gathered congregation were in reality regenerate members of Christ's body. One discipline by which God begins to "test" the church is by his permitting for his good purposes what the Devil intends for his evil purposes. Calvin makes the point well:

"In this way hypocrites are detected — in this way, on the other hand, the sincerity of believers is tried. For as this gives occasion for discovering the fickleness of those who were not rooted in the Lord's Word, and the wickedness of those who had assumed the appearance of good men, so the good afford a more signal manifestation of their constancy and sincerity. We know that Satan, in his activity, leaves no stone unturned with a view of breaking up the unity of the Church. We know also that ... God, by his infinite goodness, changes the nature of things, so that those things are salutary to the elect, which Satan had contrived for their ruin."³

Paul's concern for the Corinthians was a reflection of his concern for himself, that they might emerge from the test with God's approval. "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court ... It is the Lord who judges me" (4:3-4).

It is the application to us of this matter of "testing" at Corinth which interests me. Perhaps these four suggestions will provoke further thought:-

- a. Natural differences of culture, temperament or education will exist in the Christian church whenever the Gospel is being effectively preached in a pluriform society.
- b. The Devil will seek to exploit these differences in order to cause harmful division in the church, both at local level and at inter-church level.
- c. The Lord may allow these experiences of temptation for the greater good of his people. Calvin calls this reminder "a lovely consolation" for the church. At Corinth he was able to encourage respect for the consciences of others (8:10-13), to teach us more about interdependence (12:21) and to stimulate mutual love (13:4-7). If there had not been any differences at Corinth over spiritual gifts we would never have had recorded for our lasting benefit that superb picture of "the most excellent way" in chapter 13!
- d. A creative response to the differences we do face is to see them as **both** a threat from the Devil **and** a challenge from the Lord. We shall not want to ignore them, but to restrict the harm they might do, to make every effort to maintain the unity God has created and to extract the spiritual benefit from the trial he is permitting.

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References

1. Quoted DIVERSITY IN UNITY, Puritan Conference Papers, 1963, pp.70-71.
2. G.C. Berkouwer, THE CHURCH, 1976, p.33, footnote 11.
3. J. Calvin, Commentary on 1 CORINTHIANS, pp.367-8.