Scriptura 94 (2007), pp. 65-72

BEING A CHURCH IN A WORLD OF DISUNITY: REFLECTIONS FROM FIRST CORINTHIANS 1-4

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Abstract

The modern church faces insurmountable challenges. Globalization, terrorism, famine and disease, particularly with the HIV and AIDS pandemic, are some of the challenges the modern church has to face. To fight these challenges, the church needs unity of purpose. This unity is particularly called for in a world divided on ethnic, political, economic, linguistic and other social grounds. In South Africa, in particular, and Africa in general, where the church sometimes became divided during colonialism, the call for church unity in the post-conflict period is even more urgent. This paper argues for the need for church unity through a reflection on the Pauline message in 1 Corinthians 1-4. It draws parallels between the challenges that the Corinthian church was facing and the disunity that the modern church also faces. It then concludes that just as Paul called for the unity of the church in Corinth, the contemporary church is also called to unite if it is to be a uniting force in the world today.

Keywords: Church unity, 1 Corinthians 1-4

Introduction

Often when I read 1 Corinthians, I wonder what kind of Christian community the Corinthian community was. Sometimes I even ask myself whether the community was worthy to be called a church. This is because here one would find, in the church, almost all the "sins" that are found in non-Christian communities: Factionalism, complacency, adultery, incest, disorderly behaviour in church, homosexuality, you name it. CK Robertson (2001:117) also observed the same when he commented, "Though the Corinthian Christians were neither apostates nor outsiders, their behaviour was that of sarkikoi (flesh), making them no different than anyone else outside the boundaries of the church." However, when I look around and see many parallels between the church in Corinth and the church today, I fear to continue criticising the Corinthians. Although the above observations about the Corinthians are true of almost all the theological problems Paul addressed in this letter, our discussion shall be limited to the problem of factionalism (1-4). This article is therefore a reflection on being a church in the light of the divided nature of the church as reflected in the different denominations in particular.

The article will open with a discussion of the world of the Corinthians focusing on the city of Corinth itself. This is followed by an attempt to explain how the Corinthian context itself gave rise to the problem of factions that Paul had to address. The last section of the paper will reflect on the similar theological problem of factions that the church is facing today, suggesting what Paul's response to this problem could be on the basis of his response to the Corinthians. A conclusion will tie the reflections together.

The Church in Corinth

Most of the problems that bedeviled the church of Corinth was a result of the cosmopolitan nature of the community. The city of Corinth can be compared to modern cities in many ways. The Corinth in which Paul arrived, perhaps in the winter of the years 49/50 CE, had been reconstructed by Julius Caesar in 44BCE after the old Greek city was destroyed in 146BCE. After its reconstruction, it then served as the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. The city was located on a plateau on an isthmus between the Aegean and the Adriatic Seas. The city connected the eastern to the western world. From the eastern port of Cenchrea to the western port of Lechaeum, was a short distance of some few kilometres. A paved road through the country of Corinth facilitated trade between the eastern and the western worlds. Grooves cut into the road also allowed light ships to be hauled from one side of the world to the other. This way, travellers and traders avoided a dangerous journey of about 200miles around the treacherous end of the peninsula. Apart from the travellers there were also many visitors who came to the famous healing shrine of Aesculapius and others who came to attend the Isthmian games. Consequently, the city was home to people from various backgrounds. There is a sense therefore in which the city can be compared to modern cities today. The presence of many travellers and general cosmopolitanism are some characteristics of modern cities.

The cosmopolitan nature of the city, however, presented many challenges to the church in the same way that cosmopolitanism, globalization and modernity have challenged the church today. The common character of globalization is the fast movement of goods and services throughout the world. It is also characterized by the migration of people across the width and breadth of the world. This appears to have characterised the city of Corinth too. Brownrigg (2002:40) summarised this well as he described the city of Corinth: "It was a city of great commerce, wealth and squalor, renowned for its culture and notorious for its immorality." The many people who passed through and who visited the city contributed to its economic development. However, the cosmopolitan and heterogeneous nature of the city, like all other cities including modern ones, led to religious syncretism and general immorality. Apart from the Greek deities and the Egyptian cult of Isis and Osiris attested by archaeological evidence, there was also emperor worship and Judaism. The chief religion, however, was that of the god and goddess of love, Apollo and Aphrodite respectively. Young men went to the temple of Apollo where statues of Apollo in various positions of virility were erected. The most famed temple was that of Aphrodite (Venus) where according to Strabo (cited in Hayes 1978:402) more than one thousand sacred prostitutes offered their services. Corinth, as a result, acquired a reputation for sexual immorality such that to be called a 'Corinthian' was a slang expression of a whoremonger, a prostitute or a fornicator.

In such a city Paul, Timothy and Silvanus arrived ready to preach the gospel of Christ. Although Luke devoted 18 verses of Acts 18 to describe the activities that led to the foundation of the church of Corinth, the description still remains fragmentary. But by combining information from the two letters and Acts of the Apostles, we get the picture that first, combining his efforts with Priscilla and Aquilla and then later joined by Timothy and Silvanus, Paul managed to raise a Christian community which he left in the hands of Apollos when he left the city. However, soon after leaving, Paul would hear of problems in Corinth which he had to address through the letter we now call first Corinthians (although this was not his first letter to the community (1 Cor. 5:9). One of these problems was that of factionalism.

The Problem of Factionalism in the Church at Corinth

As already suggested above, most of the problems that Paul addressed in the Corinthian Christian community were associated with the cosmopolitan nature of the city. I will focus here on the issue of factionalism. I will look at how the factions were typical of the nature of the city and then present Paul's response. This will help us to reflect on denominationalism in the church today and to suggest what could have been Paul's response if he were to write a letter to the church today.

The first problem Paul addressed in this letter was that of divisions (factions). Apparently four parties emerged in Corinth, as Chloe's people informed Paul (1 Cor. 1:11). One party even embarrassed Paul by a partisan appeal to him as their leader. Others appealed to Apollos, Peter and Christ. Indeed groupings are a common feature of cosmopolitan cities. Cosmopolitanism breeds ground for the formation of identities on the basis of ethnicity, occupations, economic status, level of education, religion and so on. In fact, by their nature cities are terrifying in that they break traditional ties of belonging and identity. They destroy kinship relations which normally bring a sense of security. In cities people feel a bit insecure until they discover some new forms of belonging and identity. This should have been much more so in Corinth where people from various parts of the world met. Considering these diversities among members of the Corinthian Christian community, C.J. Den Heyer (2000:135) asks: "How could people with such different social and religious backgrounds ever form a community?" As we mentioned above, the community included, on one extreme, Jews who had visited the synagogue regularly from their youth. Guided by the Torah, they regarded temple prostitution as an abominable consequence of the worship of idols. On the other extreme, there were some members of the same Christian community who had recently thought it normal to visit a fertility temple and have sexual intercourse with one of the many cultic prostitutes. Apart from these two extreme groups there were also disparities among members in terms of wealth, education and culture. Paul must have been thinking about these different backgrounds of the Corinthians when he wrote, "For consider your call brethren, not all of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth," (1 Cor. 1:26). He knew that among the Corinthians some were wise and others were not, some were powerful and others were not and that whereas some were of noble birth, others were not. All these factors could have played a role in the schisms in Corinth.

Apart from their different backgrounds, it appears that each of the groups had personal preferences to the leader of their choice. Paul had founded the church and had baptised some of them (1:14-16). It was probably on such a basis that some appealed to him as their leader. Apollos, as a learned Alexandrian, was probably preferred because of his eloquence and wisdom (Acts 18:24). The group was therefore probably a product of claims to intellectualism. Paul had preached to the Corinthians, "in much fear and trembling" and it appears that Apollos came as the opposite of Paul, eloquent and confident. I am persuaded to agree with N Elliott (1995:205) that Paul established a small congregation of modest means in Corinth (1:26) while Apollos made a much stronger impact among the ranks of the privileged. Consequently, "the divisions Paul attributes to the slogans 'of Paul' and 'of Apollos' actually centre on the emerging tensions between the social perceptions and strategies of two groups: The relatively lower status 'charter members' of the congregation and the more recent converts of Apollos whose wealth, power and status have subtly introduced new standards and expectations for the new community" (Elliott, 1995:205). It is therefore probably the learned and wealthy Apollos group that was responsible for the problem of meat offered to idols that affected the community. The rich, who were often invited to ban-

quets in temples and were regular customers for meat in the market places, could have looked at meat offered to idols with indifference (Elliott, 1995:205). Attending such banquets gave one a higher social status in a cosmopolitan city such as Corinth. G Theissen (1982:139) therefore thinks that upper-class Christians like Erastos, the city treasurer (Romans 16:23), could have jeopardized their social status by rejecting invitations to occasions where 'meat offered to idols' was served. It is also such cultural codes of social status that could have caused problems at the Lord's Supper.

We do not know whether Peter (Cephas) ever went to Corinth for some to appeal to him. Such a visit was possible, but even if not, it appears to many early Christians, particularly the Jewish Christians, that Peter was a better apostle than Paul in many respects. He was called before Paul, he travelled with Jesus throughout his ministry, he was one of the inner-circle disciples of Jesus and was the one given the keys of heaven by Jesus (Matthew 16:18ff). It is possible that earlier in his gospel to the Corinthians Paul had made reference to the post-resurrection appearances he mentions in 1 Corinthians 15:1-7. If so then some Corinthian Christians could have used this to argue for the superiority of Peter over Paul as an apostle. Be that is it may, the Petrine group could also have been formed on the basis of ethnicity. I am aware, however, that this view is contested by scholars. On one hand, there are scholars such as N Taylor (1992:186-7) who see no ethnic influence in the Petrine group. On the other, there are other scholars, such as CK Robertson (2001) and CK Barret (1968), with whom I agree in seeing ethnic influence in the Petrine group. Discussing an identity crisis as one of the problems that dogged the Corinthian Christian community, CK Robertson (2001:119) sees ethnicity as having contributed a great deal to this problem. He argues that, "the combination of Roman names (such as Paul and Justus) and Greek names (such as Sosthenes) among Corinthian Christians brings to mind the differences between things Roman and Hellenistic, another particularly delicate issue in Corinth." CK Barret (1968:44) also finds the Petrine group as having represented Jewish Christianity and agrees with TW Manson that their influence in Corinth is seen in pressure for the observance of food laws (8), the judicial rights of the community and in the questioning of Paul's apostolic status (9).

The fourth group was the most puzzling. This was the Christ group. But did not all the Christians belong to Christ? FV Filson (1965:250) suggests that these were followers of James, the brother of Jesus, or a spiritualistic group that claimed special revelations and knowledge from Christ. The problem, however, is that in his subsequent arguments Paul pointed out that all belong to Christ since they were all baptized in his name. This therefore means that of the four groups the Christ group was correct in identifying itself after Christ. So why did Paul mention the Christ group in the context of divisions? Various explanations have been given including the one by Filson above. I think that this was a group which understood that the point of anchorage in Christianity is Christ not human leaders. This is what Paul had to say in his response.

In his response Paul unequivocally appealed for unity, "I appeal to you brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgement" (1:10). Still arguing for unity he went further to ask a series of rhetorical questions, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptised in the name of Paul?" (3:13). He stressed that all preachers are only servants of Christ (3:5) so all belong to Christ (3:22-23). For Paul the church of Christ is therefore one and this one church has no place for divisive pride in human leaders or personal gifts. He, however, did not despise the work of Christian leaders but argued that they are only servants and stewards of God and so should not take

the central place which belongs to Christ alone. Comparing the church to the field and a building, Paul shows that the work of the ministers should be complementary rather than a rivalry. Paul planted while Apollos watered and Paul laid the foundation while Apollos built on it.

Reflections on the Modern Church

The factions in the Corinthian church offered early signs of the divisive nature of the church till today. This divisive nature is probably not amazing to modern Christians who have become accustomed to it. The divided church follows the pattern of the human tendency to form factions and rivalries. The church has been divided along the lines of race, ethnicity, education, culture, economic status, nationality and so on. We are now so accustomed to the "Church of England", the "Greek Orthodox Church", the "Dutch Reformed Church", the "African Apostolic Church" and such other nationalist/racist/linguistic labels that the message of Paul in 1 Corinthians 1-4 no longer alerts us. Some churches are even named after their founders such as the Johane Masowe WeChishanu Church, Jimmy Swaggart Ministries, and so on! We have become so used to human patronage that we seem to think God is too far to be the patron of the church. We have become accustomed to having churches for the rich and churches for the poor. Today we have become used to people defending their own churches and attacking rival ones. We have become used to listening to or reading news of church divisions. In fact, churches seem to be even more divided than any other social institutions. I am of the opinion that football clubs are more united compared to churches. It would be interesting if one were to count how many churches she passes by on her way to her church and why. We have become used to the formation of new churches. Like political parties, church people have learnt the language of smear campaigns, the language of attacking "rivalries" and defending their own churches. Surprisingly, most of the causes of these divisions have nothing to do with theology but with human power struggles. In most African cities there exist many churches formed on the basis of ethnicity. People belong to one church and not the other because the founder of their church is their tribesman or tribeswoman. The church has therefore, in some way, promoted divisive practices such as tribalism. It is a truism that in a number of cases African Independent/Instituted/Initiated Churches (AICs) were formed on racial and ethnic grounds. One of the reasons often cited for the rise of the first batch of AICs (also called Ethiopian churches) is that Africans were reacting to what they perceived to be racial tendencies in the white / missionary churches (Sundkler, 1963, Daneel, 1987).

This divisive nature of the church has caused further problems in the public arena. Politicians, in particular, have tended not to take the church seriously. In Zimbabwe, the political leadership has not taken the advice of the church often citing the division within the church as a sign that the church is not different from political parties. Often they have pointed out that if the church wants to be taken seriously, it has to speak with one voice. This, the church has failed to do as it has, in some way, been divided along political lines. It is possible in the case of the church in Zimbabwe to categorize Christian churches as adhering to either the ruling party or opposition parties. There are churches which are known to patronize the ruling party, always speaking in its support and filling the different venues where the party holds its functions. Instead of the church playing a prophetic voice in society by "checking and balancing" the powers of those in authority; in Zimbabwe those in power have used the disunity of the church for their own good. This is seen in that soon after independence, the state worked closely with the Roman Catholic Church and other

main line churches (Linden, 1980 and Hallencreutz and Moyo, 1988). As these churches began criticizing the state, the state abandoned them and began working with some AICs.

Like the church of Corinth, the modern church remains divided at grassroots level. It has also remained divided at higher levels as seen in three groupings of churches in Zimbabwe for instance. The Zimbabwe Catholic Bishop's Conference is a grouping of Catholic churches, the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, a grouping of Protestant/Main line churches and the Evangelical Fellowship of Zimbabwe, a grouping of Pentecostal/Evangelical churches. Rarely do the three groupings come together and address national issues with a single voice. Instead, they are sometimes involved in war of words as happened recently when some bishops mainly from the Pentecostal/Evangelical and main line churches went to see President Robert Mugabe (*The Herald*, 15 June 2006). Whereas the spokesperson of the Bishops, Bishop Trevor Manhanga, commented that the meeting afforded the church an opportunity to be part of building bridges, nationally, regionally and internationally, the Roman Catholic Archbishop for Bulawayo, Bishop Pius Ncube, was quoted as saying these clergymen had been given farms and monetary gifts to campaign for the Government. This is the magnitude of the division of the church in an equally divided country. AICs, on the other hand, remain unattached to any of the three groupings with very little participation in social issues while concentrating on ministries of healing and exorcism. This surely reminds one of the Corinthian church as we have reconstructed it above. The Apollos group, which was probably more powerful and more influential in society, can be compared to those churches which have remained aligned to those in political power. Just as this group enjoyed food offered to idols at banquets, these churches also dine and wine with those in power. Obviously when other Christians point out the ills of these powers-to-be, it is difficult for those who dine and wine with them to join them. Many churches remain ethnically similar to the Petrine group in the Corinthian Christian community. Many of the AICs, for example, have either by design or by their nature remained churches for Africans. It is very rare to find Europeans or Asians or people of other races in these churches. There is therefore a sense in which some modern churches may be accused of racism. The same is also true of economic status as alluded to above. Churches for the rich and for the poor have remained divided and do not engage in theological reflection from the same perspective. In short, the modern church has remained divided in a way similar to that of the church of Corinth in Paul's time. This has been aggravated by globalization. From the definition of globalization given by M Guibernau (2001:244), "the intensification of worldwide interconnectedness in all aspects of contemporary social life," one would expect that globalization would bring unity in the world. To the contrary, it has brought further disunity. As E Conradie (2004:256) correctly observed, globalization has brought radical pluralism, conflicting diversity and cultural fragmentation. What lessons then can the modern church living in this world of disunity learn from Paul's response to factionalism in Corinth? What would be Paul's message to a divided church were he to write a letter to the modern church today?

The modern church can learn a number of lessons on unity from Paul's letter to the Corinthians. As we have seen the divisions in the Corinthian church and in the church today have nothing to do with theology. They were and are a result of people's quest for knowledge, power and prestige. In his letter Paul, however, shows that such factors should not apply in the church of God. Instead, the call in the church, as LT Johnson (1986:276) derives from Paul's argument, "is not an invitation to a club or a cult association which would demand ... allegiance to their patron or mystagogue. It is a call that reverses all human norms." Paul fights patronage, which is one of the sources of division both in and outside

the church today. DG Horrell (1996:113) should be right when he says that the slogans Paul quotes in 1 Corinthians 1-4, "I am of Paul, I am of Apollos," reveal that in some way the various teachers were the rallying points for the divisions. This is also the case today. Instead of Christ being the point of anchorage, Christians anchor their beliefs and practices on human beings and human institutions. Horrell continues by quoting LL Welborn who compared the slogans that Paul quotes in 1:12 with declarations of personal allegiance in the realm of politics. Paul's message, however, is that human leaders are just stewards, planters, waterers and builders in service to God. They should act in partnership, not in competition. In terms of belonging, Paul shows that all Christians belong to Christ. Thus there should be in church no room for division on the basis of nationality, colour, creed, social status, race or any other forms of division. If this message was necessary in the Corinthian church, I think it is more so today with the rise of terrorism and other ills affecting the world. The church needs to be more united for it to unite a divided world.

Conclusion

Disunity characterizes the present world. With the rise of terrorism, secularism, consumerism and globalization it has become even worse. It is a time for the church to become united in order to be able to unite the world. It is only a united church which can help people answer the following questions asked in contexts of cultural diversity, "Who am I? To which community do I belong? How can I cope with 'walking in two worlds'? How am I different from people of other cultures? How do I cope with changing circumstances, with a culture influx? Is it appropriate for me to derive my identity from the mass media, from a culture of consumerism?"(Conradie 2004:255). In this article I have argued for the need for this unity through a reflection on Paul's message in 1 Corinthians 1-4. It has been observed that the cosmopolitan nature of the city of Corinth corresponds in a number of ways to today's cosmopolitan societies. This contributed to the factionalism and disunity that was disturbing the church. The article offered suggestions on how these factions could have been formed. It concluded that the factions were not really a result of theological differences but that this had to do with the human tendency to divide along patronage, race, social status and so on. Paul's response, particularly his call for unity, was then noted. It is this response that has been used to argue for church unity in a world of disunity today. Now is the time for church ecumenism, not only at world level as in the World Council of Churches, but beginning at grassroots levels.

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