

The Problem with Favorites

1 Corinthians 1:10-18

January 23, 2011

Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no divisions among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose. For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What I mean is that each of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."

Has Christ been 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 can say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)

For Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

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The church where I served as pastor in Richmond, Virginia was founded the same year as our congregation, in 1845. First Presbyterian Church of Richmond had been around for a while and had grown considerably, so the session decided to plant a new congregation in a different part of town. With a stroke of creative genius, they named the new congregation “Second Presbyterian Church.”

First Pres, Richmond sent their young associate to be the founding pastor of the new church plant. His name was Moses Drury Hoge. It turned out that Dr. Hoge was quite good at new church development. The church grew under his leadership and became a respected and effective witness to Jesus Christ in the city. The church owed much of its success to Dr. Hoge, who died suddenly near the end of his forty-ninth year of service to the church.

Now, can you guess what happened to the next pastor of that congregation? He stayed for 13 months...which is almost an accomplishment after following the 49 year tenure of an organizing pastor name Moses. The phrase “we haven’t done it that way before” hardly captures it. I don’t know, exactly, what prompted the second pastor to leave – but I would have given my two week’s notice (and this is a true story...) when the congregation installed a bronzed image of Dr. Hoge on the sanctuary wall directly to the right of the pulpit.

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Everybody has favorites. Churches that have been around as long as Second Presbyterian in Richmond and First Presbyterian in Shreveport have favorites. It’s just the way it is.

Some folks around here are John Rodgers’ people. John is a former pastor who was here during the 80’s. People remember him for his theological preaching and his gifts as a teacher. Others are Rocky Laha’s people. Rocky was here from the mid-nineties until 2006. Rocky’s commitment to social justice and the radical nature of God’s grace helped many folks re-discover their faith.

People respond to Bryan for his pastoral care and the depth of his spiritual practice. They respond to Sarah because of her commitment to create communities of care and her gifts in leading young adults on the journey of discipleship. Holly has outpaced all of us with her ministry of music.

Perhaps I will be remembered as the pastor who ushered in an era of constant chaos with the Fulfilling the Vision construction project!

The point is, whenever there are groups of people it is normal for them to pick favorites...to gravitate a personality type, or leadership style, or worldview. It's just the way it is.

When Paul wrote to the church in Corinth, he wasn't concerned that new leaders had emerged from the church he started. He didn't write a letter back to his new church development because he was threatened by Appolos' rhetorical skill (which was rumored to be great), or because he was worried about Cephas – also known as Peter's – pedigree as an original apostle. No, Paul wrote to the Corinthian church because they had elevated their affinity for certain people, and certain viewpoints, above that of Jesus who is at the center of the Christian faith.

Paul was concerned about allegiances – and affinities – so strong that they divided the congregation into factions. Paul was concerned that in these divisions, members of the church found more of their identity in their personal preferences than in the God who saved them from their sins.

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If only Paul could see the Church now...

I'll leave the question of why the Church of Jesus Christ is divided into so many denominations alone for the moment...that might be a sermon for another day.

Today we would do well to consider this text as Presbyterians. For the past 33 years our denomination – like many others – has been defined by debate. The debate that makes the most headlines is our disagreement over whether or not practicing homosexuals can be ordained as leaders in the church.

This spring, we will – yet again – put the issue to a vote in the 173 local presbyteries that make up the Presbyterian Church (USA). When all the voting is complete, regardless of the outcome, you can count on the fact that one side will claim victory and the other will be looking for the next fight.

Please do not misunderstand me; I am not being dismissive. I think the issue of ordination is important. I do not believe our denomination would struggle for 33 years unless something critical was at stake.

But what has happened in the midst of this protracted debate is that people, and congregations, have tied their Christian identity to a particular outcome. People have mistaken their point of view as the object of their worship – and the witness of the church has suffered for it.

Now, I am grateful that, unlike many others, our congregation is not aligned with one side or the other. The gift of our moderation is that we sharpen one another's thinking by our diversity of thought. The challenge to our moderation is that we not shy away from faithful disagreement because we are afraid of conflict.

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Last week – in the company of some other Presbyterian pastors with whom I was studying – I heard a story about the most recent round of debates on the matter of gay ordination. Two well-respected, big-steeple preachers stood up to speak at the meeting when their presbytery was going to take a vote.

The first came to the microphone and offered a passionate argument against the ordination of gays and lesbians. He cited scripture that he believed demonstrated God's intention for human sexuality to be expressed only between a woman and a man. He noted the few occasions in the Bible where he believed homosexuality is condemned. He argued that the biblical notion of the family was threatened by an acceptance of a homosexual lifestyle, and that the integrity of the church was at stake in the course of this debate. At the end of his speech, he paused and looked around the room and said, "but, then again, I might be wrong."

The next pastor came up to the microphone. His argument was for the full inclusion of gays and lesbians in the church. He, too, cited scripture as a source – believing that the Bible clearly celebrates the goodness of all that God has created. He noted the same occasions the scriptures mention homosexuality – arguing that the term meant something completely different than it does today. He was passionate in his stories about gay

women and men who felt a call to serve the church and who did not choose their sexuality, nor could they change it. He also believed the integrity of the church was at stake in the course of the debate. And when he finished speaking, he looked at the first pastor and said, “but, then again, I might be wrong.”

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What I notice is that at the center of that remarkable exchange was the cross. Not pride. Not ideology. Not ego. Not an obsession with winning...but the cross.

Paul’s encouragement to a church divided – and I bet it is also applicable for a country divided – Paul’s encouragement to a church divided is to remember to put the cross at the center of our lives.

To remember that our identity as children of God comes not from leaders to whom we are aligned, nor ideologies to which we ascribe, nor, even, to matters of faith that we deem critical – but to Jesus the Christ who gave himself on the cross in order that we might have life.

Paul urges the church to seek unity – not without a difference of opinion and vigorous debate. The unity for which Paul advocates is bigger than this.

Paul asks that in all we do, in every decision we make as people of faith, in all of our deliberation as the church – the body of Christ – he asks that we unify our focus on the cross –

The instrument that exposed Jesus’
vulnerability, his humility, his love, his compassion,
his powerlessness, his disregard for shame, his obedience,
his selflessness...

all of them characteristics that God used to redeem the world;
all of them characteristics that the world considers foolish;
all of them characteristics that we would do well to adopt as we
seek to walk in Jesus’ path.

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