

Conflict in the church: How can we have healthy churches

(1 Corinthians 12:12-31)

Purpose statement:

Freely and joyfully use your spiritual gifts to promote harmony and unity in the church.

Greetings and Prayer

Greetings to you saints. My name is.... This is our last sermon on the series on conflict. It addresses conflict in church. We will be looking at some of the conflict in the Corinthian church from 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

Introduction

Today I have deliberately greeted you as "Saints". In some religions a **saint** is a person who is recognized as having an exceptional degree of holiness or likeness or closeness to God. However the Greek term from which the word saint is derived it means someone who is "set apart," "sanctified," or "made holy." All children of God are saints, they have all been set apart and made holy to serve a holy God. Now that we all have been made holy as the church today we seek to answer the question, "What causes conflict among saints and how can these conflicts among people made holy by God be resolved?" I am sure all of us are aware that now and again churches split. My guess which can be wrong is that in our times we have more new churches out of church splitting than from church planting. Quite sad isn't it? Because a split in the church means there is no more one Spirit among the saints.

As saints we are also described as "brothers and sisters" in Christ. So what would cause brothers and sisters in the Lord to be at loggerheads with each other? I read about a church in Canada that was divided by a necktie! Of all things you can think of dividing a church. The story goes like this, while preaching, the preacher's tie wrapped around his hand. Guess what happened. The man of God concluded that it was a sign that the devil was trying to bind his teaching. So he tore off his tie, threw it on the ground and stomped on it. He said he got a revelation that ties were from the devil. From that day he demanded and taught that Christians should never wear ties because they bound them in their Christian life. Other saints in his congregation disagreed with him and the church split into two. You will be surprised that sometimes churches don't split over serious doctrinal issues but very trivial things like a piece of cloth called a tie.

The Corinthian church we are learning from today was divided surprisingly by something that was supposed to be good and celebrated – "spiritual gifts". The congregation was composed of a diverse mix of people of different cultural backgrounds, social status, religious backgrounds. These are people like us here in Johannesburg with our different cultures, languages, social classes and different educational levels and different worldviews. This diversity in the body of Christ leads to fragmentation. Paul is going to use

the picture of how the body with different parts functions as one unit to teach them about unity in the church.

Unity in the body of Christ (12-14)

The Corinthian church was gifted in many ways but instead of the gifts being used for the good of the whole church community, there was competition with some gifts regarded as being more prestigious than the other. Instead of uniting them, the gifts divided them. Paul takes them through a lesson in anatomy. Anatomy is how the different parts of a body function to enable the body to remain healthy and functional. Read (12-14). He says a healthy church should function like a body. The different parts of the body do not pull the body in different directions, neither do some parts refuse to do their part because they view themselves as less important than others. For the body to remain functional and healthy all parts play their role as fashioned by God to do so. Paul says the body is only complete and fully functioning when all parts are well. If one part has problems then the whole body is affected.

What is Paul trying to help them realise by this image of the body? He is saying that the Church as the body of Christ is united together in Christ. When we are born again, the Spirit of God indwells us, molds us into the same body with Christ as the head of that body. The agent of incorporation into one body, The Holy spirit gives us the sameness. Male, female, Gentile, Jew, master or slave before God we are equalized because of the one Spirit who indwells us. It is important to note that Christians as children of God all baptized by the same Spirit, there is no special Spirit that makes some Christians better than others. Neither does it need a church leader to impart the Spirit of God on other believers as some of our brothers and sisters in Christ do when they call for special services for congregants to receive the Holy Spirit. Paul is saying you can't be a Christian and not be baptized by the Spirit.

"You, however, are not in the realm of the flesh but are in the realm of the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, they do not belong to Christ" (Romans 8:9).

I want you to pay attention to this; Because saints all have the same Spirit of God distinctions in terms of gender, social class or position in church are irrelevant. Because God also freely gives gifts to whoever he chooses in the church, these gifts should be used to edify and serve the whole body and not to separate. Through the illustration of the body Paul wants them to see that diversity is a gift of God's grace to the church.

I want us to leave the church of Corinth a bit and dwell on what could be the potential pitfalls that could divide us as a church.

Is it;

1. Our social classes and where we live?
2. Our tribal and ethnic groups?
3. Our preferences of being Evangelical or Pentecostal?
4. Our finances. Recently we heard there were shootings at a church here in Gauteng and a number of people were killed over finances of the church.

Christ Central Soweto church. If the Corinthians were divided by their gifts we as the local church at Christ Central today should be asking the question, what divides us as the church? For a new church like ours with believers coming from different church and cultural backgrounds how do we find agreement? Paul calls us not only to embrace diversity in our churches, but unity. As a new church, we should be engaging with all these issues to build up a DNA of unity in the Spirit

Managing diversity (15-26)

Paul moves on to point out how to manage diversity and divisions especially where divisions emanate from how individual members see themselves in their local church. In this case he addresses issue of inferiority and superiority complex. He points these out as the cause for their disunity over spiritual gifts.

Feeling of insignificance (inferiority)

As one body, the church exists as the instrument and the means through which Christ reaches out to the world. The members of the church that feel they are insignificant and can't contribute anything to the wellbeing of the church are like the foot, the eye and the ear that look down upon themselves and think the other parts are better than them (15-16). They have a self-defeating attitude and see themselves worthless compared to others. But Paul reminds them, they might see themselves as not belonging, but because of the Spirit of God that has joined them together with other believers they remain part of the whole. Without them the body is not complete (v 18).

Notice here that no one has judged them. It is what they feel they are;

1. I can't sing
2. I can't pray
3. I can't give
4. I can't teach Sunday school

They are self-judging and conclude that because they are not as gifted as others then they are worthless. Their "I am not worth" feeling is their enemy, not other people. This feeling of this attitude of being worthless to serve other people cause individuals to pull out of everything. This feeling might give a foothold for the devil, causing them to be envious of others. Envy has become a sin that instills jealousy, bitterness and strife. This attitude was fed into by the congregations' competitive spirit to outdo each other in doing

things like oratory, wealth and even spiritual gifts. As a result those with lesser gifts felt inferior to others. The spirit of being discouraged, caused others either to pull out of being involved in anything. Paul says all this inflicts injuries to the whole body.

Feeling of overconfidence (superiority)

On the flip side is this is the group in the church whose actions say, “*we have no need of you. We can do it on our own*” (Read v 21). These are the overconfident ones whose attitude says we know it all. They glory in self-praise to the point of pushing others out. These members act like they are the whole body pushing everyone else out. In the context of the competition for gifts it is easy to understand that those with more spectacular gifts like speaking in tongues, prophecy and healing were the most respected. This group was also in the danger of enjoying the limelight and fall into the temptation of pride and attitude of belittling others.

We are faced here with a church divided by preference of some gifts over others. Those who have seemingly prestigious gifts upfront gifts like preaching, prophesying and healing and those who have less prestigious gifts like the helping ministries and prayer ministries that *happen behind the scenes*. But Paul warns against treating these serving gifts differently. Paul’s point is that it doesn’t mean that we are all called to teach prophecy or speak in tongues. (If the whole body were the eye v 17-18).

We can serve in the body of Christ, the church in different ways. Imagine if we were all going to stand up to preach on a Sunday – 130 preachers all preaching the same sermon at the same time or 130 people all doing the church’s finances (That’s where guns will be pulled out on each other). This is ridiculous. Verse 18 helps to solve the problem (read v 18). God arranged the body parts and assigned them different functions. So it is with the church. God deploys us as he has gifted us to serve him with the gifts he has given us. Truly there are parts that look very insignificant, but guess what, the body can’t function properly without them. They are indispensable. The body can’t function properly without them. Let me give a humorous example.

Just think for a moment. How important your big toe compared to your beautiful and handsome face? Imagine this handsome gentleman who has the mother of all dates with this beautiful lady. He is going to propose marriage today. He dresses up immaculately, confirms and agrees with his mirror that he is irritably handsome. As he rushes out to drive out for the date, he hits against a sharp metal pipe that leaves his big toe terribly shredded. He cannot possibly drive in this condition even though only the toe is damaged but the handsome face is untouched. Great day spoiled hey!

The helping ministries of the church and those engaged in them can easily be seen as valueless as the big toes is until we miss their service. The members of the prayer team that consistently prays for the church, may not be noticed by anyone neither are the people who arrange the furniture for us and set up for the service. Imagine a day when

all 300 congregants arriving at church one day in suits and nicely done hairstyles only to find all the chairs nicely stuffed in the storeroom. Only then do we begin to realise that it takes someone to set up and give us a nice and comfortable worship space. That someone never stands up to say, you see I am the one who gives you all this comfort.

Paul is warning against the practice of promoting some gifts in the church above others. He says this causes divisions giving the impression of there being some Christians that are better than others. I once visited a church that had seven men designated by the pastor as man of valour. These were the top seven givers in the church. During the Sunday giving slot they were the last to be called on to give. They were showed with praise and ululation as they gave hugely to the church every Sunday. Paul says this creates a spirit of unnecessary competition, pride and exclusion in the church. It divides the church into “haves and have-nots”, the superior and the inferior. I pray that we don't fall into this trap here at Christ Central Soweto. Yes, finances can be a great divider in the church if giving in church is understood as showing “Who is who” in church.

Harmony is God's design for the church (27-31)

Read (v 27-31). Paul is saying because all believers have the same Spirit each one of them counts and they need to contribute to the church as God has appointed them. He is however not saying that all positions and ministries are the same. He is saying all of them are indispensable but some are higher than others. This is the reason why he ends by encouraging them to eagerly desire the greater gifts (v 31). Paul is clear that the word ministries are higher than others. The gift of an apostle is higher than that of speaking in tongues but this does not mark out the apostle as more superior than other saints. He remains a servant and a child of God like all other believers. All believers are equal but their ranks are for service not for power and prestige. The first apostles were the channel by which God established his church and gave divine revelation before the Scriptures were written.

Prophets as well as teachers were also involved in the ministry of passing on God's revelation to God's people. The word ministry was and still is for the growth and maturity of believers. The role of preaching the Word should remain central to the business of the church. Paul's point is not to give a hierarchy of church roles but that each of them are gifts that God has given to different people to serve him in that role. He is saying minimizing some gifts and hallowing others is wrong and it brings disunity instead of harmony. His argument is that there is no gift that needs to be there as evidence that one is a child of God or a better Christian than the other. The teaching that lifts up the gift of speaking in tongues as the evidence of new life in Christ is misleading and a recipe for disunity and disharmony in the body of Christ. He wants them to avoid judging each other on the gifts. Anyone can attain to any position as God appoints them. The bottom line is that they all have one Spirit. So all qualify to seat at the same table at the wedding feast and all qualify to be treated to the same food.

Conclusion

In conclusion I want to encourage each one of us brothers and sisters to take stock of our role and gifting in our local church. Once we have understood our God-given role of service then we can move on to confidently and joyfully serve in church without feeling intimidated by other brothers and sisters in Christ. Once we have identified our role the next godly thing to do would be encouraging others in their own gifts of service.

Let pray;

Thank you Lord that you gave all of us one Spirit and different gifts of service. Help us to feel that we belong together in the body of Christ and help us to strive to encourage and spur one another on towards love and good deeds as we serve you and serve one another. Keep us from the spirit of jealousy and envy that serves to divide us as a church. Keep us Lord one in Spirit loving and caring for one another, so that the world can know that we are one in you. To the praise of your glory. Amen.

Follow our teachings on www.christcentralsoweto.co.za

Reflection Questions

1. Share what you fear could be a thing that could potentially divide your congregation.
2. What would be practical things to do to avoid divisions arising from what you have pointed out.
3. Share what you understand as your gifts of service in your church. Are you presently practicing it, if not what is your limitation? What are your prayer requests for that gift?