

LESSONS FROM AN ANCIENT CHURCH

A sermon delivered by Batsell Barrett Baxter on June 21, 1964 at the Hillsboro Church of Christ, Nashville, Tennessee, and heard over radio station WLAC at 8:05 P.M.

In writing to the Ephesians the apostle Paul said, "I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beseech you to work worthily of the calling wherewith ye were called, with all lowliness and meekness, with long suffering, forbearing one another in love; giving diligence to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace." (Ephesians 4:1-3). Notice especially the phrase, "the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace."

Recently, Brother Ira North, minister of the great Madison church, told me of a conversation which he had with one of his elders, Brother Stan Lillie, as they discussed the future of that congregation. Brother Lillie said "We will always continue to grow and prosper if we keep the priceless ingredient 'the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.'" As long as Christians remain united, working solidly together, there is nothing impossible in the Lord's work. The opposites of this quality--envy, strife, jealousy, rivalry, disunity, and division--are very common, however, and have been extremely costly to the Cause of Christ through the centuries.

Paul Writes to Corinth

On his second missionary journey the apostle Paul visited Europe and established the church at Corinth. This was approximately A.D. 52. Four or five years later in A.D. 56 or 57, it was necessary for him to write to this new congregation, reproving them for the divisions that had already begun to form among them. He wrote, "Now I beseech you, brethren, through the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfected together in the same mind and in the same judgment. For it hath been signified unto me concerning you, my brethren, by them that are of the household of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. Now this I mean, that each one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. Is Christ divided? was Paul crucified for you? or were you baptized into the name of Paul?" (I Cor. 1:10-13)

In I Corinthians 3:1-4, he continued, "And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, as unto babes in Christ. I fed you with milk, not with meat; for you were not yet able to bear it: nay, not even now are ye able; for ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you jealousy and strife, are ye not carnal, and do ye not walk after the manner of men? For when one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not men?" In I Corinthians 6:5-7, he reproved them for going to law one against another in the public courts, "What, cannot there be found among you one wise man who shall be able to decide between his brethren, but brother goeth to law with brother, and that before unbelievers? Nay, already it is altogether a defeat in you that ye have law suits one with another. Why not rather take wrong? why not rather be defrauded?"

Clement Writes to Corinth

It is especially interesting to note that Clement, one of the presbyters of Rome, felt constrained to write to the same Corinthian church on the same theme some forty years later. While Clement's letter to the Corinthian church is not an inspired document, as was Paul's, it is the earliest uninspired Christian document that has come down to our day, having been written about A.D. 96. It is obvious that the second generation of Christians at Corinth committed the same sins of division and strife that their fathers had committed forty years before them.

Clement writes, "Possessed of an excellent and devout character, you did everything in His fear. The commands and decrees of the Lord were engraven on the tablets of your heart. You were granted great popularity and growing numbers ...

"From this there arose rivalry and envy, strife and sedition, persecution and anarchy, war and captivity. And so 'the dishonored' rose up 'against those who were held in honor,' those of no reputation against the noble, the stupid against the wise, 'the young against their elders.' For this reason righteousness and peace are far from you, since each has abandoned the fear of God and grown purblind in his faith, and ceased to walk by the rules of his precepts or to behave in a way worthy of Christ. Rather does each follow the lusts of his evil heart, by reviving that wicked and unholy rivalry, by which, indeed, 'death came into the world.'"

Then, Clement tells the story of Cain's killing of Abel, which he attributes to rivalry. He continues, "You see, brothers, rivalry and envy are responsible for fratricide. Because of rivalry our forefather Jacob fled from the presence of his brother Esau. It was rivalry that caused Joseph to be murderously persecuted and reduced to slavery. Rivalry forced Moses to flee from the presence of Pharaoh, the king of Egypt, when he heard his fellow clansmen say: 'Who made you a ruler or judge over us? Do you want to slay me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?' By reason of rivalry Aaron and Miriam were excluded from the camp. Rivalry cast Dathan and Abiram, alive into Hades because they revolted against Moses, God's servant. Because of rivalry David not only incurred the envy of foreigners but was even persecuted by Saul, the king of Israel."

Clement then traces the history of persecution, naming Peter and Paul and referring to many other Christians who had died because of the rivalry of others. Finally he says, "We are writing in this vein, dear friends, not only to admonish you but also to remind ourselves. For we are in the same arena and involved in the same struggle. Hence we should give up empty and futile concerns, and turn to the glorious and holy rule of our tradition. Let us note what is good, what is pleasing and acceptable to Him who made us. Let us fix our eyes on the blood of Christ and let us realize how precious it is to his Father, since it was poured out for our salvation and brought the grace of repentance to the whole world." (Clement's First Letter, Chapters 3-7, *Library of Christian Classics*, Volume I, pp. 44-47)

Before going further in this study I should like to say that my choice of this subject was not prompted by some division in the Hillsboro church. Although I have known you intimately over a period of thirteen years, I have known of no schism or cleavage in this congregation. You have lived and worked together for more than thirty-five years without the sin of rivalry or division. I speak on this theme today in order that we may continue to work together in peace and harmony. This has been and is one of your finest qualities.

Divide and Conquer

Rivalry is one of the most common and at the same time one of the most hurtful sins known to mankind. Satan has long used the technique of divide and conquer. Many good works have been frustrated by envy and division among those who were involved in them. Satan tried to divide the apostles even before the church was established. The mother of James and John came to Jesus to ask, "Command that these my two sons may sit, one on thy right hand and one on thy left hand, in thy kingdom." Jesus answered that it was not His to give such preferment, but the passage continues, "And when the ten heard it, they were moved with indignation concerning the two brethren."

At this point it was necessary for Jesus to call all twelve of the apostles together and tell them, "Ye know that the rulers of the Gentiles Lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Not so shall it be among you: for whosoever would become great among you shall be your minister; and whosoever would be first among you shall be your servant; even as the Son of Man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many." (Matthew 20: 21-28)

In the early church rivalry between Jewish and Gentile Christians was one of the most difficult problems that was faced. Many of Paul's letters deal with this problem. At one point in his career he collected funds from among the Gentiles of Lacedonia and Achaia and brought them to Jerusalem to be disbursed among needy Jews, largely to heal the breach between the two groups. Rivalry continues to be a problem today. Sometimes, we see rivalry between members of the same family, between husband and wife, or between parents and children. Sometimes one family dislikes another family, with obvious envy and jealousy. Sometimes, it is between individuals. Occasionally, even preachers are estranged because of jealousy one for another. In the long sweep of Christian history, rivalry has even been present among elders, where it is especially shameful. When the shepherds of the flock cannot work together in peace, Satan has indeed done his work well. One congregation has sometimes become jealous of another congregation, whereas they should have been working together "on the same team."

This same feeling of rivalry often exists between different sections of a country--the South against the North, the East against the West. Rivalry among nations has led periodically to devastating wars, with the destruction of thousands of lives. Rivalry has also often been apparent among the different races--the black against the white and the white against the black, the yellow against the white and the white against the yellow, the brown against the white and the white against the brown.

Envy, strife, jealousy, and rivalry are among the biggest problems that we face. As we look at our American system, we are disturbed by the fact that the competitive spirit is so deeply imbedded in us and in our system. For example, from their earliest remembrances, our children know the spirit of competition and rivalry. We send our children to school and immediately they are taught to compete with each other vigorously for the better grades. They compete for the various honors that are bestowed at school. They compete in the athletic games. Recently I had the experience of watching the selection of a Knot-Hole baseball team. Forty youngsters were cut to twenty, then, on a certain afternoon, fifteen suits were distributed among twenty boys. I have not seen more forlorn-looking boys than the five who did not receive the suits.

It makes for better baseball, for higher achievements in the various fields, but the rivalry engendered in the process is often devastating. In fact, industrialists and others tell us that their greatest problem is the problem of human relations--which inevitably grows out of years of training in such rivalry. It gets to be every man for himself, with no holds barred. We adults find ourselves caught up in the competition for jobs, for honors, for possessions, for status and prestige. There are just not enough Cadillacs and thirty-thousand-dollar homes to go around. Sometimes the competition becomes intense. Sometimes there are not enough jobs for all. Not everyone can be president, or foreman, or sit in an office and wear a white collar.

The Root of the Problem

The sins of envy, strife, jealousy, rivalry, disunity, and division grow out of too great a concern for self and too little a concern for others. The apostle Paul wrote to the Romans, "For I say, through the grace that was given me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but so to think as to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to each man a measure of faith. For even as we have many members and one body, and all the members have not the same office: So we, who are

many, are one body in Christ, and severally members one of another. And having gifts differing according to the grace that was given to us, whether prophecy, let us prophecy according to the proportion of our faith; or ministry, let us give ourselves to our ministry; or he that teacheth, to his teaching; or he that exhorteth, to his exhorting: he that giveth, let him do it with liberality; he that ruleth, with diligence; he that showeth mercy, with cheerfulness.” (Romans 12: 3-8)

Paul used the same wonderful illustration of the human body in I Corinthians 12, pointing out that while there are fingers, hands, arms, toes, feet, legs, eyes, ears and all the rest, each organ is necessary and important to the body as a whole. There is no need for rivalry among the members of the physical body nor is there any need for rivalry among the members of God’s spiritual body, the church.

The antidote to the problem of rivalry is Christian love--love of God and love of fellow man. Paul comes to the climax of his writing on this theme when he says, “In love of the brethren be tenderly affectioned one to another; in honor preferring one another.” (Romans 12:10) If Christians would only bring themselves to this level of feeling and behavior, there would be no problem of rivalry. It must be admitted that the competitive system achieves greater heights of production in the secular, material realms, but it must also be clearly seen that attitudes of envy, strife and rivalry are devastating when carried into general human relations, and especially obnoxious when they appear in the Lord’s church.