

THE DIVIDED CHURCH

1 Corinthians

By Raymond White

1 Corinthians 1:10 Now I beseech you, brethren, by 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 perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. **:11** For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you.

I suppose in an ideal world, in an ideal Christianity, there would be only one Church, we'd all be in that one Church, we'd all see eye-to-eye on everything, and live happily ever after. And I suppose that is still the goal of many ecumenical thinking Christians as well as Christians who think they belong to the one true church and that it's their God given duty to get everyone into their church.

The problem is that the more we struggle to get everyone to agree, the more diverse we become, and the more hostile we become about that diversity.

What we really should do is accept that we don't agree because we *can't* agree, and live at peace with each other in spite of our differences.

It is true that Paul was uncomfortable with divisions, and he asked that we set them aside. But the divisions are not the problem. Contentions are the problem. Paul tells us that we should be perfectly joined together. Why? Because divisions cause contentions and contentions are bad.

Two thousand years have gone by, and we are no closer to eliminating divisions than we were back then. In fact we are more divided than ever. If our goal is to eliminate divisions, we should wake up and accept that that is never going to happen.

There is a more realistic goal, and that is to eliminate contentions. Even though Christianity will never be a single Church (upper-case "C" meaning the Catholic Church, the Mormon Church, etc.) we can at least function as a single church (lower-case "c" meaning Christianity, the Christian church collectively). That, I believe, we can do. And that, I believe, is what Paul struggled with as he wound his way through this epistle.

1 Corinthians 7:18 Is any man called being circumcised? Let him not become uncircumcised. Is any call being uncircumcised? Let him not be circumcised.

In other words, it is okay to be a Jewish Christian and it is okay to be a Gentile Christian. So here we have a division that Paul accepts and encourages. It must follow then that it's okay to be a Catholic Christian or a Lutheran Christian or an evangelical Christian or a Mormon Christian or a Jehovah's Witness Christian.

1 Corinthians 12:3 ...no man can say that Jesus is Lord, but by the Holy Ghost. **:4** Now there are diversities of gifts, but by the same spirit. **:5** And there are differences of administrations, but the same Lord. **:6** And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God which worketh all in all. **:11** But all these worketh that one and the selfsame Spirit, dividing to every man severally as he

will. :15 If the foot shall say, Because I am not the hand, I am not of the body; is it therefore not of the body? :20 But now are they many members, yet but one body.

So although Paul opens this epistle with a call for unity, he quickly transitions to an acceptance of diversity.

Here is the real question: How do we achieve “unity” (and therefore peace) in the face of inevitable diversity? In short, can’t we all just get along?

Here is what we must do, in my opinion. First, embrace what we have in common. That is our unity. Then second, allow what we don’t have in common. That is our diversity.

[1] OUR UNITY

What exactly do we mean by unity? Where is our cohesion? In the face of so much diversity, is there enough core belief to think of ourselves as a cohesive unit called “Christianity”?

However much we may disagree with each other, with our fellow Christians, we should and must accept that we do have a common core believe, and that is this —

1 Corinthians 1:18 For the preaching of the cross is to them that perish foolishness; but unto us which are saved it is the power of God. :23 But we preach Christ crucified, unto the Jews a stumblingblock, and unto the Greeks, foolishness. :24 But unto them which are called, both Jews and Greeks [and Catholic and Protestant and Mormon and whatever] Christ is the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

If we can agree on just that much, then just how far apart are we? I mean, really. Let us rejoice in our commonness before we get all tangled up in our differences.

[2] OUR DIVERSITY

That the “church” is divided into factions (denominations) is not good, but it’s not *so* bad either. Now if there are *warring* factions, then that really is bad. Evangelicals believe that Catholics and Mormons and all but themselves are going to hell. Catholics believe that all non-Catholics are going to hell. Mormons think they soften it by believing that only Mormons will be in the Celestial Kingdom while everyone else will be somewhere else.

It amounts to the same thing, “us and not you,” and it’s all nonsense.

Here’s my question to you: Do any of you Christians actually believe that most beloved verse in the Bible?

John 3:16 God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, that whosoever believeth on him shall not perish but have everlasting life.

“Yes,” you say. Indeed. All Christians *claim* to believe that verse.

I claim that most Christians do not. Not so long as we believe that *we* are going to heaven but all those other Christians are not. Christians of every kind need to understand that Christianity has nothing to do with *your Church*, it has only to do with the person Jesus Christ, and that Christians who *believeth on him* will have *everlasting life* much to the chagrin of all other Christians who thought that heaven was for themselves alone.

This “us only” jealousy is ages old. It goes all the way back even to Moses. Moses was not jealous for himself but others were jealous for him.

Numbers 11:26 But there remained two in the camp, the name of the one was Eldad and the name of the other Medad ... and they prophesied in the camp. :28 And Joshua said ... My lord, Moses, forbid them. :29 And Moses said unto him, Enviest thou for my sake? Would God that all the LORD's people were prophets.

Numbers 22:9 And God [the true God] came unto Balaam. 18 And Balaam answered and said ...I cannot go beyond the word of the LORD [Jehovah] my God.

Moses was not the only true prophet. Eldad and Medad were also true prophets and Moses was glad to have them. Balaam also was a true prophet of the true God. Now, he abused his prophetic office and paid for his mistake with his life. But that's not germane to the issue. What is germane is that true prophets were not all at the same place serving the same people, or even teaching the same message. The Midianites had their own true prophet. Does that surprise you? It shouldn't. Moses was with the Midianites on *their* holy mountain when he met *their* God.

Jesus also was not jealous for himself, but his disciples were jealous for him

Mark 9:38 And John answered him, saying, Master, we saw one casting out devils in thy name, and he followeth not us: and we forbid him, because he followeth not us. :39 But Jesus said, Forbid him not: for there is no man which shall do a miracle in my name, that can lightly speak evil of me. :40 For he that is not against us is on our part. :41 For whosoever shall give you a cup of water to drink in my name, because ye belong to Christ, verily I say unto you, he shall not lose his reward.

Had Christians understood that verse 500 years ago, the Inquisition would not have happened. Or 1500 years ago, the wars between the Vandals (Arian Christians) and the Romans (Athanasian Christians) might not have happened.

The temptation to be jealous for our own cause is an easy trap to fall into, and we do it thinking we are defending some moral high ground. Not only do we sometimes get jealous for our church, we can sometimes get jealous for our own view within our church.

Paul fell into just that trap and never realized it at all.

Galatians 2:14 But when I saw that they [Peter and friends] walked not uprightly according to the truth of the gospel, I said unto Peter before them all, if thou, being a Jew, livest after the manner of Gentiles, and not as do the Jews, why compellest thou the Gentiles to live as do the Jews?

Paul had, he believed, a moral high ground and felt compelled to put Peter in his place. He thought that Peter was behaving hypocritically cozying up to Jewish Christians. But Paul was ignoring the fact that Peter had a tight rope to walk between two Christian views which both had legitimacy. For Paul it was my way or no way, and he had to get his way even if it meant embarrassing church leaders in public.

But over time, Paul moderated his view of things.

Phillipians 1:15 Some indeed preach Christ even of envy and strife, and some of good will. :16 The one preach Christ of contention, not sincerely ...:17 But the other of love ...:18 What then? Notwithstanding, every way, whether in pretence, or in truth, Christ is preached; and I therein do rejoice, yea, and will rejoice. :19 For I know that this shall turn to my salvation ...

We see here a new Paul with a more tolerant acceptance of people who he would have earlier considered hypocritical and worthy of public humiliation. The newer Paul is only concerned with the message of Christ and not so concerned with motive or method. When Paul wrote Galatians he publically criticized anyone he thought was teaching Christ the wrong way. But by the time he wrote Phillipians he had mellowed.

Christianity needs to mellow. It has mellowed a lot. Catholics and Protestants no longer burn each other at the stake and that's good, but too many Christians would still be glad to see other Christians burn in hell. America's notions of religious freedom resolved the first problem (no more stakes), but it remains for Christians to resolve the second.

All of us need to take to heart these words of Jesus: *whosoever believeth on him shall not perish but have everlasting life*. Believe *that*, and don't fret so much about what other Christians believe and don't believe.

[3] BUT I REALLY AM RIGHT

Does tolerance mean that you cannot believe that yours is the only true church? No. It's okay for all you Catholics, Evangelicals, Mormons, etc. to believe that yours is the only right way to worship God. Of course you believe that, that's why you are where you are, because you actually believe your own brand of Christianity. It's okay to believe "But I really am right." What's not okay to believe that all those other Christians who are not in your Church are condemned for believing differently. It's okay to say we teach the truth, but it's not okay to say they teach lies. Just accept that if they are teaching Christ, they are teaching the truth, at least the core truth that actually matters.

You may think that your Church has a special call from God, and you may be right. But that doesn't mean that others do not also have a special call from God that is different from yours. I understand my call from God and the mission of my Church. But that tells me nothing about your call and the mission of your Church. It would be very presumptuous for me to tell you that your call from God is invalid because it is different from my own. I don't know what's in your heart or in your head or what God has said to you. And I certainly have no right to tell God what he should and should not do.

Here is a belief that is held by too many Christians: "God, I know you are talking to us, therefore I also know you are not talking to anyone else." How can any Christian possibly know that — what God is or is not saying to someone else?

This creates a Mormon dilemma. Mormon missionaries will often say to investigators something like this: “Surely you believe that God can say what he wants to whomever he wants, whenever he wants? Therefore God can talk to modern prophets in our own day, right?” That logic segues to the Mormon message that God spoke to Joseph Smith.

However, that logic leads to an unintended consequence. The investigator can respond with this: “Oh, yes. I believe that God spoke to the pope or Martin Luther or John Wesley or Nostradamus.” Suddenly the Mormon missionary is backed into a corner of his own making because his logic, which pointed to Joseph Smith, has now pointed to any prophetic claimant. And the missionary now wants to say, “Oh no. Not *them*, I mean just *our* prophets.” To which the investigator can rightly say, “Surely you believe that God can say what he wants to whomever he wants, whenever he wants? That *is* what you said.” As for me, I just say: “Maybe.” Which is the truth. How do I know what God has said to any pope or Martin Luther or anyone else? I don’t. I do know what God has said to Joseph Smith, and that’s as far as I go. How God deals with some pope, that’s the pope’s business, and God’s, not mine. I have *my* call, you have yours.

[4] CAN I BE RIGHT AND WRONG?

What happens when you honestly believe your church is *the true church* but it teaches some silly things? How can I stick with a church that teaches silly things?

To deal with that you should understand that the reason you are committed to your church is not because of its fringe notions but because of its core notions. At its core, it teaches what your faith is committed to. That there is some fluff that you don’t like is not so big a deal. I’ll give you an example from the Old Testament.

When Solomon died, his nation was split in two, the south and the north. Rehoboam was king of Judah, the south.

Rehoboam was not a bad king, but he was a foolish king. He increased taxes so he could surpass his father’s legacy — his father Solomon had built the temple and that was a tough act to follow. And Rehoboam’s burdening the people split the kingdom.

So life was tough in Judah with its overreaching king. So, did *everybody* leave and go north to freedom? You’d think so, but no.

2 Chronicles 10:17 But as for the children of Israel that dwelt in the cities of Judah, Rehoboam reigned over them. 11:16 And after them [the Levites that headed south to Judah] out of all the tribes of Israel such as set their hearts to seek the LORD God came to Jerusalem, to sacrifice unto the LORD God of their fathers.

Here’s my point: Many believing Israelites who lived in the north moved south into Judah. Why? Because they’d rather live with the true God even if they had to tolerate Rehoboam’s financial tyranny. So they accepted the fringe bad to get close to the core good.

Maybe that is how you feel about your church. Sometimes, I feel like that about mine. But that’s not a bad thing. If nothing else, it pushes you to this question: How much do you *really* love God? What will you endure for him? Death and torture? We can hope.

How about inane Sacrament meetings that put you to sleep? Or silly doctrines that, more than just false, don't even make sense? Can you endure *that* for God? If not, you can forget about death and torture.

[5] CONCLUSION

Jesus said to Peter that one day Peter would be crucified.

John 21:18 ... when thou shalt be old, thou shalt stretch forth thy hands, and another shall gird thee, and carry thee wither thou wouldst not. :19 This spake he [Jesus], signifying by what death he [Peter] should glorify God.

That was actually good news for Peter because it meant that he would never again deny Jesus. But then Peter looked at John and asked Jesus a question.

John 21:20 Then Peter, turning about, seeth the disciple whom Jesus loved following... :21 Peter seeing him saith to Jesus, Lord, and what shall this man do? :22 Jesus saith unto him, If I will that he tarry till I come, what is that to thee? Follow thou me.

Peter's question was a natural one: I'm getting crucified and that's fine. But what's John going to get? Jesus' answer was simply: none of your business.

That's good advice to us. Don't worry about some other Christian's relationship with Jesus, you worry about your own. If Jesus asked some other Christian to do something that's different than what he asked you to do, just reflect on Jesus' words to Peter: "...what is that to thee? Follow thou me."

Christians have a variety of names for each other: cults, apostates, heretics. Christians are very creative in how we slander each other. Jesus has a lot to forgive.

We should just accept that we are not all in one Church. Many Christians would love for all Christians to be in one Church, as long as it's *their* Church. But consider this: If God had intended us to all be in one Church, he would have written the Bible without ambiguities. It is those ambiguities that splinter us.

Well, so be it. It's his book and we are, all of us, his people. Let us therefore treat each other with courtesy and dignity and tolerance.

John 14:2 In my Father's house are many mansions...

The King James "mansions" is not correct. Really, it's many "rooms" of one great house. Jesus didn't tell us which Christians go into which rooms, and I wonder, when we find ourselves in some room of God's house with fellow believers in other rooms, will we be annoyed to learn that the next room is occupied by Christians of a different faith? Will we still be petty there? Shouldn't we rather rejoice to be in such good company?

John 3:17 For God sent not his son into the world to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.

That's why he came, not to exclude but to include.

[6] MORMON ADDENDUM: THE FIRST VISION

But Mormons have a particular problem dealing with tolerance. By that I don't mean that we're intolerant — we're *very* tolerant, to a fault (see Article of Faith 11) — but what I do mean is that the First Vision does force us to an “us only” bent. Now, other Christians have their own “us only” dogma to deal with, but that's their problem, ours is the First Vision. Why? Well, let's read it —

***First Vision 18** ... I asked the Personages who stood above me in the light, which of all the sects was right — and which I should join. **19** I was answered that I must join none of them, for they were all wrong; and the Personages who addressed me said that all their creeds were an abomination in his sight; that those professors were all corrupt; that: “they draw near to me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me, they teach or doctrines the commandments of men, having a form of godliness, but they deny the power thereof.” **20** He again forbade me to join with any of them ...*

Well, that's it then. That sounds pretty “us only” to me.

So, how do I deal with it? Or should I even want to “deal with it”? You might think me very presuming to want to “deal with it” but I have a need to and can't let it go.

One thing is for sure: dismissing it is out of the question because to be a Mormon means to believe that the First Vision actually happened and that Jesus meant what he said. So, taking those words at face value is where I must begin.

Then why not just let it be? Because there are two problems: First, I really don't like saying everyone else is wrong; it just seems like bad manners. But second, and more importantly, if all other churches are wrong, how can Jesus have been correct to say —

***John 3:16** ... whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have everlasting life.*

That most beloved verse offers salvation to all who believe on Jesus. There is no restricting it to those who belong to the right church — unless we believe that we are the only ones who *really* believe and everyone else's belief is false. That bridge is *way* too far.

Okay then, so how do we reconcile the two ends of this dilemma? And I understand that what I come up with may be a stretch, but that's okay if it's a plausible stretch.

Let's begin with this question: What exactly did God mean by “wrong”? Then follow that with this question: Does salvation depend on belonging to the “right” church?

There's no mystery what God meant by “wrong” because he tells us: their creeds are abominable and their professors are corrupt and deny the power. And that was exactly the grievance that Jesus had with the church leaders of his time.

But the flip side is that “wrong” does not mean “false.” Judaism, was never “false.” Their priesthood was always valid passing from father to son by birthright. But

then *they*, not it, became wrong when they abused their privilege and refused to believe the clear revelation of Jesus Christ and his conspicuous miracles. That made *them* wrong, not their religion. Remember, Jesus was a rabbi. That fact alone validated Judaism however “wrong” its leaders were.

We commonly read the parable of the Prodigal Son to be about the prodigal son. Actually, it’s not. Remember, Jesus spoke this parable *to Pharisees*, and they were anything but prodigals. The parable is about the *faithful* son and his attitude about the father’s attitude about the returning prodigal. *And* the father forgiving *him*, the *faithful* son: *all I have is thine*. Jesus is not saying to the Pharisees, you are prodigals, he is saying, you are the faithful son, don’t be upset that God loves and redeems the lost. You should be saying, as the faithful son should be saying, “Dad, I’ve got you covered on this end, don’t worry about me, go save my brother.” Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, “Join me in redeeming the lost.”

So what’s my point? Jesus is not accusing their *religion*, he’s accusing *them* of misunderstanding and abusing their religion.

Now, notice what God does not say in the First Vision. He does not say that other churches are wrong *at their core*. He says nothing about priesthood, revelation, temples, baptism, and certainly nothing about any “general apostasy.” He is, however, complaining about their bad behavior. In other words, a church being right or wrong depends on *what it does*, not on any special revelation that it lacks. When God says they are wrong, he gives a reason, and that opens a door because maybe that reason no longer applies; people *and churches* change! Therefore it is possible that a church that was misbehaving a hundred years ago might be rightly behaving today.

But now to my second question: To be saved, do you have to belong to the “right” church? Does being the one true church mean that only Mormons go to heaven? I know that’s what we teach, but do our scriptures agree with that? Or to say it differently, is Mormon baptism *the* essential gateway to heaven? And to answer that, let’s first consider one glaring exception —

Moroni 8:11 *And their little children need no repentance, neither baptism.*

So there we have our one glaring exception anyway: children. But you may object, children are exempted from baptism because they’re innocent. But I object to that objection: *Why* they are exempted is irrelevant. That they *are* exempted is very relevant. It proves that baptism is not *the* gateway to heaven. If anybody gets in without baptism then maybe others do too. So, are there others? Well, we don’t know if we don’t look, so, here’s my list —

Matthew 9:2 *Son, be of good cheer; thy sins be forgiven thee.* [Jesus had the power to forgive sin even on a whim. It’s not baptism forgiving, it’s *him* forgiving. Baptism merely connects us *to* him.]

Luke 23:43 *To day thou shalt be with me in paradise* [True, paradise is not heaven. But it’s the parking place for people who are going to heaven (*Alma 40:12*).]

Enos 5 And there came a voice unto me, saying: Enos, thy sins are forgiven thee...[no baptism, no requirement]

Alma 14:11 ...the Lord receiveth them [these unbaptized believers] up unto himself.

Alma 19:29 O blessed Jesus, who has saved me from an awful hell. [She is not baptized yet, but she is saved].

Alma 24:26 ...we have no doubt but that they were saved [those killed on the battle field after their conversion] :27 thus we see that the Lord worketh in many ways to the salvation of his people. [Let's accept God's "many ways"].

Alma 26:34 we know that they have gone to their God, because of their love and of their hatred to sin. [More battlefield converts going straight to heaven; no baptism.]

3 Nephi 9:20 whosoever cometh unto me with a broken heart and a contrite spirit, him will I baptize with fire and with the Holy Ghost, even as the Lamanites, because of their faith in me at the time of their conversion, were baptized with fire and with the Holy Ghost, and they knew it not.

Doctrine and Covenants 137:5 I saw Father Adam and Abraham; and my father and my mother; my brother Alvin, that has long since slept; :6 And marveled how it was that he had obtained an inheritance in that kingdom, seeing that he had departed this life before the Lord had set his hand to gather Israel the second time, and had not been baptized for he remission of sins.

This last verse, Joseph's marveling over Alvin's salvation, is the gist of this discussion. Joseph receives no answer to the mystery so we are left to wonder with him. And the answer is not baptism for the dead because this vision was in 1836 and baptism for the dead was revealed six years later in 1842. So then the answer must be, as I claim, that God saves whoever he wants, whenever he wants, however he wants and we should stop arguing with him.

Now, none of this is to say that Mormon baptism is bogus. Mormon baptism is not bogus. It was revealed and it works; that is, it saves souls. And the best evidence of that is baptism for the dead which means that Mormon baptism is, at the very least, the best baptism around because it is unselfish. That is, it is *not* for us only but, literally, for everyone, including the dead. And that alone gives Mormon baptism a preeminence because *our* gateway to heaven, we share with *everyone*, most specifically, the dead. That is why we are so busy in our temples, giving to the world, the *whole* world, a salvation which we honestly believe works.

But, again, to believe that it works is not to say that it is the *only* thing that works. I cannot see into other men's hearts nor can I know what revelation God gives them, that's between them and God.

A Pope (I've forgotten which) was approached by two different orders (Jesuit and Fransican? I've forgotten that too). They had different understandings of some Christian doctrine and were asking the Pope to decide which was correct and to renounce the other as heretical. The Pope's response was they are both right in the context of their understanding, they are both allowed to believe what they believe, and they are *forbidden* to call each other heretics.

Catholics have come a long way since the inquisition and have pretty much retired the word "heretic." I'd like to retire a favorite Mormon word: "apostate." Just because Christians do not believe as we do does not make them apostates. It is time to take Article of Faith 11 more seriously, and the First Vision less seriously and accept that the First Vision does not require us believe that all other churches are false. They have their revelation, we have ours. God deals with them and God deals with us. Let's let it go at that, and let's get along, and get on with preaching the core message which is that Christ died for us and rose again. On that, we can all agree.