

Division Is Never Static

by Dan Adler

In our society, divorce has become very commonplace. So many families can relate to the process leading to it, and the pain and consequences following it. I've never been divorced, but I understand marital conflict and I also can relate to interpersonal conflict with close friends and co-workers. And something I've observed, is that division is an active thing – never static. Chasms tend to grow wider with time. They don't stay the same.

In a marriage, if you have a conflict that one or both of you refuse to work out or resolve, it creates a crack in the bond that holds you together. If that conflict is big enough and serious enough and isn't resolved, that crack doesn't just stay as it is - it begins to widen. So that with each passing day or week or month or year that these issues remain unresolved, the gap continues to grow to the point where you might not be able to find a way to bridge that divide – save the power of God. That's what often leads to separation and then divorce. By the time you get to the divorce stage, the size of the crack caused by unresolved issues is so massive compared to when it first started, that it is then judged to be insurmountable and therefore becomes a permanent divide that leads to divorce. How tragic. And while in conflict there are never simple solutions, just think of what generational pain could be avoided if those conflicts were dealt with right away – when the chasm was small and so much more mendable!

Now take it a step further. Think about how there is still potential for a divorced couple to reconcile and come back together if they don't remarry and too much time doesn't pass. But then consider how virtually impossible it is to do so, when one or both spouses remarry, new families are established and years go by in that separation.

You see that division isn't static. It doesn't stay the same. Division plus time equals greater and greater division.

So let's apply this to the Church of Jesus Christ. We have grown so content with our divisions between race, congregation and denomination, that most of us don't even think about it. I would expect that if you surveyed most pastors, they wouldn't have division in the Body of Christ (except in their own congregation) even on the list of their ministry concerns or priorities. But the truth is, God's desire for all Christians is that they would be one as the Father, Son and Holy Spirit are one (John 17). We are meant to be as intricately tied to one another as the members of a human body are connected to itself. That's why we're called the Body of Christ. Yet the Church is rife with division. Instead of living in a united family, we live in a severely broken home birthed out of generations of broken homes. We see the major divisions in the Church between Catholic and Protestant, Conservative and Liberal, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal, between ethnic groups, and between Protestant denominations. And these current divisions that we now see institutionalized in the Church, are not and have never been static either. They are active and growing with each passing year.

Take, for example, the African American church and the “white” church. Because of initial division due to racism and prejudice, because initial divisions weren’t healed, we now have culturally blessed and embraced division that has become a core cultural identity – especially amongst African Americans. Let me give you a partial brief history of this particular rift.

The Pentecostal movement began in Los Angeles on Azusa Street in 1906 and was led by an African American minister, William Seymour. The beginnings of this movement were marked by a great racial diversity of Christians, and the Church of God in Christ was established. But by 1914 there was racial division in this movement, and therefore a white denomination, “The Assemblies of God” was formed and broke off from the Church of God in Christ. Here were people who had the same core beliefs on almost every level, but because of racism and prejudice, they divided. Now if this rift had been acknowledged and repented of – as if such divisions were not a good thing or a casual thing or a normal thing to embrace – I believe it could have been healed and we’d have a Pentecostal arm of the Church (although that’s a division of it’s own) which would have a very different history than it has had. But because it wasn’t, the Church of God in Christ became an almost entirely African American denomination and the Assemblies of God an almost all European American denomination. With each passing year of separation, the history, subculture and separate identity in these divided groups grew stronger and the divide became greater. And though there has been much more racial diversity built into the Assemblies of God around the world now, the Church of God in Christ is still primarily African American. This same type of story can be applied to the African Methodist Episcopal Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church – a division started strictly because of unrepented racism in the 1800’s that has led to over 100 years of separate identity across racial lines amongst Christians. And so much of our ethnic identity, culture and history are intimately tied to our divided subculture of the Church, that tearing down those walls of division and coming together in unity is almost a threatening concept. It’s like breaking up a second marriage years later to try to restore a first one.

These are just a few examples in regard to racially motivated denominational divisions. But in the realm of doctrinal division, the Catholic/Protestant divide is another massive chasm. There is now so much history, culture, form and separate institutional government that has been established since the time of Martin Luther, that the chasm seems virtually un-bridgable – even if the doctrinal divides could be resolved. Think of how many people now proudly call themselves “Lutherans” and “Methodists” and “Catholics” instead of simply Christians! What started as a tragic division, now has become a proud, separate identity. I could go on and on to talk about the other major divisions mentioned above. Are any of these easy to resolve? No. But do you see how unresolved division/conflict does not stay the same, but with each passing year takes us farther and farther apart? It’s not something to take casually or to passively accept, but to be alarmed about!

On a purely sociological level, imagine the difference in race relations, poverty and crime in the USA, if the U.S. government had truly repented of African slavery at the turn of

the century and given the reparations of 40 acres and a mule to each slave at the time that they promised them so long ago? Think of how much easier that would have been than trying to resolve these injustices today! Think of how different the average Native American's life would be if broken treaties had been acknowledged and repented of soon after they happened instead of trying to deal with their consequences today! It's hard to even fathom the damage that's been caused by simply and passively accepting these unresolved conflicts.

So what's my point? My point is that we need a sense of urgency about divisions amongst us – both those that have been growing farther and farther apart for generations and also those new ones that keep popping up – both interpersonally and on a Church-wide basis. I know first hand how painful conflict in a church setting can be – and how there are times when we don't have the power to do anything about it. But we must at least try and do our part in bridging the gap – and do it quickly before too much time has passed and the chasm is too wide. And when these things seem insurmountable, we must join with Jesus in praying for our oneness (John 17) with a sense of possibility and hope. For surely He wouldn't have prayed that we would be one or asked us to pray the Lord's Prayer, that His Kingdom would come and His will would be done on earth as it is in Heaven, if it were not possible.

Since 1996, we've been holding Heart of the City Worship Celebrations in order to break the patterns of division and build bridges across the chasms of racial and denominational divides. It's a small effort with just a remnant of God's people. But we are doing something tangible to make a difference. And remember, just 12 disciples changed the world! So join us and pick up the burden of the broken home we live in called the Church. We've lived with it so long that all of our spiritual great-great grandparents, great-grandparents and parents were all part of spiritual broken homes. But just because that is our history and we've never known anything different, it doesn't mean that it's God's plan or that we should accept it as normal. It only takes one transformed person to break a legacy of alcohol or abuse in a family system, and begin anew with their own family. Likewise, one individual at a time can break the legacy of the broken spiritual home we live in. As Sara Groves' song "Generations" states:

*Remind me of this with every decision
Generations will reap what I sow
I can pass on a curse or a blessing
To those I will never know...*

Through individual choices and prayer, let's bridge every gap we can before it grows a day wider. We owe this much to those who will come after us. Only through the work of God can we do it. But we can know that we are seeking His will as we do.