

“In the late 1800s, there were two deacons in a small Baptist church in Mayfield County, Kentucky. Two deacons who had a big problem. They hated each other. So much so that they were always doing things to push each other’s buttons. Let’s give them names. One is Hank and the other is Sherman. One Sunday, Hank decided to put up a small wooden peg on the back wall so the minister could hang his hat. When Sherman came in and saw the peg, he was outraged. That Hank. Why didn’t he consult me about this matter? Sherman did the only logical thing. He removed the peg. When Hank saw that his peg had been removed, he became outraged. This quickly escalated, leading the entire church to take sides on the matter. The conflict became so heated that over the peg, that the church decided to split. Those that remained became affectionately known as the Peg Baptist Church. The group that left formed a new church. They called themselves the Anti-peg Baptist Church.

As ridiculous as this sounds, this is the exact kind of conflict, the exact kind of contention that Paul was dealing with. A conflict that is the source of what Paul is talking about in our passage today from First Corinthians. Instead of fighting over a peg, the Corinthians were fighting over baptism. They were fighting about who baptized them. They were acting as if the ones who baptized them had different ranks. They were choosing. Paul needs to remind them that the Gospel of Jesus calls us to be united. Paul was doing damage control. The Corinthian church needed an intervention. They needed a “contention intervention.”

The Corinthians were engaged in a good old fashioned, knockdown, drag out clash. It was all about allegiances. There were at least three camps that we know of. There was the camp of Paul converts. There was the camp of Apollos converts and there was the camp of Cephas converts. (That would be converts of Peter)

From the book of Acts, we know that Paul visited Corinth on his second missionary journey. He rated such converts as Sosthenes, who lived next to the synagogue in Corinth. Crispus, the leader of that synagogue was also a notable convert. Acts also tells us about Apollos, who visits Corinth after Paul leaves. Paul’s mention of Peter’s converts in Corinth is the only reference we have in the New Testament to Peter’s presence there. But clearly if Peter had converts in Corinth, he must have been there at some point either before or while Paul was there.

Why would there be camps for these three evangelists? I have some ideas. So those associating themselves with Paul would most likely be Gentile converts. Converts, who we believe to be the founding members of the church of Corinth. Those drawn to Apollos were likely drawn to his preaching. Acts tells us that Apollos was well educated and with moving sermons. Finally we have those that were drawn to Peter. These would most likely be Jewish converts. Corinth became a place for Jews to settle after Claudius Caesar kicked them out of Rome in 49 CE.

Paul ends by saying that no matter how they came to Christ, they all belong to one Christ. Jesus is the only One who can sanctify us. The only one who can justify us. The only one who can lead us to a restored relationship with God.

Like the Peg and Anti-Peg Baptist churches, the Corinthians were making this a competition. How many times have churches engaged in silly competitions? Who has the biggest steeple, who has the loudest bells, who has the best praise band, who has the best choir. (We do of course) The church on one corner builds a gymnasium so the church on the other corner has to build a bigger and better one. One church gets a van; the other one gets a van with custom screens on it. Oh and that church has pizza to hand out when they pick people up. It's more like sibling rivalry than Christian fellowship. And how does any of this help anyone make disciples as Jesus commanded?

All of this sounds like someone has a case of the prideys. And who took my red stapler. It's one thing to be proud of an accomplishment. Pride goes beyond that. Pride is destructive. Pride sets up boundaries and barriers. Pride strikes at unity. As **Proverbs 16:18** says: "Pride goes before destruction, a haughty spirit before a fall." When pride exceeds the bounds for which God intended it to have, it can become arrogant. It reminds me of a story I heard about people who were so proud that they refused to stand by people who were different. It was 1930, and Charles Evans Hughes was appointed as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of the United States. He moved to Washington DC and transferred his membership to a Baptist church there. His father had been a Baptist minister, and Hughes was a lifelong witness to his own faith in Christ.

"The custom of this Baptist church was to have all new members come forward during the morning service and be introduced to the congregation. On this particular day, the first person to be called was a Chinese laundryman named, Ah Canga. He moved to Washington from San Francisco and kept a laundry shop near the church. He walked over to the far side of the pulpit. As others were called, they walked to the extreme opposite side of him. A dozen people were called and Ah Canga still stood alone.

Then Chief Justice Hughes was called. He walked up front and stood next to the laundryman. He knew something the others didn't. Christians who only associate with people of the same intellectual, academic, or professional interests are not living up to what Scripture demands" Need a reminder? Here's one of those demands from the Sermon on The Mount. You know, the one that Jesus gave in the Gospel of Matthew. "If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? 47. And if you greet only your brothers, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? 48. Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect".

There may be one, there may be multiple reasons for conflict. Jealousy and pride or ambition and ego. Maybe differences between two, three, or even more groups of people.

Church family, Cain had it so wrong. We, as co-workers in Christ are called to be our brother's keeper. We are called to look out for one another, to serve one another and to love one another. John Wesley said we are to watch over one another in love.

I guarantee you that there will be obstacles that will get in the way of our care for each other. These obstacles could be self-created, or they could be created by circumstances outside of our control. Either way, these are obstacles that we must strive to overcome. Because we are our brothers and we are our sister's keeper. Say to your neighbor, I am your keeper.

Being someone's keeper involved dedication. It requires commitment. Kind of like seventy-three-year-old Alvin Straight. Alvin lived in Laurens, Iowa. His eighty-year-old brother lived three hundred miles to the east in Blue River, Wisconsin. Alvin's brother suffered a stroke so of course, Alvin wanted to see him. But Alvin had a problem. He'd lost his driver's license because of his poor eyesight, and he was afraid of taking a plane, a train, or a bus. What was he to do? He climbed aboard his green 1966 John Deere tractor lawn mower and drove the whole three hundred miles to Blue River, Wisconsin. When you're committed, you'll find a way no matter the obstacle."

Paul is asking the Corinthians to have the same kind of commitment. Asking them to be the kind of people who make a difference. Asking them to use their devotion to making a difference by finding ways through their obstacles. To turn from creating obstacles to creating unity.

Church family. We are teammates. We are co-workers in Christ. We are called to work together to Make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. I love this quote from Henry Ford, "Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success." Repeat...have conversation. Let's continue to work together to make our purpose statement a living success!