

Grief, Love and Church Politics

LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church

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Reverend Peter Jonker

2 Corinthians 1:15-2:11

Maybe you know that when it comes to hiring administrative support staff, we have a policy here at LaGrave. Support staff can't be members. The membership secretary, the bulletin secretary, the administrative manager, the custodial staff – according to our policy, we don't hire LaGrave members to those positions. Sometimes those people choose to join the church later, and that's fine, but at least according to policy, we don't hire from inside.

Why not? Why won't we hire any of you to work in the church office? You're good people! You have skills. You're competent and collegial. You would make excellent employees!

There are a number of reasons, but one of the reasons is church politics. When you work in the church office every day and deal with all the ins and outs of church business, when you answer the phones, and deal with the questions, and the requests, and the complaints, you are exposed to the messiness of church life. And it's not always pretty. Working in a church office you encounter all the sharp personalities, all the tensions, all the simmering conflicts. In other churches where the office staff are members, it sometimes spoils their relationship with the church. They know too much. Before they were staffers they sat in church and saw brothers and sisters in Christ. Now they sit in church and see the problems. And it puts a cloud over their worship experience. It fills their Sunday with stress. Sometimes it causes them to quit their job and leave the church. Church politics has that effect on people. That's why we hire from the outside.

There have always been politics in the church. Sometimes we talk about the early church with a kind of misty romanticism, like it was a place where everyone was on fire for Jesus, everyone loved each other, and no one ever fought. People who have that romantic conception haven't been reading the New Testament closely enough. Because the New Testament is full of complicated church politics, like tonight's passage. It's rarely preached on - I've never preached on it. Nor have I heard a sermon on it. And that's probably because it's about church politics. It's Paul trying to smooth ruffled feathers and sooth hurt feelings. It's Paul trying to clean up a mess, and that's not the sort of passage that attracts devotional attention. What's this mess that Paul's trying to clean up? What's this mess that has brought about grief and tears? Let me try to paint a picture of the problem that's caused such a stir in the Corinthian church.

Paul planted the Corinthian church on his second missionary journey. We read about that in Acts 18. Paul comes there from Athens and he starts to preach in the synagogue there, proclaiming Jesus is the Messiah. He meets Priscilla and Aquila, two fellow tentmakers and he stays with them. Eventually most of the Jews reject his message and he ends up preaching in a house next door to the synagogue. Paul stays there for some time – scholars say probably a year and a half, and because of a gift from the Macedonian church brought by Silas and Timothy, he's able to preach and do ministry full time. The church grows. Other churches spring up in the region around Corinth. Things are going very well!

After a year and a half Paul moves on to Ephesus and eventually he makes his way back to Antioch, which marks the end of his second Missionary journey. But there's a part of his heart that is still in Corinth. If you plant a church and spend a year and a half in the trenches with people, you become pretty attached to them. He's walked with these folks and watched them come to faith. They've stood together under stress from attacks from the other synagogue members, they have been on their knees together in prayer. They've cried together, rejoiced together.

As Paul says later in the letter, during this time Paul opened wide his heart to these people. There's a deep connection.

And Paul keeps that connection by writing letters. There are actually four letters that Paul writes to this church. We only have two of the four. The first letter was written before the letter we know as 1 Corinthians. It was a general letter of greeting and encouragement. We know it exists because in 1 Corinthians 5 Paul mentions it. Sometime between his first and second letter something happens. Some other preachers come to Corinth and start preaching and teaching regularly in the congregation and in the other nearby churches. And they start to subtly undermine Paul. Instead of a message of grace and faith, hope and love, they are more into religious achievement. They style themselves as more spiritual, more enlightened. They are powerful preachers who speak in tongues. They get a significant group of the church to start questioning Paul's work. So Paul writes a second letter, our First Corinthians partly to encourage the church as he did in his first letter, but also to push back on these other preachers. In 1 Corinthians Paul says, I am an apostle! And you should not be so caught up with the smooth words and the tongue speaking of these guys.

Love is the greatest gift. It's about faith, hope and love.

Unfortunately, the letter didn't seem to work. Sometime later, word comes to Paul that there is one person in particular who has set himself against Paul's leadership, and is trying to engineer something like a hostile takeover of the congregation. The crisis is bad enough that Paul goes back to Corinth. He seems to make an emergency visit to try to turn things around. That's the visit Paul references in verse 1 of our passage when he talks about a painful visit. The encounter didn't go well. It sounds as though there may have been raised voices, tears, frustration. Worst of all, it doesn't work. The grumbling doesn't stop. A significant portion of the congregation greet him with crossed arms and suspicion. Paul leaves humiliated and full of grief.

Out of his grief he writes a third letter to the church – also a letter that we don't have today. That's the letter he mentions in verses 3 and 4 of our passage when he says "I wrote you with great distress and anguish of heart." That letter must have been pretty forceful and sharp because it appears to have caused grief in the Corinthian church too. This is probably the low point of the conflict. Paul had been so close to these people! This church had been so full of life and hope, and now it had collapsed into grief and anger and hurt. I'm sure they wondered: "Is that it!? Is this relationship done? Is the church finished?" The tensions are strong enough that Paul changes his travel plans. He was going to visit the Corinthian church both before and after he went to Macedonia, but because things were so tense, he decided not to come on the front end of his journey. He wanted to avoid more pain.

Fortunately, while he's in Macedonia, something breaks. Paul hears that his letter has brought about change. The person who had opposed Paul's ministry has been put out of office and the church had come around to Paul's way of seeing things. They repent. So from Macedonia, Paul writes another letter, the fourth letter to the church, the letter that we know as 2 Corinthians. He writes to partly to express gladness that they've come around, but also to clean up the mess. That comes through clearly in our passage. You hear Paul defend himself. Some of opponents have accused him of being fickle and unfaithful because he changed his plans to visit them. Paul says, not, that was because I didn't want to fight again! I wanted to spare us both more grief. You hear Paul extend grace. He tells them not to be too hard on the leader who had opposed Paul. "Let him back in," he says. "He's changed! I've forgiven him, you should forgive him and comfort him!" You hear him trying to lead without being heavy handed. 'I'm not trying to Lord it over you. We're working together here for our mutual joy! And Jesus is the one who makes us all stand firm.' In short, you hear Paul doing church politics.

As a Bible nerd, I think it's interesting to get a rich sense of the relationship between Paul and the Corinthian church, but this isn't just interesting information, I think we can learn something about how to deal with our own church politics by observing the Corinthian conflict and its resolution. I want to briefly offer 3 observations.

First, church is messy and it has always been messy. There have always been church fights. There have always been misunderstandings. There have always been hurt feelings. The church has never been all sunshine and happiness.

Christians have always aggravated each other to the point of tears. In a strange way, I think that's comforting. How is it comforting? It reminds all of us that when we are in the middle of a time of conflict, a time of stress, when we are tempted to say to each other, "Things have never been so terrible!! How will we survive?" We can look at this situation and get a little perspective. There have always been big, stressful fights. And the church has made it through these big, stressful fights. Why? Not because of us; because of him. The church belongs to Jesus, and, as Paul says, "*all God's promises are yes in Christ. He has anointed us, set his seal of ownership on us, and put his Spirit in our hearts as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come.*"

Second, when we look at the Corinthian conflict we see that feelings matter. Emotions matter. Getting church right isn't just about getting the doctrines and the morals right; getting church right involves attention to one another's feelings, and communicating with each other in a way that accounts for those feelings. Later in this letter Paul makes an appeal for emotional openness between them. "Dear friends we have opened wide our hearts to you, open wide your hearts to us!" And this passage Paul opens his heart. He's been upset, he's shed many tears, he's been in great distress. And if you go back to chapter 1, verses 3-9, you see Paul being really emotionally vulnerable with them: I was under pressure that was more than I could bear. I despaired of life itself. There's a lot of great theology in 2 Corinthians, but Paul's letter is aimed right at the people's emotions. Their feelings. Sensitivity to feelings doesn't mean giving up on truth and morality, but it absolutely affects how we pursue those things, how we discern them, how we communicate them.

Third, that little verse about Satan and his schemes is a helpful reminder of the kind of mindset that destroys churches. After showing vulnerability, and calling for forgiveness and extra grace for the man who once opposed him, in verse 11 Paul writes, I have forgiven "*in order that Satan might not outwit us. For we are not unaware of his schemes.*" You could take that as a general observation about how the evil one is trying to destroy the church, but I think Paul wants to say more than that.

Satan tries to destroy the church through many means, but one of those means is a spirit of accusation. It's in his name. Do you remember where the name Satan comes from? It derives from the Hebrew word *shatan* which means the adversary or the accuser. The *shatan* is an adversary who brings accusation. Satan is an accuser. He points at people and says that person is worthless. It's a role you see him play in the Bible. In Job he comes before the Lord and accuses Job. "He wouldn't follow you if you didn't bless him so much!" In the book of Zechariah, in chapter 3, Zechariah has a vision of Satan standing at the side of the Lord accusing the High Priest Joshua of being unworthy and unclean. In Psalm 109:4 the Psalmist talks about those who have spoken against him with lying tongues and he literally calls them his *shatans* – his accusers.

The devil wants to get us into a state of accusation. Sometimes those accusations are directed against ourselves. Many people struggle with an inner voice which is constantly telling them that they're no good, that they're unworthy that they're a failure, that they're unlovable. This is a voice that goes way beyond ordinary self-evaluation and self-criticism – which is good – and strays into self-condemnation. A person who belongs to Jesus should not see themselves as worthless. They are beloved of God. That voice of self-condemnation is the voice of the Satan, the accuser who wants to drive you to a place of despair.

Often the voice of accusation is a voice that points at others and condemns them. A church is falling into the devil's schemes when everyone is looking at everyone else and not seeing first of all a brother and sister in Christ, but as one of 'those people.' He's a pro-choice. She's a Trumper. He's against women in office. She has a rainbow flag in her yard. When Christians give into a spirit of suspicion and accusation, they are getting caught up in the schemes of the devil. "*But Peter, we have to be able to disciple each other and confront each other, don't we? How is that different from accusation?*" The

difference is love. Real discipline begins and ends with loving the other person and wanting fellowship with them. Accusation pursues the truth without love. To use Paul's own standards from 1 Corinthians 13. Love seeks to honor others; accusation dishonors others – it demeans them. Love is not easily angered; accusation enjoys the feeling of outrage. Love keeps no record of wrongs; accusation never forgets a slight. Love does not delight in evil; accusation feels happy when it discovers another person's sin and error.

In our passage, Paul is celebrating the end of the spirit of accusation between him and the Corinthian church, and the triumph of the Spirit of truth pursued in love and sensitivity and kindness. Which is to say, Paul is celebrating the triumph of Jesus, Jesus who has triumphed over Satan. Jesus who has placed his Holy Spirit in us as a deposit guaranteeing what is to come. Jesus who would not let the accuser win in Corinth, and won't let him win in Grand Rapids either.

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