

Church Conflict and the Sacrament of the Altar

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January 2006

*“Suppose ye that I am come to give peace on earth?
I tell you, Nay; but rather division,” (Luke 12:51).*

A couple came to the pastor asking to be married in the church. Because the couple was living in sin and would not repent, the pastor refused to marry them. The church erupted into conflict. Attendance dropped, giving plummeted and eventually the church council asked the pastor to resign.

Church conflict is nothing new. The book of Acts tells us that the early church grew by many thousands, (Acts 2:41; 4:4). Yet soon the church was racked with conflict, first over the distribution of the common purse, (Acts 6:1), and then by theological conflicts, (Acts 11:1-3; 15:1.2). These theological conflicts split the church, and the church never again experienced such rapid growth. Not only was the church contending against the world, but now also against itself, (Gal 3-6; Phil 1:15,16).

Conflict in the church is unexpectedly painful. We are called to love our neighbor, yet instead we bite and devour each other, (Gal 5:14, 15). Yet we know conflict will always be with us.

The church is spiritual, and so we can expect that in the church we will partake of spiritual battles against the devil and his minions, (Eph 6:12). Yet the church is also in the world and part of the world. Our churches are corporations, of necessity, with a style of governance imposed upon us by the state. And our churches are made up of people who have been raised in a secular world with values that should be different than those of the church. All this makes the church a breeding ground for conflict.

Because the church is the body of Christ, it is important to understand that all conflict is theological. The church is a spiritual house, the temple of the living God, and doing battle against the forces of wickedness in high places. The apostle Paul tells us that we will always have such divisions among us, because they provide evidence of our faith, (I Cor 11:18.19).

Because conflict is always with us, we must guard against it. This is especially true when we partake of the Lord's Supper. Our Lord tells us that we are to reconcile with our brother before appearing before the altar, (Mt. 5:22-24). We are cautioned that by coming to the Lord's Table unworthily, we drink damnation to ourselves, (I Cor 11:29), for the flesh and blood of our Lord are truly present in the Sacrament of the Altar. Our Lord will not let his flesh and blood be trampled underfoot.

When we come to the Lord's Table, we drink of his body and his blood, and thereby become one in Christ, (I Cor 10:16, 17). Or, as Luther says in his 1523 Maundy Thursday sermon, we all become one cake with Christ. In the Sacrament of the Altar we walk in the fellowship of his benefits, and he in the fellowship of our misfortunes. We come out of ourselves and into Christ. We are bound to him and to our brother. Our brother's needs become ours, and our needs become his. We are no longer individual grains of wheat, but have become one cake, one loaf. Our divisions have been healed in Christ, (Eph 2:12-14).

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who hath called us out of darkness into his marvelous light, and built us into a spiritual house. Thanks be to God!