

DOCTRINAL CONFUSION

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THE CONSEQUENCES OF DOCTRINAL CONFUSION: The church at Corinth received at least two letters from the apostle Paul. He had some good things to say about those folks but his instruction was primarily corrective. Consider this partial list: They had divided themselves (1:12-13), there was sin in the camp (chapter five as well as other places), there was confusion about things offered to idols (chapter 8), and they were making a mess of worship (chapters ten through fourteen), and they were misusing their spiritual gifts (chapters 12 through fourteen). They needed a little help, to say the least.

So, what was the problem? Some folks say that the situation at Corinth was the result of the freewheeling nature of the early church. It is contended that there was no real pattern, but folks did what they wanted to do and whatever doctrinal pattern existed evolved over the years. This argument is made, often using Corinth as the prime example, by those who do not see a pattern of faith and practice in the New Testament that must be followed today. It seems to me that these folks are saying in essence, "Well, since Corinth was in such a mess we can be in a mess, too." This argument can only be made if the text is ignored.

The problem was doctrinal confusion. Their problems arose because they had not followed the pattern set before them as taught by Paul when he was with them. That this is the case is seen in that the house of Chloe wrote Paul about things they perceived to be problems (1:11). How could those folks know that there were problems? Obviously, they knew what Paul had told them before and they knew that what was happening among them was not in accord with his teaching. In like manner, when in Acts 2:42 it says that the church continued in the "apostles' doctrine" they were doing things in a way that was discernable as identical to what the apostles taught. Chloe knew that what was going on in Corinth was not identical with what they had been taught by Paul. Thus they wrote to him asking for corrective instruction.

Paul provided that instruction. He began in 1:10 by telling them to "speak the same thing." They were to be "perfectly joined together in the same mind and the same judgment." This is only possible if there is a specific doctrinal standard. For them, it was the content of Paul's instruction when he was with them (2:1-16) and in the corrective correspondence he had with them subsequently. They had a standard to go by. They got into trouble because they did not go by it.

Remember that Paul was among them to "preach the gospel" (1:17). His discussion of the nature of preaching (every preacher ought to read this once a week) is in 1:18-31. It is there because he wanted his Corinthian readers to know that the content of the instruction he had given them and was in the process of giving them was not of his devising, but instead came from the mind of God Himself.

Part of the problem in Corinth is that Paul had a cadre of critics there. This is apparent by references throughout the letter in which the apostle defends himself (9:1, etc.). In 1:20 he challenges the men who were leading the church away from the apostolic standard. They considered themselves wise, scribes and able debaters. I can just hear them teaching the church that the things Paul had taught them were if not wrong, incomplete, or perhaps, less than "spiritual."

Paul provided this unanswerable response: For that in the wisdom of God the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save those that believe (1:21). Note the biting irony in the word "foolishness." I wonder if Paul's critics had the lack of grace to call what he taught foolish. In any case, they received a sound and corrective rebuke.

The problems at Corinth arose out of doctrinal infidelity, which is the result of doctrinal confusion. Same thing happens today. The solution is the same, too. One must stay true to the words "which the Holy Spirit teaches" (2:13).