

Mortifying the fleshly Tendency of self-differentiation

By Jay Wegter

The Word of God and the theology of the cross are on a constant collision course with the instincts of the flesh. In the following verse, the apostle Paul summarizes the tendency of the false apostles to seek self-differentiation. “For we are not bold to class or compare ourselves with some of those who commend themselves; but when they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are without understanding” (2 Cor 10:12). The flesh has a propensity for forming tribes, sects, and cliques. People run with others who share their values, their score cards, and their goals. It is true of thieves and terrorists, and it is true of the righteous and the faithful. But what may be designated, *tribalism* is a natural fruit borne of the flesh (Prov 4:14-16; 24:1-2; Rom 2:8).

For example, bikers, gym rats, surfers, stockbrokers, drug addicts, young restless Calvinists, you name it, tend within their group to share similar score cards. More often than not, these little communities are but mutual admiration societies. Individuals are praised based on achieving a common set of shared values. It gets ridiculous after a while, for example, in ‘the trans’ community’ pats on the back are given in praise of the ‘courage’ to be trans’. Do people find worth and identity by binding themselves with others who think the same way? Yes, but this has a negative and a positive application. One of Paul’s correctives to the divisions in Corinth is: “Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1 Cor 1:10).

Is a common ‘score card’ how the saved are to pursue unity? Paul counters that and brings clarity to the issue by stating that there is one body but a variety of gifts (1 Cor 12:12ff.). And that these gifts which are granted by the Spirit and energized by the Spirit form a wonderful diversity of interdependence, and thus unity. How novel this is in our age of tribalism—unity should flow from complementarity between a diversity of gifts. The gifts (called the manifestation of the Spirit) are exercised for mutual edification (1 Cor 12:6). The outcome is Spirit-engendered *koinonia* around Christ and His work, and His presence in His church. Regarding a tribal, or sectarian spirit among Christians, Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Theological Seminary said, “it’s nothing but baby talk.”

An immediate application of these truths undergirding Christian unity is as

follows. Church leaders ought to exercise great care in forming local church distinctives—making sure their distinctives are exegetically-driven. Be clear that aspiring to demonstrate fidelity to the distinctives is by dependency on the Spirit of Christ. The hunger to define ourselves as the *most orthodox tribe* is so strong that personal identity becomes attached to it—as if our group has a leg up on other assemblies with inferior statements of faith. It is true that the Pastoral Epistles, no less than six times exhort us to pursue purity of doctrine (doctrine which conforms to godliness, 1 Timothy 6:3). But we are to be ever aware that our identity is graciously bestowed via adoption by Christ’s righteousness imputed (2 Cor 5:21).

We preach the blood-bought truths of Christ and His work, truths which alone can deconstruct the propensities of the flesh. For the flesh is on an endless quest for self-differentiation (the drive to establish one’s worth compared to another). And tribalism is one of the flesh’s favorite strategies. Galatians chapter five outlines the spectrum of flesh fruits which are traceable to self-differentiation. Keep in mind as you read over these flesh fruits that the ‘quarrel’ with others is not about the essentials of human survival such as food, water, shelter, covering, but rather about self-differentiation. Here are the relational flesh fruits listed in Galatians 5:20, *enmities, strife, jealousy, outbursts of anger, disputes, dissension’s, envying*. These things arise from the flesh when one attempts to carry his or her own status as compared to another. James calls it, *making distinctions among yourselves, becoming judges with evil motives, showing partiality and favoritism* (Jas 2:1, 4, 9).

James goes on to say that self-differentiation on a micro scale leads to quarrels and conflicts among you, but on a larger scale the tribal bent leads to spiritual adultery, i.e. or friendship with the world (Jas 4:1-4). What a description of the flesh James provides in stating that the source of your conflicts and quarrels is “your pleasures that wage war in your members” (4:1). Yes, the flesh wants what the flesh wants, and when it is thwarted by another, there can be ‘hell to pay’—a ready opportunity to attack the person who did not grant your desire. The apostle Paul warns concerning the cumulative direction of these flesh fruits, “But if you bite and devour one another, take care that you are not consumed by one another” (Gal 5:15). What is devoured is the Spirit-enabled unity of a true, supernatural community—destroyed because of human fleshly wisdom.

Again, James tells us that fleshly wisdom is not a matter of planned malice, no fleshly wisdom is instinctive to us all! Flesh wisdom is our default natural posture, our instinctive knee jerk response.

But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, do not be arrogant and so lie against the truth. This wisdom is not that which comes down from above, but is earthly, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing. But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace (Jas 3:14-18).

How are we to preach Galatians 5:24-26? “Now those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit. Let us not become boastful, challenging one another, envying one another.” The heart of a true servant of the Lord is animated, constrained, and bounded by the love of Christ (2 Cor 5:14-15). As ministers who understand that their most important tool is the heart, it is evident that we can only pass on what we are receiving in our own spirits. Thus, the faithful shepherd can say about his Savior without fear of hypocrisy, “I marvel at Your love, consent to Your love, am content in Your love, will proclaim Your love, am transformed by Your love, and will contemplate Your love to make known Your love. The desire for your love protects me from craving human recognition.

The man of God is always reasoning and contemplating his God from the vantage point of the base of the cross. For, the cross makes God’s love abundantly, eternally, and covenantally available. You are going to be preaching to a congregation that tends to spurn blood-bought love, and instead has a not-so-secret detente with idols—especially the idol of self-differentiation. Like Jeremiah’s congregation, things may appear to be normal externally, but God sees that loyalty to idols is etched on the heart by an iron stylus with a diamond point (Jer 17:1). Sadly, in much of evangelicalism we are witness to the fact that eternity in the heart is bartered away for what is offered as the world’s highest highs.

Who is up to this task to preach to truant and wayward hearts? We cannot disagree with the Puritans at this point. They argued solidly from Scripture that strict walking is the price of an anointed ministry. And by strict walking we mean a close watch on *the eye gate, the ear gate, the mouth gate, the mind gate*—taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor 10:3-5). So much of the Old Testament is a record of Israel’s ups and downs. And that oscillation between judgment and blessing is very much a condensed history found in the Book of Judges. For in that record, we observe that as soon as the disciplinary pressure was off, the Hebrews became loose, sluggish, sensual, and idolatrous. Like the Judges of old in the book by

that name, ministers have a calling which is impossible apart from the Spirit. They are to preach holiness and the love and fear of God without being merely moralistic.

Scriptures calls for strict self-control which yields freedom and fresh disclosures of God's covenant love (Jn 12-14). But our congregants live in a world completely permeated by the lie that self-love and narcissistic self-expression constitute freedom. The ancient lie, that revolt against the moral Governor of the universe will let us break free from repressive control is by birthright in the heart of every son of Adam. Pastors are to minister to that ailment of soul, and to be a model of what it means to discipline oneself for the purpose of godliness (1 Tim 4:7-8). Faithful ministers are ever preaching that the Father's love through Christ is available, liberating, and incredibly satisfying. Yet, we understand that our hearers are daily tempted to slacken their pace and abandon strict walking.

The grace of God has wrought the miracle of moving us from self-referential to God-referential. We are speaking to people whose knee-jerk response to life is "How will this affect me?" That question fills their emotional and mental horizons. What a challenging calling we have, to raise their thoughts to being God-referential first, i.e. 'how will this thought, word, or deed affect the honor of my God'? This is only possible through the cross of Christ (Gal 2:20).

To labor to enter Christ's rest results in the blessedness of self-forgetfulness in the service of others (Heb 4:1-13; 6:10-12). Conversely a self-referential life is spiritually numbing and deadening. In past discussions, we have referred to institutionally-minded church members as *box checkers*—dutifully logging what is expected of them. In other words, coming to church is reduced to finding another fig leaf fragment to stitch together to maintain a spiritual covering. It seems the last thing on their minds is that they comprise the Bride of Christ being diligently, carefully, comprehensively prepared for the celestial Groom (Eph 5:25-27). Believers whose lamps are lit in readiness for their Savior's return will not be content to settle into religious forms designed to perpetuate an institution.

The man of God understands that nothing but Christ and His cross proclaimed will cause His hearers to budge from their fallow fields of unfruitfulness and stagnancy. Closely associated to this dullness is a low fear of God. The unsaved religious are literally wagering their souls that God will not be true to Himself, true to who He is—that He will not let out His full holiness and *do Himself* to His entire creation through Christ. The religious unregenerate does not speak to his soul about the justice and mercy of God, nor does he daily contemplate where sovereign mercy is found. He does not converse with his own soul that the epitome of perfect love is the

creature being fully calibrated through the Son to the transcendent holiness of God. The hypocrite does not treasure the endless blessing of being hidden in Christ's wounds and being restored to the image of God.

Only the man who is a new creation daily marvels at what God has done in giving him a new identity and destiny in Christ. In dwelling upon this matchless grace, the saved sinner does not find in himself an equivalency between what he is and what he will inherit forever (see Ephesians 2). Only when he looks at his suffering Substitute and great High Priest does he see the reasons for the most radical contrasts in status, standing, and future existence. This is his daily fight of faith (1 Tim 6:12). 'I will not check the box of religious formalism as my covering in search of a fig leaf fragment'. For, it's only the gracious work of the Spirit that has allowed me to consolidate my hope in Christ and persevere another day in reliance upon Him (1 Pet 1:3-5).

How and why does justification through faith by grace produce supernatural communities? And what do we mean by a 'supernatural community'? A supernatural community has a supernatural source of unity (Eph 4:1-3; 1 Jn 1:1-4; Jn 17:21-23). That means that what binds believers together is traceable to God's wisdom in the cross of Christ. Each member possesses bold and confident access to Christ (Eph 2:12; 3:18). Each member belongs because he possesses union with Christ. Thus, each member has a status or standing with God of justification, reconciliation, and adoption. This is all of grace by virtue of the righteousness of Christ imputed.

Paul establishes in Ephesians chapter 2 that the cross kills enmity (Eph 2:14-16 ff.) For the Law had a built-in element of division between Jew and Gentile. But the great mystery of God's wisdom in the gospel is that believing Gentiles might one day be fellow heirs (Eph 3:6). Seven hundred years before His birth it was foretold through Isaiah that the Messiah would be a light to the Gentiles (Is 42:6). But, even the most insightful O.T. prophet could not have imagined that in the Messiah believing Jew and Gentile would one day have equal footing before God. What all of this means to supernatural community is profound.

For your status, and belonging, and right standing, and adoption, and inheritance are yours solely by gracious donation through imputation. That should spell the end of ego-driven self-differentiation which produces strife, jealousy, upmanship, and quarrels. Yet self-preoccupation is our fleshly default mode. Paul chides his Galatian readers, "Stop challenging one another" (Gal 5:26).

Consider that God's wisdom in the cross in giving believing sinners perfect standing by imputation sets up the ideal conditions for supernatural community. For in this arrangement, members are set free from ego-driven agendas and can now occupy

themselves with how to edify one another (Eph 4:29; Phil 2:1-4). No wonder we refer to this as a supernatural community, its entire trajectory is opposite of the flesh's drive of self-differentiation. This contrast between flesh and Spirit fruits harkens back to the contrast set up by Paul between human and divine wisdom. How you do community will manifest which wisdom you are depending upon. The Corinthians had embraced human wisdom, and the flesh fruits of that preference were manifested in *pecking orders, celebrity pastors, strife, sects, cliques, and a party spirit*.

But, if your status, standing, acceptance, sonship, and identity are carried by God in Christ, then who you are in the Son is all of grace. The believer's identity before God is by imputation and not achievement. There is no rational for boasting (1 Cor 4:6-7). Remember God has a way of saving sinners which eliminates any basis for boasting. Consider the condition in which God found us: spiritually dead (Eph 2:1), helpless (Rom 5:6), enemies (Rom 5:10; Col 1:21), and condemned (1 Pet 2:24; 3:18). In addition, Paul reminds the Corinthians and all believers that their unconditional election is designed to eliminate any possibility of boasting (1 Cor 1:26-30; Eph 1:4, 10; Rom 8:29-30). The flesh needs a constant diet of the cross to mortify its propensities.

Body life in Corinth, Galatia, and Colossae had devolved into a sandbox of self-assertion. Church became a scrappy place where people got chippy with one another. Paul describes this as infantile and tantamount to the behavior of 'mere men' who eschewed the spiritual diet of the cross of Christ (1 Cor 3:4). Human wisdom looks to self-assertion not the cross for security, significance, favor and status. Paul is the great guardian of God's wisdom which is the theology of the cross (2 Cor 1:8-11; 5:1-12; 10:7-18; 11:6, 30; Gal 6:14). We are to preach, counsel, admonish, and teach the cross-centered life, for that is the only wisdom that brings true community, and sanctification, and glory to the King of kings, and Lord of lords.