
GETTING MY ATTENTION

To increase the power and influence of a group
you do so by adding to the group,
or, even better, by multiplying the numbers of those in the group.
To decrease the power and influence of a group
you do so by subtracting from the group,
or, even worse, by dividing the members of those in the group, into smaller groups.
A simple expression of this is the axiom: "Divide and Conquer".
An efficient way to overcome an enemy more powerful than you,
is to divide the forces of enemy into smaller groups,
then attack the small groups separately.

FOCUSING MY THOUGHTS

This is what we see happening in the Scripture readings for today.

Jesus came into the world to unite people under His reign.
His plan was simple, yet very effective.
His plan was all about addition and multiplication.
First, Jesus added to those under His reign and in His Kingdom, one by one.
In the Gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus did it with the words, "Follow Me".
Before Jesus ascended into heaven, He turned to multiplication,
sending the 12 apostles to proclaim the Gospel.

Of course, the devil and the forces of evil are working for anything else but
people being united under the reign of Christ.
The powers of evil want nothing more than to keep mankind divided into groups,
and to keep humanity deceived and separate from God.
The powers of evil also attack those who belong to Christ, who are in the Body of Christ,
to draw them away from Christ, subtraction from the Body, or
to divide the Body of Christ into smaller groups, and then, attacking those groups.
We have a term for this: Denominations.
The powers of evil have been very successful into dividing the Body of Christ
into smaller groups, denominations, and then,
creating conflict between or within each of the denominations.

THE KINGDOM: ADDITION AND MULTIPLICATION

In last week's Gospel reading (John 1:29-42),
we learned that Andrew was a disciple of John the Baptist (John 1:35-37).
When John identified Jesus as "the Lamb of God", Andrew followed after Jesus,
and spent an evening with Him.
Immediately Andrew went and brought his brother, Simon Peter to meet Jesus,
telling Peter, "We have found the Messiah".

In today's Gospel reading, we find Peter and Andrew
back at work as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee.
Their associates, James and John, the sons of Zebedee were close by.

Now that Jesus had been baptized by John the Baptist and revealed as the Messiah,
it is time for Jesus to begin His ministry, to build the Kingdom of God.
Guess how Jesus starts this?

If you guessed with calling Andrew and Peter to "Follow" Him, you guessed right!
Andrew and Peter had already met Jesus, and no doubt, were impressed with Him.
Then guess what Jesus does to continue to add to the number "Following" Him?
He goes a little further along the shore of the Sea of Galilee
and He tells their fellow fishermen, who fished with Andrew and Peter, "Follow Me"!
Two plus two equals four! Not bad for a few minutes walk by the Sea!
No doubt, when Peter and Andrew returned from being down along the Jordan River,
where they met Jesus, **that they told James and John about Jesus**
when they returned to fishing on the Sea of Galilee.
I kind of get a picture in my mind that when Jesus walked up to James and John
as they were mending their nets with their father Zebedee,
that Peter and Andrew, right there with Jesus,
were motioning with their hands to James and John to come with Jesus.

How exciting it must have been for those four friends and followers of Jesus,
as the number of people who learned about Jesus and who came to Jesus
was increasing exponentially. Matthew tells us:

²³*And He went throughout all Galilee,
teaching in their synagogues and proclaiming the Gospel of the kingdom
and healing every disease and every affliction among the people.*

²⁴*So His fame spread throughout all Syria,
and they brought Him all the sick, those afflicted with various diseases and pains,
those oppressed by demons, epileptics, and paralytics, and He healed them.*

²⁵*And great crowds followed Him from Galilee and the Decapolis,
and from Jerusalem and Judea, and from beyond the Jordan. – Matthew 4:23-25*

But where Jesus unites and adds to the Kingdom of God,
the forces of evil are at work to divide.

One example of this would be among the disciples of Jesus:

⁴⁶*An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.*
⁴⁷*But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by His side*
⁴⁸*and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in My Name receives Me,
and whoever receives Me receives Him Who sent Me.
For he who is least among you all is the one who is great." – Luke 9:46-48*

In the weakness of the flesh,
people often seek to exalt themselves to gain acceptance and favor.
How foolish!
People should be loved and accepted because they are people,
not because of what they do or don't do, have or don't have!
Jesus illustrated that Truth using a child,
as children usually do not have status, wealth, power, or a great education,
(all the things adults think make a person acceptable and respected).
To receive and value a child, is to receive and value a person
as a gift of love to that person,
not because of what that person can do for you.

Jesus taught His disciples an important lesson on how to overcome division!
How? Through the gift of love to others, a love that is unconditional,
given out of grace (giving a person what they have not earned or deserved).

Jesus added and added and added to the Kingdom of God
with His message of "repentance" and "receiving the King of the Kingdom".

The multiplication way of adding to the Kingdom would be advanced as Jesus sent the apostles to proclaim to the Gospel:

Right before Jesus ascended into heaven, He told His disciples:

⁸*But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be My witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth.” – Acts 1:8*

How true those words proved to be!

On the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit was poured out upon the disciples, Scripture tells us that after the apostles and Peter proclaimed the Good News about Jesus in Jerusalem that day:

⁴¹*So those who received his word were baptized, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. – Acts 2:41*

THE KINGDOM: SUBTRACTION AND DIVISION

When the apostle Paul brought the Good News of the Gospel to the city of Corinth, he was opposed by the Jews in the synagogue in that city.

But, the Lord Jesus blessed Paul’s work in Corinth. Scripture tells us:

⁸*Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed in the Lord, together with his entire household. And many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized.*

⁹*And the Lord said to Paul one night in a vision, “Do not be afraid, but go on speaking and do not be silent, ¹⁰for I am with you, and no one will attack you to harm you, for I have many in this city who are My people.”*

¹¹*And he stayed a year and six months, teaching the word of God among them. – Acts 18:8-11*

Can you imagine that? What a blessing! To have the apostle Paul for a year and a half, teaching the Word of God, proclaiming the Gospel of Christ!

How disappointing to Paul, that after he left Corinth, the congregation descended into division and strife. He writes:

¹⁰*I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.*

¹¹*For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. – 1 Corinthians 1:10-11*

How quickly the weakness of the flesh and the forces of evil worked in the congregation to “Divide and Conquer”.

The city of Corinth is about 65 miles west of Athens.

Athens was known for its philosophers and orators (great speakers), who spoke powerfully and persuasively in debating their ideas.

They had gained great prominence and those associated with them exalted themselves by the connection with those orators and their ideas.

The Corinthian Christians were attempting to do the same with their association to the prominent and well known authorities in the Body of Christ.

¹²*What I mean is that each one of you says, “I follow Paul,” or “I follow Apollos,” or “I follow Cephas,” or “I follow Christ.” – 1 Corinthians 1:12*

Subtraction from the Body of Christ, Division within the Body of Christ happens when anyone or any group looks away from the One Source of unity!

Recognizing this, the apostle Paul directs their focus on Christ, and Christ alone!

¹³*Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?*

Unity among believers in a congregation and in the Body of Christ in the world is established and maintained as every individual follower of Christ focuses on Christ, – the Crucified, Risen and Reigning Lord of the Kingdom!

Christ and Christ alone has paid the debt for sin in His sacrificial death!

All those who turn to Christ, as they turn away from sin in repentance, receive the pardon of their debt for sin, and become partakers of the Kingdom of God! In Baptism, God washes away the sins of all who are Baptized, and God gives those Baptized a new birth, as His “sons”, partakers of Christ and His glory!

The forces of evil work against every person in the Kingdom of God, attempting to draw him/her away from Christ in any way possible, tempting a Christian to look away from Christ alone, to any one or to any thing in the world.

APPLICATION FOR MY LIFE

The day you were Baptized, you were buried with Christ, cut off from the sin and condemnation you inherited from Adam. (Romans 6:1-4)

Joined to Christ and buried with Christ in Baptism, the record of your debt for sin was nailed to the cross, where Jesus paid your debt! (Colossians 2:11-14)

Now, you are “Debt Free!” No record of your sin remains against you!

And what is true for you, is true for every fellow believer in the Body of Christ!

We are all united in Christ, in His death that paid our debt, and in Baptism where everyone of us was joined to Christ and where our debt was nailed to His cross.

When the forces of evil can successfully tempt you to turn away from Christ, to the ways of any one or any thing in the world other than Christ, then one soul has been subtracted from the Kingdom of God.

And I think you will agree, the loss of your soul to the Kingdom of God is a very great loss for Christ and His Kingdom!

Likewise, when the forces of evil can successfully tempt Christians, tempt us, tempt you, into disunity and quarreling in the congregation and in the Body of Christ in the world, then the Kingdom is vulnerable to lose souls and to lose its effectiveness to reach out with the Gospel that others may be brought into the Kingdom of God.

The spokes on a wheel are joined at the hub, and receive their support from being held together by the hub and as the wheel turns, all are supported by unity of the spokes bonded together through the hub.

So each one of us, joined to Christ, are each supported by Christ, and as we work together in the Body of Christ, we are all supported by being firmly joined to Christ. The tighter and firmer each of us is joined to Christ, the stronger we all are in Christ! The outer side of the spokes on a wheel are held together by a rim, holding each spoke firmly in place.

So, the bond of love for our fellow believers, our sharing of Christ’s love for each other, keeps us firm in our supporting each other and in our working to proclaim the Gospel. Each of us, joined to Christ, and held together by the love of Christ for each other, increases and expands the Kingdom of God for His glory! AMEN