Chapter 4

Disciples, Disputes, and Factions – and Reconciliation Structures

In the last chapter we had some very early glimpses of an actual community of disciples, the Graeco-Roman non-Jewish followers of Jesus in Thessalonica who were troubled by the discrepancies between what they had been taught by such teachers as Paul, Silvanus, Timothy, and others, and what they were actually experiencing. They imagined the end of the universe, the completion of history, was at hand, but still their fellow disciples were dying and there was no sign of an imminent divine intervention. This might seem to be a good point to discuss the values of such a community, the nature of their life as a community, and how they would like to be recognised as belonging within a church. Drawing a picture of such a community, in the springtime of faith, is both attractive and, apparently, useful for modern disciples.

There is, moreover, excellent precedent for such a layout of topics. Luke, writing sometime in the first half of the second century in the Acts of the Apostles, takes the very first opportunity he has to give a description of how wonderful the community life was and its cohesion and harmony. Luke wants his audience to know that it all started well. Having described the events and preaching of Peter that took place on the festival of Pentecost following the ascension of Jesus, Luke writes:

> So those who received his word were baptised, and there were added that day about three thousand souls. And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of the loaf and the prayers. And fear came upon

> every soul; and many wonders and signs were done through the apostles. And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking the loaf in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favour with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved. (2:41–47)

This little vignette, labelled in many Bibles as 'life among the believers', is presented as both a fact and a norm, and the implicit lesson is: get back to that perfection!

However, when we examine what we know about those early communities the picture that emerges is more complicated. We see that the communities were far less harmonious, that factions and disputes were common, and that the glowing image of fraternal sharing was created as an ideal for imitation in the face of far less attractive facts on the ground. Meanwhile, we see that the communities were seeking out reconciliation structures that might allay the fissiparous tendencies that were hurting them just as they beset every human grouping.

Is there another way to arrange topics relating to discipleship? I believe that beginning with the actual problems has much to recommend it. It allows us to grasp the need for reconciliation as a basis of discipleship far more effectively than using a mythic ideal of original harmony. With the mythic starting point, there is always a quest for the source of the disease – be it heresy, bad practices, or wilful contrariness – and a blame-game: who is the bad person who has disrupted our happiness? If we assume that imperfect, incomplete, and fallible human beings, even when seeking God with the Spirit dwelling within their hearts, generate difficulties for one another and can cause bitter disputes to arise, this allows us to have a far more realistic grasp of our situation. Moreover, it makes us view reconciliation as a basic ongoing challenge of living together, rather than as a patch-up, an afterthought, or a compromise. It also removes another systemic weakness of beginning with 'what we believe should be the case' as if it were a fact: we are not tempted to see reconciliation (and its inevitable compromises) as moral weakness or a dilution of Christian purity. 'Compromise' in that scenario is a dirty word smacking of treason! But compromise is not a dirty word nor a mark of weakness or lack of zeal. Compromise recognises the complexity of our situation and is part of loving each other and seeking the good – given that no one is perfect or infallible. Indeed, this fear of 'going soft

on sin' – by acknowledging the incompleteness of our actual reality – has been a recurrent problem in the experience of all the churches, and, in itself, has produced more alienation, often deepening divisions into unbridgeable chasms.

In short, starting with 'a golden age' is both historically fraudulent (it was not so) and theologically misleading (we cannot construct a perfect 'now'). This is because the Christian task is not to get back to a pristine past – that was the pagan vision of history where a 'golden age' decayed to a 'silver age' and that has now degenerated to our present rusty condition – but to move forward toward the Kingdom when the Christ will be all in all (1 Cor 15:28).[1] Believers in the God of Israel look forwards. There was never a perfect church in the past, nor is there an ideal church against which actual experience can be measured: there is just the reality of what we are, our consciousness that we can do better, and the need to grow in wisdom and holiness. To be a disciple, and the discipleship of a church, is a work in progress.

A World of Factions

But how fractured were the early communities? The answer to this does not come in the form a clear narrative: we have no document called 'a list of our grievances'. But when we assemble the information from occasional references in our sources, from inferences about their concerns with community reconciliation, and from the structures they put in place – such as the safeguards mentioned in the *Didache* regarding pseudo-prophets[2] – a picture emerges that shows that the halcyon, idyllic, 'apostolic' period so often appealed to in popular images of 'the early church' is mythic (albeit a myth abetted by such writers as Luke in the Acts of the Apostles).

Before looking at some of the practical disputes about what should happen in the groups, we should also note that there was no moment of perfect, unified belief – there never was an original 'orthodoxy' to which we might 'return'. That there were disputes about even what would later be seen as central elements of Christian belief is nowhere better

1. There is perhaps no better example of this 'looking to the future' dimension of Jewish thinking from the documents from the first-century followers of Jesus than 1 Cor 15:12–58.

2. See A. Milavec, 'Distinguishing True and False Prophets: The Protective Wisdom of the *Didache*', *Journal of Early Christian Studies,* 2 (1994), 117–36.

exemplified than in Paul's concerns, seen in 1 Corinthians 15, that all followers of Jesus should both believe in his resurrection and see the fact of Jesus' resurrection as of importance to them in their discipleship.

Some of the most frequently quoted passages from the canonical collection come from 1 Corinthians 15: it offers us a series of brilliant images – 'for the trumpet will sound, and the dead shall be raised imperishable, and we shall be changed' (v. 52) – that form a central element in our celebrations at Easter, at funerals, and they echo in our heads from hearing Handel's *Messiah*. However, what is far less commented upon is that Paul is so anxious to write about the resurrection because for some in Corinth it was not considered important. Paul justifies making his argument because 'some of you say that there is no resurrection of the dead' (v. 12). Why would the community there, made up of Jews and Gentiles, say this? We simply do not know the facts with any certainty. The probable answer has several elements. First, belief in the notion of a 'resurrection' was not universal among Jews. Some did see resurrection as part of the promised future of the Righteous, others did not – a difference in theology that was remembered by Luke and referred to in Acts 23:6–8. So, a difference among Jewish followers of Jesus is quite likely: some may have been more fascinated by Jesus's teaching and approach to practice, and it is easy to imagine them arguing with those who concentrated on the significance of Jesus being put to death as a cosmic event. Second, the notion of resurrection – that there would be anything bodily after death – was repugnant to Greek culture. Greek culture saw death as an immortal soul being liberated from the limitations of the body and the impurity of the material. Allowing the soul to be free was a good thing: it was a spirit which had been trapped in the body, and so the idea of further imprisonment in a resurrected body (literally: 'a body-that-had-stood-up-again') was repulsive. The teaching of Jesus might be appealing, and the practices of the community attractive, but *post-mortem* imprisonment in a body was not acceptable. This cultural suspicion regarding the body would long survive Paul, and become part of the background noise in Christian spirituality down to our own day.[3] The interesting point here is that Paul does not use belief in resurrection as a criterion of belonging in the way that later church groups would have doctrinal tick-boxes. The community is the community, and if some have what Paul considers wayward beliefs, he seeks to correct them. For Paul, disciples have joined a community rather than signed up to a theological manifesto.

3. N. Loudovikos, *Analogical Identities: The Creation of the Christian Self – Beyond Spirituality and Mysticism in the Patristic Era* (Turnhout, 2019).

However, there were far more practical issues which were dividing the churches than questions about resurrection. The fact that Paul has to present himself as one who earns his own keep, rather than being supported by the churches in which he teaches, points to disputes about money. From the *Didache* we learn that there were those who were sponging off communities in the name of being teachers. Consequently, rules had to be put in place to distinguish between true and false prophets – a false prophet is not one whose witness is considered doctrinally suspect but one whose behaviour is that of a con-artist. They even had a disparaging term for all these wandering peddlers of teaching, 'christhawkers' (*christemporoi*), who were really only trying to line their pockets or their bellies in the name of preaching the gospel.[4]

Figure 7. Christianity as a brand: a shop window in Italy.
Seeing Christianity as a brand – and as a consumer commodity – is neither a new activity nor one confined to the margins. In the first century there were those the *Didache* refers to as 'christhawkers'; today we have those who present discipleship as the key to success in life ('The Prosperity Gospel') or a quick, self-help way to happiness.

4. *Didache* 12:5.

Even within communities, the demands of seeing each other as brothers and sisters, as equals, because 'God does not show partiality' (Rom 2:11),[5] was too much. While it was most pleasant to eat with one's friends, it was quite another to have to share a table with 'others'. Jews did not like sharing with Gentiles because of ritual purity at meals – and sharing a table with women was always problematic. Gentiles might object to being lumped side by side with Jews. In a stratified society, many wanted client relationships to trump notions of equality, and then there is a problem of slaves. Would a slave who is a fellow diner as a disciple get ideas about her/his station afterwards? When we read Paul's wonderful encomium on the divine welcome in 1 Corinthians 1:4–9, we often skip over why he had to write it, which is made clear immediately afterwards in his awareness of problems in Corinth (1 Cor 1:10–13).

It is interesting to read these two paragraphs in parallel:

I give thanks to God always for you all, because of the grace of God which was given to you all in Jesus, the anointed one, that in every way, you all were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony to the Christ was confirmed among you so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift,	I appeal to all of you, brothers, by the name of our lord, Jesus, the anointed one, that you all agree and that there be no dissentions among you, rather, that you be united in the same mind, and the same judgement. My brothers, I have been told … that there is quarrelling among you.

5. This phrase 'God does not show partiality' was one of Paul's slogans: he used in in Rom 2:11 and Gal 2:6 – and it is directly echoed in Acts 2:6 and 10:34. The phrase also has echoes in other writings of the churches: Col 3:25; Eph 6:9 (see A. Standhartinger, 'The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians', *Journal for the Study of the New Testament,* 79 (2000), p. 129); Jas 2:1 and 1 Pet 1:17 – the repetitions show how problematic the idea was.

as you wait for the revealing of our lord, Jesus, the Christ who will sustain you to the end guiltless in the day of our lord Jesus, the Christ. God is faithful, who called you all into the community of his Son, Jesus, the Christ, our lord 1 Cor 1:4–9	What I refer to is this: One says 'I belong to Paul' Another 'I belong to Apollos' Another 'I belong to Christ' Is the Christ divided? 1 Cor 1:10–13

We shall examine in this book's next chapter some very specific sources of division in the churches and the way they conducted their gatherings, but for now it is sufficient to make this point: if there had been fewer disagreements and squabbles in the early churches, then we would probably now have a much smaller collection of Pauline letters. In every one of the genuine letters, we have problems just below the surface: the letters are Paul's attempts to move communities beyond the limitations of vision exposed in disputes. So, when we hear him preach his great embracing vision:

> *For as many of you as were baptised into Christ*
> *have put on Christ.*
> *There is neither Jew nor Greek*
> *there is neither slave nor free,*
> *there is neither male nor female,*
> *for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:27–8)*

we have to think 'backwards'. The reason Paul so exhorts them is that these were the very distinctions that the churches were insisting upon. Jews did not want to mix with Gentiles: they certainly did not want to eat at the same table as them – and the same went for eating with women who were not family members. Gentile men might not have the same worries about ritual purity as the Jews that were now their 'brothers' and 'sisters', but it was best for everyone if there was some decorum: so let the men eat together and the women eat together – and probably the women were as insistent on this among

themselves as the men.[6] And as for the slaves: while obviously a slave might want to eat with her/his master; one did have to acknowledge reality and that meant that, while they might be one in the Christ, they were anything but one in every other way. Indeed, in all our early documents, praises of the need for unity are an index of the extent of actual division.

The actual challenges of discipleship that these social divisions show us are not those we usually imagine. However, it is precisely these kinds of challenge that are so difficult for us Christians of the twenty-first century. We might enjoy the sense of belonging to our particular church, we might be smug in our own social milieu, but seeking an ever-expanding human fraternity is something we 'park' on the level of nice theory. If we do take this notion seriously, then with it goes a commitment to human equality in human opportunity and not just 'before God'. This is even more socially demanding than asking someone in a purity conscious society to share food with someone impure. To be willing to address other disciples as 'sister' and 'brother' can seem just the in-house jargon of my group – and even then it sounds a bit corny – but it becomes a real issue about life and living if we consider that it means we have to be conscious of human slavery, exploitation of workers, and neo-colonialism. Then it is as difficult as a master sharing a table with his slave while listening to a story about his Teacher who says that he was among those at table as 'one who serves'. Hearing the whole sentence could be rather irritating to a slave-owning Christian: 'For who is greater, one who sits at the table, or one who serves? Is it not he who sits at the table? But I am among you as one who serves' (Luke 22:27).

Discipleship seems to involve finding ourselves irritated by the clash of our attitudes with the implications of those we claim to espouse. Confronting this is more awkward than setting out a 'things to do' list of pious actions.

6. Although the comments of B.J. Bauman-Martin, 'Women on the Edge: New Perspectives on Women in the Petrine *Haustafel*', *Journal of Biblical Literature,* 123 (2004), pp. 253–79, relate directly to a later period (i.e. the early second century when the letter we call '1 Peter' was composed), they are applicable more generally to the cultural situation of the early churches of Paul's time.

How do we Read Luke's Presentations of Harmony?

If we can see disputes at every turn in not only Paul's letters, but in community guidelines such as the *Didache*, the 'household codes' found in other documents,[7] simmering in the background – the life-situation – of the gospels, as well as in other texts such as the letter from a Roman church to a Corinthian church known as '1 Clement', what are we to make of the very different picture that we get from reading the Acts of the Apostles?

At the outset, let us note that for most of the period between the late second century and the later nineteenth century the canonical text known as Acts has been seen as a direct factual account of what happened in the churches – presented collectively as 'the Christians' on the basis of Acts 11:26 – until Paul's arrival in Rome for his trial. This historical reading is still prevalent, as a default, in many Christian groups today: they appeal to what Luke *says* as simply an account of what *happened*. Second, we should note that there is no simple way to reconcile what we see in other documents with what we find in Acts: there are real contradictions, not merely differences of understanding that can be harmonised through ingenious scholarship. This creates tensions in churches because some have so committed themselves to the notion of a perfect original era that they can use simply as a prototype that they recoil at the notion that Luke's picture is 'fancy' rather than 'fact'. Other groups are so committed to the notion of the biblical texts as 'the inspired word' of God that pointing to historical ineptitude of Luke seems little less than treason. Third, popes, patriarchs, and pastors when faced with the less than lovely face of Christianity today often engage in a little bit of off-the-cuff Platonism and invite us to contemplate an ideal Church – and flesh it out with quotes from Acts – rather than facing the actual situation that the messy mob we Christians are is the only church that exists.

There is no ideal church – just the one we have.

I am fairly sure that Luke did not set out to deceive later generations but that he played a rhetorical game with his audience that would have been familiar to most authors – Jewish, Christian, or other – of

7. There are short texts which deal with how a household – women, children, slaves – should be ruled by someone who wants to consider himself a Christian. The fact that we have repetitions of them (Col 3:18–4:1; Eph 5:21–6:9; Tit 2:1–10; and 1 Pet 2:18–3:7) suggests that some Christians did not think the usual rules of their society should apply – and the response was this restatement of traditional paternal authority. See A. Standhartinger, 'The Origin and Intention of the Household Code in the Letter to the Colossians'.

his time. Luke – in both his gospel and Acts – is an evangelist not an historian in any sense of the word that we would recognise. Let us speculate as to what his starting question was: how does one convince these churches that they are falling short in their discipleship without haranguing them, making them close their ears, and alienating them? One strategy is to imagine a perfect group and then let the audience measure themselves against it. Such ideal societies can be found in Greek pagan writers (e.g. Plato in the *Republic* or the *Timaeus*), in Jewish writings from the times before Luke (such as the Books of Tobit and Judith), which use the imagery of a past time or a foreign situation a critique-cum-sermon for their author's time. Luke does likewise and paints the first generation of disciples as the group who did it well; and then he lets his audience assess for themselves how they have fallen away. Luke's method is rhetorical – and dangerous. It is dangerous because we – not the intended audience – can see it as a golden moment rather than as a perpetual challenge.

We have a Dream

Surprisingly, once we have moved away from the notion of Acts as history, its potential as guide for a community of disciples today is suddenly released. Acts functions for us in a manner equivalent to Martin Luther King's 'I have a dream' speech in that it holds before us the community values that we should be striving towards now as our future. The paradox is that Acts is more about the wondrous Christian future than a golden Christian past.

If we want to see what this dream looks like we can just pick on any of the themes that run through Acts. For example, an aspect of discipleship that Acts presents to us is the significance of a commitment to ecumenism. This is often simply a concern of church leaders where it is part of their diplomacy, but Acts presents us with a whole network of churches, seeking to work harmoniously in the greater task of taking the message from Jerusalem, to Judaea and Samaria, and out to the ends of the earth (Acts 1:8) – or, at least, the cities of Luke's Greek world. Luke invites the groups to stop looking at their own situations and dream of the big, global picture.[8] Is this

8. T. O'Loughlin, 'Sharing Food and Breaking Boundaries: Reading of Acts 10–11:18 as a Key to Luke's Ecumenical Agenda in Acts', *Transformation,* 32 (2015), pp. 27–37.

an aspect of discipleship you recognise? Many churches view their own network as equivalent to the whole. Many see real engagement with differing churches as diminution or contamination. But the fact of division is real and, therefore, making bridges is part of the work of everyone who can see that the Kingdom is bigger than their particular locality.

The churches that Luke visited were stressed groups divided along ethnic, social, and party lines. That some were for Apollos and some for Paul (1 Cor 3:4) tells us far more than the names of two early apostles. Likewise, how each community was to relate to the larger society – such as whether one could eat meat that had been part of the normal civic system of sacrifices – were live sources of bitterness. No doubt one side saw their stance as virtue signalling, while the other side saw the matters regarding purity/syncretism as no more than religious obscurantism. In this situation Luke dreams of moments of reconciliation following discussion, prayer, and a mutual quest for enlightenment. What later ecclesiastics saw as 'the Council of Jerusalem' was a picture of an ideal pattern for overcoming divisions and promoting reconciliation. This too is a part of discipleship; promoting reconciliation between factions before they lead to breakdown, bitterness, and the wasteful false-witness of division. While many churches speak about reconciliation in the context of discipleship – for example, Roman Catholics now refer to 'the Sacrament of Reconciliation' as the formal means of seeking forgiveness for sins committed after baptism – this often is interpreted in a very narrow, individualistic sense. Reconciliation is thought about in terms of an individual sinner being reconciled with God, but reconciliation is a much larger theme than this private 'clearing of accounts'. The Lukan dream is far more embracing: he imagines seeking out reconciliation within communities and between communities as the work to which his listeners should dedicate themselves. To be a disciple means to be someone who not only seeks to avert being disruptive – a 'thou shalt not' – but who promotes reconciliation in the midst of discord – a 'thou shalt'. Reconciliation is a community need rather than a private matter, and it is basic to what disciples have to offer because, when it comes to human strife, 'if you are not part of the solution, you are part of the problem'.

We might generalise this theologically: if God in the Christ was reconciling the world to himself (2 Cor 5:19), then the followers of the Christ are called to be agents of reconciliation, as well as messengers of reconciliation, in their lives, their communities, and in the world.

Structures

We are now in a position to locate some of the practices that are found in Christian communities which can be seen as exploring this notion of overcoming ruptures between people. The most obvious is the 'the peace' or 'the sign of peace' that many churches have as part of the eucharistic liturgies. For some this is just a bit of user-friendly ritual intended to 'humanise' liturgy. For others, it is a moment to be avoided: a confusion of human communion with divine communion which distracts. For many, it is just tokenism: pretending that I wish someone I hardly know 'peace' as a 'sister' or a 'brother', when we will both return to a confrontational anonymity the moment the service ends. While such negative reactions are 'the facts on the ground', they also reveal just how hard it is to embed being a conciliator within our lives.

Figure 8. A Confession Box.
Reconciliation cannot be reduced to formulae. Perhaps the greatest instance of such a reduction has been the rise of individual rituals such as the 'Confession' – officially referred to by Roman Catholics as 'the sacrament of reconciliation' – where the notion of private account with God trumps the challenge of practicing reconciliation as part of a life of discipleship.

However, if we view our formal ritual actions as our dreams of what our discipleship should be – in a parallel way to how we should read Acts – then we might appreciate this gesture as a prayer for a better world. The gesture – reaching out to someone we may not know – and being willing to exchange touch and word expresses a common commitment among we who have gathered. It is an expression of the reconciliation theme within the Lord's Prayer: 'forgive us our trespasses *as* we forgive those who trespass against us'.

Reconciliation is not merely a religious attitude, or being willing 'to forgive and forget', but makes deeper demands. We live within human webs of connections, societies, and we know just how easily these can foster disruption and division. Disciples can find themselves in situations of condoning such behaviour. Here are two situations which might illustrate just how much attention and dedication is called for. The first case is seemingly very simple: there is a shortage of nurses and medical doctors in many developed countries. Meanwhile, in poorer countries there are many willing to train and qualify in these fields – and who would like to migrate for economic reasons to the developed world. This, at first sight, is a matter of supply and demand in skills, and to involve moral questions only accidentally (e.g. they should get fair wages when they arrive) if at all. Then, if a wealthy state's government facilitates and encourages this, it is no more than facilitating an economic transaction that benefits its people, and all concerned (the health system and its new migrant workers) are happy. But if we think of this in terms of the inequalities between states and living conditions, and the notion that one group can live off another group by stripping it of its assets, and skilled people are a community's greatest asset, then the situation is changed. Looked at as one society viewing another simply as 'raw material' – an ever-present source of human evil – then it is eminently a moral issue. One society, in greater need of medical skills than one's own, is being deliberately stripped of them and the wants of one's own country given an absolute and superior status. This is a disruption that causes suffering, and merely claiming to reject such colonialism is not enough: seeking human reconciliation means that such processes should be rejected. But we should not imagine that seeing these needs for reconciliation is an easy matter – for example, the Roman Catholic Church in the developed world, faced with diminishing pool of full-time, celibate ministers, is increasingly 'importing' clergy from Africa, India, and the South-East Asian countries. This is done without reference to the relative available of clergy in the developed and undeveloped countries, nor without reference to the best use of scarce educational resources in developing

countries. While this is rationalised as 'an example of [that church's] catholicity' and even presented as somehow a worthwhile activity, it is, in fact, colonialism: the 'outpost' is serving the metropolis. Here is an action – justified in terms of 'discipleship' – that is actually running counter to the real needs of the churches.

The second situation is even more toxic in that it can lead to direct violence towards others. Is there an easier way to make people come together, and stick together, than to give them a common enemy, and portray some nearby group as 'other', wicked, dangerous, and a threat not only to your way of life, your culture, but your very survival? Any leader – such as a politician wrapping himself in a flag and inciting nationalism – who can convince a people that they are in such a danger will be sure of a following. Recent human history is littered with the suffering caused by such appeals to nationalism (perhaps the most dangerous form of sectionalism and secular sectarianism) as a means of binding a group together. While collective rivalry adds zest in sport – *our* team against *their* team – and provides an occasion for bonding rituals within a society, when this is extended to the actual treatment of other societies it is an ethical question for Christians, because we have this vision of God's peace spreading out, through disciples, to the ends of the earth. One cannot adopt being a reconciler/disciple as part of one's identity before God and then condone policies that work to create barriers and deadly rivalries between peoples.

Reconciliation is hard enough when it means shaking hands and agreeing to a fresh start after a quarrel because deep inside each of us there is the desire to have won and our memory can rake over the coals for us to reignite the dispute. When it comes to being part of Christian identity and witness it is all the more difficult. That Luke saw the chasm between the vision of what should be 'the Christian thing' and the reality of the divisions in the churches he visited was his real historical insight.