

### ***Don't Let the Dark In***

In the name of him whose light shines in the darkness, dear friends in Christ: One of the big problems facing our nation – a problem hotly debated by our leaders in Washington but never solved by them – is the issue of our unsecured borders. The argument is usually cast in terms of *who* should or shouldn't be allowed to enter the country. One side accuses the other of being racist and unsympathetic to the plight of refugees for wanting to increase security and limit the number of immigrants who can come in; and that side gets accused by the other of being foolish and fiscally irresponsible for wanting to lay out the red carpet for anyone who wants to come in whether they do so through proper channels or not. Like you I have my own opinions on the subject, but this is a sermon not a campaign speech, so I'll keep them to myself.

The question of *who* aside, often overlooked in this discussion is that border security is necessary also to restrict *what* is allowed to enter the country. Illegal drugs and weapons, cheap knock off merchandise, plants and animals that have the potential to spread disease or to afflict our agriculture with exotic pests – preventing the entry of these and other items that have devastating effects on our people and economy is part of what good border security is all about.

Ah, but recall that we are citizens of two kingdoms: one of the earth, for us these United States of America; and one from above, the kingdom of God, his Church here below. This latter kingdom has no physical borders. And there is no question about who may enter it. We want *all* people to come to the knowledge of the truth of Christ and be saved. We want everyone to be in God's kingdom. But we still need to enforce a sort of tight border security with regards to *what* may be allowed to enter his kingdom. Inside the Church is the light of Christ. Here we have his saving Word of truth that enlightens our hearts and minds. Outside there is only darkness: false religions, the ideas and philosophies of fallen men, the lies of the devil. So, by all means open the gates. Let the people come in. But at the same time we need to ensure that we don't let the dark in.

Prior to St. Paul's arrival in their bustling metropolis in the year AD 52, the 200,000 or so inhabitants of the Greek city of Corinth were truly a people in the dark. Pagan temples where the gods of Greek mythology were worshipped stood on virtually every corner. There were even some temples dedicated to foreign gods like those of Egypt and Babylon to cater to visitors and to Greeks who wanted to hedge their bets. In addition to their pagan myths, however, the citizens of Corinth were like most other Greeks in that they had a passion for philosophy, that is, the pursuit and love of wisdom. Consider that Athens, the epicenter and ancient world capital of philosophy and the home of such great names as Socrates, Aristotle, and Plato (along with dozens of others) was only sixty miles away from Corinth.

In our time people sometimes think that philosophy is an arcane pursuit that belongs to a rare group of overly academic deep thinkers that has no practical application to day to day life. That's not correct. The truth is that everyone operates under some kind of philosophical system. We all have an answer to life's big questions like: who are we? Why are we here? What's the meaning or purpose of life? By what standards are right and wrong, and good and evil determined? What's the best way to live? And finally where are we going, by which I mean is there life after death? If so, what will it be like? And do the things that we do or don't do now affect how it will be for each individual later? However you answer those questions is your philosophy.

Understand that for the most part Greek religion didn't answer those questions; the philosophers did. And there were a lot of them, each with his own set of answers to life's big questions. And sort of like people in our day become fans of particular sports teams, the ancient Greeks became fans or adherents of certain philosophers. And like dedicated sports fans, they loved nothing better than arguing about why my chosen philosopher and his ideas are better than yours. It was a national obsession. When they weren't sleeping, the chances are high that you would find your typical Greek arguing philosophy.

This helps explain the problem in the Corinthian church that St. Paul is addressing in today's Epistle. It's about six years after Paul left Corinth at the end of his second mission journey. Before that, he'd stayed there for 18 months preaching about the person and work of Jesus Christ for our salvation, and laying the foundation of the Corinthian church firmly on the Rock that is Christ. He left them in pretty good shape. At no other place had he stayed anywhere near as long and had the opportunity to so thoroughly teach the essentials of the faith. So they were well positioned to be a shining light in that otherwise dark place.

At the time he writes 1 Corinthians, Paul is across the Aegean Sea in the city of Ephesus in the middle of his third mission journey. A delegation from the Corinthian church has come to him. They carry a letter full of questions that have come up since he left. They also report a number of serious problems that plague the congregation – first and foremost is the one we heard about in the reading about there being divisions among the members. Some claim to be followers of Paul. Others claim to be followers of Apollos, a well spoken preacher who served the congregation after Paul left. Others claim to be followers of Cephas, that is, St. Peter. It's possible that they were among the visitors to Jerusalem who heard Peter preach on Pentecost, and who came to faith in Jesus and were baptized that day. Still others claim the highest ground of all and say that they are followers of Christ.

You see what they were doing: they had turned from their false gods to the One True God. All well and good. But they didn't turn away from their love of arguing about why my favorite teacher is better than yours; which, by the way, is another way of saying *I am better and smarter than you*. Yes, it's a sinful pride thing. But the point is this: they had come into the light of Christ; but they let in some of the dark of their culture with them – with devastating results.

This is why Paul wastes no time in setting them straight. He asks them a series of rhetorical questions to show how foolish the game they're playing is. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized into the name of Paul? The answer to all of these questions is an emphatic *no!* How could you even think such a thing? Paul goes on to thank God that he personally baptized so few of the members – not because baptism is unimportant, but because he doesn't want anyone saying, "Well, my baptism is better than yours because St. Paul, the great evangelist himself, applied it to me. You were only baptized by that no account Gaius fellow." Such distinctions belong to the darkness. There is only one Christian baptism. It makes no difference who applies it. Just as there is one Christian Gospel. It makes no difference who teaches it.

In the pagan Greek mind, religion and philosophy were separate. We might all worship the same god, Zeus; but we followed different philosophers. For a Christian religion and philosophy are one and the same. Christ is both the God we worship and he is the wisdom we seek. In him we find the answers to all life's big questions: who are we? Human beings, the crown and capstone of God's creation, made originally in the image of God but since fallen into

sin and placed under the curse. Why are we here? God loves us and wants to restore us to his image by the saving work of Jesus who suffered, died, and rose again. What's the meaning or purpose of life? To gratefully live in God's love and to love and serve our neighbors. By what standards are right and wrong determined? According to God's Law. What's the best way to live? By faith in Christ. Where are we going? To glory, to inherit the new heaven and earth, and to live in the fullness of God's presence forever.

Every Christian preacher or teacher proclaims these same truths. What matters is not the man, but the message, namely the word of the cross, which is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. And the word of cross actually works to make void the kind of boasting of the factions in the Corinthian congregation about which teacher they followed. Again, their saying that they followed this teacher or that was a claim to superiority over the others. But the reason why Jesus had to go to the cross is because none of us has anything to claim superiority about. All are equally in the dark. All are equally lost. All are equally dead in sin and condemned until Christ in his grace and mercy sends his word and Spirit to bring light, life, and salvation to those who would otherwise perish forever. The word of the cross calls us not to pride but to humility and to gratitude to God for his grace in giving us so great a salvation.

Okay, two quick applications of this text for us in our day. First the obvious one which has already been stated: the teacher doesn't matter. What matters is Christ and the Gospel he teaches. People naturally like to play favorites. And the men whom God has called to serve his church all have their own set of strengths and weaknesses. Some are better Bible scholars. Some are better teachers. Some are more sociable and charismatic. Some, like me, are just better looking. (Yes, that was meant to be funny.) Whatever. We – both congregations and pastors – have to guard against the tendency to make the church a cult of personality. It's divisive to the church and obstructs the Gospel we proclaim.

The second application is a little more subtle. It's this: just as members of the Corinthian congregation imported some of the dark thinking of their culture into the church, we are predisposed to do the same thing. The trouble is that because we are immersed in the culture, we have a harder time seeing it. It's like fish not realizing that the water they swim in is wet. They don't know anything else. That's the way it is with us. There are these ideas and norms that shape our culture, the sorts of things that everyone supposedly knows and takes for granted about say, marriage and family, divorce and remarriage, how to be successful in life, what level of education should someone achieve, which films, television programs, and books are suitable and which are not, and hundreds of other things. The point is that our culture's views on these things are very often at odds with the Word of God which defines the standards for his kingdom. And so it's good practice for each of us to engage in some periodic border security. When dealing with an issue for which you have a preconceived idea about how it should be, ask yourself, "Where did I get this idea?" Does it come from the surrounding culture, that is, the dark? Or did it come from the light of God's Word? The goal of such periodic inquiry is to ensure that you live in the light of Christ. And that you don't let the dark in. In Jesus' name. Amen.

***Soli Deo Gloria!***