“WHO ARE YOU FOR?” 1 CORINTHIANS 1:10-17 AS CHRISTIAN SCRIPTURE IN THE CONTEXT OF DIVERSE METHODS OF READING

Clive Marsh

The Corinthian Factions: A New Look at an Old Problem

1 Cor. 1:10-17 offers itself as an ideal text for considering the value of a reader-response approach to the New Testament.¹ Whoever is reading, a contemporary experience of division in a human community is usually readily available and will be drawn upon by a reader. Whoever is reading the text in a Christian setting will have a contemporary experience of Christian division ready to hand. Go into any church and ask about ‘factions’ and you are likely to find some. Whatever else they may be held to be, churches are, after all, human organisations. Thinking only of the British scene in recent years, it is easy to list many types of factions which occur regularly in the lives of local churches. To name but a few:

- those who welcome critical thinking in Christian faith and those who would prefer it not to be used
- those who advocate ‘free worship’ as opposed to highly-structured forms
- those who put social and political action at the top of the Christian’s agenda, versus those who mainly want to pray or worship in gathered congregations, or who primarily want to study
- those who accept gay and lesbian relationships as equal to heterosexual relationships and those who don’t
- those who favour more recent music over classical hymnody
- those who welcome contact and dialogue with those of other religious traditions, and those who favour distance or detachment.

¹ A point readily picked up by commentators keen to look at the question of contemporary relevance and/or writing in a commentary series which looks for ‘points for preachers’, see e.g. Richard B. Hays First Corinthians (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 25-6.
Whether consciously articulated or not, such polarities and factions as these create the contexts out of which, and thus the groups of Christian readers within which, such texts as 1 Cor 1:10-17 are actually read in churches today. Before anyone has asked a historical question about Apollos, Peter or Paul, a contemporary Christian group of any kind knows what it means to be divided. The reception, then, of such a text as 1 Cor 1:10-17 (esp. v.12) sharpens the question of how reader, text, historical context (past and present) and the history of tradition interweave in the act of interpretation. The moment a hearer or reader of the text recognises that what the text is ‘about’ is division—or at least potential factionalism—within a Christian community, then the de facto existence of known contemporary factions is unavoidable as a factor in reading.

The analytical challenge, however, begins precisely here. What is to be done next? One could go in a number of different directions. One could seek to use this experiential starting-point as a means of accessing the author’s intention. On this view, the contemporary experience will ultimately be left behind, in the service of clarifying the original meaning: the nature of the division in Corinth. Alternatively, one could be more positive about the contemporary access-point—this present church division really does matter—even whilst maintaining a controlling, normative function for the original meaning. The point here would be to see how the best available historical reading of Paul’s sense in 1 Cor 1:10-17 is to be made use of in clarifying and even resolving the contemporary situation. But the priority remains with the original meaning. If there is no real ‘fit’ between Paul’s meaning and the contemporary situation, then Paul’s words at this point simply do not help. To try and pretend that the meaning of a biblical passage could be ‘applied’ to a current dilemma might, in other words, be a misuse of the text. To suggest that Paul could be held to be talking here about those who think differently about forms of worship may be permissible. (It would not be wholly unreasonable to suppose that Pauline, Petrine and Apollonian factions favoured different forms of worship, whatever their main emphases may have been.) But we are not likely to be able to prove it. So on this understanding, the contemporary situation may only really be addressed if there is an evident connection between past and present contexts.

There is, however, a third alternative. This alternative prioritises a reader or reading community over any sense of an original meaning