

Dr. Lonnie H. Lee

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God in Our Darkness

1 Corinthians 1:23

In 1944 Hans Mol was a prisoner in a Nazi hard labor camp in Halle, Germany. As he participated in the worship opportunities provided in the camp he discovered that worshipers came with very different expectations about who God is and what God is doing in the world. This is what he observed:

The Lutheran chaplain in the prison...insisted on making the gospel relevant to his Nazi audience by equating the German conquests with saving civilization as God's global purpose. The gospel of salvation through faith in Christ was obviously shaped by...what his Nazi audience...wanted to hear. Simultaneously in the same institution at the same time my nine Norwegian friends (serving heavy sentences for underground activities) held their visiting Norwegian Lutheran chaplain in highest esteem as he had managed to bolster their anti-Nazi convictions...Here too the gospel of salvation through Christ was...determined by what my Norwegian underground friends...wanted to hear (Hans Mol, *Calvin for the Third Millennium*, page 255)

Paul makes a similar observation in his first letter to the Corinthian church. In that situation competing expectations had become a source of conflict and division. At one level the conflict seems to be about leadership and worship practices. On the surface it looks like a fight for control between the various power cliques of the church. But Paul is looking deeper than church politics to understand what is really going on. Paul recognizes that this is a struggle between people who come to church with very different expectations of who God is and what God is doing in the world. What Paul sees is a cultural war which is being waged in that society and then is bleeding into the life of the church. Paul suggests what is going on when he writes, "For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom (1 Corinthians 1:22)." Jews and Greeks represented two competing cultures which were present in the congregation. Because there was so little common ground between these groups the congregation was being torn apart.

We are a people who can empathize with the Corinthians because we, too, live in a time of cultural and political polarization. The cultural and political battles of our time also have the potential of dividing the church. Like the Jews and Greeks of Corinth we struggle to find and hold common ground.

When Paul addressed the controversy in Corinth he challenged the people to look again at who God is and what God is doing in the world. He writes, "...but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 1:23)." For the Jews who are looking for signs of a God performing miracles the crucified Christ is a stumbling block. For the Greek Gentiles who are looking for a God who opens to us the mysteries of creation the crucified Christ is pure foolishness. From both perspectives a crucified Christ looks like an abject failure.

In our world which is so much driven by the love of money, sex, and power the crucified Christ is either incomprehensible or irrelevant. Paul challenges the Corinthians and us to recognize that God

does not conform to our pre-conceived expectations. God does not bless the ideologies of the left or the right. God rejects all of our labels and all of our categories.

Paul wants us to understand that the God who is revealed in the crucified Christ is to be found where we least expect to encounter Him. God comes in the darkness of our suffering and brokenness. Or in the words of the theologian Douglas John Hall:

The theology of the Cross declares God is with you—Emmanuel. He is alongside your suffering. He is in the darkest place of your dark night. You do not have to look for him in the sky beyond the stars, in infinite light, in glory unimaginable. He is incarnate. That means he has been crucified. For to become flesh, to become one of us, means not only to be born but also to die, to fail (*Christian Century*, January 11, 2011, page 3).”

That is the common ground which is stronger than everything which threatens to divide us. The God who is in our darkness brings us together on the holy ground we find at the foot of the cross.