



A Tale of Two Picnics

By Elizabeth Fields

It was the best of times...

A summer picnic burgeoning with young, ambitious church planters. Discount hamburgers on the rusty park grill. Potato and macaroni salad dripping in warm mayonnaise. Lilacs in bloom and kids running through midwestern grass with watermelon slices in hand. I slipped away from the beautiful chaos to nurse our newborn son while my husband chased our three-year-old daughter. A dear friend came to check on me after realizing I had been gone awhile. Her simple kindness helped me in my postpartum state feel seen and valued. Unified as a team, we planned to conquer our city with the love of Jesus.

It was the worst of times...

Five years later, we gathered at another picnic. Church planting ambitions shattered on the rocks of divisive criticism. Discord alienated hearts. Gossip betrayed friendships. Love grew ice cold. The sharpest knife could not cut through the awkward tension. People had a lot to say but sat in bitter silence. The kids lingered close with worry, sensing the conflict but protected from the details.

This painful dichotomy can harden the softest heart, running off the most faithful parishioners. My husband and I weathered the storm, but it also weathered us. It took years to untangle the damage. “Christians eat their own,” a dear woman expressed, still yanking out the shrapnel from her own church pain.

How can this detrimental experience be a consistent pattern that is so divergent from the unity detailed

in the book of Acts? During the Church’s explosive inception, “believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer.” “All the believers were together and had everything in common.” Every day they continued to meet together, “praising God and enjoying the favor of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved” (Acts 2:42, 44, 46–47; see also 4:32–34).

Church planters have poured over these verses for two thousand years, desiring eager implementation. However, they are often met with derailed faith, broken friendships, and efforts empty of God’s transformative power. We stand baffled by the disconnect.

Even though conflict is a part of life, *tearing each other down* will never build up the Church. Weaponizing words, aggressive natures, misrepresentations, false accusations, and exclusive mentalities are not characteristics of believers, but classic descriptions of a bully. This might be normative behavior in the world, but allowing it to seep into the Church perpetuates an agenda that is anti-Christian. Paul said believers should be perfectly united in mind and thought, with no divisions among them (1 Cor. 1:10). He tells Titus to warn divisive people (Titus 3:9–11). He writes in Romans to watch out for those who cause divisions, put up obstacles, and use smooth talk and flattery (Romans 16:17–18). Scripture is clear: Christians need discernment to avoid falling prey to deceptive, divisive agendas that stifle the Holy Spirit and live according to the flesh.

Therefore, how do we flourish in our churches and Christian relationships when we have an enemy bent on destroying and dividing us? I believe we must understand three key truths:

1. **Christ gave us victory.** Jesus told Peter that the gates of hell would not prevail against the Church (Matt. 16:18). *That means hell is on the defensive—and the Church is on the offensive.* The body of Christ is called and equipped to advance and grow, while hell sits gated in defeat. John says, “The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work” (1 John 3:8). Yet Satan is a liar, “the father of lies” (John 8:44). He deceives us into thinking the Church is on the defensive. Powerless and fearful, we long to be raptured from this evil world more than we desire to go into all the world and make disciples (Matt. 28:18–20). Sure, we are hard pressed on every side, *but not crushed*; perplexed, *but not in despair*; persecuted, *but not abandoned*; struck down, *but not destroyed* (2 Cor. 4:8–9). Defeat does not define Christians, because we are more than conquerors in Christ (Romans 8:37)!
2. **God’s wisdom must guide us.** Harsh, competitive, aggressive personalities that use lies and character attacks, that demonstrate a desire to control or exclude others should alert leaders of a need for healing, not elevation. Placating insecurities fuels immaturity, not growth. We need to join James in asking for wisdom (James 1:5) because it’s an oxymoron to do God’s work without God’s help.
3. **Live filled by the Spirit, not the flesh.** Scripture explicitly teaches that God sets the ministry standard higher than humans can achieve. We can’t accomplish the works of God in our flesh. Paul admonished, “After beginning by means of the Spirit, are you now trying to finish by means of the flesh?” (Galatians 3:3). He says in Romans that the mind governed by the flesh is hostile to God . . . “and *cannot* please him” (Romans 8:7). Likewise, Jesus said, “The Spirit gives life, the flesh counts for *nothing*” (John 6:63). This word flesh is *sarx* in Greek, representing “the seat of sin and rebellion to God,” which can never advance God’s kingdom on this earth.

These three truths will help us address the destruction of division and avert the bully mentality from slipping into our own thinking, for no one is immune to the enemy’s cunning.

We might have some painful picnics. One day people love us, and the next day they’re ice cold. Jesus experienced the same disparity with followers vacillating from praise to hatred, but it didn’t deter his mission. With his eyes fixed on his father, he accomplished God’s will despite human rejection. Likewise, we need to welcome Jesus’s healing and move on in strength. Don’t give headspace to those who have caused heartbreak. We can’t move forward if we are rehashing and ruminating on the pain of the past. Dwelling on the hurt will only keep us stuck in resentment, preventing us from pressing on in faith. Here’s the thing: **People will cause us pain.** However, our hope is in Jesus, not people. Our hope is in Christ, not the church. His Bride is unstoppable when we embrace the victory, seek God’s wisdom, and live by the Spirit.



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