

## GOOD ADVICE: WORK TOGETHER

Have you ever watched “The Apprentice?” Twelve men and women, the cream of the country’s young business elite, compete for a highly paid position working for Sir Alan Sugar- entrepreneur extraordinaire.

It is worth watching, if only as an ego-booster. Because, no matter how stupid or inadequate or uncooperative you might think you are, I guarantee you will see at least half a dozen people on that show who make you feel a whole lot better about yourself. If this is the country’s business elite you think, it is no wonder we are in economic crisis. And I gather Alan Sugar thinks so too, from the words he uses.

These people are supposed to work in teams but their “team spirit” appears to consist in ignoring the team leader, rubbishing each other, throwing tantrums when they don’t get their own way and spending so much time shouting each other down that they never actually get around to doing anything.

But then I suppose teams are tricky things to build up and maintain. Teams are made up of highly individual men and women all of whom bring to the team their own personality traits, their own cultural and social background and their own unique experience. It can be a highly explosive mixture. Or it can turn into a soggy non-event. It is not easy. As the Red Indian proverb says, *“Do not judge a man until you have walked a mile in his moccasins.....”*

The city of Corinth was a busy seaport and centre of international commerce when St Paul visited there in the first century AD. Its population embraced a wide mixture of ethnic backgrounds. It had twelve temples dedicated to different gods, plus a Jewish synagogue. It did not have a University but many of its people were well educated deep thinkers. It did have an extensive “red light” district, with its own temple dedicated to the goddess of love.

It was from this hugely diverse population that the first Christian church in Corinth was formed. Men and women chose to embrace the Christian faith; membership was open to all; there was no competition. Paul got the church set up, gave them their basic brief- which was much the same as ours *“to know the difference Jesus Christ makes in your lives and to share it with others”*- and then, like Sir Alan Sugar, left them to get on with it.

Once his back was turned, the team promptly started falling apart, which was where we came in with our readings. Members of this team were rubbishing each other, throwing tantrums when they did not get their own way, spending so much time arguing and shouting each other down that they never got around to doing anything. By now Paul was miles away in Ephesus. All he could do was to write this letter.  
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What kinds of things cause churches to fall apart? The most well-attended and controversial church meetings, in my experience tend to be those which deal with the appointment of a minister, changes to the church building or proposals to do something radical with a church service. The church in Corinth as yet did not have a building. They met in people’s homes. But they had had ministerial leadership; they were having arguments over the proper conduct of worship and it looks as though there were personality clashes by the bucket load.





God's ways are not our ways. God's timescale is not our timescale. It will not always be easy to know the right way forward and a tremendous level of faith in God and in the church will be required of us at all times; not just when a big decision has to be made but in conversations over coffee in The Link, in keeping up a commitment to a particular work when things change, in answering someone who has a deep concern they want to share with you, in the ongoing sharing of church space, church time, church money, church people. Belief in the church asks a lot of us

But if you have faith in the church as being what St Paul calls it: the visible body of Jesus Christ in the world today; then you will believe that every single person in your faith community will have something to offer you in your quest to know Christ and to share Christ. Even if all one or two of them teach you is a far higher degree of patience and keeping your mouth shut than you once had- is not that coming closer to the person of Christ?

In a second letter he wrote to the church in Corinth Paul actually speaks of a "thorn in the flesh," presumably a person, who was driving him mad. He prayed long and hard that God would take this thorn away from him. God did not. Instead God gave him a message which has become a comfort and inspiration to countless Christians ever since: *My grace is sufficient for you. My strength is made perfect in your weakness.* Even that thorn in the flesh had given Paul a powerful insight into the nature and grace of God.

When we finally recognise that it is in each other we find the reality of Jesus Christ, we also come to terms with the intrinsic value of self-sacrifice, of crucifying our own desires with Christ so that we can rise with him, as a stronger community, to life that is indestructible. And in this life we can build resistance against those destructive cancers of fear, selfishness, greed, resentment and self-seeking which spread through the body of the community until there is no alternative left but radical and violent surgery. The sin was not in going to war against Nazism but in allowing it to grow, unchecked, in the first place. The sin was not in fighting for our religious freedom but in religion having become so cruelly intolerant and tied up with financial and political interest that spiritual freedom was seen as a threat.

*Good Advice: work together.* It is called "incarnational theology"- remember?  
 Discovering the amazing reality of Jesus Christ in one another.  
 Amen.