

United by the cross of Christ: 1 Corinthians

1v10-25

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[0 : 00] 1144. I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another, so that there may be no divisions among you, and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

My brothers, some from Chloe's household, have informed me that there are quarrels amongst you. What I mean is this. One of you says, I follow Paul.

Another, I follow Apollos. Another, I follow Cephas. Still another, I follow Christ. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?

Were you baptized into the name of Paul? I am thankful that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized into my name.

Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel.

[1 : 09] Not with words of human wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved.

It is the power of God. For it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, the intelligence of the intelligent. I will frustrate. Where is the wise man?

Where is the scholar? Where is the philosopher of his age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God, the world through its wisdom did not know him, God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

Jews demand miraculous signs, and Greeks look for wisdom. But we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God, and the wisdom of God.

For the foolishness of God is wiser than the man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than the man's strength. Thank you very much, Maria.

[2 : 41] Well, if you were here last week, you'll know that we started our new series, our new studies, in 1 Corinthians, Messy Church, Holy Church. And if you haven't yet got a copy of this, which I'm holding up here, there's some more on the table, which is just a little overview, and helps you to get a big picture idea of what the letter is all about, and what we'll be looking at over the coming Sundays.

Well, we need God's help, as always, when we look at his word, and so we're going to pray for God's help. Now, let's do that. Our Father God, we thank you for this letter of 1 Corinthians written centuries ago, but a word which comes from you to us today by your Holy Spirit speaking into our lives and into our context.

Father, we do not want the wisdom of the world. Rather, we want the wisdom of God. And we want your power to change us because we are powerless to change ourselves.

So, as we look at your word together, would you please do that work amongst us and bring us closer to an understanding of what it is to be a united church because of the cross of Christ.

Christ. We pray this in his name. Amen. Well, this church in Corinth was a real mess.

[4 : 35] Sinful attitudes, immoral behaviours were not being dealt with and so the church was beginning to fragment and fall apart.

Have a look at verse 11 from our reading this morning. My brothers and sister, some from Chloe's household, so this is a family within the church, he says, have informed me that there are quarrels, that there is arguments among you.

What I mean is this, one of you or one group is saying, I follow Paul. He's a great speaker. I love the way he puts his arguments. He's brilliant.

Another group is saying, well, I follow Apollos. He's much easier to understand. He's simple. I like him. Still another group are saying, we follow Cephas or Peter.

He's direct and straight to the point. People, you see, were fighting over which leader and speaker was better. So instead of one united church, they were one unholy mess.

[5 : 49] In fact, some of them even thought that they were far superior to these other divided groups. Look at the end of verse 12. It's like, you know, we don't follow Peter or Paul or Apollos.

We're much better than that. We follow Christ. The problem is, they've all become personality focused, not spiritually focused.

instead of being united by gathering around Christ and his cross, they have divided by gathering around people and their status.

Now, this kind of behaviour that we see in the church then is not a million miles away today. I mean, have you heard about that new pastor in town?

Apparently, he's got an amazing gift at speaking. Brilliant. I think I'll start going there. All the students think he's wonderful and they've got a great band as well.

[6 : 52] Or have you heard about the church down the road? The amount of people that are going to that church, it's incredible. There are hundreds going. And they've got a brilliant children's programme in creche.

My kids are going to love that. I think I'll go there. Or did you catch that online ministry? The lady who speaks there, she registered over 200,000 downloads last week and that was just on one talk. I get much more out of that than I ever do at church. You see, the danger is we can become personality-focused rather than spiritually-focused.

Instead of us gathering around Christ and his cross, we gather around people and their status. But perhaps we don't get sucked in by popularity and programmes.

We think of ourselves much too spiritual to be kind of led down that road. We just like to say, oh, I follow Christ. Me and Jesus, we get along fine.

[8 : 00] I don't need the church or its leaders. I can just stay at home, me and Jesus. Oh, it all appears to be spiritual, but in reality, like all these other groupies, it causes unholy division.

So how do we maintain our unity? Well, we need to go back to where it all began.

Have a look at verse 10. I appeal to you, I plead with you, I love and I care for you so much, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Now, perfectly united is not the name of the local soccer team. It's what God's holy church should look like to a watching world.

Literally, being perfectly united means to knit together or to mesh together. together. So you think of a wire mesh the way it's all integrated and locked together.

[9 : 22] So instead of being ripped apart, they are tied together, bound and strong. And what ties and unites this church together is the cross of Christ.

It is the common thread, that common piece of wire, if you like, that holds everything together. Have a look down at verse 13. Here we're asked a series of questions.

They may seem odd at first, but it gets to the heart of what it is to be united in the cross of Christ. He asked us, is Christ divided? I mean, can you split Christ up into lots of different little parts and still call him Christ?

No, of course not. You can't do that. So just as Christ is one and just as you cannot divide Christ, so the church, the people are one and cannot be divided.

He actually gets back to this a little bit later on. If you jump forward to chapter 12, I think this very helpfully illustrates what he's getting at or what he introduces at the very beginning.

[10 : 39] So chapter 12 and verse 12. chapter 12 and verse 12. Here he's talking about the body, the physical body, and he uses it as an illustration to talk about the church.

So do you see it there, chapter 12 verse 12? He says the body, he's talking there about the physical body is a unit, it's one, though it is made up of many parts. So a body has arms and legs and eyes and ears and different parts.

And though all its parts are many, they form just one body. So you are one unit, you're not all different pieces, you are one, I'm one. So it is with Christ.

Now look at verse 27 of the same chapter. What does it tell us we are? Now you are the body of Christ.

Christ. And each one of you is a part of it. So the church, that is the people who have entrusted their lives to Jesus, we are the body of Christ.

[11 : 53] There's many parts to that body, but together we form one united body. So just as Christ is one, we the church are one.

Back to chapter one. one. So this unity, this gathering around Christ, is not something that's humanly manufactured.

It isn't coming from our ideas or our design. It is a supernatural work of God. And it happens in two ways. Firstly, through the death of Christ.

So he goes on with his questioning in chapter one verse 13. He says, is Christ divided? No, he's not. Was Paul crucified for you? What a silly question, but he's trying to make a point.

Did some church leader take the punishment that you deserve for your sins? I mean, Ralph is sitting over there. Did he die for you? No, Christ died for you.

[12 : 57] He alone takes the blame for our sin so that we might be incorporated into his body. through Christ's death we are now included, brothers and sisters of the Lord Jesus and of each other.

He goes on with a third question. Was Christ divided? Or is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul?

When you got baptized, if you were baptized, did somebody say, I baptize you in the name of the Father and of Johnny Grant and of the Holy Spirit? Well, it sounds a bit crazy, doesn't it?

We're baptized into the name of Christ, symbolizing our being united to Christ and being united to his church.

That's what baptism is a symbol of. You see, what Christ has united, we cannot divide.

[14 : 04] If Christ has died for you, if you have been baptized into Christ, then we are one in Christ, whether we behave like it or not.

That's why Paul has been crystal clear in his task. In verses 14 and 15, he talks about, he says, yes, I baptized certain people in the church when I was there. There were some people I didn't. But that wasn't the real reason. I'm not wanting followers of Paul. No, he's something much more important that he's about. Look at verse 17.

For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, to preach the message of the cross, not with words of human wisdom, not by telling jokes and little stories, not that they're wrong, but just that, or clever little arguments and little asides.

No, I just want to preach simply the plain and simple message of Jesus. Lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power, because that's where the power is, in the message.

[15 : 16] So Paul is saying, when I preach, I'm not looking for more likes on Facebook. I'm not interested in more followers on my blog or checking how many downloaded my sermon.

No, I want people to know Christ, because through Christ we're saved and we're brought into the family of the church. That's how we're united. So church is not about finding the most popular preacher.

Or maybe you're a student here, and you're thinking, well, I'm going to be leaving soon, and I'm going to be getting a job somewhere else, or whatever the case may be. When you're looking for a church, it's not about how many people go, or how cool the music is.

It's not even how dynamic and how energetic their programs are. It's not about clever arguments or slick presentations. It's all about the cross of Christ.

Christ. That is what brings us, and that is what unites us together, and that's what we should look for when we are looking for a church.

[16 : 28] Is the message always about Christ and his cross? Now, there are two reasons why we need to unite around the cross of Christ, why it is so important that we keep it central, and he goes on to explain the reasons why.

Here's the first one. The cross of Christ is God's wisdom to save. You see, for some people, and maybe you're a person here today who thinks like this, they see the cross of Christ as absolute nonsense, silly, not important.

Look at verse 18. for the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God.

For those who've rejected Christ and have turned away from him, and their eternal destiny is separation from God, hell itself, for them the message of the cross is absolutely stupid, a complete waste of time.

There's some very clever people around. One clever person, he's just recently passed away, was the scholar Christopher Hitchens. He wrote a book called God is Dead.

[18 : 04] A very, very clever and intelligent man, an amazing debater. God is a God is a wonderful mind, but this is what he thought.

He said, I find something repulsive about the idea of vicarious redemption. That's just a technical way of talking about the cross of Christ. This impossible action of a Jesus dying robs us of individual responsibility.

So the whole apparatus of absolution and forgiveness strikes me as positively immoral. Or take another person, Professor Richard Dawkins.

He's a world leader in science. Again, a very capable and very intellectual man. But here's what he said, you cannot be an intelligent scientific thinker and still hold to religious beliefs.

In other words, you can't say you're an educated person and still believe in the cross. Now these are world thinkers who've written many things and people listen to what they have to say and they're telling everybody the cross is foolish, it's silly, it's a nonsense.

[19 : 23] We don't need anybody to save us, we can save ourselves. Salvation for humanity is found in the wisdom of learning and of understanding.

That's how we're going to better the world and better humanity. But listen to what God has to say.

Verse 19. He says, for it is written, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise.

the intelligence of the intelligent, I will frustrate. So the very thing that the world counts as foolish, that's the message of the cross.

God says, I'm going to take the message of the cross and it is going to be the means of salvation for the world. So look at verse 20.

Again, he asks a whole load of questions. Where's the wise man? Where's the scholar? Where's the philosopher of this age? In other words, what has all this learning done for the world?

[20 : 33] All the great minds that have ever lived, the great intellects that there have been down through the centuries, what has it all led to for the world?

Well, there's been some great things, hasn't there? There's been the advancement in science, which means we all live a little bit longer than before and there's now more cures for illnesses.

That's a good thing because of learning.

Yes, our understanding of physics means we can go further into space and maybe somebody one day is going to live on planet Mars. Who knows? We might need to. Yes, our application of mathematics means we have better technology and communication systems.

That's all great things. But with all this learning and all this advancement and all the wisdom of the world down through the centuries, the human heart is still the same.

We are still broken and sinful. By nature, we specialize in unholy division. I mean, look around the world.

[21 : 41] How many nations are fighting and at war today? Look at the pictures on our TVs. As thousands upon thousands of people are leaving countries because they're all fighting.

Or look at our communities. We've seen it again in the news this week in Northern Ireland. A community again falling apart. Look at our own individual families.

How many of them can we all say are so nicely together? The reality is so much is broken and falling apart. What about our friendships?

How many of us have lost friends because of things we've said or done or because of something they've said or done? The reality is we specialize in unholy division.

We divide. We fall out. We quarrel. Look at the end of verse 20. Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world?

[22 : 42] God made the wisdom of God. God made the world through its wisdom did not know him. God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

The world's wisdom says this. We can go it alone. We don't need God. We don't need a cross. Don't talk to me about a cross. That's nonsense. It's foolish. It's silly. The world thinks it can save

itself and save humanity along with it.

But God in his wisdom comes along and says what the world thinks is foolish and stupid, what the world laughs at, I will use that to save the world and save people.

That's what he's saying at the end of verse 21. That God was pleased through the foolishness of what was preached to save those who believe.

In the first century there was a piece of graffiti that was found on a wall and it's a little picture, it's just kind of like a chalk kind of drawing and there's a picture of a man spread like this as if he's on a cross.

[23 : 52] But for a head is a donkey, an ass. And there's a little caption underneath and it says, Alex Amenos worships his God.

So obviously in the first century there was a little guy called Alex, a Christian who had heard the message of the cross he'd come to believe and other people thought it was stupid. Maybe a neighbour, maybe one of his mates in school, who knows, but they draw a little picture and say, what a stupid boy to follow that.

And maybe that's what people think of you and me. Why would you follow such a simple and stupid message? A man dying on the cross, how utterly pathetic. But that is God's wisdom, to take something the world thinks is foolish, to save people like you and me.

Let me try and apply this through to some situations today. Look for example at Northern Ireland. We've seen it on the news, the Northern Ireland Assembly. The world in its wisdom has put in millions of dollars into that.

There's been thousands of hours around the negotiating table. The world's brightest and most talented politicians of lawyers have been employed. Nothing has been spared to make it work.

[25 : 12] But where are we at again this week? Division, brokenness, distrust, falling apart. What if I were to go to them or somebody else and say, why don't we sit them all down round the table and we'll preach them the message of the cross?

What kind of response would you get? Don't be so foolish. Don't be so stupid. What an ignorant and uneducated idea to do that.

But I could take you to churches today where the cross of Christ has been preached, the message has been proclaimed, and in those churches are people from either side, nationalist and unionist. I even think if you were to dig around here you would find people on different sides. I could take you to churches where there are people from a Jewish background and a Palestinian background united together, Muslim backgrounds united together.

Why? Because they have come to hear the message of the cross and they have been saved because they've trusted in Jesus, they've been forgiven of all their sin and they are now together as one people.

[26 : 28] the cross of Christ is God's wisdom to save. So that's what he says to the church.

Guys, if you're going to be perfectly united, it's got to be the cross of Christ. The second big thing he says is this, the cross of Christ is God's power to unite.

You see, those God saves, he doesn't just save individually and say there you are all on your own. He saves to bring them into a community, into a family, into a church.

There's no such thing as an individual Christian. You are brought in. So let's have a look at how this works out. Verse 22. Jews demand miraculous signs and Greeks look for wisdom.

So some people are like Jews and they look for proof of God's power. So they say something like this to God or to the church or to the teacher. Do some miracles.

[27 : 30] Go on, heal somebody, raise somebody from the dead, change my circumstances and get me a job. If you do all of this then I'll believe in God's power. Then there's another group of people like the Greeks and they look for proof in clever arguments and they say give us something deep and philosophical, something that we've never heard before, some new kind of teaching.

Tell us something different that we've never ever heard before. Then I will believe in God. But look at the answer, verse 23.

We don't do those things, Paul says. We preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles. Instead of just throwing them miraculous healings, instead of just firing out new philosophies and new teaching, God says, here's what I give you.

I give you my crucified son. If you want to see the power of God at work, if you want to see the greatest display of God's power that the world has ever seen, then I want you to look at the cross.

And look carefully at the cross. Look at this broken God man. beaten, crushed, naked, hanging on a cross to die.

[28 : 58] Look at those nails that have been driven through his hands and feet, ripping and tearing flesh apart. Look at the crown of thorns as it is crushed into his skull, blood pouring down, blinding his eyes and dripping from his side.

Hear the cries of agony and pain, the grasping for breath as his life edges away. Listen to his shouts from the cross, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Watch the scene around the cross as the crowds jeer and taunt and they spit and laugh and the so-called followers all run away in the other direction. Look at the cross of Christ.

It's a picture of weakness. It's a bloody mess, foolish, stupid and pathetic. verse 24.

But to those whom God has called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God.

[30 : 08] He is saying for those who would dare to look at the cross and dare to listen to its message, for those who would believe that this God man crucified on the cross that looks foolish and stupid to everybody else, is God's means for taking the sin of the world on himself, punishing it and judging it so that messy, sinful people like you and me can be forgiven of all of our sin and united together.

Paul knew that he had a hard job to try and pull this church together, the Jews and the Greeks. Well, trying to get them together was like trying to get Sinn Féin and DUP to talk.

It would be like the GAA trying to join forces with the IRFU. It's like trying to make Russia and Ukraine one. It's impossible from a human point of view.

Jews and Greeks, they just didn't get on with each other. They didn't fit. And here they are now clumped together in this church. But through the cross of Christ, every barrier has been broken down.

Every division has been healed because their every sin has been forgiven. And that's how God united them together as his church. Not in miraculous healings, not through clever arguments, but through the simple preaching of the cross of Christ.

[31 : 42] Because that is God's power and the only power to unite the people of God. As I look out on this church, the people who trust in Jesus, as we're gathered here this morning, I see, myself included, people of different backgrounds and cultures.

But we're a diverse, motley crew, aren't we? Different ages. Some are single, some are married. We speak different languages.

Even the colour of our skin can be different. Our incomes and our jobs are different. We've got different hobbies and different interests. We're at different stages of life, with kids, without kids, looking for work, retired from work.

But we're all kinds of different people. And if we were to meet each other walking down the street, there might be not one thing that would have anything in common that would connect us to each other.

Nothing. We just pass each other as we pass by lots of other people. So what are we doing here? This mixed bunch that we are. Why do we meet each other with each other here on a Sunday and Wednesdays?

[32 : 58] Why do we gather together? Why do we love and care? What's brought us all together? From all our vast backgrounds. The cross of Christ.

Because what the world sees as foolish, we have come to see as incredibly wise. What the world sees as weak, we have come to see as power.

Look at verse 25. For the foolishness of God is wiser than man's wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than man's strength.

In Christ, we have been saved from all our sin, and in Christ we have been united together. So how do we remain perfectly united to a watching world?

not by gathering around people and their status, not by running here and there to different things and other situations, but by gathering around Christ and his cross and pointing each other to there every single day.

[34 : 09] Let's pray together. our Father God, we come to you with a confession and in repentance for thinking that our ways are better than your ways, or thinking that we know and we know how to do things and how to save and how to unite.

But we humbly come before you and we stand at the cross and we look at the cross and we listen to its message and we say thank you God for your amazing power, for your great wisdom to send your son to us so that we could be forgiven, incorporated into your family, to love you, to belong to you, and to belong to one another.

Father, we praise you for all that we have and we pray your continued protection upon this church family from every squabble or every disagreement that we would not divide over personality or program, but that we would be united around Christ and all that he has done.

Please help us to go on showing this wonderful unity to the world and the hope that the cross brings to broken nations, broken families, and divided communities.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. We're going to sing together a song that does what we've been thinking about and that is to...