

Seeking Love in the Church of Christ

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Preacher: Rev. Dr. Russell Herbert

[0 : 0 0] The writer of 2 Corinthians, Paul, was passionate about the church and we should be too. Now I know that at least some of you are probably thinking, well you would say that Russell, you're a minister. But I want you to know that I don't say that we should be passionate about the church because that's who I work for. I say it simply because if you're a Christian, church is the body you belong to. It's your family. It's the people among whom you can and should expect to encounter the love of Jesus Christ. Now that's all very well, I hear you say, but what about when things have gone wrong? What about those times when someone else who is supposedly part of the church and who claims to be a Christian has said or done something that's upset me?

You know, I think that's a fair point. My guess is that all of us who have been part of a church for a while will have at some time or another witnessed the words and actions of others that have made us want to, frankly, walk away from it all. If only, we say to ourselves, if only the church was like it was back in the days when the Bible was written.

Well, let me quote you something that was written years ago by someone called Clive Calver. A young man named Mark had just become a Christian, so he was looking for a good local church to attend.

One Sunday, he went along to the church that was situated closest to him, but he was shocked by what he discovered was taking place. It wasn't just the savage gossip that he overheard before the service began.

There were plenty of other things going on that he hadn't expected to find. There was the sermon that denied the resurrection of Christ.

[2 : 1 7] Then the quarrelling that broke out during Holy Communion. And the group of people who got up and walked out during the prayer time. After the service, someone took the time to fill Mark in on all the latest gossip about others in the church.

He explained how two members of the congregation were taking legal action against each other. He exposed the fact that one individual was carrying on an affair with his stepmother.

He also elaborated on the presence of internal strife and party rivalry. And on the way in which that church looked highly likely to undergo a four-way split.

In the light of this disconcerting visit, Mark returned home and started to have serious second thoughts about his newfound faith.

Perhaps the advice that would most readily be given to Mark might focus on his need to look elsewhere and to try to find a different church.

[3 : 2 8] To concentrate on seeking out a church more closely modelled on New Testament lines. That advice sounds fine in theory. The only problem is that the church that Mark went to was not only patterned on the New Testament ideal of church.

It was a New Testament church. See, Mark was a citizen of the first century. And his local church was the church at Corinth.

You see, the point is this. Church always has been in a mess. And that's because it's full of people. And people, people like you and me, are, to put it bluntly, in a mess.

That's because we're human. Paul wrote his letters to the Corinthians not because they had it all sorted out and all was neat and tidy. That was not their reality.

If it was, he wouldn't have needed to write to them. But he did need to write to them. And what he wrote to them about the mess they were in is right there in Scripture to remind you and me that life in this world is a mess.

[4 : 4 3] And we are in that mess. So why should we be so passionate about church? Well, we might be in a mess. But Paul uses a phrase here to tell us of something far more fundamental.

We may be in a mess. But most importantly, as Christians, we're in Christ. In Christ. That's a term that comes up over and over again in the New Testament. In fact, the expressions in Christ and in the Lord and in him occur some 164 times in the letters of Paul alone. And we find it in our passage today as Paul writes, It is God who makes both us and you stand firm in Christ. So what does it mean?

Well, we could go on all day. It's such a profound term and so unfathomably rich in meaning. So I just want to share one piece of imagery with you.

[5 : 48] I've got a Bible in my hand. I want you to imagine that this Bible represents Christ. And this scrap of paper that I've got here represents you and me. When it's placed inside, it becomes part of the book.

So where the book goes, so does that piece of paper. If I pass you the book, the paper comes with it because it is in the book. When we're in Christ, it means as messed up as we might be, Christ has got us covered.

We go where he goes. He carries us. Life might be troublesome at times, but we're in him. He's the one who holds us together.

And it's in that togetherness that we can encounter him. Now, of course, at this precise moment in time, we're not physically gathered together. Hopefully it won't be too long before that changes.

But remember, we're still held together in Christ, just as Paul was with the church in Corinth, even though they were apart. So wherever you're watching this from right now and whatever's going on in your life right now, whatever mess you might find yourself in right now, know this.

[7 : 05] If you believe in Christ, you really are in Christ. We're in it together. Or rather, we're in him together.

Let's pray. Lord God, life can be really, really messy and church can be really, really messy.

Thank you that however difficult life is, we can be reassured that we are in Christ. Help us to know that, to remember that and to cherish that every day.

Amen.