

# Imperfect Church - Perfect Saviour (3): Is Christ Divided?

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Date: 18 August 2024

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[ 0 : 00 ] What do you think is the greatest threat to any church? Is it persecution from the outside? And you know, the fascinating thing is that so many places where there is persecution, the church is growing. The church is thriving.

Is it the values and beliefs of our secular society that's the biggest threat to the church today? I want to suggest to you that the biggest threat to the church is not out there, it's in here.

The biggest threat to the church is the church itself. Jesus could say a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Sadly and tragically, some of the history of the Christian church from its birth, its inception, is a history of division and disunity, as well as a lack to foster unity.

[ 1 : 28 ] You know, the church grew out of Israel. The first Christians were Jewish Christians.

But you know, around 900 BC, there was a great schism and split of the nation Israel between the north, who ended up with ten tribes, and the south.

Can you believe it? Can you believe it? Way back then, 900 BC, in the 18th century, there was a group of people in the Church of Scotland, which is the Church of Scotland, which is the Church of Scotland, which is the church that was created at the Reformation in Scotland, at the time of the Reformation in Scotland.

But in the 18th century, there was a group of people who called themselves moderates, and they were, as they thought, cultured people, high middle class, people who knew about good taste, and people who would make sure that they wouldn't sort of proclaim anything in rough language or anything like that.

There was a split in our own denomination, the Free Church of Scotland, in 2000.

[ 3 : 06 ] All of these are tragic, are they not? Especially as our Savior and head of the church prayed in the way that we heard him pray in John 17.

John Calvin, the French reformer, at the time of this Reformation in Europe, although scholars now don't use the singular Reformation, they use the plural Reformations, because of the significant differences between a Reformation in Scotland, in England, in Switzerland, and in Germany, and in France.

Calvin famously said, Though a church be teeming or swarming with faults, we should not reject it or leave it, so long as it preaches the true gospel and properly administers the sacraments.

Great pity the church hasn't listened terribly well, but that's the way that it is. It follows, does it not, that each of us should do everything in our power to prosper and foster that unity that we read about in Ephesians chapter 4 as our call to worship.

So, here's the question, are we as individuals doing all we can to guard and keep the unity of the Spirit? What are we thinking of here?

[ 4 : 55 ] So, for example, are we praying one for another? Are we always ready to forgive one another?

Ah, there's the rub. How difficult to forgive. And let me say this, it is difficult, especially when you've been hurt and especially when you feel that hurt palpably.

It's not easy. And especially if someone has wronged you several times. But here's the thing, and I don't know if I'm any better than anyone in here at this business of forgiving.

And yet, Jesus did say, it's kind of frightening in a way, in the Lord's Prayer. He put that extra bit onto it, didn't he?

But if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive you. Now, I do think, I remember speaking to someone in Sky, a lady who had been hurt a lot, and I know what the hurt was, and it wasn't an easy hurt, but it was a hurt from a fellow Christian.

[ 6 : 34 ] And she said she could not forgive. But sometimes I think, maybe people don't agree with me, it takes time to forgive.

Not everything you can maybe snap your fingers and forgive like that. Yeah. So, are we doing all we can to guard and keep the unity of the Spirit by praying, being always ready to forgive, by not allowing a root of bitterness to spring up in us?

Are we going out of our comfort zone in the congregation and reaching out to others apart from our little group? Are we avoiding cliques and partisan parties?

As I've said, the Corinthian church was founded by Paul around AD 51, and he wrote the letter about, just as an aside, by the way, people reckon there's four letters that were written to the Corinthians.

We only have two. The Corinthian church had been founded by Paul around AD 51, and the letter written roughly AD 54, how quickly a church can find itself divided, eh?

[ 7 : 58 ] even a church as near to Christ as that. You can imagine the disappointment Paul must have felt to hear that there were divisions and strife.

These two words that are used here, divisions and strife, are, they reflect in the language that a word that we know, schism or schism, however you want to say it, and strife, but it's contentious strife, so even if you're looking at the words there, it looks as though this is quite a serious situation in Corinth.

I want to look at three things here. I want to look at Paul's appeal for unity, Paul's analysis of what is threatening this unity, and Paul's answer to the schismatics.

First of all then, Paul's appeal for unity. Now, it's very interesting, isn't it not, this Christian church in Corinth, I'll put it this way to you, is replete with problems, but the one that's at the very head of the letter for a very, very good reason, remember what Jesus said, a house divided against itself cannot stand.

Notice, right at the very head of this letter is this appeal. Notice that the word appeal is a very, very strong word, which we could even translate as, I plead with you, I beseech you, and this language that Paul is using, and this fact that he's bringing this appeal right at the head of his letter, indicates how serious Paul is taking this business of the church being divided.

[ 10 : 04 ] And look at what he presents to them, the highest name that he possibly can present to them in his appeal, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The appeal he doesn't make in his own name, he makes it in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Indeed, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

reminding them who they are as well by saying brothers.

And that's, he's using the Lord Jesus Christ as the basis of his appeal, and he's appealing, he spells out what it is that he wants from them, he spells out towards the end of that verse, doesn't he, that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. He's asking for unity. That's what he's asking for. Now, we must be careful that unity is not the same as uniformity.

[ 11 : 32 ] Paul, least of all, wants people to be clones. Paul, least of all, doesn't want to muffle freedom of speech.

when you read this whole letter, you pick up what Paul is about, really, and what is about is the essentials of the gospel.

What is about is, we'll see later in a moment or two, Christology. In other words, Jesus Christ and his person and his work and his place in the church.

That's what Paul is about here. Paul is not asking everybody like parrots to say the same thing as everybody else. It might sound like that, but that's not what he's asking.

And let me just move to my second point. that's the appeal. What about Paul's analysis of this problem that's happening?

[ 12 : 48 ] Well, he says, what I mean is this. One of you says, I follow Paul. Now, that sounds like, doesn't it, people in the congregation?

This is not Paul or Apollos or people like that that are saying, follow me, follow me, or that are trying to construct a following by flattery or by whatever.

I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas or Cephas. Now, that's Peter, because that's Peter's other name, if you like, or I follow Christ.

Now, I don't know why these people wanted to behave like that, but we do get some clues from Paul here, and probably more clues as we go.

And by the way, this issue of the divisions, it goes, you know, beyond chapter four, he finally finishes dealing with these divisions, and I would want to suggest to you, it's like a shadow cast over the entire letter.

[14:19] Let me give you an example, chapter three, me, but I, brothers, could not address you as spiritual people, but people of the flesh, infants in Christ. I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you are still of the flesh.

While there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not acting in a human way when one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos?

Are you not being merely human? Now, that's chapter three, the first few verses in chapter three.

And if you go into chapter four, verse one, this is how one should regard us as servants of Christ.

And then at verse six, I have applied all these things to myself and Apollos for your benefit, brothers, that you may learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you may be puffed up in favor of one against the other.

You know, of one against the other. So, this is still in his mind as he goes deeper into this letter.

Maybe some were thinking, I love Paul's intelligence.

[15:34] I love his insight. Okay, maybe he's not a best speaker, but you know, something, his theology is just unbelievable. It's right up there.

Maybe some were saying about Peter, he's the one I like, he's for tradition. Exclusive psalmody.

Maybe a Apollos, a great orator, eloquent, probably trained in rhetoric and oratory.

And, of course, Corinth was besotted, if you like, with rhetoric and oratory. There was a great influence of that within the city.

And, indeed, there were secular teachers who had trained in oratory and rhetoric and they were bamboozling their followers and everything.

[16:41] And, perhaps, some of the people in the church thought, yeah, this is the way to do it.

And, they went for Apollos. Because, you know, the next thing that Paul moves into, as you know, is this wisdom.

To beware of using human wisdom in the advance of the gospel. I'll come to that at the end of the sermon. Not only as something for all of us to think about, but especially preachers.

It's absolutely almost incredible to think that that's what was going on in a first century Christian congregation in Corinth.

But, there we are. I want to move on quickly to Paul's answer to those people.

I mean, he does, he says basically three, what I think is really funny here, it's almost as if Paul, you know, in a wee sly way, decides to use a wee bit of rhetoric himself, because all the questions that he puts to them are rhetorical questions.

[18:10] Is Christ divided? you need to be pretty dull to think the answer to that was yes.

Was Paul crucified for you? Is that what I proclaimed to you? Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes.

Yes. Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I've just framed my appeal on the highest court of authority, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Are you trying to tell me you seriously think you were baptized in my name? I believe here that Paul is playing a wee game here and playing some rhetorical stuff himself and what I think is that Paul is essentially saying to them, you very well know that Christ is one and his church is one body and one bride.

You very well know that all of you were baptized.

[19:40] You see, who you're baptized into or who you're baptized by, you might say, especially thinking of these secular teachers, they might have been baptized in the name of their teacher.

anyone who's a Christian is baptized only in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Yes, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

But they're baptized, actually, they probably were only baptized in the name of Christ at that point. Remember, Matthew's Gospel is a lot later than this.

Paul is saying to them, you know well fine that I didn't baptize hardly anybody, and you know well fine people are baptized in the name of Christ. And you know that Paul wasn't to crucify for you. Now, can I ask if you have been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ? To be baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, it's a symbolic act if you like, and it's you're really saying I'm placing my entire life upon Jesus Christ.

[ 21 : 27 ] I'm staking everything on Him. My values, my priorities, my longings, my searchings, my questions, I'm going to trust them.

I'm going to trust them. have you been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ?

Certainly, Paul wasn't crucified for you or for me, but Jesus Christ was crucified for everyone in this building here.

He died that we might be forgiven. He died that we might come home to where we really belong and that we might have that unity that John spoke of that is almost unspeakable.

The great father, one of the fathers of the church that lived around the fourth century AD, Augustine, he was never more reverent when he was dealing with the Trinity, with the being of God, with the mystery of that being as Father, Son, and Spirit.

[ 23 : 11 ] And yet Jesus says, the most profound and mysterious, magnificent unity is in a sense not the unity, albeit that it's so wonderful as being members of one body of Christ, as we'll see as we come to the communion.

But this goes even deeper and more mysteriously that just as the Father is in me and I am in the Father, they will be in us.

This is what I'm praying for. Jesus prayed for it. Can I understand it? No.

Can anyone understand it? No. does anyone really know what is being said there? Now, I could start to give more talks on this theologically, but this is not the place to do that.

But there's something momentous here in these words of John's gospel. Read them when you go home. chapter 17 verses 20 to 23.

[ 24 : 37 ] Christ isn't the exclusive property of any one segment of the church.

As we try to wind this up here, the great danger and threat of the personality parties in Corinth lay in these two areas the person and work of Christ and the place of Christ in his church.

Person and work of Christ because, you know, it's as if they were, if they were saying, I am of Paul or I am of Apollos or I am of Cephas and I am of Christ.

We're not too sure what that party means, but it's probable that it's not as wonderful as it sounds. they were more or less undermining the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ as the Savior and the exclusiveness of Jesus Christ as the head of his body, the people of God throughout history. we could put it in theological terms, they were undermining Christology and ecclesiology.

[ 26 : 36 ] because, you see, here's the thing, if we're wrong Christologically, I mean in relation to our understanding of Jesus Christ, who he is and what he did, his work, and if we're wrong in understanding his relation to the church, the people of God, the redeemed of the Lord, we're really, really moving out into no man's land away from the gospel.

If we're wrong here, we're wrong everywhere. That is why our understanding of Jesus Christ is so critical and so important, and that's why Christology is the bedrock of theology.

Whom do men say that I am, said Christ, and then he turned to his disciples and said, who do you say that I am? What are some of our dangers?

dangers? We may not be going after personalities. We may not be saying, I am of this person or that person and so on, but what might be some of our dangers?

Humanistic wisdom. thinking that we can advance the kingdom of God by human ideas and strategies.

[ 28 : 42 ] Another danger might be Sunday only worship. Another danger might be for us, me, you, silent, secret Christianity.

I want to finish this talk about the appeal of Paul for unity and how important it was in his mind because he recognized that if that just is not healed and sorted out, the Corinthians are finished. Paul says in verse 17, for Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel and not with words of eloquent wisdom lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Wow! That's frightening for preachers I would say. So I can do the preaching in such a way that empties the cross of Christ of its power.

clever sermon so well constructed so deep so insightful don't know about you but I know that and I'm sure I would be as guilty as anybody else but sometimes Mary and I, my wife think what is it that's missing?

[ 31 : 11 ] power of the Spirit of God may God help us from emptying the cross of its power power.

You know the cross the crucifixion it was an execution by the Romans for what they would have seen as the dregs of humanity.

humanity it was shame it was disgrace it was a horrible horrible way to die but you know this if you read through the New Testament this is what the Christians are doing glory for the cross because it was the cross of Christ our Savior our Redeemer our Lord and as Thomas once said my Lord and my God Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel and not with words of eloquent wisdom bless the cross of

Christ you see why that cross is so brilliant why that cross is so glorious is that concealed in all its horror God was reconciling the world to himself hallelujah what a Savior bearing shame and scoffing rude in my place condemned he stood sealed my pardon with his blood hallelujah what a Savior is he your Savior this evening he is and with love one is gonna