

# The Quest for Church Unity

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please be seated, everyone. Well, congratulations are in order, friends, because the truth is that you and I, every one of us, are members of the most spiritually selfish, individualistic, and rebellious generation that has ever lived.

How good does that feel? You shouldn't be feeling good about that. That's not a good thing. Today, everyone has a theology of their own, don't they?

Everyone has their persuasion, their perspective, their theory, and if you don't have one of your own, you can just jump on the internet and Google something and jump on someone's blog bandwagon.

It's very easy today to come up with your own ideas. You can find your own online church at the click of a button. The world is your oyster. And if anyone accuses your opinion of being wrong, anyone accuses your persuasion or perspective of being unbiblical, you can label them as arrogant and bigoted and even unbiblical.

Because what we are trying to fight for at all costs is tolerance today, spiritual tolerance of every perspective possible.

[ 1 : 27 ] And so with this in mind, this individualistic culture committed to the broadest possible reading of Scripture, we come to 1 Corinthians.

And over the next few weeks, we're going to be looking at the first few chapters of 1 Corinthians, which is going to be interesting because the book of 1 Corinthians is written largely about the church.

It's not written to individual Christians. It's written to the body of Christ. And Paul is at pains to show the church in Corinth and to show us that we are a church, a body of believers.

Today, particularly in these first 17 verses, we're going to look at the issue of unity, church unity. There was a real problem there in Corinth. A lot of disunity in the church, a lot of factions and arguments and infighting.

So we're going to see how Paul attacks that this morning and replaces instead of in its place, the fundamental truth that all Christians are united in Jesus Christ, who is Saviour and Lord.

[ 2 : 36 ] I think I've probably got a one-point sermon this morning. I'm just going to talk about Jesus. I'm going to tell you that Jesus Christ is what unites every one of us here this morning and every Christian in the world.

The fact that Jesus lived the life that we couldn't live, a life without sin, that he died the death that we should have died, the death for sin.

Now he has been raised for our salvation. Jesus is Lord and Saviour. A little bit of background before we jump in.

A bit of background for the next few weeks in 1 Corinthians. You need to know that this is a letter written by Paul in response to a letter or letters from the church in Corinth.

And the reason they were writing to Paul, apart from the fact that he is an apostle, is that he actually founded this church. He planted this church. You can read about it in Acts 18. Paul spends about six months in Corinth.

[ 3 : 35 ] He teaches the Bible. He teaches in the synagogues. He gets kicked out of the synagogue. So he goes next door to the house next door and plants a church there. And people become Christians and a church is planted.

So much of this book is written to that church that he planted, trying to sort out some of the issues that they're having and to teach them largely about church.

It's largely a story, a book about a church plant in Corinth. This morning we're going to see, as I said, 17 verses that talk about Jesus, talk about the fact that we are united in Jesus.

So I'm going to pray to Jesus now and ask him to help us as we look at his word. Let's pray together. Dear Lord, we do pray now that as we open your word to us, that you would convict us of sin by a Holy Spirit.

That you convict us where we are wandering from the way of righteousness. That you convict us where we have left the gospel aside and concentrated on minor things.

[ 4 : 50 ] Lord, bring our attention back to you, to Jesus Christ crucified. I pray it for Jesus' sake. Amen. If you tune into what's going on in the church in Melbourne and Australia and actually in the world today, you'll hear a lot about church planting.

And it seems as if this is a new thing, the way that people are talking about it. But we know that Paul planted this church. Church planting has been going on since the beginning of the church, I should say.

And so there's a lot being said about church planting and I like to hear about it. I love church planting. I think church planting is fantastic and exciting and cutting edge.

And one of the reasons I became a minister was because I want to plant a church one day, God willing. I come from a long line of missionaries in my family. And so for me, church planting sort of fuses missiology and ecclesiology in a really attractive way where you can go and plant a church, have a congregation like ours, usually in a place where there is no church or where there's no gospel ministry being done.

And that excites me. I think that's wonderful that that's being done. And it's being done in Melbourne. You might have heard recently of the Anglican church plant in the Docklands area.

[ 6 : 09 ] A good friend of mine, Guy Mason, I've done ministry with him the last few years, worked in churches with him. And he's planted a church there. And it's wonderful to see. It's an exciting ministry.

And it's a tough ministry. I've been privy to the struggles that that church has had in getting together and launching and just kind of existing as a church in the Docklands, where there's no church building, there's no established church.

It's a very new area. It's a very wealthy area. It's very independent, materialistic, committed to individualism. And all manner of multi-faith, multicultural support and license.

And so I've seen that church take root there. And I've seen God bless it. And by God's grace, it's still there, active in the community, in the Docklands. And that's a great thing.

Who would have thought that a church could be planted in a place like that, in inner city Melbourne, in the 21st century, and thrive like it has?

[ 7 : 14 ] Well, it's a very similar story this morning in Corinth. Very similar story. We have a story this morning of a church that was planted in the most unlikely place.

Let me read the first three verses of our reading. Paul, by way of introduction, says, A couple of things to start with.

Firstly, Paul appeals to his authority here. You'll notice in verse 1, he says that he is an apostle. He's been called to be an apostle by Jesus Christ and by the will of God.

And so he establishes his authority. He knows that he's going to have to get stuck into this church because there's a lot of crazy stuff going on. And he's going to need to teach them, rebuke them, correct them.

And so he says, listen, it's Paul here, and I have been called an apostle by the will of God. So listen to what I've got to say. He also mentions his brother Sosthenes.

[ 8 : 36 ] And I mentioned Acts 18, which tells the story of the church planting Corinth. And I assume it's the same Sosthenes. We can't be sure, but I think it is. The same Sosthenes here with Paul as in Acts 18.

And you'll notice in Acts 18 that Sosthenes is the chief ruler of the synagogue there. So what's happened is Paul has come in, preached in the synagogue, and people in the synagogue have heard the gospel and believed in Jesus.

And this Sosthenes, who was beaten in Acts 18, has followed Paul despite that. And he's with Paul now as he pens this letter. But more than that, and that's interesting background information, but I think the most encouraging, incredible, amazing part of this section of the scripture is verse 2 where it says, To the church of God that is in Corinth.

Did the hairs on your head stand up? They should have. When you understand the kind of place that Corinth was. That there is a church of God in Corinth.

That's incredible. Let me give you a little background on Corinth in the first century so that you know where I'm coming from. A little history lesson here. The city of Corinth perched astride the narrow isthmus, connected the Greek mainland with the Pelopias.

[10:06] What is it? Pelopias. That's right. No? Something like that. It was one of the... I love history. It was one of the dominant commercial centers of the Mediterranean.

And as early as the 8th century, it had risen to dominance in the Mediterranean. So like Rome, you notice that Paul goes to very strategic places to plant churches.

This was a trade route, a major trade route, just like Rome was. And so as the gospel is preached, the gospel is easily spread throughout the Roman world. Very strategic.

No city in Greece was more favorably situated for land and sea trade. With a high, strong citadel at its back, it lay between the Saronic Gulf and the Ionian Sea, with ports at Lekion and Sankria.

A stone road for the overland transport of ships linked the two seas, and crowning the Acro-Corinth was the temple of Aphrodite.

[11:10] According to Strabo, that temple was served by more than 1,000 pagan priestess prostitutes. Amen.

By the time the gospel reached Corinth in the spring of AD 52, the city was a center for open and unbridled immorality.

So widely known did the immorality of Corinth become that the Greek verb, Corinthizane, meaning to Corinthianize, came to mean to practice sexual immorality.

So he's committing adultery with a prostitute. He's Corinthianizing. I'm told that in plays, whoever was portraying a Corinthian was always the drunk on stage.

So this place had, for all its bravado and boasting about being a great center of academia, really it was known as a place of severe sexual immorality.

[12:18] Terrible place. And into that city, the Apostle Paul comes with the gospel. And all kinds of people were converted.

If you look at churches today, in middle class, Melbourne, you could be fooled into thinking that churches are mainly made up of sort of good church boys who wear knitted sweaters and, and, and, and, you know, respectful ladies.

And we, and we like, we like those people, but Paul's church certainly wasn't only made up of those kind of people. We can see this. He gives us a great insight into the kind of people that were in his church.

In chapter 6, verse 9, he says, do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived.

Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers, none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

[13:26] And this is what some of you used to be. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and in the spirit of our God.

Paul has a church full of former fornicators, sodomites, drunkards, robbers, who have been changed by the gospel and by the spirit of God.

The church of God, in Corinth, Corinth, Corinth, that's amazing. We saw last week, Jonah chapter 4 in Wayne's sermon, that God is not constrained to save by many or by few.

He's not constrained by geographical area or by the grossness of our sin. He saved the Ninevites of all people. And now he's come with the gospel to Corinth.

God can and will save whomever he chooses. Let's move on to verse 4 to 9. Paul says, I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given to you in Christ Jesus.

[14:49] For in every way you have been enriched in him in speech and knowledge of every kind, just as the testimony of Christ has been strengthened among you, so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.

He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful. By him you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. It's a very Christocentric text, isn't it? You want to count how many times he mentioned Jesus Christ our Lord. And so he wants to hold up for us and for the Corinthians, Jesus Christ is worthy of our praise.

Jesus Christ is the Son of God. Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior. He knows that the Corinthians were very given to worshipping their preachers, to worshipping their orators.

The Greek culture was very given to praising the latest orator who had come into town and give them such an eloquent speech.

[16:07] And we're the same today, particularly today. I know in myself, this is a sin in me in some cases. Proliferation of the internet, you can download a whole bunch of great sermons.

And for me, I can name my three favourite preachers straight off the bat, John Piper, Mark Driscoll, Tim Keller. I download all their sermons. I listen to 10 to 15 sermons a week. This is a warning to me.

We'll see later in the text, the Corinthians worshipped their preachers. Same could be true of us today.

How many of us, honestly, have sold our church to someone on the back of Paul Barker's preaching? I'm not saying we can't glory in the fact that we have good preaching.

We want to praise God for that. But we want to make sure that we're praising and worshipping the God of the Bible and not the man who expounds it. So then, I'll just say this too.

[17:18] A lot of you have said to me after a service, you know, your preaching is very Christocentric. You seem to always come back to Jesus on every point. And I'm glad about that because I think today particularly, we live in a culture that is multicultural, multi-perspectival, multi-faith, multi-persuasion.

And so we need to hold up Jesus Christ as our distinctive as Christians. He is our distinctive. He's what makes Christianity exclusive.

And so we need to, like Paul does in this passage, keep telling people about Jesus. From the pulpit and at your desk and at playgroup and everywhere you go, tell people about Jesus.

Well, though God had worked powerfully to plant this church in Corinth, an amazing thing in itself, and although it had been planted by such a Christocentric apostle as Paul, it's fair to say that this church has its fair share of problems.

It's got more than its fair share of problems. If you're ever tempted to take a swipe at Holy Trinity or complain about something here, you need to read 1 Corinthians and just see how messed up that place was.

[18:43] Because it's a mess. One commentator says that the church in Corinth is the worst church that's ever existed in the history of the world. He might be right.

Gordon Fee says in his good commentary, he says, Although they were the Christian church in Corinth, an inordinate amount of Corinth was yet in them, emerging in a number of attitudes and behaviors that required radical surgery without killing the patient.

And that's what Paul is doing in 1 Corinthians. That's what you're going to hear in the next few weeks. Paul is doing radical surgery on this church without killing the patient.

By way of rebuke and correction and teaching, he's doing radical surgery without killing the patient. So he's prepped himself for surgery by way of introduction.

He's established his authority as the apostle. And now he's going to dive into the issue at hand. Let's read verse 10.

[19:57] Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you should be in agreement and that there should be no division among you, but that you should be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

What does that mean? What does he mean when he says that they should be in agreement with no divisions and united in the same mind and purpose?

This is really important for us. If we're going to understand how we need to behave in this place.

Well, I know for sure it doesn't mean two things, at least two things.

Number one, unity doesn't mean that Paul wants them to get along and turn a blind eye to sin. A lot of these issues were raised.

A lot of these, you know, Chloe was writing to him, the household of Chloe, who was a successful businesswoman and sponsor of the church. They've written to him because there's trouble, there's sinfulness, there's immorality.

[21:05] And so what he doesn't mean is, just forget it, don't worry about the immorality, just be friends. That's what's important. He doesn't mean that. We need to hear that because today, tolerance is at a high premium.

And people will tell you, doctrine divides. Forget about doctrine, forget about truth. We just need to get along. We need to turn a blind eye to that sin because we don't want that person to leave. We just want to be friends. Paul doesn't mean that. The Bible never, ever instructs us to turn a blind eye to sin. It calls us to be holy and to keep each other accountable.

So he doesn't mean that. Two, unity doesn't mean that Paul expects there to be uniformity in the church. He doesn't expect everyone to be the same.

He doesn't expect everyone to hold the same opinion on every little point. You see this in chapter 12 of this book because he talks about the metaphor of the body of Christ, how there are different members.

[ 22 : 08 ] You can't have a body of eyes. You need to have different gifts and different kinds of people. There's a necessity for different kinds of people in the church.

So he doesn't mean uniformity. What Paul means by unity can be found by looking at what he says negatively. Verse 10, that there should be no divisions among you.

That there should be no divisions among you. What are these divisions? We see in 11 and 12. He says, For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters.

What I mean is that each of you says, I belong to Paul, or I belong to Apollos, or I belong to Cephas, or I belong to Christ. When you look at the Greek, it's really emphatic on the I part. What's happening is there's spiritual one-upmanship going on in Corinth. Some people are saying, Well, he's your favorite preacher? I belong to Paul. Paul's nothing.

[ 23 : 18 ] I belong to Cephas. He was there first. That's nothing. I don't want to get caught up in petty arguments about apostles. I belong to Christ.

There's nothing wrong with saying, I belong to Christ. But when it's done out of a spirit of trying to look down on another Christian, spiritual one-upmanship that's rife throughout 1 Corinthians.

You notice that the rich are taking advantage of the poor at the communion table. And you notice throughout, spiritually mature looking down on the spiritually immature, the strong looking down on the weak.

This is happening a lot in Corinth. One believer is looking down on another. So Paul goes on, verse 13, Has Christ been divided?

Rhetorical question. Of course not. Then why are Christians who follow him divided? Why are these factions over meaningless things? Was Paul crucified for you?

[ 24 : 23 ] Of course not. Then why are some people boasting in Paul? He uses himself as a humbling example. Why are you boasting in me, in Paul? I wasn't crucified for you.

Jesus was. Boast in Jesus. Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? Paul seems that some people were boasting about the people that they had been baptized by, the men who had baptized them.

That's what they were boasting about. So some people were saying, well, when Paul was in town, I got baptized by him. He's an apostle, by the will of God. Who are you baptized by?

That deacon? It's nothing. Like today, I got baptized by the Archbishop of Canterbury. That's nothing.

I got baptized by Wayne Shuler. I only got baptized by John. Who cares who baptized you?

[ 25 : 25 ] It's a man. It's nobody. It's nothing. You're not baptized into the name of Wayne Shuler. You're baptized into the name of Jesus Christ. So it keeps coming back, you'll see, to Jesus Christ.

He goes on a little rant, just to hammer this home. He says, and I don't think he kept very good baptismal records.

Here we're really big on records. I don't think Paul was. He gets a little bit muddled. He says, I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that none of you can say that you are baptized in my name.

Then Stephanas, who is probably with him at this time, nudged him in the ribs and actually, he baptized me. So he says, I did baptize also the household of Stephanas.

Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. The point is, coming back to point, Christ did not send me to baptize, but to proclaim the gospel, and not with elegant wisdom, like they're used to, with the sophists, the orators, so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power.

[ 26 : 46 ] Paul's not against baptism. Paul is pro-baptism. But his point is, these other things are side issues. Who baptized you?

Who cares? You dividing over these things? They're meaningless. Come back to Jesus, to the gospel, to the cross of Christ.

And so he ends with the cross of Christ. And I think that's been his concern all along, and will continue to be. Paul wants the Christians in Corinth, and he wants the Christians here today, to focus on the cross of Christ.

You'll see, it's the Christ who made him an apostle in verse 1. It's the Christ who has sanctified them in verse 2. It's the Christ who has given them grace in verse 4.

It's the Christ who enriches them in verse 5. It's the Christ who they're waiting for in verse 7. It's the Christ who strengthens them in verse 8. It's the Christ who is faithful, and with whom they have fellowship in verse 9.

[ 27 : 47 ] It's the Christ who has authority over them in verse 10. It's the Christ who was crucified for them in verse 13. And it's the Christ who gave them the gospel in verse 15.

That is the Christ that they are to worship. See, the point on which they all must agree, the essence of church unity, is that we be of one mind on this point.

that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. Can you say that this morning? Tell me.

Can you say it? Good. We need to be emphatic on this point, because there are churches of every denomination who will not confess Jesus to be Lord and Savior.

It's too controversial. It's too exclusive. Makes me angry. Today you'll find Christian churches in Melbourne who are meeting at this point.

[ 29 : 04 ] I don't know what they're doing. I don't know who they're worshipping. But they will not say the plain truth of the gospel, that Jesus, in his own words, is the way, the truth, and the life, and that no one comes to the Father but through him.

Friends, if you can't categorically say that this morning, then you're not a Christian. Not a Christian. Not a Christian. So in the next section, and you'll hear about it next week, from 118 to 323, Paul tells us the gospel.

He underlines and outlines the fundamental gospel that defines Christianity. And in chapter 15, he gives us that great hymn, or great sermon, about Jesus, who was crucified, and buried, and rose again.

That's what we need to be united on. I think if Paul was here this morning, he wouldn't be too concerned about the secondary issues that we disagree on.

[ 30 : 37 ] I think he'd be interested, and he'd have something to say, but he wouldn't be so concerned about our views on gender issues, and women in ministry, or worship styles, having the organ versus having the band, or teetotalism versus drinking in moderation.

You know, secondary issues. I think what he'd really be interested in would be your answers to these questions.

He'd ask you, who do you boast in? Who do you put your trust in? Who do you worship? And he'd want your response to be emphatically, Jesus, Jesus, Jesus.

Fundamentally, to be a unified church means that we follow Jesus, we worship Jesus, we preach Jesus. We do it on Sunday morning, we do it on every day during the week, we teach our kids about Jesus, at family devotions, we pray to Jesus before meals, before bed, first thing in the morning, we read the word that Jesus gave us in the Bible, we trust in Jesus, in the fact that he lived the life we could not live, life without sin, that he died the death we should have died, death for sin, that he was raised again for our salvation.

And with the Corinthians, we wait for his revelation again, his second coming on the day of the Lord.

[ 32 : 34 ] I'd like to pray for us now and ask that Jesus would keep us faithful to him and unified under the gospel. Let's pray. Lord, thank you for this word that has brought us back to our fundamental confession of faith, that you are Lord, you are Savior.

Lord, I pray that we would be encouraged by the millions of Christians who are meeting today to worship Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior.

I pray that we wouldn't be deterred by the false witness of false teachers and false Christians and false churches who refuse to confess you as Lord, but that we would be emboldened by your word to preach the gospel, not just from the pulpit, but every day.

Father, give us strength to hang on to this truth, to the confession that Jesus Christ is Lord and Savior. We pray for Jesus' sake.  
Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.