

To Corinth with Love

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of October 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled To Corinth With Love and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verses 1 to 17. I've been told I've got to use the microphone so that the sermon tape gets done properly. Let's pray that God will help us to understand that reading.

You may like to keep it open on page 926 and I'll pray for us. Almighty God, we pray that you'll help us to understand these opening words of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians, not only to understand them, but also to see how they apply in our own lives and church, how we should avoid the same problems the Corinthians fell into and how we can serve you better.

We pray this for Jesus' sake. Amen. Synod is on at the moment and for those who don't know, Synod is the annual governmental meeting, if you like, of clergy and lay representatives of the Anglican Church in Melbourne.

[1 : 22] There are about a thousand members of Synod, though most of them don't, well not most of them, some of them don't go to much of it or don't go to all of it. But one of the good things about Synod meeting is that over the four or five days that it runs, it's a good opportunity to catch up with people that I know but I hardly ever see.

Friends who are clergy in other parts of Melbourne that I rarely see at any other meeting. And invariably, when you see these people, they say, how's your church going? And you ask them the same question and we reply.

Now thankfully for me, I can honestly and easily reply that Holy Trinity is a great place to be. But sometimes the replies of some of my clergy colleagues are probably very honest but not very complimentary.

Their churches may be divided. There may be problems of immorality. They may be unloving churches or lacking in spiritual understanding or concern.

Some of them are full of power struggles. Sometimes I wonder when my friends describe their churches in that way, whether anything positive could be said about them at all.

[2 : 41] Indeed, sometimes it makes me think of the church of Corinth of Paul's day. For in Paul's day, the church was divided, unloving, ungenerous, immoral, boastful, and full of some sort of power struggles.

And it's nothing unusual at all. In fact, if you read on from today's reading through the rest of the letter, you will see a whole sequence of things that are going wrong in the church at Corinth. Always beware of people, by the way, in our day and age who say, what we've got to do is get back to what the church was like in the first century. They're wrong. If you read 1 Corinthians 2 to the end, you may well think, is there anything positive that can be said about this church?

Well, yes, there is. And Paul opens the letter with some strikingly positive things to say about a church that causes him no end of strife.

Typical of a first century letter, he begins by saying who he, the writer of the letter, is. Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, that is, somebody who's been picked out by God, so to speak, somebody who witnesses the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ.

[4 : 03] Notice how he acknowledges his own authority that is given to him by God in these descriptions in this verse. He mentions Sosthenes, who perhaps was a Corinthian ex-Jew who was converted and now perhaps is with him as he writes this letter from Ephesus.

And then again, typically of a first century letter, he describes the people to whom the letter is written. That's verse 2. Could this be the same church that is described in the following chapters?

Could this be the same church that is divided, immoral, unloving, ungenerous, full of power struggles and spiritual boastfulness? Could he really call that church the church of God that is sanctified and full of saints?

The description of verse 2 is true. It is God's description, if you like, of the church at Corinth. The word church is to do with the idea of gathering.

And that's the idea here, that the Christians are gathering together, that constitutes them as church. He calls it the church of God, because that's what it is.

[5 : 34] It belongs to God. God's work of saving the church has in effect bought the church for himself. At a heavy price, of course, the cost of his son's life on the cross.

But in saying it's the church of God, Paul is also making it clear that it's not his church. It's not Apollos' church. It's not the lay leaders of the church's church.

It is God's church. And it's not for any human being to claim ownership of it. All of us fall into the trap at times of talking about my church that I go to, as if we own it sometimes.

It's well to remember, in everything that we do as a church, in all our discussions and debates and disagreements, it is God's church, bought by God.

None of us owns it. But then he calls it in that verse, sanctified. For us, that conjures up pictures of very moral or very holy.

[6 : 39] They're right pictures. And we may think, well, how can this church be sanctified when it's so full of the problems of chapters 2 to 16? But literally, the idea of being sanctified is to set something apart for a purpose.

It's to call something holy in the sense of it is for a particular purpose. The table behind me is strictly called the holy table. Not because the wood is imported from Bethlehem, but because the table is set apart for a particular purpose, which tonight you may not be able to detect because of music books all over it, but it's set apart for the celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Christians are sanctified by God, set apart for Him, for a relationship with Him. That's its fundamental meaning.

Although, of course, it carries moral connotations. Set apart for God carries the implication that is that those who are set apart for God are to bear the character of the one to whom they are set apart.

Paul then calls them saints. We tend to think of a saint as a specially good person, the Mother Teresa's of this world, rare though they are.

[8 : 00] But in the New Testament, the word saint is never used in the singular to talk about a person. It is always in the plural and it is always talking about the church as a whole.

It's not, Paul's not talking about the specially good Corinthians here. He's talking about the church as a whole. All of you, he says, are saints because you've been set apart by God for Him, for a relationship with Him.

And despite all your faults and strife and divisions, fundamentally, you remain sanctified saints. That's what God has done through Jesus for them.

It's God's activity. That's how he's describing the church here. What God has done to make those Corinthian people, Jew and Gentile, God's church.

And the end of verse 2 makes it clear that they're not unique, they're not special, they're just part of the worldwide or universal church. They're a church just like all the other people in the world who call on the name of Jesus are also church.

[9 : 11] The church of Corinth is not therefore independent of all the others. In some ways, these days where we have churches that call themselves the independent church of something or other, there is a wrong connotation about that word sometimes.

No church can be independent. We are interdependent. All of us, whatever our denomination. Well, to this church, Paul extends his greetings in verse 3.

That's the typical thing of a first century letter, though he, of course, Christianizes what he says. He doesn't just say, G'day, how are you going? But he says, grace to you. The word grace sums up everything about God's activity for people.

Starting and ending with something that is undeserved. To pluck us out from paganism and bring us into a relationship with God summed up by the word grace.

And the result of that grace is peace. Not the sort of peace we see in East Timor at the moment, but peace that is positive well-being and harmony and positive relationships with God and with God's

people.

[10:21] So that's the introduction to this letter and then typically for Paul's letters in the New Testament, he writes a prayer and it's a prayer of thanks which is also typical.

But it's also striking, isn't it, that for the church that is so rife with problems, Paul begins by giving thanks now there are five points I want to mention in this prayer which is verses 4 to 9 the main bulk of the paragraph that follows.

Firstly, Paul delights in God's work in other people. Paul delights in God's work in other people. That's verse 4. I give thanks to my God always for you not because of something they have done but because of what God has done for them.

I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that has been given you in Christ Jesus. Paul is delighting in the work of God in the Corinthians' lives.

[11:30] It's bringing him joy and he's expressing his gratitude to God to the Corinthians. Maybe sometimes we take for granted God's work of grace in our lives and in other people's lives.

Paul doesn't. He gives thanks for it. So ought we. When you see the work of God's grace in someone else's life does that fill you with joy and thankfulness to God?

When last Sunday night we heard the testimony from Jo as she was confirmed giving thanks to God for the grace of God's and God's work in her life did that fill your heart with excitement and gratitude to God?

It ought to have done. And when you see other Christian friends in fellowship here at the church growing as Christians do you give thanks to God for God's work in their lives?

We ought to. If not we're perhaps just presuming upon the grace of God. The second thing about this prayer of thanks in verses 4 to 9 is that it is thoroughly God centered.

[12:42] Not only from verse 4 what I've already said. Paul goes on at the beginning of verse 5 for in every way you have been enriched in him. It is God's work he's saying.

It's a passive verb you have been enriched. That is it's God who's done the enriching. It is a God centered prayer. Many of us are not very good at giving thanks to God or to people.

And often when we do give thanks even in a church setting we give thanks to human beings. But Paul's thanks is God centered. And he does that for a reason.

his reason is that the Corinthians are boasting in their spiritual prowess and gifts. So Paul's opening prayer of thanks is not for the Corinthians it's for God and it's not for the Corinthians work it's for God's work.

He's trying to put their situation in the right theological context. It is God's work that they should be boasting in not their own ability or prowess. Paul's prayer of thanks here is actually taking out the grounds of the Corinthians own boasts.

[13:57] If you read on in the letter you'll see some of the things they boast about. Well thirdly in this prayer he gives thanks for the very gifts that are causing problems in the church.

If you read through the whole of this letter you'll see on several occasions that they are being rebuked by Paul for their use of or their concern with their speech and also with their knowledge. Later on he'll tell them off in effect for valuing too highly speech that is full of Greek wisdom or Greek philosophy or Greek rhetoric as though somehow eloquent speech is to be treasured above all things.

Later on he will chastise them for boasting in their own knowledge which he tells them just puffs up rather than builds up. Yes it's true they had spiritual knowledge and it's a gift from God and it's true that they had great speech even in foreign tongues or other tongues that is a gift from God both of them are acknowledged in chapter 12 as God's gifts the gifts are good but the pride the Corinthians have in them is not.

So Paul here is giving thanks for the gifts that are given by God in a God centered way he makes it clear they're not things to boast about he'll come to his rebuke later in the letter but it's a distinction worth noting the Corinthians problem is not the gifts it's their misuse of them and pride in them Paul gives thanks for the gifts he places them in a context that is they are given by God he'll deal with the issue in more depth later on well the fourth thing about this prayer to note is its future orientation the word for that theologically is eschatological that's too long the word for you don't worry it means thinking about the things of the end times when Jesus returns and in a sense heaven is inaugurated the Corinthians we see later in the letter are boasting that they've got it all they've got every gift they need they've got it all in abundance it's as though the end times already come they're living in

heaven almost

[16:30] Paul corrects that in this prayer he says you've been enriched in every way by God you've been given gifts by God but still you must anticipate the end see what he says in verse 7 and 8 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift but that doesn't mean heaven's arrived but rather as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ that means his coming again his second coming when Jesus will be revealed in glory when he comes to judge this world and then he goes on in verse 8 God will also strengthen you to the end so that you may be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ for the Corinthians it's as though Jesus has already returned there's nothing in the sense in the future to look forward to Paul is saying you've got your perspective wrong what you are enjoying now is just a foretaste of the end so to speak the gifts are really a down payment or guarantee of a heavenly glory yet to come the

Corinthians you see were living for the present as though it was the end Paul is correcting that in his prayer here now for many Christians in our day and age I think the opposite truth is the problem not not we think we think we've got everything and this is heaven now and that Jesus in effect has almost returned our problem is that we don't really think he'll ever come where the Corinthians over realized their expectations of Jesus coming we downplay it too much we under realize it I think Paul's prayer ought to make us think how we longing for Jesus return how we living in anticipation of it whenever it will occur well the fifth aspect of this prayer to draw attention to is the faithfulness of God again it picks up the idea as I said in the second point of a God centered prayer Paul anticipates the final judgment day in verse 8 and verse 9 he looks forward to the day when the Corinthians will stand blameless before God not really meaning morally perfect but rather meaning guiltless before God because their guilt has been done away with he's anticipating the final judgment of God when God will say to a Christian person before his judgment throne you are not guilty not because you're perfect not because you've you've you've never done anything wrong but because Jesus has taken your sins away the theological word for that is to be justified by God to be acquitted on that judgment day when God declares you not to be guilty why does Paul anticipate that here with such confidence because God is faithful not because the Corinthians are good not because their their achievement merits his confidence but because God is faithful what confidence Paul has there in God when he's dealing with a church full of such strife as I anticipate judgment day for myself

I have no confidence of standing before God I'm not sure that I will last in my Christian life there are times when I think about giving up but my confidence is in God I know I'll stand before God on that day blameless not because of my ability or my knowledge or my spiritual competence but purely because of God's faithfulness and grace that's all it's the only grounds of confidence that is worth having and God is utterly faithful so we can be utterly confident that's Paul's prayer of thanks it is a prayer that delights in God's work it is a prayer that is God-centered it is a prayer that gives thanks for the very gifts that cause the strife in the church it is a prayer that looks forward to the end when Jesus returns and it is a prayer that is confident in the faithfulness of God

Paul then turns to the issues and problems of the Corinthian church and through this letter for 16 or nearly 16 chapters he will deal with one issue after another some are his own concerns some have been reported to him by people some have been questions that the Corinthian church has written to him about wanting his advice or ruling on but the first thing that Paul deals with is a report that there are divisions or factions or disagreements in the Corinthian church that's the issue he begins with in verse 10 and he continues on into chapters 2 and 3 as we'll see in the weeks to come literally in verse 10 it talks about divisions but the word is not so much that there are party factions as though the church almost meets in separate groups rather it's just the idea of disagreements between people or tears in the fellowship it's not so much a schism or a faction as just somehow problems or disagreements coming in between Christian fellowship it's like something is torn or just ripped but not quite in two and then when he talks in verse 10 praying that there may be no divisions but that you may be united that word is also used in an interesting place elsewhere in the New Testament where it talks about people mending their nets in Mark 1 so it's about the idea of something that's being torn a bit and he's praying that it's going to be mended sewn up that's the issue

Paul's heard about this from Chloe's people we don't know who she was we don't know whether she or some of her friends or cohorts have visited Paul in Ephesus to tell him but he's writing to the Corinthian church because he's heard about this and he explains what he's heard in verse 12 he says that some of you say I belong to Paul and some of you say I belong to Apollos and some of

you say I belong to Kephas and some of you say I belong to Christ now it doesn't mean that there are sort of four distinct parties or factions here but rather it's expressions of personal preference that are being expressed here some people it seemed liked Apollos he had gone to Corinth he'd ministered there he's mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament it seems that he was a very eloquent person a persuasive preacher and teacher you could understand why people would like his preaching and say well

[23 : 57] I belong to Apollos I follow what he says I like what he says there are others though who it seems liked Kephas another name for Peter we don't know whether Peter ever visited Corinth this may imply that he did at some stage Peter was of course Jesus' right hand man and disciple we don't know what it was about Peter that they liked but some of them it seemed hero worshipped almost Peter and others Paul and others we're told said I belong to Christ that's not to say the other three groups weren't Christians probably those who said I belong to Christ are being super spiritual oh we don't need human leaders that doesn't matter I belong to Christ he speaks to me directly some of you may have met people who say to you the Lord's told me this as though they don't need any other authority no Bible no preacher no teacher the issue here is personal preference it's sort of along the lines of hero worship there's no reason to think that

Apollos or Kephas or Paul have created the divisions themselves in fact Paul's response here makes it clear that the people they looked up to weren't in themselves at disagreement nor is there any hint that it's a theological distinction as though some people are following Apollos because he taught this and others are following Paul because he taught that and Peter taught this so we like what he taught it's really about the personalities and the people that are causing the problems here well that problem is very common almost every church has that sort of problem at times personal preference is dangerously ungodly but it's very easy to express and follow see Christians often try and play off a leader against another within the same church or same denomination oh I like that person rather than that person and so on that sort of distinction where matters of truth are not really considered is ungodly don't be sucked in by the criteria of our world that says well the thing that you've got a value in a person is their charm or their charisma or their good looks or what sort of shoes they wear or something like that in the

Corinthian church it seemed that their Greek philosophy or their wisdom or their rhetoric or their eloquence was what was treasured and prized by some oh we like Apollos because he's full of wise words and he preaches so well the issue is not what he preaches but how he preaches in the end if we are making distinctions between Christian leaders they have to be distinctions that are based on what they teach and what they practice rather than style Paul exposes the absurdity of these distinctions in verse 13 has Christ been divided or or parceled out as though you know now there are sort of different bodies of Christ that are almost distinct well of course not was Paul crucified for you that's the most absurd rhetorical question but it shows where this issue of personal preference heads down very heretical lines or were you baptized in the name of

Paul well no whether you were baptized by Apollos or Kephas or Paul or somebody else you were baptized into the name of Jesus Christ Paul goes on with a little digression really in verses 14 to 16 to say that baptism is not really the issue if I baptize somebody it's in the name of Christ and it doesn't really matter whether I baptized anyone or not I hardly baptized any in fact I can't really remember who I baptized that's not the issue he's saying Paul will return to the issue of divisions in chapter 3 but the issue of divisions raises a very fundamental problem the nature of the Christian message or gospel itself and that's what he deals with in this the rest of this chapter and chapter 2 because the divisions between these groups expose a wrong thinking about the nature of the Christian faith and its message you see eloquence is not the criterion smartness or cleverness or verbal dexterity is not the thing to look for the message of Jesus crucified is what matters Paul by implication is saying Peter preached it Apollos preached it Paul preached it Christ did it there's unity between them your divisions show a wrong thinking of the fundamentals of Christian faith this is not a trivial issue it's not just you see personal preference well that doesn't matter it does matter because it corrupts the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ the Greeks valued those who spoke well persuasively Paul values content more than form what matters is whether the true gospel is preached of Jesus dying for the sins of the world that's the key not eloquence or charisma or charm and indeed Paul's words in verse 17 make it clear that the content is powerful and if it's preached weakly that is w-e-a-k-l-y stutteringly or badly if the content is right that's what matters and indeed if it's preached badly or weakly then actually it highlights the power of Jesus himself it

will be very clear then when the gospel takes root in someone's life it's not because of the skill of the preacher it's because of the power of

[30 : 09] Jesus himself that's what Paul means when he says for Christ did not send me to baptize but to proclaim the gospel and not with eloquent wisdom so that the cross of Christ might not be emptied of its power you see if Paul was full of grand eloquence and people followed him for his eloquence where's the power of Christ it's sort of been lost and subsumed in his skill that's an issue he'll develop further as we'll see next week what matters is the content of the gospel the death of Jesus for the sins of the world that's power not the power of the preacher but the power of the savior and that issue my friends is very important today perhaps even more so than then because in our world content is no longer valued style and form is you look now at who the political leaders are and what is done to make them successful it is all about style

Margaret Thatcher was told to drop her voice by a tone and it would make her more persuasive and people would vote for her and they did what a person looks like now matters more than what they actually say our news reports our current affairs reports are in the end more about style than content they give us such brief word snaps of what people say that they're actually fairly meaningless it is all about what they look like whether they look smart look nice look honest but their words and content matter little that same trend is seen in advertisements on television why buy Nike because they're the best shoes because they're made of the best material because they last well no we buy them because is it Michael

Jordan wears it and Shane Warren wears it it's all about style it's not actually about whether the material or the goods are good and you look at a Nike ad and it doesn't tell you anything about the product at all in very bizarre sort of ads it's all about style you'll be cool and trendy if you wear Nike it's the same with Sony Walkmans isn't it who wants to grow huge tomatoes that's not why you buy Sony is it it's all about the mood the style but there's nothing in the advertisement anymore that tells you why Sony is the best product to buy it's just about style not content years ago our advertisements would tell us reasons for why we should buy a particular product the things that give it value no longer the content it's all about style well those ways of the world are easy to infiltrate in the way we think about the gospel churches look for people who are full of style and charisma the content is unimportant

Paul is saying here don't be fooled by that value what matters is the content Christ crucified if that is not at the heart of a preacher or leader of the Christian church that no matter how eloquent or charming or charismatic or personable that person is they are disqualified by what they say not how they say it anything that diminishes the power of the cross needs to be put aside but anyone or anything which commends to the full the power of Jesus death must be held on to that's Paul's argument let's do it we stop let's do it wrap it tips occasions let's do it take a Mod that will get loved how it is the right little would Verm move to Table I would I would oh but this thr ress