

Powerful Leadership in Weakness

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Date: 02 January 2005

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of January 2005. The preacher is Tim Johnson. His sermon is entitled Powerful Leadership in Weakness and is based on 1 Corinthians chapter 1 verse 1 through to chapter 2 verse 5.

Well, good evening everyone. As Paul said, we're going to be starting our four-part series tonight on leadership and we're going to be looking through the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, asking the question, what does Christian leadership look like? What is it to be a Christian leader? If you walk into a Christian bookshop, there is no shortage of books on Christian leadership. There's bookshelves and bookshelves on it, nods from a word employee at the front. So we want to look at what the Bible says about Christian leadership. And it's a very important question for each one of us to consider. There are people here who are already in some form of Christian leadership, whether that be leading a Bible study group or teaching Sunday school or leading youth group or some other form of Christian leadership.

And it's important for you to look at the Bible and to see what God has to say about leadership and measure your own leadership against God's ideal. Perhaps there are others here who are thinking about Christian leadership with a new year ahead. So it's important for you to properly weigh up what it is to be a Christian leader. What are the responsibilities of Christian leadership?

But even if you're not involved in some form of leadership or thinking about it, it's an important question for you to consider as well. For any of us as part of the church, we have a commitment to each other and we have a commitment to our leaders to pray for them and to care for them.

And that involves understanding what the responsibilities of Christian leadership are. So it's an important topic for all of us to consider. So let's have our Bibles opened at 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and let's ask God to help us as we look at this first passage.

[2 : 1 4] Amen.

Well, if you have a look at our passage there, you can roughly divide it into two sections. Chapter 1 verses 1 to 17 deal with the context for Christian leadership and the remaining verses up to chapter 2 verse 5 deal with what the content should be for Christian leadership and Christian ministry. So let's start by thinking about what is the context for Christian ministry.

Well, the context for Christian ministry and leadership is the church and it's very interesting to see the way that Paul describes it in the verses. Have a look with me at verse 2. First of all, in verse 1, Paul's introduced himself but then he provides a description of the church to which he's writing.

Do you notice the way there that Paul describes the church? First of all, he describes them as the church of God. The church doesn't belong to any particular leader or any particular person.

The church belongs to God and Paul acknowledges that right from the outset. It is God's church. He also noticed that Paul implicitly describes the church as one, as united. He writes to the church in Corinth. He's not writing to the churches or the parts of the church but he is writing to the church, the unified church in Corinth.

[4 : 23] You notice also that they're holy. Paul writes to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus and sanctified means set apart or made holy and that's reinforced again by the words called to be saints.

The word saint literally means holy one. So he's repeating the same point. People are called to be, sorry, are sanctified or made holy in Christ Jesus and called to be holy ones. The church is holy.

And finally, Paul shows that the church is universal. The Corinthians have been called to be holy ones but not alone. They are together with all those who call on the name of Christ Jesus.

The church is not limited to Corinth. It's not limited to Doncaster or to any one location but throughout the world it is universal. All those who call on the name of the Lord are part of the one church of God. So Paul is describing the church as belonging to God, one, holy and universal.

It's interesting as an aside that when we say the Nicene Creed together in church, we affirm those things. We say that we believe in one holy, a Catholic, which means universal, an apostolic church. One united church, holy, set apart by God with all of its members saints or holy ones, people made holy by God. Universal, that is, extending throughout the whole world.

[5 : 58] world. The word apostolic refers to the fact that it's built on the testimony of the apostles. And if you consider verse 1 where Paul, an apostle, is writing to this church, then you have that same idea that we affirm in the Nicene Creed there as well.

In the following verses, verses 4 to 9, Paul goes on to give further descriptions of the church. He talks about God's grace to the Corinthians. Primarily God's grace is seen in the fact that he saves these people through Jesus, brings them to himself, makes them holy. But we also see there that God enriches the church. He gives them gifts so that they can minister and they don't lack any gift, any spiritual gift that they need. That's something that we looked at last year in our series on spiritual gifts and I take it that you'll look further at that at the young adults weekend later in January.

Paul also there affirms that because God is faithful, he will strengthen his people to the end, ensuring that they're blameless until the day when Jesus returns. Now if you put all of that together, it is a pretty impressive picture of the church, which is the context for Christian leadership.

The church belongs to God. It is one. It is united. It is holy. It is universal. It's received God's grace and it's been enriched by God with every spiritual gift that it needs. Furthermore, God who is faithful will strengthen the church and make sure that it stays blameless until Jesus returns.

Now that's a great context for leadership. Who would not want to be a Christian leader when that is the context for ministry? It sounds to me like the perfect workplace. United, holy, perfect, worldwide, great opportunities for promotion throughout the world perhaps. But as we read on in verses 10 to 17, we see that despite this reality, and it is a reality that the church is all of these things, we see at another level it may well be wracked with problems.

[8 : 05] In verse 10, Paul says, Having described the united oneness of the church, Paul has to go on to encourage the members of the church in Corinth not to be divided but to have one mind.

And the trouble is that the Corinthians aren't living out the reality of church. They're not living out what they're supposed to be. They're not being united. They're not being holy.

Instead, they're being factious and divisive. They're being unholy and they're dividing into groups based around human personalities. You see that there's one group who claims to be followers of Paul, another followers of Apollos, another followers of Cephas, who is Peter, and another probably trying to take the moral high ground, the holier-than-thou approach, say, well, you're all wrong.

I follow Christ. So there. It strikes me that this would never be a problem in our church. Even if we were terribly divisive people, as soon as the argument began, I follow Paul. No, I follow Paul. Oh, right. We're all okay.

But jokes aside, it's a very serious situation in Corinth, dividing into these different groups. They're supposed to be the church of God. That's how Paul described them.

[9 : 36] But instead, they're being the little church groups of human leaders, dividing into their little groups around these human leaders. There's no unity.

And they're forgetting that these leaders are just servants of God, servants of his church, and they're not heads of different factions. So the church at Corinth needs to be reminded that there's only one Lord, Jesus Christ, who was crucified for them, who they all serve, and who's the basis of their unity.

That's the purpose of the rhetorical questions that you see there. Paul says, has Christ been divided? Divided. Obvious answer. No, Christ hasn't been divided up and shared out to these different groups.

There is one Christ who is the head of the church. Was Paul crucified for you? Of course Paul wasn't crucified. Jesus was crucified, and they need to look to him, not to these individual leaders.

Were you baptised in the name of Paul? No. You were baptised into the name of Christ. Follow him. Indeed, Paul goes on to explain how thankful he is that he baptised so few people so that it can't be a basis for boasting or thinking that they're special.

[10 : 48] So you see there in the first part of this passage that we're looking at tonight, our first lesson, if you like, for Christian leadership or Christian ministry, understanding the context in which leadership takes place.

You see, we see there quite clearly that there's an ambiguity in the church. On the one hand, the church is one, it is holy, it is universal, it is enriched with gifts.

But on the other hand, it can be wracked with divisions, unholy, with people treating gifts as weapons against each other. And as Christian leaders, people thinking about Christian leadership and Christian ministry, we need to keep those two sides of church clearly in our minds.

You see, very often it can be tempting to only see the negative side of church. Where there are problems and divisions, it can be very easy to focus on those and think that is what the church is about.

Where there are problems and divisions, they are immediate and pressing and they're hard to avoid. And church life can seem a long way from God's ideal. In this situation, it seems that this description of church that we see there as united, as holy, as universal, is nothing but unrealistic idealism.

[12 : 09] But I want to say quite clearly that that is not the case. Paul is not just giving an ideal here that the church can never actually reach, but it is a real description of church.

It is a genuine description. You see, there really is one church. The church really is united. Because there is only one Lord, Jesus Christ. And everyone who calls on his name is part of the church.

So the church is genuinely united. All those who call on the name of Jesus are part of this one church. The church really is holy.

Because it is God who makes people holy, who makes his church holy in Christ Jesus. It's not because people are righteous. Quite clearly, they aren't. And we still fall into sin very often.

But in Jesus, God has forgiven us. And we are holy. We are perfect in Christ Jesus. And the church really is universal.

[13 : 10] Because Jesus is the Lord of the whole world. And national boundaries are irrelevant. It is a universal church. Again, all who call on the name of Jesus are part of his universal church.

None of this is wishful thinking. That is what the church actually is. Because that is what God has made the church. Christian leaders need to remember that that is a key part of the context in which we are working.

We are working with God's unified, holy and universal church. What a high privilege it is to be a leader and a minister in such a context.

But Christian leaders also need to keep the other side of church in mind. The church is still filled with sinful people. People who fall short of the calling that God has brought them into.

And often the church doesn't act in a unified, holy and universal way. We know that all too well. And it's foolish for Christian leaders to ignore this fact. But where this happens, it's actually a deviation from what the church truly is in Christ Jesus.

[14 : 21] And so it's the role of Christian leaders to call the church back to what it is supposed to be in Christ. Where there are divisions in the church, Christian leaders need to call the church to live out its unity in Christ.

You are united in Christ. Stop being divided and be united. Where there is sinfulness in the church, it is the role of Christian leaders to call the church back to holiness.

You have been made holy in Christ. Therefore, live like that. Don't live as unholy and ungodly lives. But live holy as Christ has made you.

Where the church is insular and parochial, focusing only on its own issues and its own local interests. Then Christian leaders need to call the church to have the universal church in mind.

To have a broader vision. To remember that Jesus is the Lord of the whole world. And that we need to have a broader scope for church. So the context for Christian leadership and ministry is the church.

[15 : 30] On the one hand, unified in Christ, holy and universal. But on the other hand, still sinful until Christ's return. And sadly often racked with divisions, needing to be called back to what it is supposed to be.

So having considered there in the first 17 verses the context for Christian leadership, let's think about what the content of Christian leadership is in the second part. What is it that Christian leaders need to have as their primary message?

What is the heart, what is the core of Christian leadership? Well you see there that the answer given in the second part of what we've read tonight is that the core, the core content of Christian leadership is Christ crucified.

This is Paul's initial means for combating the problems of the Corinthian church. They're racked with divisions as we've seen and they're acting in an ungodly way. And so Paul takes them back to the heart of the Christian gospel.

He reminds them what it's all about. They've forgotten the key thing. And he does that in order to undermine their selfishness and their divisiveness. Paul reminds them that the heart of the Christian faith, the heart of the church, is the fact that Jesus died on the cross in order to save people.

[16 : 52] Now the thing about this gospel is that it's a very unpopular message. As you see there, as Paul says, to people who are perishing, who haven't understood the gospel, then the message of a Lord who was put to death on a cross is complete and utter foolishness.

If you go out and ask your average person on the street, do a vox pop and ask people, how is it, do you think, that we might get right with God? How can we get into a right relationship with God?

You get a variety of answers, but almost all of the answers will have something to do with what we do to put ourselves right with God. Perhaps it's something to do with being good people or attaining to some higher knowledge or learning.

Perhaps through a series of meditations or something spiritual that people might bring themselves up to God's level. What those people would be expressing is human wisdom.

Humans trying to work out how we can somehow reach God and become right with God by ourselves. But we see quite clearly in this passage that God discards human wisdom.

[18 : 08] You see there, as it is written, quoting Isaiah in verse 19, I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart. Where is the one who is wise?

Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? For since in the wisdom of God the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided through the foolishness of our proclamation to save those who believe.

Human wisdom tries to know God, to reach out to God and aspire to him, but it cannot, it can't. It fails and God dismisses it.

People can never reach God in their own wisdom. Instead, God flips human wisdom upside down and he sends his son Jesus to die on a cross so that people can be right with him.

Now that is completely out of step with what people would expect. Paul writes there, describing the situation in the first century that Jews wanted powerful science, they wanted power, and Greeks, meaning Gentiles or non-Jews, wanted great wisdom.

[19 : 25] Power and wisdom, that's what we want in order to be right with God. Similarly today, people want high-powered, miraculous religion or perhaps cutting-edge wisdom.

But the Christian gospel doesn't accommodate these human desires, human wisdom. And instead, it offers apparent weakness and foolishness of God's king hanging on a cross, being scorned, mocked, suffering and dying in order to put people right with God.

What sort of message is that? Where's the power in that? Where's the wisdom in that? What good can someone do by hanging on a cross, suffering and dying?

It's very hard for us to understand these days how shameful crucifixion was. Mel Gibson's movie, The Passion, released last year, went some way to capture the horror and the stigma of a death on a cross.

In the culture of the time, it was just the most abhorrent thing, something that you wouldn't and couldn't discuss in polite company. It was so appalling. It really is a crazy gospel that proclaims a Lord who hung on a cross and was crucified.

[20 : 48] And yet that is the way that God puts people right with him. People believing in this Lord, suffering and dying on a cross, that makes people right with God.

I think apart from the horrific nature of crucifixion, the thing that is so completely unappealing about a Lord who hangs and dies on a cross is that it shows that we can offer nothing of our own in order to be right with God.

Even more than the unappealing nature of crucifixion is the fact that we contribute nothing to our salvation. Jesus does everything. He does the lot by hanging and taking our sin on the cross.

And all we need to do is believe in him, put our trust in him. No great wisdom is required on our part. No great power or strength is required.

Just putting our trust in a crucified man. Now from a human perspective, that seems foolish and weak. And yet because Jesus' death puts us completely right with God, this message is actually the expression of God's great power and God's great wisdom.

[22 : 06] You see there in verse 25, for God's foolishness is wiser than human wisdom and God's weakness is stronger than human strength.

Human wisdom can't get us there, but Jesus hanging on the cross is God's power and God's wisdom and puts us right with God. And to reinforce that point, two further points are made.

Firstly, about the people who made up the church in Corinth in verses 26 to 31 and then about the weak messenger Paul in chapter 2 verses 1 to 5.

Both of these reinforce the fact that it's not about human wisdom. It's not about human power. In the church at Corinth, not many people there were wise or powerful or influential from a human perspective.

Sure, there were some quite influential people there. The synagogue ruler Crispus, who's mentioned there and who's mentioned in Acts, was converted. But it seems that most of the church at Corinth was made up of slaves or people who weren't highly regarded from a worldly perspective.

[23 : 15] And Paul's pointing out that if getting right with God is about our power or our wisdom, then how do you explain the church at Corinth made up of nobodies, people without power?

You can't explain it because human wisdom and human power have nothing to do with getting us right with God. In fact, God deliberately chooses weak and foolish and insignificant people in order to shame the strong, wise and influential people.

Some years ago, my mother ran a Christianity Explained course for a girl who was mentally handicapped. She went slowly through the course explaining the gospel to this girl.

And as she explained to her the fact that Jesus died on the cross for her, tears rolled down her face as she understood that Jesus had died and suffered for her.

And in a limited way, she was able to pray a prayer wanting to become a friend of Jesus. That girl was not wise or powerful or influential in any way by the world's standards.

[24 : 25] And yet, when Jesus returns and she is standing there as someone who has put her trust in Jesus and is saved, there will be university professors who are put to shame because they trusted in their own wisdom and their own power rather than Jesus, the crucified Lord.

See, as verse 29 explains, God has done this so that no one can boast that anyone has earned their place with God. If you want to boast, then the only thing that you can boast about is what God has done for you, not what you've done.

And finally, Paul explains that he, as a messenger of the gospel, demonstrates that it's not about human power and wisdom. He didn't use high-powered speaking tricks of the day. In fact, he was fearful and trembling when he came to Corinth.

All he did was faithfully proclaim the message of Jesus crucified. And through the power of the Holy Spirit, people came to faith. It wasn't Paul's preaching that made people Christian because he was a great speaker or anything like that.

It was God's power that did it. And time and time again, that has been repeated through the centuries since Paul preached. John Stott tells a story about how he was preaching at a mission at Sydney University many years ago.

[25 : 48] and the night of the big address, he had almost completely lost his voice. He had nothing left. All he could do was croak in a monotone his gospel presentation into the microphone.

And yet he says every single time he returns to Australia, people come up to him and they say, do you remember that night in the great hall at Sydney University where you'd lost your voice? I became a Christian that night.

It's possibly most people came to know the Lord through that address by John Stott in Australia than at any other time.

Showing that God's power works through human weakness. It's not about the personality or the persuasiveness of the speaker. It's about the content of the proclamation preaching Christ crucified.

What all of this makes clear is that Jesus' death on the cross in our place is the heart of the Christian message, the Christian gospel. Therefore, the content of Christian leadership must be to proclaim to people again and again and again and again that Jesus died on the cross in their place so that they can be right with God and they need to put their trust in him.

[27 : 12] Now, obviously, Christian leaders will need to teach people other biblical truths to grow and develop them but in a real sense we never ever move on from proclaiming Jesus crucified.

This is something that we all need to hear and we need to keep hearing and hearing and this is something that Christian leaders and the Christian church must never grow out of or else we will have abandoned the very heart of Christianity altogether and abandoned the content of Christian leadership.

In the church that I grew up in there was an older guy who quite frankly was very crusty. He was the guy who would complain about the youth group making too much noise, about the songs being too loud in the service, about the youth wrecking the church hall.

But for all of that he had it absolutely spot on when it came to the heart of the Christian gospel. He would continually say to people getting up to preach sermons, preach the cross.

He'd say to people teaching Sunday school, teach the cross. To youth group leaders, teach the cross. To service leaders, teach the cross. Teach the cross.

[28 : 29] Teach the cross. So I want to say tonight, do you want to have a powerful ministry? Do you want to be a powerful Bible study leader?

A powerful Sunday school teacher? A powerful youth group leader? Church service leader? Any sort of Christian leader? Do you want to have a ministry that will transform people's lives?

That will bring people into relationship with God and see them change to be the people that God wanted them to be? then preach the cross.

Preach Christ crucified because by doing that you'll be preaching the power of God and the wisdom of God. Amen.