

'A Church Divided'

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[0:00] Well, please turn to your Bibles again, to 1 Corinthians 1. But first, we need to decide what sort of leader we want.

What would your criteria be? Some of you might say, oh, we need someone who is intelligent and theologically deep. Others might say, no, no, we need social skills, someone warm and personal. Some might want someone who is very traditional. Others might want someone creative and innovative. Can you imagine the mess that we would create?

Before long, we would have factions forming, and each faction would be convinced that their priorities were the most important. That was one of the problems facing the church in Corinth. Corinth. So Corinth was a Greek city that was fascinated by social status, personal advancement, and impressive public speaking.

[1:36] So the city was visited by traveling speakers who would display their intelligence and eloquence for the purpose of attracting followers for themselves.

That's the culture of the city. Now, here in our text, it seems that the Corinthian Christians had brought that culture and value into the church.

And because of that, they were divided. But before Paul addresses that problem, he reminds them of some theological fundamentals in the opening of the letter, which later will be important.

So in verse 1 to 3, Paul reminds the Corinthians of whom they belong to. In verse 2, the Corinthian church is called the church of God in Corinth.

They're the church of God in Corinth, not the church of Corinth. They don't belong to the world. They belong to God.

[2:46] Other people in Corinth might have worldly values because they belong to the world. The Corinthian Christians should have different values, godly ones, because they belong to God.

And then Paul calls them those sanctified in Christ Jesus. To be sanctified means to be set apart, separated from the world for God.

Again, they don't belong to Corinth. They belong to God. This is shocking when we know what Paul is about to say about them in the rest of the letter.

These Corinthian Christians were suing each other in the letter. They were practicing sexual immorality. One man was sleeping with his father's wife. But Paul says that they're sanctified. How can he possibly say that? Well, he can say that because the church's holiness was not something that they had achieved. It was something that God had given them in Christ Jesus.

[4:04] And so before Paul tells them what they must do, he reminds them of what God has already done for them in Christ. This is the gospel.

They have been made holy. They have been sanctified through the cross. But because they have been sanctified, then they must live holy.

They must live it out. And so they were called to be his holy people. They're called to be saints.

They have been sanctified, so now they are to be and to live holy.

They belong to God, so they must live according to that identity. Now, because they belong to God in verse 4 to 7, they also possess God's grace and gifts, including the gifts of speech and knowledge.

Now, this is also interesting because based on what Paul will say later in the letter, the Corinthians were not using their speech or knowledge well.

[5:15] They were using speech and knowledge for boasting to boost their own ego and pride. And yet, Paul starts with the affirmation of the good.

They did have speech and knowledge, not from themselves, the gifts, enrichment from God, to confirm the testimony about Christ amongst them.

That is, they believed the testimony about Jesus, and so God gave them spiritual gifts, including speech and knowledge. And because they're rich with spiritual gifts, they're not going to lack anything as they wait for Jesus to come.

Again, Paul starts with everything that the church already has because of what God has done in Christ Jesus.

Paul doesn't start with what they must do. The church, this church, belongs to God as demonstrated by their possession of spiritual gifts.

[6 : 28] Now, further, in verse 8 to 9, because they belong to God and God is faithful, then God will keep them until the end.

God will make them blameless when Jesus comes. The current condition of the Corinthian Christians might be far from impressive, might be far from blameless, but nonetheless, because they belong to God, they have God's promise that God will make them blameless in the end. So even before Paul addresses any particular problem in the church, he's reminding them of some theological foundations that are true for the Corinthian church because they belong to God, redeemed by Jesus.

Now, the implication is, because it's true that they belong to God, now they must live as a church belonging to God. Live it out. And this is where they fail miserably in the living out of their identity. But it doesn't negate the identity. Now, before we continue, I think we can already apply this to ourselves.

[7 : 49] Who are we? Are we the church of God in Doncaster? Or are we a church of Doncaster?

Whom do we belong to? If we are the church of God in Doncaster, we belong to God, not to the world. That means the values that we carry in our lives should not be the values of the world around us.

Here in Doncaster, people can place enormous value upon, what, education, professional competence, financial security, respectability, impressive assets.

Have we brought these values into the church and lifted them up higher than Christ crucified? Do we quietly believe that our education, for example, or our experience, our theological knowledge, or years of service make us more important than others?

Do we secretly feel proud of ourselves when people ask what we do or what we used to do and we can say that we have or used to have one of those high-valued professions?

[9 : 14] Do we secretly feel proud of ourselves when we describe our church as one of the biggest churches in the Melbourne Diocese in terms of numbers? And we feel better than other churches that are smaller.

What values identify us where do those values come from? From the world around us or from what God has done for us in Christ?

If all the good things that we have come from Christ, from God in Christ, what have we to boast in? As Paul says, only Christ.

Now, Paul continues. Paul gets into the first issue that he would like to address in the letter.

In verse 10 to 12, the problem that Paul is addressing is divisions. It seems from verse 12 that the Corinthians were using Christian leaders as badges of honor, probably based on worldly values.

[10 : 32] Again, like the traveling speakers in Corinth. Corinth used to be visited by traveling speakers who used to gather followers. So they assumed that, oh, if Paul and Peter and Apollos, they came here to preach, surely they're doing the same thing.

And so these people, these Corinthian Christians were following certain leaders and opposing the others. Paul appeals to them in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Previously, Paul has reminded them that they belong to God in Christ Jesus, so now he appeals to that identity in the name of our Lord, our mutual Lord Jesus.

We all have the same Lord, so let's live like we have the same Lord. No divisions. And so Paul is urging them to be perfectly united in mind and thought.

Now, this does not mean that Christians must possess identical opinions on every subject. That's impossible.

[11 : 50] No, the word divisions in verse 10 carries a political meaning. It means being in competing factions and parties. So it's not about disagreements like, for example, what kind of coffee is best for morning tea?

Or hymns versus hillsong? Which one? No, being united in mind and thought means not being divided into factions and parties and instead having the same fundamental mindset, the mindset of the gospel, and the same direction to follow the same Lord.

Christians can disagree about how best to express our allegiance to Christ or how best to serve Christ in a particular situation or how best to sing the Christian truths.

We can have different preferences. We can argue. We can discuss. The church leaders argued with each other. Acts 15, for example. But we must be united in the same mind.

That is, whatever our preferences are, they need to serve Jesus and his gospel, not ourselves. What songs are best?

[13:11] Well, what songs are best for what? For making me feel good or for serving Jesus in this place? That's what the Corinthians were not doing.

Instead, they used Christian leaders as badges of honor to boost their own ego and pride. Oh, I follow Paul. Paul is better than Apollos that you're following.

Now, amongst these people in verse 12, there were some who said, I follow Christ. Isn't this the right thing to say or believe?

Yes, it is. If they said they followed Christ and therefore they rejected all factionalism and divisions. But I think that's unlikely because these people were also included in the rebuke.

What's more likely is that these people used Christ to participate in the divisions. They used Christ as a badge of honor to boost their own ego, not to serve Christ, but to use Christ to serve them.

[14:30] They were saying, nah, I follow Christ. If you say you're following any other leader, then I'm better. I'm a better Christian than you. And that's the trap, isn't it, with our sinful hearts.

we might say the right thing, we might believe the right doctrine, but we might use the right doctrine to serve ourselves and lift ourselves above others rather than to serve Christ and lift him up as Lord.

Paul responds to this problem of divisions with three questions in verse 13. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?

Were you baptized in the name of Paul? The answer to each of these questions is, of course not. And each of these questions points to the supremacy of Christ.

We all belong to the same crucified Lord. One Lord, one cross, one baptism. Again, Paul points to the theological identity that he affirms at the beginning of the letter.

[15:52] Now, that last question, were you baptized in the name of Paul, might suggest that the Corinthians chose leaders not only based on worldly values like rhetorical skills, but also because they were baptized by such leaders.

some of them may even have been boasting about who baptized them. Like, oh, Paul baptized me, the apostle Paul baptized me.

Another might say, well, I was baptized by Apollos, he's a better preacher than Paul. As if the baptizer gave the baptized person a higher spiritual status.

So, Paul says in verse 14 to 17 that he's thankful he didn't baptize many people in Corinth so that no one could use baptism by him as a badge of superiority.

In verse 17, Paul is even relieved that he's called primarily to preaching the gospel rather than baptizing people. And even in the preaching of the gospel, he didn't use human wisdom or eloquence.

[17:08] His message is just a plain cross of Christ so that there's no basis of following him based on worldly wisdom or values.

Paul wanted to draw people to the lordship of Christ crucified, not to himself so that people might belong to Christ rather than to Paul so that people are not divided but rather live as one church of Christ.

What does division look like today? Today, we might boast in our denominations perhaps. Again, based on worldly values.

I know of a popular pastor in Indonesia who publicly boasted about the denomination that he started because it's got more members than most other older denominations.

That's a worldly value, isn't it? Popularity, number of members. We might even use our theological tribes to lift ourselves higher than others.

[18:24] we might say, oh, I'm a Calvinist, we're better in theology than others. Oh, I'm a Wesleyan, we're better at social justice than others.

Now, those labels, those descriptions in themselves can communicate genuine and important theological convictions. It's not necessarily wrong to use them.
but if those labels make us feel better than other Christians, or worse, if we feel better than other Christians so we don't want to associate with them, then something is wrong.
That means we have lifted something or someone above the lordship of Christ, just like the people of the world, and then we divide the body of Christ.
Christ. Or perhaps we say, oh, I don't follow Calvin or Wesley or any theological system.
[19 : 26] I simply follow Christ. I have no creed but the Bible. Which is okay if that is what you believe.

But, like some of the people here in Corinth who said, I follow Christ, even that can show spiritual pride.
because beneath that sentence might be the pride that says, unlike those other Christians, I am completely free from tradition and simply read the Bible correctly.
I don't depend on Calvin or Wesley because I have Christ, again, unlike those other Christians. We can use the right doctrine for the wrong purpose.
instead of receiving truth as a gift that causes us to worship and lift up Christ higher than others, we use it as a weapon that allows us to boast!

[20 : 31] and to divide. Now, there are, of course, boundaries to Christian unity. unity. When a group or denomination denies Christ or gospel truths, then the basis of Christian unity doesn't exist.

We can't be united under the same Lord if they deny the Lord. We can't be united under the same gospel if they deny the gospel. But with those who follow the same Lord, believe the same gospel, gospel, we have to maintain unity.

We may disagree about a lot of things, about baptism, sprinkling or dunking, kids or adults. We may disagree about Holy Communion, about ordination of women, about styles of worship, about church government, or about spiritual gifts.

We may argue, because we all love the Bible and we want the truth. But can we still maintain unity in mind and thought? Can we have the same aim of glorifying God under the Lordship of Christ? When we disagree, can we disagree based on the same motivation, that is, to know God in Christ rather than to prove that I am right?

[22 : 01] disagree with you? Can we do what Paul does at the start of this letter? Can we remember that the Christians that we disagree with are also part of the Church of God, sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be His holy people, just like us?

Can we thank God for the gifts that God has given them? I disagree with you. I thank God that you have those gifts that I don't have.

To those Christians who are still struggling with immorality, just like the Corinthians, can we say to them what Paul says in verse 8? God will also keep you firm to the end so that you will be blameless.

I'm so looking forward to that day when you and I will be blameless. can we say that? So today I continue Paul's appeal.

Brothers and sisters, be united under Christ within this congregation, across congregations, within the Anglican denominations, and even across denominations.

[23 : 24] if we genuinely confess Christ crucified and risen, we belong to God in Christ together. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for giving us Jesus as our crucified Lord in whom we are united. Through the cross, he has destroyed all barriers cross.

So don't let our worldliness break the unity that he has accomplished on that cross. Unite us through the power of your spirit. In Jesus, our head, we pray.

Amen.