

'A Church Divided'

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[0:00] Please keep your Bibles open to that passage from 1 Corinthians.! Well, our vicar is away today, as I said.

! So, hypothetically speaking, this would be a prime opportunity for us to stage a hypothetical coup.! Let's choose a hypothetical new leader for ourselves.

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, no, we need social skills, someone warm and pastoral. 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.

[1:14] That was one of the problems facing the church in Corinth. Corinth was a Greek city. Yes, that picture is AI, because I could not find any photograph of the real ancient city of Corinth.

Corinth was a Greek city that was fascinated by social status, by personal advancement, and impressive public speaking. So the city was visited by traveling speakers who would display their intelligence and eloquence for the purpose of attracting followers for themselves.

Now, here in our text, it seems that the Corinthian Christians had brought that culture and value of following speakers based on worldly performance into the church.

And because of that, they were divided. Some said, oh, Apollos is the greatest. Others said, Paul is the greatest. 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, he opens the letter like this. Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours, grace and peace to you, from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

[3:03] Here, Paul reminds the Corinthians of whom they belong to. In verse 2, the Corinthian church is called the Church of God.

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

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 Paul calls them those sanctified in Christ Jesus.

To be sanctified means to be set apart, to be separated from the world for God. Again, they don't belong to Corinth. They belong to God.

Now, this is shocking when we know what Paul is about to say about them in the rest of the letter. Because these Corinthian Christians were, they had lots of problems.

[4:11] They were suing each other. They were practicing sexual immorality. One man was sleeping with his father's wife. And yet, Paul says that they're sanctified.

How can he possibly say that? Well, he can say that because their holiness was not something, was not ultimately something that they had achieved.

It was something that God had given them in Christ Jesus. 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 through the cross. They have been sanctified through the cross. But because they have been sanctified, they must live holy.

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.

[5:25] Because they belong to God. And because they belong to God, they possess his grace and promises. In verse 4 to 7, Paul says, Again, this is interesting, right?

Because based on what Paul will say later in the letter, the Corinthians were not using their speech or knowledge well. They were using speech and knowledge for boasting, to boost their own ego and pride.

And yet, at the start of the letter, Paul starts with the affirmation that they did have speech and knowledge, despite how they used it.

And these were gifts. These were not from themselves. These were gifts. Enrichment from God. Because they belong to God.

These gifts, Paul says, confirmed the testimony about Christ amongst them. That is, they believed the testimony about Jesus, and so God gave them spiritual gifts to confirm that they believed.

[6:56] And because they're rich with spiritual gifts, they're not going to lack anything as they wait for Jesus to come.

Further, in verse 8 to 9, Paul says, He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Because the Corinthians 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 blameless.

But, nonetheless, because they belong to God, they have God's promise that they will be blameless at the end. Because God will make sure that that will happen.

Now, before we continue, I think we can already apply this to ourselves. Because who are we? Are we the church of God in Doncaster?

[8:18] Or are we a church of Doncaster? If we are the church of God in Doncaster, we belong to God, not to the world. And that means the values that we carry in our lives should not be the values of this world.

Here in Doncaster, what values do people have? People can place enormous value upon education, for example, professional competence, financial security, respectability, impressive assets.

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

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

And we feel that we're more important than others. Or do we secretly feel ashamed of ourselves when we can only say, I'm currently unemployed, or I'm just a stay-at-home mom, both of which are undervalued by society.

[9:53] But what values are we adopting? Do we secretly feel proud when we describe our church as one of the biggest churches in the Melbourne Diocese in terms of numbers?

And therefore, we feel better than other churches that are smaller. What values identify us?

And where do those values come from? From the world around us? Or from what God has done for us in Christ? Now, these questions will be important for the rest of the letter.

For now, Paul gets into the first issue that he would like to address in the letter, in verse 10 to 12. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.

My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household, have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this. One of you says, I follow Paul, another I follow Apollos, another I follow Cephas, still another I follow Christ.

[11:23] Now Paul gets into the first issue that he would like to address in the letter. Here, the problem that Paul is addressing is divisions. It seems from verse 12 there that the Corinthians were using Christian leaders as badges of honor, probably based on worldly values, just like the Corinthians did with the traveling speakers.

And 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 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 doesn't mean that Christians must possess identical opinions about every single thing.

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, hymns versus Chris Tomlin.

[12:54] 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. For example, Acts 15. But we must be united in the same mind.

Whatever our preferences are, they need to serve Jesus and his gospel, not ourselves. Which songs are best?

Well, best for what? To make me feel good? Or to lift up Christ in this particular church? That's what the Corinthians were not doing.

[14:10] Instead, they used Christian leaders as badges of honor to boost their own personal ego and pride. Oh, I follow Paul. Paul is better than Apollos that you're following.

Now, among these people in verse 12, there were some who said, I follow Christ.

Isn't that the right thing to say or believe? Yes. If they said they followed Christ and therefore they rejected all factionalism and divisions.

But I think that's unlikely because these people are also included in the rebuke. What's more likely, I think, is that these people used Christ to participate in the divisions.

They used Christ as a badge of honor to boost their own ego. Again, maybe they were saying, nah, I follow Christ. If you say you're following any other leader, then I'm better than you.

[15:13] I'm a better Christian than you are. And that's the trap, isn't it, with our sinful hearts. We might say the right thing, we might have 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 the Lord of Lords.

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. Only one person died for us.

We are all baptized in the one name. One Lord, one cross, one baptism. Again, Paul points to the theological identity that he affirms at the beginning of the letter.

[16:29] We all belong to the same Lord. 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 wisdom and 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, the apostle Paul himself 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 than others.

So Paul continues in verse 14 to 17, I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius.

So no one can say that you were baptized in my name. And perhaps after writing that, he remembered, ah, yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas.

[17:41] Beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Now here, Paul is not saying that baptism is not important. He will say a great deal about baptism elsewhere. His point here is that the person administering the baptism is not important compared to

the person into whose name we are baptized, Jesus Christ.

So Paul is thankful that no one in Corinth 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. His message is just the 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.

[19 : 22] What does division look like today? Today, perhaps, we might boast in our denominations.

Some people do. Again, based on worldly values. members. 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 of the 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.

We might say, oh, I'm a Calvinist. We're better in theology than the others. Or, oh, I'm a Wesleyan. We're better at social justice than the others.

Now, those descriptions, those labels in themselves can communicate genuine and important theological convictions. It's not necessarily wrong to use them.

[20 : 30] I use them too. 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 I think something is wrong.

That means we have lifted something or someone above the lordship of Christ who unites us. Just like the people of the world, we use Christ to lift ourselves up higher than him.

Or perhaps we say, I don't follow Calvin or Wesley or any theological system, I simply follow Christ. I have no creed but the Bible. Like some of the people here in Corinth who said, I follow Christ.

Is following Christ good? Of course it is. Is submitting everything to Scripture good? Absolutely. But even that can show spiritual pride.

God. 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.

[21 : 54] I don't depend on Calvin or Wesley because I have Christ, 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, we use it as a weapon that allows us to boast and to divide the body of Christ.

Now, there are, of course, boundaries to Christian 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, we have to maintain unity.

We may disagree about a lot of things. We may disagree about baptism, sprinkling or dunking, kids or adults.

[23 : 12] We may disagree about Holy Communion. We may disagree about ordination of women, styles of worship, church government, about spiritual gifts. We may argue, and we may argue strongly, but can we still maintain unity in mind and thought?

If they follow Christ and believe the gospel, can we still call them brothers and sisters in Christ? Can we have the same aim of glorifying God under the lordship of Christ, even if we disagree on some things?

when we disagree, can we still agree that our motivation in disagreeing is to understand the Bible, to proclaim the gospel, to worship God in Christ, rather than to prove that I am right and you are wrong?

can we do what Paul does at the start of the 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 he has given them? can we say, I disagree strongly with you, but thank God for the gifts that he has given you, that he hasn't given me?

[24 : 48] Can we rejoice that God has promised to keep them along with us until the day of Jesus Christ? To those Christians who are still struggling with immorality, just like the Corinthians, can we still 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 made blameless, even if we disagree.

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 denomination, and even across denominations. 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.

[26 : 08] Jesus has broken all barriers, so don't let our worldliness break that unity that he has accomplished on the cross. Unite us through the power of your Spirit.

In Jesus, our head, we pray. Amen. Thank you.