

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

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[0 : 00] Well, I'm very glad you've joined us for this series in 1 Corinthians. And at this point, if you would take up your Bible and turn to the reading that Zoltan just read for us on page 952.

This long letter was written to a church in Corinth by the Apostle Paul. He'd planted it four or five years before.

And as we saw last week, it's a church with issues. It's one of the most dysfunctional churches we hear about in the New Testament. Some people call it a hot mess.

It's a train wreck of issues. And as we saw last week, it makes the first nine verses so encouraging that as the Apostle tries to wrest their focus away from themselves onto the person of Jesus Christ, he says, you are a complete miracle.

The fact that God has made you a church, called you out of Corinth, is because he's called you into the fellowship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

[1 : 10] And now here in verse 10, we come to the first big issue. And this issue now runs for the next four chapters.

He begins an appeal to the Corinthians that's going to go from chapters 1 to the end of chapter 4. And then in chapter 5, he begins the second big issue.

Question. How do you help a selfish, immature, spiritually arrogant, hypersensitive church? It's a good question.

I ask myself that often. I include myself in that, you know. What the Apostle does is very gentle but very clear.

He doesn't command them here. He doesn't give them a list of things they need to fix. He comes beside them and he appeals to them. If you look at verse 10, he says, Brothers and sisters.

[2 : 11] Brothers in Corinthians always means brothers and sisters. We have the same Heavenly Father, the same Lord Jesus Christ. And he does this right at the start because the issue is not theological but personal.

Look down at verse 11. It has been reported to me by Chloe's people. Chloe was a wealthy woman in the congregation. Some people from her household have gone over to Ephesus to talk to Paul.

It's reported to me, my Chloe's people, that there is quarreling, big word, among you, my brothers and sisters. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Jordan.

I'm sorry. I follow Paul. I follow Apollos. I follow Cephas. And best of all, I follow Christ. That's the group I want to belong to. The quarreling word is very important because there are divisions.

There's open fighting and factions in the church at Corinth. Groups have formed and gathered around their favourite teacher, favourite leader.

[3 : 18] And you may say, so what? I mean, don't all of us have our favourite preacher? Doesn't everyone have preferences? What's the big deal?

I've got two points. Paul makes two points here in this passage if you're a note taker. The first one is how to break a living church. And the second is how to mend a broken church.

So firstly, how to break a living church. It's no exaggeration to say that what they are doing is threatening to destroy the church of God at Corinth.

If you go over to chapter 3 in this first section and drop down to verse 16 on the next page, the apostle says this, Do you not know that you are God's temple and God's spirit dwells in you?

If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy him. For God's temple is holy and you are that temple. So this is not a trivial matter.

[4 : 23] And you can hear the alarm in Paul's voice in our passage in verse 13 when he says, Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you?

He can hardly believe what they are doing. Because what they are doing is not one thing, but two. They are gathering around these four different names, forming cliques and factions, and they're quarrelling.

They're openly fighting and competitive with each other. They're boosting their own human leaders as a way of boosting themselves. They're climbing over one another for reputation.

And it's broken out in open hostility and fighting and quarrelling and verbal combat in the church. I don't know if you've ever been in a church like that. It's awful.

But it's very common in church land. We're bothered and consumed about things that don't matter. And not bothered and not consumed about things that do.

[5 : 27] In churches, we fight over all sorts of things that are not the gospel. Style of preaching. Style of music. Style of services.

Style of building. Style of clothing. In Corinth, there were at least four groups. The first group says, I follow Paul.

Now, this is probably the old guard. You know, the first ones converted at Paul's time. They just said, well, he was our founding father. He's the planter. He's the apostle. He's our guy.

And you might think that the apostle Paul would say, I like this. I like that group. Let's make that group bigger. I mean, it's very different than getting beaten and thrown in prison.

But he's not going to have anything to do with it. The other group is another group that says, Apollos is our guy. Back in Acts 18, where we read the story of how the gospel first came to Corinth, after Paul left, a young man named Paulus came to Corinth.

[6 : 28] He was from Jewish background in Alexandria. He was brilliant. He was articulate and an eloquent speaker. And he taught the gospel from the scriptures with great knowledge and power.

And he refuted those who disagreed. It would be like having a preacher who had four PhDs, who held the record, the world record for 100 meters, who climbed the chief before breakfast.

Am I getting the picture across? Just released six award-winning albums. I'm just making this up. There's no disagreement between Paul and Apollos. Apollos has done nothing to create this personal following.

But he's much more appealing to the Corinthians because he's so outwardly impressive. And you can see the Corinthians saying, finally, we've got someone we're not embarrassed to bring our non-Christian friends to hear.

Finally, strong and powerful person. We can make a real impression on our pagan neighbors. Come and hear Apollos. The group around Cephas, and that's the Greek word for Peter, probably Jewish group.

[7 : 40] There's no evidence that Peter ever got to Corinth, but they might have some connection with him. And the Christ group, this is the ultimate in one-upmanship. They just look down on everyone else.

What are they doing? What they are doing is they are bringing into the church a profoundly secular Corinthian practice, unchallenged and unchanged.

The terrible quarreling comes back in chapter 3, verse 3. If you just cast your eyes down there, Paul says halfway through the verse, While there is jealousy and, here's the same word, quarreling among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving in a human way, behaving like every other Corinthian, verse 4?

When one says, I follow Paul, and another, I follow Apollos, are you not being merely human? Or some translators say it, are you not just operating in a secular fashion?

In Corinth, the main entertainment, the main education, the main activity of the elites was dominated by a group called the sophists, or sophists, it depends what university you went to.

[9 : 00] It was the most lucrative job available in Corinth. Sophists were public performers and orators, brilliant at philosophy and debate, brilliant at putting other people down.

They were professional quarrelers who were really good at their job. You didn't need social media in Corinth, you promoted yourself by live quarrelling with someone else.

And most evenings you could go out into the open market squares and watch them competing with each other, way better than Netflix. These are the ones Paul calls in verse 20, the debaters of this age.

And they would come to Corinth and they would open shop in the public square and wealthy families would send their young to be disciples. And you would form a school and you would make a fortune.

And if you became a disciple of one of these sophists, you would say something like, I am of Alvinus Balbina, or I am of Celsius Lepidus, or I am of Maximus Postumus, or whoever your teacher was.

[10 : 12] And they would imitate their teachers in fashion, in speaking style, even how they walked. And above all, competition was at the heart of being a disciple.

A key part of being a disciple was to quarrel. Same word is used in secular Greek as this word here. We have record a couple of years after Paul leaves Corinth of a Christian teacher who goes into Corinth, who goes up to the temple of Poseidon and watches sophists fighting each other and shouting at each other, descending into fistfights, and they killed each other.

Some of the disciples would kill each other. This was amazing. And what the Corinthians are doing is they're bringing in a competitive Corinthian city culture straight into the church, and they're operating exactly like the world around them.

And Paul says, if you do that, you're in danger of tearing Christ in pieces and destroying the body of Christ in Corinth. And the reason it's so destructive is because it's based on pride.

Pride is the opposite of love. It's the opposite of the cross. It empties the cross of all its significance and all its effectiveness.

[11 : 54] C.S. Lewis, who's a Christian writer, wrote on pride. He said, pride is the essential vice, the utmost evil. He says, unchastity, anger, greed, drunkenness, and all that, they're mere flea bites in comparison.

It was through pride that the devil became the devil. Pride leads to every other vice. It is the complete anti-God state of mind.

And Lewis could have been reading 1 Corinthians 1 to 4. Just look down in chapter 4, verse 6, just over the page for a moment. Paul says, look, I've applied these things to myself and Apollos.

He's going back to that first idea. For your benefit, brothers and sisters, so that you might learn by us not to go beyond what is written, that none of you be puffed up in favour of one against another.

For who sees anything different in you? We'll get to this in a couple of weeks. What do you have that you didn't receive? If you received it, why do you boast as if you didn't?

[13 : 03] But this word puffed up, which is also translated as arrogant, comes back again and again in Corinthians. And the word literally, it's what you do to a balloon or a soccer ball.

You just blow hot air into it until it can float. And Paul says, you Corinthians, you're puffing yourselves up against one another so that you can feel better.

It's arrogance, it's pride, because it's spiritual competitiveness. Back to Lewis again. He says, pride is essentially competitive.

It's competitive by its very nature. Pride gets no pleasure out of having something, only out of having more of it than the other in the next person. We say, people are proud of being rich or clever or good looking.

He says, they're not. They're proud of being richer or cleverer or better looking than others. That's why pride is enmity. Not only enmity between humans, but between us and God.

[14 : 12] For pride, he says, is a spiritual cancer. It eats away the possibility of love or contentment or common sense. You know, isn't it amazing how easily pride creeps right into the center of our faith and our relationships in church?

We compare ourselves to each other. We seem so willing to fight over things that are a million miles from the gospel. I'm in two minds about telling this story.

But I worked in another church 13,000 kilometers away from here. And the church council meeting descended one night into a shouting match. And on one side of the table was the rector's warden.

And on the other side of the table was the head of InterVarsity in New South Wales. And when they couldn't shout over each other, they stood up and started pounding the table with their fists.

It made an indelible mark on the table and on me. Do you know what they were fighting about? The length of the children's services. That's right.

[15 : 19] So it's pride that kills churches. And it kills churches either by slow carbon monoxide poisoning or by outbursts around different people.

It destroys the work of the gospel in us because it's the work of the gospel to destroy pride in us. It's the work of the gospel to bring us low. So I just want to finish this first point.

We harm the church when we put ourselves first. We harm the church when we quarrel over things that are not the gospel. We harm the church when we elevate ourselves over others.

We harm the church when we think of the church as the place for my favorite cause. When we're prickly and territorial. When we feel we're not noticed or not thanked. Or we gather in factions around personality.

Or we bring worldly practices into the church unchallenged. So Paul writes this letter to a church full of pride and selfishness. Full of knowledge and their own sense of spiritual superiority.

[16 : 29] And they're in danger of destroying the church. Now what do you say? What do you do with this? Because it's humanly impossible to turn a church like this around.

We as humans just don't have the resources to do it. We're powerless in the face of this spiritually subtle and deadly power of our own pride.

And most of us are blind to it in our own lives. CS Lewis has this lovely thing in his chapter on pride. He says, The way you can tell how proud you are is how much you hate it in other people.

There is only one remedy God offers us. There's only one thing that can overturn the power of his grace. Overturn the power of our own pride. And that is the grace of God in the cross.

It's the cross alone that is the power and pattern to dethrone our proud thoughts. And to humble us under his grace. To create new people with new love and new unity.

[17 : 33] So let me move quickly and briefly. How to break a living church. How to mend a broken church. And that's why Paul begins this section with the name of the Lord Jesus.

That's where he starts. You see back in verse 10. I appeal to you brothers and sisters by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. It's the name of the Lord Jesus.

He says that all of you agree. That there be no divisions among you. That you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. He's not talking about a mindless conformity.

He's not saying that when you become Christians you suddenly agree on politics, sport and arts. That would be so boring. But the agreement he's speaking here is the agreement in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Having the same mindset that Jesus had. Having a mindset where we don't see others as competitors. But we see others as more important than ourselves. Doing what we can to build them in love.

[18 : 39] It's a unity that comes from sharing the life of the one who gave himself over to death on the cross. It's very interesting. This word for united in the same mind is the word for mending nets that have holes in them.

Or fixing broken bones. Healing them back into place. He says by your dividing Corinthians you're trying to tear Christ's body into pieces.

And the only way to mend this broken church is to repent of the idea of using the church to build your own status. Accept his love and the death as the way to love others.

And value the church as he did. Incidentally I think that's why Paul mentions baptism. Because we're baptised into Christ Jesus. We're not baptised into the Anglican church or into Paul.

And you can see Paul dictating this and saying I thank God that I didn't baptise many of you. And Sosthenes says well what about Gaius? And he says oh yeah I did baptise.

[19 : 38] Oh yeah maybe the household of Stephanas. That's right. But it's in the last verse of this little section where the apostle comes to what's most important.

And this is going to consume him for the next four chapters. Let me read it again. Christ did not send me to baptise but to preach the gospel. Not with eloquent words of wisdom lest the cross of Christ be emptied.

The word power is not there. Lest the cross of Christ just be empty. I think this is brilliant. He doesn't go straight at their divisions. But to heal them he goes at what's underneath that binds us together.

The miracle of the wisdom and saving power of God in the cross of Jesus Christ. And here is the first reference in the letter to this idea of wisdom. Sophia.

From which we get sophist. He says I'm not preaching with words of eloquent Sophia. You're a clever, sophisticated, deliberate eloquent speaking.

[20 : 47] Speaking that manipulates the audience for a particular response, particularly to gather disciples around themselves. it's what the corinthians wanted it's what a lot of pan people a lot of people in vancouver want the corinthians want to be wowed they want to be manipulated manipulated they want to be overwhelmed by emotional eloquence and moving stories to show how clever the speaker is and the apostle says either we allow the cross to empty of us of pride and self-love or we are we empty the cross of power and significance and he applies the power and grace of god in the cross to this corinthian issue of quarreling and gathering around favorite leaders because as we're going to see over the next few weeks it is the cross of jesus christ that that deconstructs what's wrong in the culture of corinth just as it has the power to do in the culture of vancouver it's only the cross of jesus christ that gives us the power and principle of radical love and unity and self-giving and you know as well as i do that the more a preacher draws attention to themselves away from christ they more the more they empty the cross of its saving power because the power of the cross is the sheer grace of utter humiliation and giving over to death of the son of god i'll just say this some people think that paul was a pathetic speaker that he was dull and could not rise and couldn't compete in the eloquent stakes absolute nonsense you read his letters just have a look at his eloquence but he is saying that he deliberately chose to hide himself under the cross not just in what he preached but in how he preached when i first became the rector of saint john's a friend of mine gave me he had framed a little text that hung in john stott's bedroom john founded in a parish church some years before and it pulled it out last night it goes like this when telling thy salvation free that all absorbing thoughts of thee my heart and soul engross and when all hearts are bowed and stirred beneath the influence of thy word hide me beneath thy cross it's beautiful isn't it and you can tell can't you when a preacher is after approval they will use charm to captivate and cleverness to manipulate and it's about prestige and it just empties the cross of its power the cross becomes a tool for their pride i think we live in a day in our world most people i think believe that our society is more divided fractured than ever before there's more mutual suspicion and hostility between nations and within nations and there are easily identifiable factions in just about every area of life and saint john's i think we ought to thank god for the precious unity that he's given to us over the years it is a gift from god it's not ours but he's given it to us and he's called on us to maintain that unity with humility and with love because in the end what is behind divisions and quarreling in the church is pride and the new testament doesn't come along and offer us advice saying stop that it comes along and offers us the son of god bleeding and dying in the most humiliating way to pay for our pride and our selfishness an act of heartbreaking pride emptying love creating grace and it's only the cross which opens the door to a new unity not marked by self-seeking but seeking the

good of others so this morning as we come to receive the body and blood of christ let's pray to god not just thanks for his unity pray that god would give us that humility we need to seek the best of others and to love others as christ has loved us now let's kneel and pray to bless our true blessings weeks to bless to bless we to ph ■■■ to to to to to to