

1.1 When Wanting to be Different Is Disastrous

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[0 : 00] This morning, Josh is going to be preaching for us from the book of 1 Corinthians. So let's turn to 1 Corinthians together, and we'll read chapter 1 and the first 17 verses.

So that's 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1 to 17. 1 Corinthians 1, verses 1 to 17.

I give thanks to my God always for you, because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge, even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you, so that you are not lacking in any gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, who will sustain you to the end, guiltless, in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

God is faithful, by whom you are called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment.

For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ.

[1 : 56] Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name.

I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

Amen. This is the word of God. Well, do open your Bibles again to 1 Corinthians chapter 1.

We've got a bit of an introduction to the letter this morning, and we're going to be returning to this first key section, chapters 1 to chapter 4, later in June.

But this morning, let's look at the introduction. The Apostle Paul is a marketer's nightmare.

[3 : 08] We live in a world that seems to be increasingly obsessed with public perception and image. Digital to marketing, comms, it's a booming industry. The question of how can organizations boost their profiles through social media?

How can public perception be shaped to tell a story that will imbue even more loyalty? And expert communications can dig even failing politicians out of deep holes.

Put forward a picture of yourself as someone utterly confident and competent, and you can get away with all sorts. But the Apostle Paul was a marketer's nightmare.

If Christchurch Corinth had a brand manager or an image consultant, then they'd be keeping Paul as far away from the mic, the platform, the social media accounts as possible. Because Paul was determinedly weak, shaped in all ways by the pattern of the cross.

And in truth, that helps us get to the very heart of all that was wrong in Corinth. This was a church that didn't really want to be associated with Paul.

[4 : 14] Throughout the letter, Paul has to instruct them again and again to imitate him, to copy him, to follow Paul as he follows Jesus. We saw that recently when we looked at the section of the letter that covers food offered to idols.

Paul's last word in that section, 11.1, Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ. But we see it also in chapter 4. Paul says, I urge you then, be imitators of me.

But something about this just doesn't sit with the Corinthians. You see, they're a church that thinks themselves rather special. This isn't Christchurch Smallville, population 12.

No, no, this is Corinth. Metropolitan Trade Center, sophisticated, educated, significant. They're no one-horse town. Corinth was where things were at.

They were spiritual kings, or so they thought. Paul says sarcastically of them later in the letter that they are rich, that they are kings even.

[5 : 22] But there's something that just doesn't quite add up in all of this. Corinth thought themselves super spiritual. But at the same time, if you read through this letter, you realize that they'd be the happiest of hunting grounds for a gossip column.

After all, this is a church with no small list of newsworthy issues. Sex scandals were rife. Chapters 5 to 7. There wasn't just one of them. There was incest, prostitution.

Perhaps the most puzzling sex scandal of all was the sexless sex scandal. Here was a place that celebrated married couples not being one together. But it wasn't just sex that they're happy to take each other to court.

They will sue each other whilst meeting to sing with each other. Chapter 6. Idle worship? No problem. As long as it comes with a good meal. Chapters 8 to 10.

Mysterious cult-like deaths around a sacred meal? Chapter 11. Confusion about the whole realm of the roles of men and women? Chapter 11. Chaotic expressions of super spirituality and languages nobody understands?

[6 : 30] Chapters 12 to 14. A church that denies the resurrection? Chapter 15. And that isn't to mention the bizarre notion of baptism for the dead. How many Netflix seasons could you get out of all these juicy issues?

But the question comes, how on earth do these things marry? That Corinth thought itself a mighty church, but it was a church that was in a mess.

And in all kinds of different ways. Well, I don't think it can make much sense that all these issues that I've listed are completely disconnected and unrelated to each other.

As if the group of people who will sit in the balcony in Christchurch Corinth, they're the ones who sue each other. The ones who sit at the front, they hate the resurrection. The four families who come in late, they're the ones who are all messed up about sex.

No, no. There's something that holds all these things together. Paul has his hands full in dealing with this church. All these issues are present and ought to concern any serious church.

[7 : 37] But there's something that undergirds all of them. And that's what Paul's dealing with in chapters one to four. Think of each issue, whether it be food offered to idols or resurrection.

Think of each issue like a tap. As it's turned on, out comes the mess of how Corinth were getting things so badly wrong. No matter where you turn the tap on, no matter which tap it is, the presenting issue spews out the same problem.

Paul's letter isn't trying to give instructions to fix each individual tap. Rather, he recognizes that the source of the water is corrupted.

That's where the issue is. And the issue is this. The Corinthians think that they're mighty, but they're not. They think that they're spiritual giants who are glorious in this age.

But the reality is they've dressed up worldliness in pious spiritual language. They think they're so mighty that they've moved on from even the apostle Paul himself.

[8 : 48] And so that leads Corinth to drawing lines through the church. In their mind, there are the strong, wise, glorious Christians. And then there's these weak, foolish ones. The ones that the world around looks at and scoffs at.

And so Corinth, Paul's in that camp. He's weak. He's foolish. He's their brand manager's nightmare. Worse still, he doesn't even try to hide his weakness.

In fact, at the start of chapter 2, he points it out to them. He reminds them of his weakness. And so Paul has a job on his hands. Because he needs to win this church round to his way.

To imitate him. But he has to do so in a way that doesn't play into their predisposition. To create impressive things. So he can't use his own wit or wisdom.

Because that would only perpetuate the problem. They'd love that. And so we're going to look, firstly this morning. A little bit at this problem.

[9 : 52] Before turning to the introduction. To see how Paul's going to deal with it. So first, verses 10 to 17. We see silly ruptures. Silly ruptures.

Verses 10 to 17. When a church adopts the world's standard for power and success. It loses its only true power. That was the warning for Corinth.

You see, rife in this church was a kind of factionalism. A tribalism. Verse 10. Paul wants them to agree that there would be new divisions. Verse 11. There is quarreling.

And verse 12. This all centers around which leader you belong to. Which tribe is your tribe? See, some are saying, I follow Paul. Or I follow Apollos.

Or I follow Cephas. Of course, it isn't wrong to identify the church you belong to or are loyal to and respect the leaders God has given you. But the issue here is around why such stock was put into belonging to each faction.

[10:53] Who you belonged with could either elevate or demean you. We'll come back to verse 13. But notice what Paul goes on to say in verse 14.

He says, I thank God that I baptized none of you. Well, there are a few. Crispus, Gaius, Stephanus and his household. Paul says, I don't know if there are any others. But I'm glad that that's the case. Because verse 15. Paul doesn't want people wandering around the church. Having pointless theological debate. Showing off. Dropping into the argument as if it wins it.

Well, do you know who baptized me? I was baptized by Paul. Who were you baptized by? Oh, just the young associate. What's his name?

I've forgotten his name. Don't know who he is. He's not a big deal. Not like Paul. I'm sure he's nearly as good. It seems that baptism in Corinth is being used to identify the faction that different Christians belong to.

[11:56] It's where they're getting their identity. But look at verse 17. Paul has no time for such pettiness, such worldly attitudes. We know what that's like, don't we?

If someone studied at the right university, they're the real deal. And the truth is that so much of the world's ambitions are shaped by being associated with the right names, the right brands, the people who do and say the right things.

And it helps when applying for jobs, that your degree was from a top-tier university. It helps that you've worked in companies with name recognition. But that cannot come into the church.

Why? Paul gives us at least two reasons. The first one, because we all belong to Christ.

Verse 13. Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in Paul's name? There is, of course, a sense in which Christ is divided here.

[12:58] His body, the church, is divided all over the place in Corinth. The factions are bringing division to Christ's body. And there's a sense in which Paul has been crucified for them. He says later in the letter that he dies every day.

That's his ministry. Dying for the sake of the gospel. He embodies the cross the whole way through. But Paul's point here is that it is folly to look down on other Christians over who their leader is.

Over how wise and strongly look by the world's standards. Because we all belong to Christ. He was the one who died for us.

He's the one whose body we're baptized into. All Christians belong to Christ. And that's the important identity. So that's the first reason. But the second reason, Paul makes clear that it negates the power of the cross.

Verse 17. Paul's job was to preach. And here is where we begin to see what the Corinthians love. Preaching isn't about eloquence.

[14:06] Corinth was a city that loved philosophers and wordsmiths. Those who were really dazzling would earn patronage from wealthy people in the city. The more impressive you were, the more money you'd be paid.

The more people who'd want to hear you. And it was prestigious to be associated with the right speakers. But this standard seems to have drifted into the church.

Which preachers are going to draw a crowd? Which ones show how wise we are? But when a church puts its emphasis on being mighty by the world's standards, what happens?

Verse 17. The cross is emptied of its power. Notice it's not made a little less powerful. It's emptied. We cannot put our confidence in what will dazzle the world and put our confidence in Christ at the same time. So, as a church, we don't need to have the coolest buildings.

[15:10] We don't need to be culturally trendy. We don't need to have music that would feature in the charts. We don't need hip and popular ministers. A truly spiritual church, and thus a truly powerful church, is one that proclaims and personifies the gospel of Christ crucified.

A church that's filled with people who want to stand out, who prefer the might of the world to the weakness of the cross, that is a church that is going to be riddled with problem after problem.

That is a church that is going to be utterly ineffective for gospel ministry. That's a taste of the problem in Corinth.

And that's why Paul begins this letter with a rather pointed introduction. So, we're going to look at verses 1 to 9 now, and we see shared riches. Shared riches, verses 1 to 9.

A church that knows where its true riches come from is a church that cannot have any sense of superiority. At first glance, these opening verses are a warm, encouraging opening, full of the blessings of the gospel, giving thanks in relation to the Corinthians.

[16:27] But that is to miss the point. Paul is using his introduction here to land his first blow on this church, to set the course for the whole letter.

And so his introduction is preparing us for all that's ahead. And in it, he's taking aim at the very roots of the Corinthian problem. And he does it in three ways.

First, he tells the Corinthians that, spiritually speaking, they're just like everybody else. They're certainly no better off, verses 1 to 3. And to a proud Corinthian, that would be a chastening thing. Secondly, he makes clear that all that is good about them is gifted to them, in verses 4 to 7. And then he reminds them that their privileges are for their perseverance, verses 7 to 9.

So, first of those, verses 1 to 3, the Corinthians are just like everybody else. Look at the language Paul uses.

[17:29] Verse 2, To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.

Do you see how Paul is aligning them with every other church? The Corinthians have their lines through the church to separate the strong and weak, the winners and the losers.

But look at what Paul does. He draws the line around the church. Turn over to chapter 4, a really key chapter in this whole letter.

And verse 8, it's a really key verse. Paul says, sarcastically, that without us, you have become kings.

But notice the last phrase in the verse. He says, And would that you did reign so that we might share the rule with you. You can see here how the Corinthians want to be distanced from Paul.

[18:36] But Paul's insistence that what is true for one church that is built on the apostolic gospel is true for all churches built on the apostolic gospel. Slight diversion here.

Of course, not every church that calls itself a church is a church. When a church has given up on the gospel completely and doesn't trust Jesus as Lord, it isn't a true church. Look at how Paul frames all of this.

The Corinthians are called to be saints together with all those who call upon the name of the Lord. And so know and act like Jesus is Lord. So there are churches that aren't in the same standing because they're not true churches at all.

End of diversion. Paul is clear that there are no tiers of super Christians and the rest in truly gospel churches. He says, If you are kings, we reign with you.

Look on to 4, 16 and 17. Paul says, Be imitators of me. That's why I sent you Timothy, someone else like me, my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, to remind you of my ways in Christ as I teach them everywhere, in every church.

[19:51] It is a disastrous thing for a church to want to be different if the difference means abandoning Paul. Back to chapter 1. Notice that Paul uses the same language for himself here in his unique roles in apostle as the language he uses for the Corinthians.

So verse 1, both have been called, Paul in verse 1. Verse 2, the Corinthians have been called. Verse 1, Paul is what he is by the will of God.

Verse 2, the Corinthians are what they are as the church of God. Paul's apostleship gains its place by virtue of Christ Jesus. Verse 1, verse 2, the Corinthians are sanctified in Christ Jesus.

Both called, both belong to God, both have become this through Christ Jesus. Paul is saying, abandoning him is abandoning Christianity.

A truly spiritual church isn't a church that acts like it's superior. And very often we can think that Corinthians is a letter that was really written to charismatic churches over there that aren't like us.

[21:11] It deals with their issues. It can be more comfortable to distance ourselves from much of what Corinthians deals with because we like to think that we're above it. But we must be very careful.

The central problem in Corinth that provoked all the other issues was that they thought that they were strong. They thought they were a very good church, better than the others.

And wouldn't that be an easy thing for us to fall into? Scotland's drifting away from Christianity more and more. There are many so-called churches that have actually abandoned Paul long ago and proven to be a new church at all.

And so with that backdrop isn't it easy for us to be suspicious of other churches? Add into that all the ways that the Lord has blessed us here. We're a fairly large church.

We've got three locations. Had some positive media attention recently. Got strong links with a very good training course. Lots of people trained as Bible teachers. Been able to send other workers to other churches.

[22 : 14] churches. It would be a very easy thing for us to puff our chests out and be rather pleased with ourselves, wouldn't it? Let's show these other churches how a proper church does things.

Well, if we're involved in things like that, if we get caught up in our own hype, then the list of staggering behaviors found in Corinth may soon be found here in Glasgow.

It's worth remembering as we are involved in things like CU leadership or similar things in work or school when we're mixing with people from other churches. We must be very gracious and never fall into the trap of puffing out our chests.

The Corinthians wanted to be mighty. Paul was an embarrassment to them because not only was his message about a Savior who died on a cross, but he was an apostle who personified that same cross in all of its weakness, all of its sacrifice, and all of its shame.

Paul never goes down well with this world. That is both because of his message and his manner. And so any desire that we have to stand out to be different by impressing the world is simply a desire to prize what they prize.

[23 : 41] So maybe we cringe when we see the public attention that other Christians get or other churches when they're being mocked and ridiculed. But if that happens to them for being faithful to Jesus in ways that look utterly weak and foolish, if it's even in some lacking tact that we might want to have ourselves, who on earth are we to feel superior?

Or to put it another way, if we want to be a truly spiritual church, we must be comfortable with being ordinary, regular, weak-looking, just like Paul and just like every other true church.

Well, imagine that. Imagine a company, any company in the world, having their marketing department set up to say that. Apple, we make phones and computers just like all the rest.

Cambridge, an education just like any other. Carlsberg, probably the most average larger in the world. The Tron Church, a church just like any other.

If that's true, then we'll be a church that's full of the power of the cross. And that's so important because secondly, verses four to seven, all that is good about the Corinthians is gifted to them.

[25 : 12] All that is good about us is gifted to us. Verse four, notice what Paul is thankful for.

he's thankful for the Corinthians because of the grace of God that was given them. Verse five, because they were enriched in Christ. Verse six, as the gospel was confirmed among you as it bore fruit.

Verse seven, so that you are not lacking any gift. In each of these four verses, Paul is making clear that all that is spiritual in them, all that is good and mighty in them has been given to them.

It isn't their boost. It's all gifted, given through grace. Are the Corinthians rich? Are they spiritual?

Well, verse five, in every way, they were enriched in all speech and all knowledge.

Verse seven, they are lacking, not lacking in any gift. They were rich, they were spiritual, but only through what they had been given through Christ.

[26 : 25] It's worth noticing words that appear in here, that appear all over this letter. They've been enriched in all speech and all knowledge. They are big Corinthian words.

This was a church that loved to speak. They loved impressive, eloquent speakers as we've seen. And Paul is already making clear that any gifts in speaking that they enjoy, any power that comes from their preaching, any theological clarity they enjoy was only theirs because it was gifted to them.

So these things don't separate them as Christians. They don't elevate. It's quite the opposite. There are two ways in which these spiritual realities don't elevate them because all Christians have received the same.

All those in every place who call upon the name of our Lord Jesus have received these things, have been enriched in Christ and they're all gifts.

They're not earned but given. Turn over to chapter 4 again. This time verse 7. We see the same idea play out.

[27 : 38] Paul says, Who sees anything different in you? What do you have that you did not receive? If then you received it, why do you boast as if you did not receive it?

When a church enjoys privileges, when there is real maturity at work, when they have ministers who are respected outside their own congregation, when they have great resources to use, when they're growing, when they've got talented musicians, all of these things aren't to produce gloating but gratitude.

The Corinthians didn't get this. There's a pattern that plays out in 1 Corinthians. Paul responds to things that the church have asked him about starting in chapter 7 and he points these things out but it is now concerning.

And the pattern is that Paul says now concerning and quotes what the Corinthians think about something, the language they use and then he moves on to correct it.

Turn over to chapter 12. 12 verse 1. Now concerning spiritual gifts.

[28 : 57] But look at the footnote. The footnote has a more helpful translation for us. A more accurate one. Spiritual persons. The Greek word is just the spirituals.

The word gift isn't there. So remember the pattern. Paul quotes the Corinthian word and then corrects it. The Corinthian idea is to speak about the spiritual people.

Paul's correction is to talk about gifts. 12.4. Now there are varieties of gifts. Different Greek word.

There's a change in idea. The Corinthians like to think about what makes them special and spiritual. Paul knows all of these things are given. In fact he says chapter 12 verse 3 no one can say Jesus is Lord except in the Holy Spirit.

So Paul's definition of a spiritual person is anyone who knows and trusts and responds to Jesus is Lord. Anyone who does this is enriched in Christ.

[30 : 06] Given all manner all manner of gifts. So as a church we don't need to long to be something that we're not. We don't have to strive after looking mighty to the world.

In fact if we do if we're a church that's celebrated in newspapers and blogs if we fit in with all around us then we will have likely forgotten the Lord Jesus himself.

Back to chapter 1 again. Notice in these 9 verses of the introduction that Jesus is mentioned in every single verse 10 times in 9 verses.

All that we have all that makes the church who we are all that makes any true church a true church comes to us through the Lord Jesus. and when we long to be mighty we want to make a splash in the world by being like the world then we're squeezing Jesus out of the picture.

Jesus didn't grasp at the world's glory and praises. We'll see that next time in 1 Corinthians he actually turns them upside down. A mighty church is a church that looks like Jesus enriched through him gifted by him living like him particularly in embracing weakness sacrifice and shame.

[31 : 45] We need to be reminded of these things don't we? For whilst we do look foolish to this world I'm sure we're all familiar with that feeling. Every little obedience to Christ every sacrifice made that gives up the world's joy for the joy of the world to come that does look silly to the world around us.

And so it's easy for us to feel weak and to want to do something to change that. It can be for noble reasons that we want to appear a bit less weird, a bit less weak, a bit less witless and maybe even to appear a bit more woke.

It can be for the noble reason of wanting to help more people like us and like the gospel. people like us to be for the people. But Paul wants to encourage us. All that we have doesn't give us grounds for boasting but we have still been given great riches in Christ.

In every way we're enriched in him. The world doesn't see that. And were it not for those riches we really would be foolish.

but as it is every true church has been gifted with every spiritual blessing. And Paul finally says these blessings, these privileges are for our perseverance.

[33 : 10] Verses 7 to 9. Notice verse 7 what these gifts are for. The Corinthians are not lacking any gift as they wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ who will sustain you to the end guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The other thing about the Corinthians, they're an impatient church. They didn't like to wait. Paul mentions the future three times here as they wait, as they will be sustained to the end and the day

of our Lord Jesus.

The truth is that the church will be seen to be mighty because the church's future is being raised to reign with Jesus. But Jesus' pattern was stepping down from a great height first to then be raised up to the highest place.

Jesus' life on earth was death, then resurrection. The Corinthians are impatient. They don't want to wait for glory.

they want it now. Back to chapter four. Verse five. Therefore, do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes.

[34 : 37] Verse eight. Already you have all you want. Already you have become rich. Before, before. Already, already. And then in chapter 15, Paul is very careful to make clear the proper order of things.

He says, this age is not marked with glory for Christians because our glory is to come. First is death, then resurrection.

Our glory comes when resurrection comes. The Corinthians wanted it all now. They wanted to skip the crucifixion thing and jump straight to the victory.

But there isn't the splendor of resurrection without the sacrifice of the cross. Not for Jesus. Not for us. Ours is to wait.

We wait in weakness. We wait as we imitate Paul. We wait by pouring ourselves into the run of the mill everyday Christian life. Living to honor Jesus, trusting his word, and accepting all the costs that come with that.

[35 : 51] And there are all kinds of costs that make us look weak. When we have to give up relationships that are painfully, that just aren't going to be helpful.

When precious hobbies drift by the wayside because we're devoted to our church family. When luxuries are sacrificed to the offering basket. our street cred in the office.

God has enriched us in so many ways through Christ, but they aren't seen in power, in strength, in wisdom, and in honor by the world.

Quite the opposite. We'll see them fully and finally only after our death leads to resurrection. verse 9.

Paul hasn't given up on this church. That's why he's writing. At points, he's scathing about them, but he's not writing as a nitpicker.

[36 : 58] He's writing as a pastor. He's not writing to flog them, but he's writing out of concern as their spiritual father. a church. A church that gets too big for its boots needs to be disempowered.

That was Corinth. And what they're given by the Lord was an apostle who has been brought low. Corinth wanted a crown.

Paul is giving each of them a cross. That's what a truly spiritual church looks like.

A church that's embraced weakness. A church that looks just like Paul. is not what we want to be. Let's pray.

Father, we thank you for the very many evidences of your grace that we enjoy. Grant us more grace that we might never be taken with this world over the world to come.

[38 : 15] shape us by the unseen realities of heaven and hell so that our crown would never be found here but only in the wonderful day to come.

And we pray in Jesus' name.