

Unified Fellowship

1. Intro & Context

- Today we're starting a news sermon series studying the NT letter of 1 Corinthians
- 1 Corinthians was written by the Apostle Paul to a church community that Paul new well
- Because of its location, Corinth was a major port city in the ancient world which meant it was also a was also a big economic centre
- It was also a city that had lots of temples to Greek and Roman gods

- All of this meant that as a city. Corinth was wealthy, cosmopolitan ... but it was also full of sexual immorality, pagan idolatry and greed
- It was a city known for being obsessed with status, self-promotion, and personal rights

- Because of its strategic location, Paul went to Corinth on his second missionary journey
- Refer map
 - Come up through modern day Turkey
 - Down through northern Greece to Athens
 - After leaving Athens came across to Corinth
- He spent 18 months¹ in Corinth (50-1AD)
 - Worked as a tent maker alongside Aquila and Pricilla
 - Luke has recorded for us in Acts that Paul devoted himself to preaching and teaching the word of God and that Jesus was the Christ and that
 - Acts 18:8 - *many of the Corinthians who heard him believed and were baptized*
 - Most of those converted were Gentiles who had turned from idols (1 Cor 12:2)
- And so this Christian community was formed in Corinth because of the faithful preaching of Paul amongst the people of Corinth
 - You can read about it in Acts 18
 - I encourage you to read that this week

- After a while, Paul moved on in his missionary journey to start churches in other cities

- Sometime later, he began to get reports that things were not going well back in the church in Corinth

¹ Acts 18:11

- You see there in 1:11 that people from Chloe's household had either written or visited Paul and informed him that it the church back in Corinth was plagued by all types of problems
- What will become evident as we work our way through this letter, is the Christians in Corinth were struggling to live out their new identity as followers of Jesus
- And what I mean by that is ... they were allowing the culture of the city ... of Corinthian paganism ... to creep into their church and their lives
- And this was resulting in:
 - divisions within the church
 - incest,
 - lawsuits among believers,
 - sexual immorality,
 - idolatry,
 - greed,
 - abuse of Christian freedom,
 - disorder in church gatherings,
 - denying the resurrection
- And so, Paul writes this letter to address the issues he has heard about, in order to urge them to live according the gospel that he first taught them
- 1 Corinthians is a very practical letter for us to be studying, because the culture that the Corinthian Christians were swimming in, was much like the culture we are part of here in Sydney
- Like Corinth, Sydney is wealthy, cosmopolitan, and full of sexual immorality, idolatry and greed
- And like the Corinthians, we often allow the culture around us to impact on and influence us, causing us to live lives that are not consistent with what we believe to be true about Jesus and the gospel
- That is, we struggle to live out our identity as disciples of Christ because we too get led astray by the cultural norms that we live amongst
- And as Paul addresses each of these issues in his letter to the Corinthians ... and teaches them how to they ought to live ... it will teach us what are the **'Marks of a Healthy Church'**
- And so I pray, that his term you'll be encouraged and challenged by this series in 1 Corinthians as we consider the **Marks of a Healthy Church**
- As we begin our series ... I want to look at today's passage under two headings
 - United Fellowship with Christ
 - United Fellowship with One-another

2. United Fellowship with Christ

- Now throughout most of the letter ... Paul is pretty much addressing one issue after the other
 - Divisions, sexual immorality, greed, pride, idolatry etc
- And on the face of it ... it could seem like the church in Corinthian is a complete basket case ... and one might be left wondering whether these guys are Christian at all!

- But right at the start of the letter ... Paul says the exact opposite
 - You see ... despite their:
 - Worldliness
 - Immaturity
 - Sin
 - They none-the-less remain in this united fellowship with Christ
- Key verse there is v9 where Paul says
 - *God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ*

- You see the Corinthian Christians, like all Christians, are in this privileged position of being in relationship with God the Father by virtue of their union with Jesus Christ
- And throughout these verses we see the depth and significance of that

- v2 – Paul refers to them as the church of God
 - They are God’s people / his church
 - There’s no doubting their status despite their problems
 - The Corinthians are part of the fellowship of God’s family
- Paul also says they are ‘sanctified’
 - That just means ‘set apart’
 - Like you might set apart a nice watch or piece of jewellery to wear to a wedding or a special occasion
 - God has set apart these believers from the rest the population in Corinth
 - to be his special people ...
 - saved for a special purpose

- In addition, Paul says these Corinthians are ‘called to be holy’
 - Most of the other Bible translations translate the word holy as saints
 - So what Paul is in effect saying is that ... the Corinthians are ‘called to be saints’
- Not called to
 - Play for St George Illawarra Dragons
 - Be saints like Saint Patrick, Francis of Assisi. Pope John Paul II
- Saints in the Bible are Christians > God’s people

- If you're a follower of Jesus Christ ... you're a saint
 - That's the meaning behind the song 'When the saints go marching in'
 - Talking about Christians marching into heaven and wanting to be in that number / wanting to be among the believers entering eternal life
 - Not talking about Dragons winning a NRL GF!
- Paul says God has called these Corinthians to be saints ... to be Christians
- Not only do they enjoy this privileged position ... they're also a privileged church
- He says in v5
 - *you have been enriched in every way ...*
- And v7 they
 - *do not lack any spiritual gift*
- These guys are a blessed church

- And so, despite their waywardness, lack of maturity and issues ... they're none-the-less still
 - God's church
 - Set apart by Him
 - Called to be saints
 - Blessed beyond measure

- Now given the issues going on this church ... you've got to say ... this is a very surprising and unexpected introduction to his letter
- Got to ask –
 - How is it that Paul can be so positive about the Corinthians knowing what he knows about them?
 - How can he be so thankful to God for them even though he's about to rebuke them for disunity, sexual immorality and worldliness?
- Maybe Paul has read one of those management books on how to have difficult conversations ...
 - and it says ... "say five positive things for one negative"
 - so, he's getting his positive things in at the beginning
 - before he goes on to talk about the mess

- It's because Paul is looking at the Corinthians through the lens of the gospel of grace
- You see it's because their calling, sanctification, conversion and blessing depend on God ... and not on the Corinthians
- Paul says in v4
 - *I always thank God for you because of **his grace given you** in Christ Jesus.*

- You see their status as
 - God's church
 - Set apart by Him
 - Called to be saints
 - Blessed beyond measure
 - Is because of God's grace
- That it's because by grace
 - **God** sanctified **them**
 - **He** chose to call **them**
 - **God** is the one who blessed **them**

- The other reason Paul can be so positive about the Corinthians and so thankful to God for them ... is because God is faithful
- You see there in v9
 - *God, who has called you into fellowship with his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is **faithful**.*
- And because God is faithful ... Paul knows God will keep them
 - *strong to the end, so that they will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- You see ... despite the church in Corinth being messy and wayward and sinful ... they have this wonderful assurance that
 - on the last day they will be standing before God
 - continuing to enjoy their privileged status
 - as sanctified,
 - chosen,
 - called and
 - blessed

- And the reason for this is because of God's work in them through his Son, Jesus Christ
- Notice that?
- They are:
 - Sanctified **in Christ**
 - God's grace has been given to them **in Christ**
 - Fellowship **with Christ**

- It's the work of Jesus ... through his death and resurrection to atone for their worldliness, and immaturity and sinfulness which gives Paul the **confidence** to remind the Corinthians of their privileged position and their future salvation

Application

- These verses are greatly encouraging and assuring for you and me

- Because we too are fallible, broken, sinful and lost
- This is true for you whether you're a Christian or not

- If you are a person here this morning who trusts in Jesus ... however tentatively that may be ... God has
 - called you,
 - set you apart and
 - brought you into fellowship with Jesus
 - despite your sin, waywardness and rebellion against God

- And that is an extraordinary thing!
 - That despite everything God knows about you and your life ... you have been called in Christ Jesus

- And it has nothing to do with what you and I have done
- It's not your or my decision to be a Christian ...
 - but about what God has done
- It's a mark of God's grace to you and his faithfulness to hold on to you until the end
 - Because if was down to you and me ... we haven't been faithful
 - But God in his grace is faithful to us ... in and through Jesus Christ
 - And God **will** sustain you to the end ... guiltless on the day of our Lord Jesus

- And so, friends ... these verses give us great confidence
 - Because no matter how messed up your life may be
 - Regardless of your past or current sins
 - Despite all the ways you fail to live up to God's perfect standards
- God's grace and his faithfulness means that when you are in Christ
 - That is ... when you are united in fellowship with Christ by faith
 - Then you have this privileged status and position of being
 - God's chosen people
 - Sanctified and set apart
 - Called to be a saint
 - Blessed beyond measure
- And not only do you have that privileged status now ...
 - But because God is faithful ... he will never let you go
 - And you can know that despite what sin and failures you might be guilty of in the future ...
 - *He will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*
- Because by his grace ... you have United fellowship with our Lord Jesus Christ

3. United Fellowship with One-another

- Now the United fellowship they have with Christ is something they currently **don't** have with each other
- And in v10 Paul begins to address this issue of divisions and disunity that is going to run right through to Ch 4
- Since Paul left Corinth, others had come and had attracted people to themselves ... and the Christians had attached themselves to these new leaders like groupies
- We know from 3:21 they were boasting in their leaders
 - In their pride ... they were seeking to gain some form of spiritual one-up-man-ship at aligning themselves with a particular leader
- And so, in v12, Paul quotes them saying
 - *'I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas'*
 - And as a result, they'd created factions and divisions around these various leaders
 - Clarify > not the leader's fault ... they not the ones creating this rivalry an division ... it was the Corinthian Christians
- This situation is not a surprising one as the Corinthians were used to hearing professional speakers on the streets
 - Philosophers, Politicians, Poets
- As one public speaker rose up after another people would latch themselves to the ones
 - they most enjoyed
 - offered them financial gain
 - had the greatest political control
 - was known for their charisma and rhetoric
- And this cultural practice was seeping into the church
 - The Corinthians were gravitating to their favourite preacher and identifying with them
 - Not because of theological differences ... but more around style, personality or their status
- By his own admission, Paul was not a flashy preacher
 - He says in v17 and 2:1 that he didn't come to them preaching *'with eloquence or words of human wisdom'*
 - He's was a plain preacher

- You might say he was a solid or faithful preacher
- Paul's the guy who was preaching for so long in Acts 20 that he put Eutychus to sleep and he fell out a third story window!

- Apollos on the other hand was known as a preaching powerhouse
 - Tim Keller, Mark Driscoll & Don Carson wrapped into one person
 - He spoke with passion
 - He was clever and charismatic
 - He was known for his rhetoric
- And in Corinthian culture that made him the cool guy

- Now I don't know what you're making of the preaching at the moment
- Some of you are probably to be sitting there working out what our preachers are like
 - Stu ... he's a Paul
 - Tom on the other hand ... Apollos!

- And it seems some of their small group house churches had
 - aligned themselves behind Apollos
 - others had remained faithful to Paul
 - others were taking sides elsewhere
- And this had created divisions among them ... which was evidence of their pride, worldliness and immaturity

- Paul says ...
 - "Church is not a popularity contest
 - "Because if you follow men ... all that does is create division and disunity
 - "We don't follow men ... we follow Christ
 - "And therefore, there ought to be no divisions among you
 - "We follow one saviour ... and therefore, you ought to be united

- Now the unity Paul is speaking of here is not
 - That they're all the be the same
 - He's not saying they need to be clones of each other
 - Nor is he saying they all need to have same opinion
 - Or that they should bring all their house churches together as one church

- No, he wants them United in their allegiance to Christ!
- And to do that he reminds them of the gospel
- Because what does the gospel teach us?
 - Our fellowship with God is in and through Christ alone
 - Not through human leaders and preachers

- And Paul makes that clear with his rhetorical and somewhat sarcastic questions in v13
 - Is Christ divided?
 - No! Christ is one
 - Was Paul crucified for you?
 - No! Christ was crucified for you ... not me or any other leader you're following
 - Were you baptised into the name of Paul?
 - No! You were baptised in the name of Christ ... not Apollos or me or Cephas

- **Illustration – Tuning the Orchestra**
- If you've ever been to a symphony to listen to an orchestra you may have noticed that the orchestra all tune their instruments to what's called the **concert master** – to the lay person like you and me ... the lead violinist
 - Play a note
 - All other musicians tune their instrument to him / her
 - Why? Then the entire orchestra ... up to 100 musicians will all be in tune with one another > they have 'tonal unity' [made up!]
- What doesn't happen is
 - Trumpets tuning to the lead trumpeter
 - Flutes tuning to the lead flautist
 - Clarinets tuning to the lead clarinettist
- Because if that happened ... they might be in tune and have unity in each of their sections ... but inevitably they won't be in tune / have unity as an entire orchestra
- And it would sound terrible
- You see for the entire orchestra to be in tune with each other ... they ALL need to be tuned to the one thing

- And Paul is saying ... unless you are all tuned to Christ ... unless you find your unity in Jesus ... you're divided

- And so, he reminds them ... that the gospel and centrality of Christ mean
 - He is the Lord
 - He is our saviour
 - He is the one we follow
- And if they are united in these truths about Jesus ... then there's no place for divisions, disunity and factionalism amongst them

Application

- Now this is hugely relevant to us today ... because we're bunch of fallen, broken sinners who are just as susceptible to let worldly thinking and culture impact on and influence us
- One of the ways our worldliness expresses itself like the Corinthians ... is around the modern practice of following and constantly referring to our favourite preachers
- We
 - Download their sermons
 - Follow them on FB and Twitter
 - Listen to their podcasts
- What can happen is we start saying things like
 - "I really like Mark Driscoll > he's so passionate and motivating
 - "You should have heard this sermon by Matt Chandler ... best sermon I've ever heard"
 - "I think Tim Keller has the greatest insight on this. I like what he says"
 - "I'm a John Piper man ... I subscribe to the Desiring God podcasts"
 - "Francis Chan ... he just connects with people like no-one else"
- What can happen is ... the gifted, celebrity preacher becomes the gold standard that people look for and expect ... and suddenly, the plain old suburban preacher back in Smithtown becomes well ... plain, boring
- And what can happen is people tend to start
 - disengaging from the preaching
 - and when that happens, they start disengaging from the ministry and mission of the church
 - a lack of unity develops
 - then they leave to go to another church where the preacher is more exciting
- Now there's nothing wrong with listening to
 - Matt Chandler
 - Francis Chan
 - Tim Keller
 - And following them on twitter and listening to their podcasts
 - They're gifted preachers and Bible teachers and we should rejoice in them and give thanks God for them
- But Paul's points for us to remember is that
 - It's not the preacher that matters ... it's the one they're preaching about that matters
 - It's not the style that's important ... it's the substance that's important

- It's not about the one who is charismatic ... it's about the one who is Christ
- If you're a Christian, then you follow Christ ... not preachers, pastors and leaders
- And when your life is tuned to him ... then we will maintain our unity ... and guard ourselves against division
- =====
- Now it's clear from v10, that the thing Paul is saying is the mark of a healthy church ... is that we agree with one another and that we be perfectly united in mind and thought
- For some people ... this call to unity within the church a bit of a red flag ... especially in a Sydney Anglican church like ours
- One of the criticisms I sometimes hear about our church is we just conform to 'Sydney Anglicanism'
 - That a particular line of teaching is proclaimed because "that's what they teach at Moore College"
 - "That's just Sydney Anglicanism for you"
- The implication is ... being part of a Sydney Anglican church means conforming your thinking to a particular theological line or position
- But friends ... Paul is not saying that to be united as a church means everyone must think the same
 - He's not saying you must all be clones of one another
 - In fact, later in the letter in Ch 8 he will say it's okay to come to different positions about eating food sacrificed idols
 - In Ch 12 he will commend the fact that they have different spiritual gifts
 - And therefore, Paul expects that within a healthy church ... diversity of thought on some issues is expected
- He's not talking about everyone thinking the same on every single issue
- What's he's calling them to is unity in the one they follow – Jesus Christ
- And that their unity flows out of the gospel
 - For it is Christ who was crucified for them, who dealt with their sin, in whose name they have salvation
- Here at C@P it is okay to have diversity of opinion
 - One of the joys and privileges of being a body of believers in a church like this is we can learn from each other
 - As the proverb says ... 'as iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another'
 - And so, I learn from you as you learn from me

- Because the reality is ... there is a diversity of thought here at C@P on secondary matters ... things that are not core to the gospel
- And therefore ... it's okay not to agree on all things
 - Everyone on is a journey in their walk with Christ
 - Everyone comes to this church with different ideas, backgrounds
 - Everyone is growing in their understanding of
 - the scriptures
 - implication of the gospel for their life
 - what it looks like to 'be and make disciples of Jesus'
- And therefore, we ought to expect diversity of opinion and be willing to be a church that shows grace to one another as we wrestle with and move towards what the scriptures are saying for us and our lives

- And so, if there are things that are taught from the front or in a GG ...
 - it's because of the convictions of the preacher or GG leader
 - it's because that's what they understand the scriptures to be saying ...
 - not because they are seeking to conform to a denominational norm

- In the same way that we ought not to be divided by identifying ourselves with preachers and leaders ... it's important we don't create divisions by identifying ourselves as
 - Sydney Anglican
 - Anti-Sydney Anglican
 - Presbyterian
 - Baptist
- If you're a you're a Christian ... then the way you and I are to identify ourselves is as a follower of Jesus
 - What church or denomination you are part of is secondary
 - And we need to be on our guard that this doesn't create disunity among us

4. Conclusion

- And so how do you go about being a healthy church that agrees with one another and is perfectly united in mind and thought?
 - We don't conform to a leader
 - We don't conform to a denomination
- I want to urge you to conform your thinking to the Bible
 - Invest time in reading the scriptures
 - Keep reminding yourselves of the glory of Christ
 - Keep soaking in the grace of God to you in the cross of Christ
 - Keep shaping your heart and your life around the good news of the gospel

- Seek ways to conform you thinking to the gospel
 - If you're not in a GG ... get yourself in a GG this term where you can gather with others and look at the scriptures and shape your mind and thinking about the truths of the gospel
 - If you are in a GG ... I want to encourage you to make being there regularly this term a priority
 - Aim to be a consistent, and committed member of that group so that you can not only allow the scriptures to shape your mind and thinking each week ... but you can be there to help and encourage others in the group do the same thing
 - If you've got questions, or checking out Christianity, tick the box on the comms card to do Christianity Explored this term

- And the reason I say this is because just a Paul reminded the Corinthians of the gospel ... it will be as you and I know and remember the wonder, joy, power and grace of the gospel with fresh eyes and open hearts ... that the preacher, the leader, the denomination will always be secondary
- And we'll see them for what they truly are ... mere servants of the one who was crucified for you
- And as we remind ourselves of the wonder of the gospel every day
 - We will be strengthened in our fellowship with Christ
 - Which in turn with strengthen our fellowship with one-another

PRAY