

Text: 1 Corinthians 1: 1-17

Theme: Series: A Church Just Like Ours – An Appeal for Unity

Sermon delivered by Revd Canon Dele Agbelusi during Service of the Word on 06/08/2017 at 10.30am

.The human author of this letter was Paul. He begins by pointing out his authority, and describes himself as a called apostle of Jesus Christ- in other words, an ambassador.

An ambassador is a representative of the one who commissioned him. An ambassador has the authority to order military and civilian employees and only the president of the country the ambassador represents can countermand the ambassador's word.

That is the kind of authority an apostle had, has and will have. That is the kind of authority we have as we represent our Lord and Master.

Paul emphasised that he is an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God: With this, Paul emphasizes his point and already begins contending with the Christians of Corinth. It is as if he says, "You all may not recognize my apostolic credentials. That is of little importance to me, because I am not an apostle because of a popular election. I am not an apostle through the appointment of the other apostles. I am an apostle of Jesus Christ through the will of God, not the will of any man."

Paul had received reports from people in Chloe's household about disturbances in Corinth (1 Corinthians 1:11); and he may have received a delegation from Corinth (1 Corinthians 16:7) who brought him questions from the congregation (1 Corinthians 7:1). So, 1 Corinthians is written in response to these reports. Paul had planted the church in Corinth and he spent over a year with them trying to ground them in the faith. But like many of us, the church was gradually losing its distinctive qualities and it was becoming difficult to see a difference between Christians in Corinth and the average Corinthian.

Corinth was a great city with a lot of commerce going on which makes it a city of great wealth and opportunities. It was the city which held the Isthmian Games, which was second only to the Olympics. Corinth boasted of the worship of many gods: Athena, Apollo, Poseidon, Hermes, Isis, Serapis, and Asclepius, among others, had temples to their honour in Corinth. But most prominent was the worship of the Corinthian Aphrodite, who had more than 1,000 priestesses who were sacred prostitutes in her service. This was a very popular goddess and you worship there by uniting your body and souls with the temple prostitutes and priestesses, and in the evenings they came down from the acropolis and plied their trade on the streets of Corinth.

This made the Corinthian people known for partying, drunkenness, and loose sexual morals. The term Korinthiazesthai was well known in the Roman Empire and it meant literally "to live like a Corinthian." But everyone knew it really meant "to be sexually and morally out of control."

Understanding the tension between the church and the city is important to understanding the letter of 1 Corinthians. The bottom line is this: is the church influencing the city, or is the city influencing the church? "The measure of failure on the part of the Church is the measure in which she has allowed herself to be influenced by the spirit of the age... **We are sometimes told today that what the Church supremely needs is that she should catch the spirit of the age. A thousand times no. What the Church supremely needs is to correct the spirit of the age.**"

The Corinthian church is shown to have, at times, problems about morality issues, doctrines, church government, use of spiritual gifts, church service, authority etc. It might be easy for us to think they weren't even saved! But they were. They were called saints, called out ones! How amazing is the grace that saved wretches like us! They are saints together with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord. What is grace? **"Grace is everything for nothing to those who don't deserve anything"**

Verses 4-9

When Paul looked at the Corinthian church, he could say: "These people proclaim Jesus, they know about Jesus, there are the supernatural gifts of God among them, and they are excited about Jesus' return." Whatever problems they had, these are some pretty impressive strong points. Can even this much be said about many churches today? We may pride ourselves on not having the problems of the Corinthian Christians, but do we have their positives? Yet, these positives were no great credit to the Corinthian Christians themselves. They were not the spiritual achievements of the Corinthians, but the work of the grace of God in them.

How can Paul be confident of this when the Corinthian church has so many problems? He can be confident because God is faithful. He is the One who has called them into the fellowship of His Son, so He is the One who will confirm them to the end and present them blameless.

In these first 10 verses, Paul refers to Jesus in every verse, for a total of 11 times. In this emphasis on Jesus, Paul promotes the sure cure for the problems of the Corinthians: getting your eyes off self and focus on Jesus.

The Corinthians Situation (vs 8-17):

- (1) they were full of divisions (vs 10)
- (2) they were full of quarrelling (vs 11)
- (3) they were full of cliques (vs 12-17)

What were the rags they were now wearing? Answer: Three mentioned in this section.

(1) They were Full of Divisions (vs 10).

"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." 'Divisions' comes from the Greek word 'schisma' meaning; "To separate, to rip, to tear, to split". This Church at Corinth which Paul loved and nurtured and left growing in good health, has now ruptured, broken, divided and in very poor health, no matter the outward façade to the contrary.

In one of Aesop's fable he tells the story of three bulls: They fed in a field together in peace and safety. For a long time, a lion had been watching them in the hope of making one of them his prey.

But as long they kept together he had no chance of devouring one of them. So he came up with a cunning plan: The lion began to secretly spread lies and nasty stories of one bull against another till he created jealousy and distrust among them. Soon they began to avoid each other and each took to feeding alone. This gave the lion the opportunity it had been wanting. He fell on them one by one and made an easy prey of them all. **It is true of God's people that - 'united, they stand; divided, they fall'**

(2) They were Full of Quarrelling (vs 11)

“My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe’s household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.” They brought news of the disputes with which the church was torn.

(3) They were full of cliques (vs 12-17)

“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.”¹³ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?

The Corinthians’ boasting about their “party leaders” was really boasting about themselves. It wasn’t so much that they thought Apollos was great, but that they were great for following him.

There was an old, contentious Quaker who went from one meeting to another, never finding the “true” church. Someone once said to him, “Well, what church are you in now?” He said, “I am in the true church at last.” “How many belong to it?” “Just my wife and myself, and I am not sure about her sometime.

What is the cause and the solution for division? Answer: Focus!

When our focus is misplaced – the result will always be division. When our focus is rightly placed – the result will always be unity & harmony. The apostle Paul tells this Church: Stop looking at men and focus again on Jesus!

A.W. Tozer used to illustrate that if a person had 4,000 pianos and tried to tune them all to each other, he would fail miserably. But if the same individual instead used a tuning fork, he could successfully tune all the pianos to it. The one tuning fork all believers need to tune to is not each other but the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our faith does not rest on baptism or the baptiser, so don’t keep boasting about it. It happened, it was important...now move on! Likewise, our faith does not rest on a certain Pastor or preacher, no matter how good an orator they might be.

Gifted teachers are important, learn from them and let them move you on towards Jesus! Paul reminds them the basis of our unity is always at the cross!

Lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect: Paul makes it clear that it is possible to preach the gospel in a way that makes it of no effect. If one preaches the word with a reliance on wisdom of words, they can make the gospel of no effect.

How sobering this is! The great gospel of Jesus Christ, the very power of God unto salvation – made empty and of no effect through the pride and cleverness of men! This danger was constantly on the mind of the apostle Paul, and should be constantly on the mind of any preacher or teacher.

It was Paul’s aim to set before everyone the person of Jesus Christ – not himself- as He is our only hope, Saviour and guide through the uncertainties of life..