

THE CHURCH IN 1 CORINTHIANS

UNITED IN CHRIST

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I love the book of Acts, but sometimes my local church experience doesn't seem to line up with what I read there. My church in Newark, DE is the dearest place on earth to me, but it does not always seem to echo Acts 2:42-44:

And they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. And awe came upon every soul, and many wonders and signs were being done through the apostles.

But 1 Corinthians? First Corinthians is different. This early letter of Paul to the messy and seemingly dysfunctional church in Corinth is exactly what I often need to read. God's love for these messy people and their local expression of church life is powerful to consider. What we see here is that our sin affects church life. Yet, while the church might not always look like the book of Acts, it is no less a part of God's powerful plan for this world. God is present in both the shine of revival and in the dirty mess of personal conflict, wrong priorities, prideful spiritualism, and over-realized eschatology.

Lessons from Corinth

Unity Matters

If you were to look for a main idea or thesis statement for 1 Corinthians, a solid choice would be chapter 1 verse 10 where Paul says, "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..." Paul wants the Corinthian church to be united—and for good reason! They were deeply divided by loyalty to different leaders, disagreements about liberties, economic division while celebrating communion, one-upmanship with spiritual gifts, and many other issues. This led the church to have more discord than harmony, more conflict than communion, more division than unity.

But Paul earnestly desires them to be united. He *appeals* to them to be united. And what reasons does he give for them to be united? Well, there are many, but one stands out. The centrality of the cross. All of the

secondary and tertiary things that divide our churches are *nothing* compared to the singular priority of Christ crucified. The world around us is so divided because of its many different priorities, but our local churches are able to remain united because the cross has taken center stage in our lives.

Our unity displays the centrality of the cross. In fact, the presence of division often means that the cross is no longer central to us. Paul says that divisions come when we live with *worldly* wisdom. This is because we quickly focus on ourselves. But unity comes about when we center on the cross because we see there the ultimate example of selflessness and the greatest priority in this world. The cross for Paul is a rallying point. When the cross is at the center of our lives, it draws Christians together. When the cross is displaced, division is not far away.

We are not people of titles, positions, or power. To be so is to be *merely human* (3:4). But we are not merely human. We are people who have been enabled by the Spirit of God to see the foolishness of God as our greatest hope and confidence.

Membership Matters

In the midst of so much weakness, Paul still assures the Corinthians of their significance. He *always* thanks God for them, and he *envisions* them for who God has called them to be. They are “called to be saints” (1:2), they are “God’s building” (3:9), they are “God’s temple” (3:16), they were “bought with a price” (6:20), and they have been “called into the fellowship of [the] Son” (1:9).

This heightened perspective of who God has called the church to be, despite our great weakness, has multiple effects upon us. First, it steers us away from condemnation. Our status before God does not rest with our performance. That would lead only to condemnation. By God’s grace, we are spared condemnation because God sees us in Christ.

Second, it leads us to value the *whole* church. Paul is not addressing individuals. He is addressing a local church family. There are different issues among them, but Paul is addressing them *together*. This is significant if we are going to understand the call of 1 Corinthians. What we do, we do together. We are called together (1:2), we grow together (3:9), we assemble together (5:4), and we hold each other accountable and fight sin together (5:1-13).

It’s hard to study the church in 1 Corinthians and not have a heightened value of official church membership. Paul may not use the word “membership” here (but see 1 Cor. 12:12!), but the reality he describes assumes such a formal connection. God’s design, as seen here, is that we be officially and identifiably committed to each other. What we read here is not possible without such membership.

Love Matters

The resounding call from this letter is to be united, and this happens when we remain cross-centered. When we do, we will walk in love. Paul says in chapter 8:1 “Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up.” He loves this building imagery. Our lives within the local church are to be lived in a way that does not make much of ourselves or our own perspective, but that honors Christ through earnestly loving others. We can be the fastest growing church in our area, we can have countless programs, we can express every spiritual gift, but if we do not have love, we are building nothing (13:1-3).

Through 1 Corinthians, it is clear that people of the cross are people of love. How can we not be? If we resolve to know nothing else but Jesus Christ and him crucified, we *will* walk in his footsteps and we *will* build our lives and our churches with love. We will reflect our Savior as we love those who differ from us. We will build our church as we live lives of sacrifice and praise. When reviled, we will bless. When persecuted, we will endure. When slandered, we will entreat. We will labor in every way not for our own good, but for the good of others (4:8-21).

The Resurrection Matters

Many scholars speak of the Corinthians’ over-realized eschatology. They suggest that much of the chaos and carnality in this church came from how they thought of themselves as *so* victorious in Christ that sin could no longer touch them.

They viewed themselves as victorious kings and queens (4:8) who could not be troubled or bothered by the brokenness and sinfulness of this world. But their claims of victory led them to not care about practical holiness or personal love.

In their over-realized eschatology, their perspective seemed to be limited to this life and to this world. Once they began to think about life after death, there is a sense in which the Corinthians actually seemed to have an under-realized eschatology. They had very little hope of a future life. With dualistic tendencies, they denied the physical resurrection and lived as if this world was all that there was.

And so, Paul speaks directly. The most theologically rich section of this letter comes at the very end when Paul takes fifty-eight verses to speak about our resurrection hope. He exhorts us to “wake up” to the hope of the resurrection (15:34), then to live accordingly. It becomes very clear that in Paul’s mind, the content of chapters 1-14 is not even possible if we do not believe in the bodily resurrection of Christ from the dead. Jesus’s victory over sin and death not only removes the ultimate sting of the grave, but it also fuels our obedience right here and right now. Living with resurrection power does not lead us towards an over-realized eschatological indifference to practical holiness. No, it compels us to live with joyful confidence as we apply the gospel to every area of our lives. We are able to die to ourselves every day and face any trial

for the sake of Christ because we know that eternity is before us. If our churches are to grow into the churches that God intends, we must remember how much resurrection hope we have been given.

Finding Hope in Corinth

While we should all hope and pray that our churches will be a clear reflection of the beauty and power of the church in Acts, we should also be very grateful for the mess in Corinth. Even though there were countless issues to address, Paul is still able to say “I give thanks to my God always for you” (1:4). Why was he able to do this? He was able because of his confidence in God’s plan to use imperfect churches to display his perfect grace.

As weak as your church may be, it is built on a very strong foundation, “which is Jesus Christ” (3:11). May the church in Corinth remind us of how God intends to display his glory through our imperfect unity, our selfless love, our united membership, and our joyful confidence in the resurrection.