

Messed up, but blessed

1 Corinthians 1.1-17

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Today, and next week, I plan to speak about the opening chapter of the letter of St Paul to the Corinthians. And the week thereafter we will also use Paul's letter to the Corinthians as the basis for his sermon.

Today I like to lightly touch on three topics that stand out in the first 17 verses of the letter.

First, what is a Christian. Secondly, how rich it is to be a Christian. And thirdly, that being a Christian is something we do together.

1. What is a Christian

First, what is a Christian.

Paul addresses his letter to all people who 'call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ'. That is the mark of a Christian. Someone who prays to Jesus.

There were at least ten temples for ten different gods in Corinth at the time the New Testament was written.

If people had a particular need, like for money, a good harvest, fertility, or power, for a successful hunting, for wisdom they went to a particular god, specialised in that issue.

Praying to Jesus was a strong statement of who the Christians in Corinth were and of what they believed. They were the people who prayed to Jesus as to God. Jesus was their God.

This is clearly meant by Paul, because he uses terminology that he borrowed directly from the Old Testament, where the Jews were encouraged to call upon the name of the Lord Jahweh.

By addressing the church as people who call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, he set them apart from the Jews in Corinth. Paul makes clear that in the church, they viewed Jesus just as the Jews in Corinth viewed Jahweh. He is God. There is more to say about this, but I will not do this now.

And as we, Christians here today, we are related to those Corinthian Christians, because we are also people who pray to Jesus Christ. Christians are people who pray to Jesus, who depend on Jesus, who trust in Jesus.



We do not just pray to some sort of vague Higher Being, to the Source of all Being, to an unknown God far away. We pray to Jesus Christ. And this makes our faith very particular.

How 'particular' is underlined by the other manner in which Paul addresses our family in Corinth. He calls them 'sanctified in Christ'. Sanctified, that is, consecrated, set apart.

They stood out as different from the people around them, because of to whom they prayed and how they lived.



But the term sanctified, consecrated, is in the first place a word that speaks of their relationship to God.

You are consecrated. Not because you decided to be good. Not because you try to live holy. You are sanctified because God has made you fully for him. To people who call upon the name of Jesus, God says: you are mine. Consecrated for me.

This is very encouraging.

Look at the problems in the Church of Corinth that Paul will later discuss in his letter. He whacks them for many wrong behaviours and many wrong opinions.

We mess up just as much. There is no health in us.

But that is exactly why we call upon the name of the Lord Jesus Christ - because we need him. We need his help. His love. His forgiveness. We need him to direct our lives. To help us to get out of our mess.

But as to the Corinthians who were in the middle of their mess, so to us, in our situation, right where we are now, with all of our misbehaviour and strange opinions, He says: you are mine. You are sanctified. You are consecrated for me. You belong to me.

That is awesome.

Stop your doubts - you are a child of God if you call upon the name of the Son of God.

This is the starting point of who we are and of how we relate to God. And then after that, next, Paul says, you are also called to be saints. To live a better life.

But to live a better life is not in order to become part of the people of God. It is the opposite. If you pray to Jesus Christ, then you are his. And then you are urged by Paul to live in conformity to the family you are already part of.

2. Our riches

We have been made so rich by God. Paul mentions a few areas in which the Christians in Corinthians had been gifted by God.

“You are not lacking in any spiritual gift”, Paul writes. They are not lacking any *charisma*. Charisma means gift. They were very gifted, very charismatic.

The first charisma that we all have, is the charisma of salvation. “Call upon the Lord Jesus Christ and you will be saved”, Paul writes ten years later to the Church in Rome.

It is enough to ask Jesus Christ and you are saved, you become part of the people of God, you enter into the ark of Jesus Christ.

The second charisma, is that those who have become part of the church, also share in the Holy Spirit and his work in their life. The Spirit is at work in you, not because you are so wonderful. But because you are part of the family of God.

God gives his church a wealth of gifts for serving him and one another. To pray better. To praise better. To serve better. Gifts of administration, or leadership, of servitude. Gifts of preaching, of reading, gifts of praying for healing for people, gifts of wealth - so that you can help others. Gifts of patience, kindness, love.

And God wants us to use all those gifts - all we have, all we are - for the benefit of his whole family, the church. And for the world. But first for the church.

You have to ask yourself, what are my gifts? What can I do to contribute to the life of the church? I think you can make quite a list of things that God has blessed you with. And if you find it hard to make such a list, ask someone else what he or she thinks you are good at.

We are in the process of developing the life of this, our church, and we need your gifts, we together need what each of us can contribute to the community life of the church.

We are setting up about ten small groups of people in our church, with clusters of ministry related to it. To develop our evangelism. Our worship services. Our Bible studies. Our music. Our care for children. Our care for the sick.

3. Christians are united in one community

And we need to do this together, as one community, in harmony.

That is where problems started in Corinth. God had greatly blessed them with knowledge and speech, that was a true blessing, gifts from God, but it was not balanced by humility and wisdom; it was not used for the common good.

Thank God for your best abilities; your insight, the things you are good at; your spiritual insight maybe. But God did not give it for your own fun, but for all to enjoy

in community. And that needs a high level of love and care for, and submission to what your community needs.

The skills we possess are not our own achievement, they are gifts from God; we hold them in trust. In Corinth they had forgotten this a bit, and they had become a very divided bunch of people.

Paul speaks of them as the Church of God which is at Corinth. It was not the Church of Corinth; it was the Church of God. He would not have spoken of the Church of England, but the Church of God in England, or in Arnhem, or Nijmegen.

There is only one church. The community of the family of God. And we are the local expression of that one church.

If we would think of the Church in that way we might remember better the reality of our unity and focus less on differences that separate us from each other, or from other churches.

St John Chrysostom says, in his homily on the first chapter of our letter:

The Church of God is one in its members, and forms nothing but a single Church with all the communities spread throughout the world, for the word 'church' does not mean schism: it means unity, harmony, concord.

So we have no excuse for divisions. Unity is not dependent on which teacher you had or who baptised you; it is something based on Christ. And there is only one Jesus Christ, one body of Christ, one Church.

Therefore I can only conclude that today, the whole Church of God lives in sin. In dreadful sin. Because we have fractured the body of Jesus Christ. As a worldwide church, we continually commit the sin of hurting Jesus Christ. We call upon him, but then we turn our back to him by not being able to form one body.

Some Christians like to focus on our spiritual unity. Well, that is true. There is one body of Christ, spiritually united.

But just as we have to work out our God-given holiness in a holy lifestyle, the church must work out its spiritual unity by acting as one body.

Look how Paul speaks about unity. Because they are united in Christ, they have to be a united community.

He prays that those Corinthian people “all agree...in the same mind and the same judgment.” This is not a call by Paul to merely be externally united, or to come together once a week for a liturgical ceremony.



He wants something that goes much deeper than that: the concord that should reign among them should stem from them being of one mind, from feeling the same way about the important things.

This does not mean we must all become similar - but it does suggest that our ideal, in our church family, should be a broad agreement about the truly important things. And one of those things is that we cannot accept division among us.

Conclusion

We will not solve the problems with other churches. But we, here, have no option but to at least make sure that we do not allow irrelevant things to divide us. Because we are of one mind in all things that are truly important.

We are starting the season of implementing our Mission Action Plan.

We are one family of God; we are all his children. We are all called to live for Him and to do what is good for his church.

As part of the church of God in our city, let us use our gifts, our talents, all our abilities, for doing what is good, for what is best for this church here, the church of our Lord Jesus Christ.

+Amen