

Let's set the scene:

Situated in Southern Greece, Corinth was a **massive** city. It was the third largest city, in the whole Roman empire. With a population of around about 200 000<sup>i</sup> people, the only places that were any bigger, were Rome (itself), and Alexandria (in Northern Egypt). So, Corinth was huge. It was a very important trading city.

If you have a look at this map, there is a very narrow neck of land, separating 2 very important harbours (one on the East and the other on the West). And Corinth, was right on that narrow neck of land – ideally situated, to receive freight on one side, carry it over land a short distance, to the other bay, and therefore ships could avoid a long voyage around the dangerous capes to the south.

And so Corinth was a very big, very important, thriving city. It was originally Greek, and then Rome destroyed it, but finally rebuilt it again, and so the culture was a mixture of Roman **and** Greek..., **and** ... very immoral. Corinth *was the centre for the worship of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love*, and its temple had 1000 *sacred prostitutes*<sup>ii</sup>.

But God did something really good in Corinth. On Paul's missionary trips, he would arrive in a place, and preach the Gospel, but usually the residents would be so offended by what Paul had to say, that within a few days (or weeks), he would get run-out-of-town, and he'd have to move on to the next spot. But that didn't happen in Corinth. They **did** try to bring charges against him, but the authorities declared him "innocent", and I think it was 18 months that Paul ended up staying there<sup>iii</sup>.

He had plenty of time to plant a church, and to get them started on the road of being disciples of Jesus... And so Paul was quite attached to this Corinthian church. He felt responsible for them. And within this very letter, he says “Look, <sup>1 Cor 4:15</sup> .... I became your father in Christ Jesus through the gospel.

I don't know if you realise or not, how much a missionary or a pastor or a teacher, feels connected to (and responsible for) a local church, even after they've left (particularly when they'd been there for some time)...

Some people try to portray ministry today as a profession, where a professional is employed – he comes to town, provides a professional service, and then after a few years, moves on to another town, relinquishing all previous care and responsibility for the people he's been ministering to for all these years... But ministry, isn't a profession – it's a calling. And any pastor or teacher (worth his salt), will at times, **continue** to feel a need to encourage that church, and to urge them on in the faith, and to urge them on in following Jesus as His disciples...

*You may have a relationship with a former pastor or teacher (someone who was influential in your faith journey), who when you meet him (even now), he takes a **great** interest in how you're currently walking with God... Do you know why? Because he cares. And because he wants the impact that his ministry once had on your life, to not be lost... He wants you to be growing in the Lord.*

...

And I don't know if you realise how much it hurts – how much it **hurts** a pastor's heart like Paul's, when those whom he once brought to Christ, and those who he'd spent life with – when they get distracted from the main thing, and when they begin to fall for false teachings, or when they puff themselves up with self-righteous zeal, or when they cease to live, as the disciples of Jesus that they're meant to be....

And as we study this letter, we're going to see some of **Paul's** hurt. We're going to see his heart on his sleeve, and the sadness that Paul has, that this Corinthian church, have fallen so far, that some within the church, had even turned against him...

Paul's First letter to the Corinthians has some of the most amazing teaching on:

- Spiritual Gifts; and
- Love; and
- marriage; and
- singleness; and
- communion; and
- the Christian resurrection; and
- how the Christian church functions as a body

... But all this amazing teaching (which we're going to be studying over the next few months), is all written in the context of trying to get this church to stop fighting and bickering with one another, and to stop standing up for their **own** views and their **own** rights, and to start forgiving and loving one another,,,,, and to be a community of Christ...

You know, some people feel that because divisions are evident in churches of today, that this is a sign that the age of churches is a thing of the past (that God doesn't want churches any more)... Rubbish!!! Divisions were happening in Paul's day, and this letter to the Corinthians, is written for the very purpose, of getting the Christian church in Corinth, **away** from quarrelling – **away** from dividing – **away** from schism,,,,, and to being the people of God together (in one mind [or one mindset] and one judgment [or consent, or voluntary willingness to accept and love the other]).

*Tuesday of this week just gone, (31<sup>st</sup> October), was the 500 year anniversary of when Martin Luther stuck his thesis on the door of the All Saints' Church in Wittenberg, and this is the date, recognised as the beginning of the Reformation...*

Church schism – the tearing apart of the Christian church, has been a fact of life, ever since Christ ascended to heaven. For goodness sake, in this little town of St George, we have 8 Christian churches represented (and a couple of little home groups)...

Most major denominations have been formed over **big** issues, and **big** disagreements around the understanding of God; The nature of sin and grace; and on issues of church practice...

It happens. It **has** happened.

But way too many **local** fellowships have split. And way too many people have fallen out of fellowship, over little issues, or over politics or pride, or self-righteousness, and a failure to love and respect anyone who disagrees... And as we read this

letter to the Corinthians, we're going to see, "that's pretty much what was going on, in the church in Corinth."

It was a church of division. It had been reported to Paul that there was quarrelling, and division. The Greek word is the one from which we get our word "schism"...

*The other day where I was working, there was a narrow gap, and I quickly darted through there, and my shirt caught, and it tore it apart... It's the same word here, for the tearing apart of a church... And I've been in a number of churches, when issues between individuals in a church, have threatened to tear a church apart...*

And Paul says:

<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions (no schism – no tearing apart) among you, but that you be united (or joined together – or knitted back together) in the same mind and the same judgment.

He's appealing in the name of Jesus Christ, for their church, not to tear apart, but to be knitted together – he's appealing, for the tear that has begun, to now be repaired...

And so the problem, seems like it's political; and **unspiritual**; and personality driven... but Paul draws on who God is, and he centres us on Christ Jesus, to identify the cure.

So, before the split began, the Corinthian church had a fair bit going for it, and it was all by the grace of God:

Do you know what most newer churches lack?

No.1: People with good Christian knowledge; and

No.2: People who are able to get up in front of others, and speak about Christ...

But the church in Corinth, had been blessed with people able to do this – people with knowledge, and people who **could** speak. And as V6 says, it was evident by the way this church, would testify to Jesus Christ... This was a good thing...

In fact, it was a church that had been blessed **greatly** by Spiritual gifts (of **all** kinds).

But as we get into this letter, we're going to discover, that what they lacked most, was "love". Spiritual gifts were being used to hurt; a sense of knowledge (we know stuff. We know what's right), was puffing up pride; and eloquent speech is not the power of the Gospel – the cross is...

And so, this Corinthian church, had all of these things going for it, but it had lost one of the most important things for a church to have – love and unity. And I reckon the key problem for the Corinthian church, could probably be boiled down to "Pride". Pride is where priority is given, to self-opinion; "I know what's right", "I'm more spiritual than you are". You don't know what I know.

And by the time we get to Chapter 8, we're going to hear how "Knowledge puffs up", but "**love builds up**"...

And so, rather than pride and Spiritual superiority, in Paul's opening remarks of this letter, we find the **basis** for fellowship – the **basis** for unity, the basis for a church to hold together and to be one.... And that basis, is to know that we're all on an equal footing in Christ Jesus ....

1. V2 says that we're called to be saints together, with **all** Christians – with **everyone** who calls on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ... You see, we're not called to be saints alone – we're called to be saints together... By the way, the word “saints” literally means “holy ones” ...  
How do we get holy?

*Do you know who the self-proclaimed experts on holiness were, in Jesus' day? The Pharisees. And Jesus had some mighty hard words to say to the Pharisees. The Pharisees aimed to be holy, by separating themselves from anybody, who they deemed to be, “**un**holy” ... And they used to accuse Jesus, “Well, how can you hang out with prostitutes and sinners? (you can't possibly be holy)*

But separating ourselves, isn't what makes us holy. It's when we call upon the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ, that we become holy. And we don't become holy on our own. We become holy, with the saints together. Not one, is greater than another.

2. And it's the same when it comes to Spirituals gifts. Any spiritual gift, or Godly ability that we have, is a gift from God. We haven't earned it. We don't excel spiritually through our natural or practiced goodness. We can't claim a spiritually superior position because we have a certain spiritual Gift that somebody else doesn't have.

3. Even possessing Christian knowledge or eloquence in speech isn't something to have pride over – That too, is a gift of God. In fact, Paul said of himself, that he didn't preach with eloquence... (I see that as a source of hope for me, by the way) I'm not eloquent – there are far better speakers than I... And I don't know it all. As I prepare for my sermons, it takes time. It takes time to study the Scriptures, and seek God, and to read what other Bible teachers say about it...
  
4. And the fourth reason there's no room for pride in the church, is every one of us are waiting for the coming of Jesus, and while we wait, it's **Jesus** who maintains our guiltlessness. V7 you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ, <sup>8</sup> who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

The same Lord who sustains me, is the same Lord who sustains you. So I have no reason for pride – that I'm being a better Christian than you are. And you have no reason for pride – that you're a better Christian than somebody else...

Verse 9:

<sup>9</sup> God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

What fellowship are you called into? And what fellowship am I called into? The fellowship of Jesus Christ. What **is** the

fellowship of Jesus Christ??? Well, look around you!! It's the church!! **This**, is the fellowship of Jesus Christ, right here!!! This is what you're called to.

**These**, are your brothers and sisters in Christ. **I**, am your brother in Christ... God didn't merely call me or you to fellowship with Christ and Christ alone... God called us to fellowship together, as the fellowship **of** Christ...

And the church – the unity of the church – the love of the church – the care that we have for one another, is a witness to Jesus Christ... Jesus said:

**John 13:34** A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. <sup>35</sup> By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another."

OK, so this Corinthian church, despite the abundance of spiritual gifts and knowledge and eloquent speakers, had become a church, that was getting torn apart – it was a church of factions, where one says "Oh, I follow this teacher". "Well, I follow this teacher". And then somebody else thinks they hold the high ground "Well, I follow Jesus Christ"... There can't be a higher claim than that can there??? ... But Christ isn't divided...

But, what if they were to lose their attitudes of superiority. What if they realised, "Hey, we all worship the one Christ, and

without Christ I'm nothing..." What does Paul hope for this church to be?

V10 is translated by different versions of the Bible, quite differently, and the reason for this is, some of the original Greek, is quite difficult to translate into English.

The ESV says: <sup>10</sup> 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.

The NIV says: <sup>10</sup> .... but that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought.

The NRSV says: <sup>10</sup> .... but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose.

What it's getting at, is to be united in our mind (or perhaps, "frame of mind"), and "judgment" or "thought" or "purpose" might better be understood as "opinion"<sup>iv</sup> ...

What tears a church apart (apart from the big issues of course) is quite often "frame of mind" and "opinion" ...

And if our "frame of mind" and our "opinion" are yielded to Christ, and if our "frame of mind" doesn't come from a place of "superiority", and if our "opinions" aren't held from a place of "superiority", then this is a church, that can be united...

We, like the Corinthian church, are called to be saints together. Self-righteousness and attitudes of spiritual superiority, are what destroy Christian unity. I need to know that I'm not spiritually superior to you, and you need to know, that you're not spiritually superior to me... We all depend on Christ, and don't we depend on each other??? Don't I depend on you? And don't you depend on me???

Let me tell you, if we don't depend on each other, that's pride. And it's not the fellowship of Christ.

I'm really looking forward to these studies in 1 Corinthians. My prayer, is that **as** we humble ourselves, Christ will unite us and strengthen us to the end, so that we will be blameless, on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ....

Amen..<sup>v</sup> , <sup>vi</sup> , <sup>vii</sup> ...

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<sup>i</sup> Fernando, A. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1998. P.490

<sup>ii</sup> Fernando, A. The NIV Application Commentary – Acts. Zondervan: Grand Rapids. 1998. P.490

<sup>iii</sup> Acts 18:11

<sup>iv</sup> Morris, L., 1985. *1 Corinthians: an introduction and commentary*, Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

<sup>v</sup> When we turn from the metaphorical uses of *σχίσμα* to the phrase *ἵνα τὸ αὐτὸ λέγητε πάντες*, for which a wooden replication would be *that you all speak the same thing* (AV/KJV) the *political* nature of the language begins to emerge more clearly. The English versions offer a wide array of proposals, including *that all of you be in agreement* (NRSV); *that all of you agree* (NIV) *all to be in agreement in what you profess* (NJB); *agree(d) in what you say* (Barrett); *drop these party cries* (Moffatt); and *be in agreement* (Collins). It has long been recognized that this is the language of classical politics. Lightfoot (1895) writes: "We have here a strictly classical expression. It is used of political communities which are free from factions, or of different states which entertain friendly relations with each other."

Thiselton, A.C., 2000. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>vi</sup> For the *σχίσματα* denote not mere personal rivalry and quarrels, but also a diversity of *spiritualities* based on individualism, on loyalty to specific groups or factions as "spiritual." The issue is not *personal* rivalry, but rivalry among "*spiritual*" groups within the one church.

Thiselton, A.C., 2000. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

<sup>vii</sup> But if Welborn and Mitchell are right about Paul's use of political terminology, we may infer that the competitive corporate self-centeredness which characterize some of the "groups" stands most directly in semantic contrast to **consent**. The unity and harmony of the community depends on a voluntary willingness to respect the otherness of the other as having its place within the one community..... In this sense "agreement" entails not uniformity but voluntary constraints of one's "rights" (cf. on 6:12, below) for the good of the whole.

Thiselton, A.C., 2000. *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: a commentary on the Greek text*, Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.