

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

1. COMING TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 1:1-9

So – here we are again in church. For most of us it’s something we do pretty well every week, and some of us are down here – or engaged elsewhere in activities to do with the church – during the week as well. Why? Why do we come to church? What’s it all about? What do we think we’re doing? Different people have different ideas about what church is, what the point of it is. I’m sure there are several different opinions held by those of you who are here today. Someone once said that *“The church is like a bag of chips: to be taken with a large pinch of salt, but at its best brilliant.”* Dean William Inge wrote, *“Perhaps the most lasting pleasure in life is the pleasure of not going to church,”* and if you’ve seen the episode of *The Simpsons* where Homer decides not to go to church, you’ll know the dangers, too! Ronald Blythe, author of *Akenfield*, summed it up by saying, *“The British churchman goes to church as he goes to the bathroom – with the minimum of fuss and no explanation if he can help it.”*

Church is a place where all kinds of people who wouldn’t normally be seen dead with each other are thrown together and expected to get on with it, whatever “it” is. Church is not perfect – certainly not in its local expression. Things happen which we don’t like. Things happen which God doesn’t like. People join and people leave. We make mistakes and we get on each other’s nerves. In the first sentence of his introduction to Paul’s *First Letter To the Corinthians* in *The Message*, Eugene Peterson writes, *“When people become Christians, they don’t at the same time become nice.”* In fact, some of them never become nice!

So people end up behaving in ways that are quite at odds with what we might expect of good Christians. As Abigail von Buren writes, *“A church is a hospital for sinners not a museum for saints.”* In every church I’ve ever had anything to do with, there’s a bunch of people who mess up, who complain, who criticise – “the church is full of cliques and factions ... no-one listen to me ... this church is too simplistic, too intellectual, too demanding, too liberal ... the leaders don’t care ... it’s not like it used to be ... it’s too traditional, too modern, too noisy, too quiet ...” And that has always been the case: just have a look at the history of the Church down through the centuries. It’s been the case since halfway through the first century, just twenty years after Jesus had left his great project in the hands of a bunch of Jewish and Gentile converts.

It’s been the case since the Apostle Paul planted a church in the Greco-Roman city of Corinth. You can read about it in *Acts 18*. We know from the New Testament that he visited the church there at least three times after he’d got it started. And he wrote at least four letters to it, two of which are in our New Testament. We read from the first of those two letters this morning.

Corinth was a city on the isthmus between northern Greece and the Peloponnesus (the little thin bit that seems to join the top and bottom of the country). It had been a great Greek city, but had been destroyed in battle, then rebuilt by the Romans. Because of where it was, it was a city of great strategic importance militarily and it was also a hugely successful commercial centre. The isthmus of Corinth is now crossed by a canal, but in Paul’s day ships would arrive on one side and, to save a long journey down round the south, their freight would be unloaded on one side and carried the couple of miles overland to be put on ships the other side. Small ships were dragged across the isthmus on a roadway of rolling logs.

Like any seaport, Corinth was home to a community of people from all over the known world – multi-national, multi-ethnic, multi-faith. It was a great sporting centre, home of the Isthmian Games. It was known as a very intellectual city, with many people who considered themselves rather cultured and guardians of great academic knowledge and forward-thinking views. And the main faith was the worship of Greek and Roman gods, in particular Aphrodite, the goddess of love. There was a huge temple dedicated to her on the hill above the city, a temple that was served by one thousand temple prostitutes. In a city with such a liberal intellectual approach to morality and facilities such as were found at the Temple, sex was pretty high on most people’s agendas. One scholar called it a city of *“culture and*

courtesans” and the name of the city was actually used in a couple of proverbial Greek sayings: to use “Corinthian words” was to talk in a rather pretentious and literary way, and “to give someone a good Corinthian” ... well, you can probably imagine what that meant! It was a city that in many ways reflected the kind of culture in which we in Western Europe live today. One writer summed it up like this: “*The ideal of the Corinthian was the reckless development of the individual. The merchant who made his gain by each and every means, the man of pleasure surrendering himself to every lust, the athlete steeled to every bodily exercise and proud in his physical strength, are the true Corinthian types.*”

So it was in this situation that the little church began, started by Paul, with Silas and Timothy and a couple of merchants, Priscilla and Aquila – a church full of Corinthians who hadn’t suddenly become nice! There were arguments over who could do what in the church and what Christians could and couldn’t do during the week. There were factions and cliques which emphasised the differences between the intellectuals and the artisans, between the Jews and the Greeks, between the rich and the poor. There was all manner of immorality, some of it even worse than the usual pagan stuff. There were those who wanted to impose strict rules on the new Christians and those who believed that Jesus had given them freedom to do whatever they wanted. Some people felt that if they had the Holy Spirit they needed no other authority and would not accept the leadership of Paul or anyone else. And their Sunday services were a bit of a free for all anyway.

In fact, it was all getting a bit out of hand and some people in one of the housegroups, which met at the home of a woman called Chloe, decided they’d write to Paul and tell him what was going on, and other people wrote to him with various questions about Christian behaviour. Paul could see that there were problems, so he wrote back to them to try and answer some of the questions and to put them right about a number of issues that were causing difficulty. That letter is the one from which we have just read, *I Corinthians* – a letter to that local church, a letter to any local church, a letter to **this** local church.

And over the next few Sunday mornings we’re going to read through this letter and reflect on what God might be saying to us through it. How do the things that Paul wrote to a church in a sex-obsessed, anything goes, intellectual, well-heeled Greek seaport nearly two thousand years ago speak to a church in a sex-obsessed, anything goes, intellectual, well-heeled city in middle England in the twenty first century? What can we learn? How can we apply Paul’s words to our own situation? If you want to get the best out of it, can I suggest four things you might like to do?

Firstly, come along on Sunday and listen. You may not agree with everything that is said from the front about this letter, but at least give us a try. Secondly, take a bit of time to read the letter right the way through in one go, so that you can follow Paul’s argument and see how all the bits link up together. If you have a copy of it, try reading it through in Eugene Peterson’s paraphrase *The Message*, which captures something of Paul’s emotion and the informal style of his writing. If not, any translation will do. Thirdly, if you feel up to it, try reading a commentary which will bring out the main ideas. Probably the best one is Tom Wright’s in the *Paul For Everyone* series: it’s very readable, gives a lot of background and really gets to the heart of Paul’s message (£9.99 from the Cathedral bookshop). Fourthly, you might like to go along to a house group where you can discuss the issues raised on Sunday mornings. Not all of them will be following the series, so check before you go: the various groups are indicated on the notice sheet. And you can find the discussion notes either at the back of the church on Sunday or by going to the church website (www.wadestreetchurch.com) and following the links to “Sermons”.

So, in the time we’ve got left this morning, we’ll have a brief look at the introduction to this letter (*I:1-9*). It’s a fairly standard Greek introduction. Most people would start a letter in a similar way – obviously not with the overtly Christian phrases, but certainly with some formal greetings and a few lines of thanks for something or other. You’ll find most of Paul’s letters in the New Testament start off in the same way. But Paul shows in these first nine verses what his two great emphases are, and they’re summed up in the phrase he uses at the beginning of v2 – “*To the church of God*”. God and the Church – that’s the foundation of this letter, indeed all his letters. He wants people to know more about God, to know God more: and he wants them to discover what it really means to be a church.

I looked through the concordance in preparing this and discovered that half of all the uses of the word “church” or “churches” in all Paul’s letters are in his letters to the Corinthians. This is a letter about the church, which is why I’ve entitled this series *To The Church Of God*. And we can more or less list what he says in these first few verses.

The church is **sanctified and called to be holy**. It’s been set apart by God, set apart from the morass of immorality and selfishness that are the characteristics of the culture around. They are to be what Jesus described as a “*city on a hill*”, a beacon of light, salt in a rotting society. The church may be full of people who aren’t yet nice, who still have difficulties living as God wants, who are more sinners than saints, but they are people who have been made special by Jesus. You have been made special by Jesus: doesn’t that make you feel good? That’s where we start, with a community of sinners who are being changed.

And that community is **part of a much bigger network** of people made special by Jesus – Paul says they are “*together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours.*” We are not alone here in this building each week. We are linked through our allegiance to Jesus to the Christians meeting in the other churches in this city, to the denominations of which we are a part, to the Church of Christ across this nation, across this continent, across the world. There might be only a hundred and fifty of us here, but there are millions of us around the world.

The church in Corinth was a **cause for thanksgiving** for Paul. He regularly thanks God for them – for who they are and what they are doing and what God is doing in and through them. As we read on we’ll find that Paul had a great many things to take issue with them about, there were all kinds of things that were not right in the church, but nevertheless he was thankful for them. Some of you – all of you, probably – find things to criticise and complain about in this church. Some of you are more vocal than others in expressing that. And, as we’ve said, all churches have their faults. But your attitude to it might change if you were to spend a bit of time thanking God for it. There must be some things that you can find to thank God for here, so start with them!

The church was **enriched, equipped and kept strong by God**. Paul talks about their being enriched in every way – “*in all your speaking and all your knowledge*”, the two things that were highly prized in a city of intellectuals and orators like Corinth. They had all the spiritual gifts they needed: God provided for them in their worship, their behaviour and their evangelism. And he has always done that for his church. This church here is particularly blessed in terms of resources and gifts. God has been very good to us and enabled us to do all kinds of things. And when we do find ourselves needing help in some way, God will provide, will continue to enrich and equip us if we are faithful to him, if we allow his Holy Spirit to keep us strong to the end.

The church was **eagerly waiting for Jesus**: there was a point to it all, a goal in view. Jesus was going to return and they wanted to be ready for him. That is something that we need to keep ever before us, this idea that Jesus will return, that this church stuff is not just an end in itself, an activity to keep us occupied on Sunday morning and for a couple of hours during the week. What we do here is part of a bigger picture, not just in terms (as we have seen) of the geographical extent of the church around the world, but of the temporal extent of the church down through history. We are a part – a small part admittedly – of God’s plan for humanity, from creation to the final consummation of his purposes.

And finally, a very importantly, the church was **called together**, called into fellowship with Jesus Christ. Society in Corinth and society in twenty first century Europe is obsessed with the individual – individual rights, individual expectations, individual this, that and the other. As Christians we are called into community, that’s what the church is all about. I mentioned Tom Wright’s book earlier on, but I always remember him saying in a lecture once that we might be saved personally, but we are never saved individually. You cannot exist on your own as a Christian. This letter contains those great chapters in

which Paul compares the church to the body – interdependent, indivisible. And that’s why Paul is so eager to ensure that the Corinthians get a grasp of what being a church is all about.

And the other major emphasis in this letter and this introduction is, of course, God. Did you notice as this passage was read just how often Paul mentions God or Jesus? In these nine verses, just six sentences in the version we read from, Paul mentions God and Jesus fifteen times. This is God’s church – it is not the church of any denomination or faction or party or leader. I try very hard when talking about Wade Street Church to resist calling it “my church”. It’s not mine, nor yours, nor the URC’s nor the Baptist Union’s. It’s God’s.

And it’s God’s church because it’s his idea. He called the Corinthians together. He called us together. If you like, that’s the past tense – God called the church together. The present tense, as we’ve seen, is that he equips and enriches us. That’s going on all the time as we submit ourselves to his will and receive his gifts. And there’s a future aspect, too – Jesus Christ “*will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*”. One day he’ll finish the job. It’s not finished yet. We are not perfect, nor will we ever be this side of Christ’s return. Now, that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be striving to be the best that we can be, but it does mean that we shouldn’t feel too despondent (nor, indeed, critical) if everything is not exactly as it should be now.

You see, whatever else might be said about the church in Corinth or in Lichfield – and Paul is going on to say a great deal, not all of which is positive – this is the bottom line. It’s God’s church. He’s the one who has called us together. He’s the one who saves, equips, enriches, empowers, energises, enthuses. And that is just wonderful, amazing – that he should choose to do his work through us. We’re part of that, just as Priscilla, Aquila, Chloe, Stephanas and all the others were part of it. As I say, Paul is going on to say some very hard things to the church in Corinth, but he puts this first, so that everyone knows exactly what the score is. And this is what God has already done, already started. We are “in Christ”, together. David Prior, in his *Bible Speaks Today* book about this letter, writes this: “*Paul looks at the Corinthian church as it is ‘in Christ’ before he looks at anything else that is true of the church. That disciplined statement of faith is rarely made in local churches. The warts are examined and lamented, but often there is no vision of what God has already done in Christ.*” Try reading this letter without these first nine verses and you’ll get a pretty pessimistic view of the church at Corinth. Forget what God has already done in our lives, in the life of this church here and you’ll end up with a very unhelpful view of what this church is all about. We are, as our church slogan puts it, “*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church.*” Let’s never forget that it’s the second part of that slogan that is the vital one. And let’s thank God for all that he continues to do for us, in us, through us – despite us – in this local church.

(House group notes on next page)

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- The future tense – Jesus Christ "*will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ*".

You see, whatever else might be said about the church – it's God's church. He's the one who has called us together. He's the one who saves, equips, enriches, empowers, energises, enthuses. Be thankful!

Questions for discussion

1. Sum up in one sentence what you think church is.
2. If Paul was writing to our church, what might he find to be thankful for?
3. In what ways does God enrich us?
4. Paul writes "*our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you.*" How? How might that happen in our lives?
5. Do you "*eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed*"? Why/why not?
6. Why is it so important to remember that this is God's church? How can we ensure that we don't overlook that?
7. What do you expect to get out of this series on *1 Corinthians* ?