

“TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER”

12. TOGETHER GLOBALLY

1 Corinthians 16:1-24

Well, we've finally got to the end of this letter. The Corinthians probably felt the same when it was read out at their meeting by Paul's messenger. It had been a hard letter for Paul to write – and the second letter is even more difficult, but that's another story! – and it had been a hard letter for the Corinthians to have to listen to, despite the fact that Paul was actually answering a number of questions that they'd actually asked themselves. Remember, these are new Christians, converted from a highly pagan culture into a very new faith – after all, it was only about twenty-five years since Jesus himself had lived. They had no experience on which to base their life together. There was no church history. There were no institutional structures. It was a completely new way of worshipping, witnessing and living.

Now, we may think that would be great. The church has built up so many traditions and so many structures around it over the past twenty centuries that it might seem very attractive to be in this situation. But the first Christians were really making it all up as they went along. It might have been an adventure, but it was also very scary. And they'd made a lot of mistakes. Many of the members of this church in Corinth had encountered real difficulty moving on from their life of immorality and selfishness. The unjust structures of the wider society had found their way into the life of the church. There were some who couldn't cope with the amazing diversity of people within the congregation. Many of them were having trouble getting used to the spiritual gifts and abilities that were being manifested in the worship times. And Paul had had to point out to them a number of things that they really needed to put right, as well as answering the questions with which they had bombarded him. Despite his straight talking, though, he concludes his letter with a reminder of his love for them all (v24).

But now he gets to his final comments. As in many of his letters – indeed, most people's letters – there are a few paragraphs at the end which include all the little practicalities and greetings that haven't found their place elsewhere. For many readers today, these are bits to skip over. Paul's set out the meat of his doctrine, not least in the glorious chapter about the resurrection which we read last week. And he has spoken of the various ethical issues which affect the church today, just as they affected the church then. But the last chapter is usually a list of names and odd bits and pieces about visits and plans.

However, Paul tells us elsewhere that all scripture is inspired and is useful for us as a source of teaching, so there must be something we can learn from these fairly personal remarks at the end of the letter. Throughout this letter we have stressed that it's all about living together as Christians, about life as a church, about unity and mutuality. Paul was anxious to ensure that these new Christians, who had very little in common other than the love of Christ, managed to live and work and worship together in a way that was a witness to the wider community. They were not to get involved in this new way of life without realising that there were others who were part of it too – others who might frustrate and exasperate them, but with whom they had to work to further the purposes of God's Kingdom. There is no room for individualistic Christians in the church of Jesus Christ. They had each been saved into a community of God's people.

This last chapter, then, reminds them that the same is true of congregations. The churches may well have been pretty well independent in the way they operated within their locality, but they were certainly not independent from each other. The two denominations of which we are a part here at Wade Street Church – Baptist and United Reformed – both rightly pride themselves on a non-hierarchical structure. It is the local church, the church members' meeting, which makes the decisions. We are to a very great extent autonomous. But that doesn't mean that we can cut ourselves off from the wider church. There needs to be a constant reminder, as Paul gives here, that churches need to associate with each other.

In this last chapter, Paul names a number of other churches and groups of Christians – in Judea, Galatia, Macedonia, Ephesus and Western Asia – all very different provinces of the Roman Empire. And he names a number of individuals, too – Timothy, Stephanas, Apollos, Fortunatus, Achaicus, Aquila and

Priscilla. The church at Corinth was part of a network of churches and individuals that was spreading around the Roman Empire, which for many of them was the entire known world. They could not ignore the fact that they were involved in a much wider project than simply the local church in Corinth.

And nor should we. We are very fortunate in having a lot of resources here. We have a number of very gifted people. We have been blessed by God in all kinds of ways. So the temptation can sometimes be just to go forward alone, to plough our own furrow and not to worry too much about other churches – which, after all, might not think and worship quite as we do. But those other churches, be they part of Churches Together in Lichfield, the URC West Midland Synod, the Heart of England Baptist Association, or the body of Christ around the world, are full of our brothers and sisters. We are together not only with one another here as Jesus' disciples, but together globally as witnesses to the love of God and the saving work of Jesus Christ. Paul's closing section reminds us of ways in which that should be demonstrated.

1. **RELIEF WORK** (vv1-4)

Paul begins this closing section with a reminder of what was going on in other parts of the world, particularly in Jerusalem. Judea had always been a poor area and now the Christians there were finding it particularly hard as they were suffering from the famine there, as was the wider population, but they were also having trouble accessing food and resources because of the distrust with which they were viewed by the Jewish and Roman authorities. Paul asks the Christians in Corinth – a relatively wealthy place – to put some of their money aside for the relief effort. He encourages them to do this systematically so that they can really get it into their routine. [Incidentally, this is the first mention in the New Testament of Sunday as a special day of worship as a Christian community and, as Tom Wright points out, the very first reference to Sunday services is to do with the collection!]

This is one way we can ensure that we connect with the wider church. For every ten Christians alive today, nine live in poverty, according to Tearfund. One in every two children alive today lives in poverty. Nearly half the world's population – that's about 2.8 billion people – live on less than \$2 a day: and one billion of those live on less than \$1 a day. Paul arranged for money to be collected and distributed from all around the Mediterranean. Couriers would collect the money from the richer churches (all in coins, of course) and take it to the poorer ones. It's easier today. Tearfund, Christian Aid, World Vision and other organisations collect and distribute the money we send in by cheque, standing orders and so on. Maybe you could take a leaf out of the Corinthians' book and put aside a sum each week or set up a monthly standing order so that your brothers and sisters in the poverty-stricken areas of the world can feel connected to us here in extravagantly rich Lichfield.

2. **EVANGELISM** (vv5-8)

Paul goes on to write about the mission work that is going on in Macedonia (in northern Greece) and in Ephesus, from where he is writing. He tells the Corinthians about the exciting opportunities that are opening up there. We know from the story in *Acts* that Paul spent a long time in Ephesus with a daily series of lectures in the public lecture hall persuading the local population of the truth of the gospel. And he wants to Corinthians to know that, almost certainly so that they can pray for him.

He mentions opposition and, again, we know from *Acts* that he faced all kinds of problems from the locals, not least the Ephesian Chamber of Trade who could see him knocking the bottom out of the religious souvenir market if he turned enough people away from the Greek and Roman gods. So Paul is sharing with them his needs and his joys as far as mission went in another part of the world.

Once again, we need to get involved in that kind of associating. Over there in the corner is a board with all kinds of missionary information on it. The magazine racks around the building are stuffed with news from those who are serving God in other places – maybe relatively close at hand in open-air ministry in

Birmingham or working on tough estate in Stoke: maybe far away doing eye surgery in Benin or proclaiming the gospel in Chile or in our twin church in Limburg. Have a look at these letters and magazines: find out what other Christians are doing in other places and pray for them.

3. **HOSPITALITY** (vv10,11)

Paul tells the Corinthians that his young protégé, Timothy, is going to pay them a visit and asks them to take care of him. We know from the letters Paul wrote to Timothy that he was a nervous person and felt that he was looked down on because of his young age. Paul encourages the Corinthians to make him feel at home. They are to accept him as he is and to “*send him on his way in peace*”. We know that Paul considers hospitality to be a Christian virtue and both Peter and John encourage it in their letters. It is part of the attitude that derives from recognising that all we have – including our homes – comes from God and is to be used generously to help others rather than becoming just another selfishly guarded part of our lives. And, if Timothy was visiting Corinth on his way down from Macedonia (as we read in *Acts 19*), he wouldn’t be just dropping in for a coffee and a cake (or whatever the Greek equivalent was – a pastry and some ouzo?), but staying a few days. One of the memories I have of our home when I was a young child was that we always seemed to be having people to stay – often missionaries who were visiting our church (it’s how I first encountered an African). And it’s a great way of strengthening our associations with the wider church.

4. **TEACHING & DISCIPLESHIP** (vv12-16)

Paul then reminds the Christians in Corinth about a couple of people whom they need to pay attention to – Apollos and Stephanas. Both these men, we know, were more experienced Christians. Apollos is mentioned several times in the New Testament as someone who was eager to share the gospel and who needed to be instructed in what that all meant by Priscilla and Aquila. Stephanas was the first convert in Corinth and so had been at it a bit longer than many of the others. Paul says that these men are to be listened to, particularly Stephanas. Their knowledge and experience are useful for others to learn from.

We still need that today – the opportunity to hear from others whose experience and knowledge can be useful for us. With Liz joining us here later in the year, it would be possible to ensure that one or other of us is always in the pulpit. But it’s good to hear from other people, people from outside this church, people with other stories to tell, people with other perspectives on the Bible and on life in general. Take the opportunities to listen to or read what people from the wider church have to say about God and about the mission of the church. There will be a great opportunity to do that in the autumn when we have the new *Keswick in Lichfield* taking place in these buildings – two outstanding preachers who will have much to tell us about the Bible from the perspective of the wider church.

5. **ENCOURAGEMENT** (vv17-20)

Finally, Paul gives thanks for the encouragement he has received (specifically from Fortunatus and Achaicus – of whom we know nothing else) and encourages the Corinthians with greetings from himself and others. Just meeting or hearing from other Christians is an enormous encouragement – talking with, sharing with, praying with, listening to others who are engaged in the same work, sharing the same gospel, loved by the same Lord.

I’m sure we find it a source of encouragement meeting the same people here each week, deepening friendships, building one another up, sharing what’s going on in our lives. But it is great, too, to meet up with other Christians who are not from this church. We often have folk come here to find out about something specific (our ways of worship or our building project or whatever). But it might happen for most of us through Churches Together or through an event organised by the Baptist Association or the

URC Synod. It might be at a conference or on a Christian holiday, visiting another church while you're away on holiday. Even if you're abroad, why not try and find a church to go to on a Sunday and take the opportunity of encouraging and being encouraged. Get involved with visits to our twin church in Germany. Write to some of the missionaries who have left this place to serve God elsewhere. This is the kind of thing that kept Paul going and can be an enormous help to us today.

Paul and these Christians at Corinth, who were so focussed on the particular issues and concerns of a group of new converts in first century southern Greece, probably never imagined that their correspondence would ever be the means of helping Christians in a provincial English city two thousand years later. But, as I hope we've seen, there's plenty here in this letter that speaks into our own situation today. As we learn from it, and grow and develop in our own Christian lives, let's hear what Paul has to say about connecting with God, with each other and with the Body of Christ around the world.

Discussion notes on the next page

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Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think it is easier to get on with things ourselves rather than to connect with Christians in other places and other churches? Why bother with others anyway?
2. What can we do to take seriously the needs of our brothers and sisters in Christ in poorer parts of the world (and of our own nation)?
3. How can we inspire others to connect with missionaries and evangelists in other places?
4. Do you think we are too protective of our own homes? If so, why do you think that is? How can we show greater hospitality?
5. What are the benefits of listening to preachers and teachers from beyond our own church?
6. What (if anything) do you know about HEBA and the URC West Midlands Synod? In what ways (if any) could Wade Street Church get more involved in the work of the wider church?