

Messy Church, Part 2: Messed Up Together

1 Corinthians 1:1-17

In a nutshell: *The church in Corinth was a mess. It was made up of people who were acting far too much like citizens of the city of Corinth, and not enough like citizens of the city of God. But despite all the mess, Paul was confident that God's grace was at work in these Corinthian Christians, and that his faithfulness would win the day.*

1. What We Are (1 Cor 1:1-3)

Paul starts his letter in a style typical of the time with a declaration of who he is, who he is writing to, and a greeting. But there are also important differences to normal Greek/Roman letters.

Paul's credentials are not the normal ones of official status or position, but his calling as an apostle. Apostles are church builders. They start churches, and help existing churches and call local congregations into a sense of larger mission. At Gateway we are gladly pulled into apostolic advance by being part of the Newfrontiers family of churches. This week I was at a team meeting where we were talking about church plants in Taunton, Truro, Portugal, Madrid and Delhi – this is exciting to be part of!

Something very unusual about Paul's greeting is that he adds the name of Sosthenes. This is possibly the same Sosthenes that we read about in Acts 18:17, but whether or not it was, the unusual thing was that it was very rare to add someone else's name to a letter. What is different about Paul is that he knew he was commissioned to work in team. Right from the get-go of this letter all the indications are there that Christianity is a team sport.

As followers of Christ, everything we do, we do with others. The problem in Corinth was their self-sufficiency; they weren't sufficiently conscious of the body. So right from the start of the letter, Paul emphasises the body:

- He works in team
- They are sanctified *in* Christ Jesus
- They are called *together*

In Corinth the church was dividing into factions, around different personalities, but Paul emphasises the inclusivity of our faith. We are united with *all* those in *every* place who call on the name of the Lord. In saying this Paul is quoting Joel 2:32 (and Acts 2:21). Calling on the name of the Lord is the sign and test of what it means to be a Christian believer. And all believers are in this together. We are joined together!

If we can grasp how we are organically united to Christ, and to all his people, we will avoid factions, while at the same time recognizing and receiving ministry gifts that come among us.

If you call on the Lord, you are called to be a saint, just as Paul was called to be an apostle. A saint is what you are! And as a saint is how you are to live. For Paul to say this was remarkable in Corinth; and it is remarkable here. But though remarkable, it is true, by the grace of God. Grace means we are at peace, with God, and with one-another.

2. How We Are to Live (1 Cor 1:4-9)

From these verses we can see three things about how we are to live:

1. In grace

Paul is always thankful! Even though the Corinthians's are in a mess, Paul is thankful for God's grace at work in them. God has gifted himself to the Corinthians's in a variety of ways, which is all grace, and cause for thanks.

Like Paul, we should live with a greater awareness of God's grace than our weakness and need. Living this way we can know the richness of God's gifts.

2. In light of eternity and God's character

Corinth was a city built on the *now* – Paul calls their attention to the *forever*. Failure to live in the light of eternity leads to status-anxiety – a general sense of dissatisfaction and depression about life because you are not *now* doing or achieving or owning all the things that it is possible to do and achieve and own.

This is how Corinth lived, but Paul wants to live differently, because Jesus is coming back! This is a frightening prospect – how can we be confident that we will stay true to Jesus until the end of time? Because of the faithfulness of God: the Father is faithful and Jesus will sustain us.

Faithfulness is central to God's character while Corinth was a faithless city. Those from the city, coming into faith in the true God, needed to readjust their expectations about faithfulness. Similarly, we need to learn God's faithfulness, and learn to be faithful ourselves. We need to live in a way that acknowledges that this life is not all there is.

3. In fellowship

God has called us to share in the life of his son. This must affect everything we do! Whether we are in a church meeting, at work, doing the shopping, making love to our spouse, cooking a meal, going for a walk, or anything else, being *in Christ* must shape how we do it.

3. What We Are to Avoid (1 Cor 1:10-17)

“Chloe's people” were members of the church at Ephesus, who had visited Corinth on business, found the Corinthian church, and been shocked by what they had seen.

The Corinthians were living like the city, and not like those in Christ. Corinth was all about status and reputation, and the church was finding favourites to follow. This was getting as petty as who had been baptised by whom. Paul's response to this is that he was not sent to baptise. This might seem somewhat odd, as Jesus commissioned his disciples to baptise, so surely Paul was meant to baptise? Baptism is a key part of becoming a Christian – it was how the early church knew who was part of their number. So what did Paul mean?

I think the point Paul is making here is that baptism is about Jesus! When people responded to the message that Paul preached, they would have been baptised, but Paul clearly delegated the actual dunking to others. Whether it was him or someone else who did the baptism was inconsequential – what mattered was that the focus was on Jesus.

So when Paul says that he did not come with “eloquent wisdom” what he means is that church leadership is not a beauty parade. In a place like Corinth (and a place like 21st century Britain) it is easy to fall into the trap of wanting the church to be more like the culture: a big name leader, flashy presentation, more lights, more video, more

status, more fame. We can start to be deluded in thinking the church will be more 'relevant' if it looks more like a TV show.

This misses the point, and the point is this: THE CROSS!

The cross is counter-cultural, offensive and nonsensical. It doesn't measure up to what a place like Corinth is looking for. But it is by the power of the cross that we are saved.

Paul wants these messy Corinthian believers to unite around the cross; and so should we.