STAYING TOGETHER

1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:1-23

It is fashionable, in any era, to bemoan the ways in which the Church is attacked by the attitudes and influences of the world around. We spend ages in meetings and at conferences beating our breasts about the diminishing influence of the Church, about falling numbers, about creeping immorality and unbelief in society. But one of the greatest threats to the Church – if not **the** greatest threat – comes not from outside, but from within. And that threat is a perennial problem for the Church – disunity, factions, cliques, disagreements, whatever you want to call it. So, in this, my last sermon here as minister, I just want lovingly to commend to you these words of St Paul and plead with you to heed them, particularly in the hopefully short time you might have to spend without a minister when the danger might be a bit greater.

Because, you see, this affects the Church worldwide, split into huge, powerful denominations – a legacy of the schisms which have torn the Church apart down through the centuries. There are the three main manifestations of the Christian Church (although, if you belong to one of them, you'd probably say the other two aren't properly Christian!) – the Roman Catholic Church, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Protestant Church – and within those a myriad denominations and groupings. In North America alone, for example, there are 11 different Methodist denominations, 13 Presbyterian groupings, 23 Lutheran groupings and an astonishing 51 different Baptist denominations (including such wonderful sounding groups as the *Two-Seed-In-The-Spirit Predestinarian Baptists*, the *United American Free Will Baptist Church* and the *United American Free Will Baptist Conference*). It's quite a good rule of thumb that any church with *United* in its name isn't!

And within local churches, large and small, there is plenty of scope for disagreement and division. You won't find many churches where someone doesn't tell you that there are factions and cliques within it. Usually what they mean is that there are some groups that they are not a part of. It's all part of the problem that Paul is having to deal with in Paul's two *Letters To The Corinthians*: when people become Christians, they don't suddenly become nice. There are all kinds of things that we cling to which mean that we don't see eye to eye with other people, with other Christians.

And it's not the way it's supposed to be. Jesus did not want any disunity within the Church. He prayed to his Father in the series of prayers that John records in chapter 17 of his gospel: *"Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name – the name you gave me – so that they may be one as we are one* (*John 17:11*) and *"I pray for those who will believe in me through their message, that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you"* (*John 17:20,21*). And Paul was certainly upset by it, when some people from Chloe's housegroup which was a part of the Church in Corinth, came and told him what was going on there. In the opening chapter, he writes of their divisions (*1:10*), their quarrels (*1:11*) and their jealousy, which is worldly (*3:3*). In fact, the tensions and divisions in the Corinthian church are the main reason for his writing this letter to them.

Part of the reason is that they are allying themselves with different leaders, according to what he writes in the first chapter. Some people are saying that they follow **Paul** himself. After all, he started the church and was a great international evangelist. They have a certain loyalty towards him and there was, no doubt, some kudos to be gained from identifying with such a great figure in the emerging church. Others say that they are following **Apollos**. Apollos, who is mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament and whom other writers also refer to, was a gifted orator and intellectual from Alexandria, who was now preaching in Corinth. He was preaching exactly the same message as Paul, but his style was more flamboyant and more in tune with the prevailing style of the day. I remember there were people who left our little church in Winchester, where the Pastor, Roger Hammond, preached faithfully and powerfully each week, to travel every Sunday to Westminster Chapel to hear Dr Martin Lloyd-Jones, who was reckoned to be a great preacher. It was a 120 mile round trip. They were following the man not the message.

And Paul also mentions **Cephas**, also known as **Peter**. Others were claiming to be his followers. Peter was, of course, a good Jew and very much the traditionalist. He liked to keep to the rules and he seemed to embody the old ways of doing things, so the traditionalists followed him. And others (the most pious, probably) said they were following **Christ**. There's quite a bit of debate about this. Some scholars think that Paul is commending this group for getting back to basics. Others think that this is Paul's own comment, the claim he would make. Looking at what Paul has to say in the rest of these two letters and knowing what he is challenging in the Corinthian church, I reckon he is referring to a group that say they follow Christ because they feel they need no other earthly leader. It's the kind of self-absorbed arrogance that you often find in people who are always saying *"The Lord told me ..."* In other words, you can't quarrel with them, they have a direct line to God. What it all boils down to, of course, is that different people want different things. Even within church we all have our vested interests, and sometimes that does indeed take the form of being allied to certain personalities.

For some people the important factor is change – or lack of it. Music, buildings, liturgy, decoration, clothing – all these things act as seeds of disunity if we let them. It was interesting (and rather amusing) to read the results of the little opinion poll that we ran a few years ago. Of the surveys returned to us exactly half of the respondents to the question about music said they liked it and half did not. Of the half that did not, exactly half said it was too traditional, and exactly half said it was too modern. In one of Jeff Lucas' columns in *Christianity* magazine a while back he mentioned a church in America that was having a three way split over the position of a piano stool. And he also mentioned a Salvation Army church where they are having problems over the type of waste bin provided in the ladies' toilet. We may laugh, but I could mention several examples from our own church life (I will spare some of you that embarrassment).

The curious thing is, the difficulties and disagreements which we have are never over doctrine. In all the churches I have ever been a part of, I can never ever remember people falling out over what we believe the gospel to be. They disagree over how to communicate it and how to apply it sometimes, but most of the stuff we get so het up about is absolutely nothing to do with the gospel at all. But we still have all kinds of situations where we find ourselves at odds with one another.

The church at Corinth was facing the same problems and Paul was not happy about it. In fact, he responds to the members of the church there with great vehemence and some strong words, as you can see if you read on through this letter. Firstly, though, he deals with the issue at the root of it all – and that is **the priorities of the followers of Jesus Christ**. It is easy to become so distracted over the relatively insignificant aspects of our life together that we completely lose sight of what it's all about. We rarely really find ourselves asking why we're here, what we're doing as a church. Well, says Paul, sort that out and you'll start to make progress – and these silly disputes will soon pale into insignificance. In the words we read this morning – and in chapter 3, which we're also considering today – there are four things which I'd suggest we need to keep in focus if we're going to be able to concentrate on the things that are really necessary in our church life.

1. PREACH THE GOSPEL (*1:17*)

This could be an awkward verse for Baptists, but only if you haven't sorted out your priorities. Baptism is important, but not as important as preaching the gospel in the first place. Now, we could discuss the details of what this actually means until the proverbial cows come home (and in the housegroups some of you probably will), but let's strip it down to this. We need to be speaking of Jesus and his message, and showing his love in our lives, keeping the cross at the centre and giving people glimpses of the Kingdom of God in our daily lives.

What's the gospel? It's the story of how God loves this world so much that he sent his only Son Jesus into the world to provide a way of escape from the consequences of all our wrong choices and selfish behaviour. It's the amazing, foolish, earth-shattering, heaven-filling story of the cross, of the way Jesus allowed himself

to be sacrificed for our eternal well-being, and then burst out of his grave of Easter morning to demonstrate God's overwhelming power to defeat anything that could prevent us living life as he wants us to. It's the account of God's amazing grace, his astonishing love, his totally awesome (in every sense of the word) mercy pouring into the lives of men and women throughout the world, throughout history. And we are called to preach it, to share it in conversation, in proclamation, in our daily routines and on our special occasions. It's why we are called to keep *"Christ at the heart of the church"*.

Now Paul was so convinced that this is a powerful message that he says he didn't try to communicate it with *"words of human wisdom"*. He wasn't going to try and dazzle people with his oratory, or to entertain them with his wit, or to impress them with his knowledge – all of which he was more than capable of doing. He was going to tell the story simply and let his life demonstrate the truth of what he was saying. Yes, it's great doing all the wonderful and whizzy things that we try to do with technology, with eloquence, with the trappings of our post-modern, celebrity obsessed, glossy magazine culture. There's nothing wrong with all that *per se*, but if we've forgotten the message at the heart of it all, then we've got nothing to say at all.

2. KEEP AN AWARENESS OF GOD'S SOVEREIGN ACTIVITY (*3:5,6*)

That sounds a bit arcane, doesn't it? What I really mean is that we need to ensure that we keep God and his activity at the heart of all that we do. God is the one who effects the change in people's lives, he's the one who does the work. We all have our part to play in this, as Paul makes clear in these verses, but without God, anything we do is useless.

If you read some of the later parts of the letter you'll see that everyone has something to do in the life of the church, everyone has some gift or ability that they can use in the task of sharing the gospel. But, in the end, it's all down to God's Holy Spirit at work in the lives of those to whom we are speaking. There is absolutely no point in putting all our faith in particular individuals, or in our own strengths and abilities.
As Paul says, *"Neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who makes things grow."*
Of course, we need to explore all the avenues of communication and make use of every method that we can to enable people to hear the message of the gospel, but it's a waste of time if we aren't sure what the message is and we don't have some kind of awareness of God's Holy Spirit at work. Billy Graham, great preacher that he was, never embarked on an evangelistic campaign unless he could be sure of the prayers of his supporters in the place where he would be preaching. And the reason for that was that he knew that, however good he was, he was absolutely nothing without God's activity in the lives of his listeners. Now that's a challenge – and an encouragement, because it means that, if we truly have God at the centre, and our message is the cross of Jesus, then even if things don't seem to be going the way we want, God can still be fulfilling his purposes.

3. BUILD TO LAST (*3:11ff*)

Paul moves away from agriculture and picks up the image of a building. And, as everyone knows, the most important part of the building is the foundation. If that's wrong, the rest of the building won't really last as long as it should. So it's important to get the foundation right – and that foundation, as we've said already, is Jesus Christ. Everything else depends on that. Without him we have no message, we have no motivation, we have no real purpose in what we do.

But on that foundation we need to build something that will stand the test of time. Paul uses the imagery of various building materials and reminds us that some of them will not last as long as others. What he is describing here is the way in which all those things that we have spent our time and energy and resources on in this life will, when Christ returns, be tested in the dazzling fire of his presence. The things that have been for the good of the Kingdom – that have been built with quality materials, as it were – will stay with us for eternity. The rest – the inconsequential things, the trivia, the things that have been added for selfish

reasons – they will all disappear. There's no doubt, of course, that the person will still be saved and will have a place with God in heaven, but for some people, there won't be much left at all, which will be a great shame. Others, who have managed to keep Jesus at the centre, who have spent their lives modelling the values of the Kingdom, who have resisted the temptation to get too involved with the unnecessary factions of church life, will see far more of their effort rewarded.

4. REMEMBER YOU ARE CHRIST'S (*3:16, 21-23*)

Sticking with the image of the building, Paul goes on to remind the Christians in Corinth that they are *"God's temple"*. There are two Greek words for "temple" that Paul could have used. One refers to the whole temple area – the courtyards and cloisters and lobbies and everything. The other one, the one used here, refers to the inner sanctum, the "holy of holies", the place where God's presence is supposed to reside. That's why he says that *"God's Spirit lives in you."* And that "you" is plural. He's not talking here about individual Christians (so this isn't a verse to shout at people who smoke or have tattoos or whatever): he's talking about the church in Corinth. He's talking about us. It means that, as a church, we are to be holy; and it means that God's presence should be obvious amongst us. There is no point boasting about anything else – about wisdom or eloquence or programmes or whatever.

Over the years, I've often been asked by people from other churches why this place isn't declining at the same rate that many churches are: indeed, why is it growing (albeit rather slowly). It would be nice to be able to say that it's all our doing, that it's down to our hard work, our highly gifted volunteers, our wise elders, our imaginative programmes. But it's not. It's down to God and to the fact that we are his, we are in Christ and his Holy Spirit is in us. You and I are fortunate to have been here while God's been at work. We try to remember that Christ is at the heart of the church – but once we forget that, we're done for.

There is no place for boasting, says Paul in *v21*. All things are yours and there's no point splitting any of it up in factions or pressure groups or anything else. Everything comes from God, who is perfectly united in the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit, so we too should reflect that unity in our life as his people. The very best way to do that is to keep our eyes on Jesus and to ensure that we have got our priorities right – preach the gospel, remember God's sovereign activity, build to last and remember – always remember – that we are all Christ's, we are in him and he is in us.

(*Housegroup notes on next page*)

"TO THE CHURCH OF GOD – CHRISTIANS TOGETHER"
2. STAYING TOGETHER – 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 3:1-23

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Some people are saying that they follow **Paul** himself: the man who planted the church. Others say that they are following **Apollos** a gifted orator and intellectual from Alexandria. And Paul also mentions **Cephas**, also known as **Peter** who liked to keep to the rules and he seemed to embody the old ways of doing things, so the traditionalists followed him. And others said they were following **Christ**, a group that say they follow Christ because they feel they need no other earthly leader. What it all boils down to, of course, is that different people want different things. (The curious thing is, the difficulties and disagreements which we have are never over doctrine!)

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Paul goes on to remind the Christians in Corinth that they are "God's temple" the "holy of holies", the place where God's presence is supposed to reside. And that "you" is plural. There is no place for boasting, says Paul in v21. Everything comes from God, who is perfectly united in the Trinity of Father, Son and Spirit, so we too should reflect that unity in our life as his people.

Questions for discussion

1. Why do you think factions develop in any organisation, and particularly in churches?

2. Is it wrong for people to have a favourite leader or preacher? Why/why not?

3. What do you understand by "preach the gospel" ?

4. How can we ensure that we are always aware of God's sovereign activity?

5. What do you think 3:15 means? Do you find it comforting or scary?

6. How can we as a church best express the belief that we are "in Christ" ? What difference will it make to us? to the wider community?

7. Is there anything that has particularly struck you in these verses? What will you do about it?