

1 Corinthians 1v10-31

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Date: 15 February 2026

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[0:00] Please open up your Bibles to 1 Corinthians chapter 1 and we'll take it through from the passage that was read for us. We hear a lot today about how divided we are as a world, as a country, how much division there is all around us.

And that's certainly true. People seem to be quicker than ever to jump to tribes. The rhetoric is harsh, there's no doubt about that. And when it gets violent, it's ugly.

We are divided in lots of different ways. Something I've noticed is how much division there is in supposedly like-minded groups.

How bitter the division becomes, the closer people are in terms of their ideology and in terms of the vision that they share. The two main political parties in our country at the minute are riven by disunity.

There's talk of coups within the Labour Party, week, day in, day out, week in, week out. And, well, we're waiting to see how long it'll be before the next conservative defects somewhere else.

[1:02] These groups that are supposed to be united around a vision are more divided than ever. There seems to be something about that closeness that makes division more likely, more common.

I don't know why that is. Certainly the case marriages and families, they can be very divided and the division is bitterly. And I'm sorry to say that church division can be the most divided and most bitter of all.

Which is why Paul starts where he does with the Corinthians. Chapter 1, verse 11, Last week we saw these high words of introduction where the Apostle Paul speaks of God's work among these people.

The fact that it is evident, the fact that it is clear to him in the way that they've been gifted.

Everything, as he kicks the letter off, really starts well. And yet here he is. He goes straight for the division that he sees happening in the church.

This is where he starts with them. And he calls it out. But in challenging the division, that's what we're going to see this morning, he also brings an answer to that division, which is a paradoxical other kind of division.

[2:17] So what I want us to see this morning is that there are two contrasting types of division that the Apostle Paul is addressing here. The first is this. It is the division that Christ hates.

The division that Christ hates. That's verses 11 to 17. It has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, I follow Paul, or I follow Apollos, or I follow Cephas, or I follow Christ.

What has happened is that factions have grown up around different leaders that have been at the church at different times. The leaders themselves, they're not the problem, either in what they teach or how they've behaved.

If that were the case, the Apostle would have made that point. He would have addressed them, or he would have highlighted what the problem was. He doesn't do that. The factions have developed around the different ministry styles or emphases that these different ministers have, perhaps even around their different personalities.

Some follow Paul. They were likely part of the group that started this church in Corinth. They came to faith under his preaching.

[3:27] So, it's not only the case that they love him. There is an affection that is created between the person that you hear the gospel

through and the ministry that you're formed in in your earliest days as a Christian.

It's not only that they love him, but because Paul's ministry worked in their life, it is the ministry. Paul's style is the style. Blunt, sarcastic, all about the cross.

That's how the church got started. That's how God works. I follow Paul. Some prefer Apollos. Apollos was an educated Alexandrian Jew.

We know that from Acts 18. He came to Corinth after Paul. He was an effective debater among the upper echelons of Greco-Roman society. His ministry flew well with upscale elites.

And, of course, if we're going to reach the influential in the culture, well, we need him. I follow Apollos. And then there was Cephas, Peter.

[4:30] Peter's followers were probably Jewish converts who found it hard to assimilate into the Corinthian church. And so what they did was they stuck together.

And Peter was like them. And Peter's ministry emphasized certain elements of their Jewish culture. And they, therefore, wanted a minister who was one of them.

He was like them. He understood them. He was one of them. I follow Cephas. Paul. Apollos. Cephas. You can see how it happens.

Paul then introduces the name of Jesus. In our translation, it says, I follow Paul, Apollos, Cephas, or I follow Christ. And we usually take this as a fourth group in the church.

They're so spiritual, we're told that they don't actually need an earthly leader. They follow Christ. No need for the church. They have a direct line to him. But scholars think that the presence of a group like this in Corinth at that time was unlikely.

[5:32] And I agree. What I think is happening here in light of the introduction that we've just had is that Paul is actually correcting the Corinthians. They say, I follow Paul, I follow Apollos, I follow Cephas.

And Paul introduces Christ to say that those names should be replaced by his. So it's, you say, I follow whoever. You should be saying, I follow Christ.

Remember the introduction, as I've said. He couldn't stop mentioning Jesus there. You belong to Jesus. You have been gifted by Christ. Christ. It's all about Christ.

And as he goes on to make clear, the reason that their division is such a problem is because of what it does to Christ. Here's the thing. Here's the point that he makes.

Division in a church does violence to Christ in two very striking ways. Look at verse 13. First thing we see is it divides Christ.

[6:34] Is Christ divided, he asks, rhetorically. Literally, he's saying, is Christ apportioned out to these different groups? I follow Paul. Does Christ get apportioned there? I follow Apollos.

Does he get divided out into that group as well? Well, he can't be. That can't be the case. But that is what you're effectively doing with your factions, he's saying.

The church is Christ's body. So to divide the church is to divide Christ. To treat someone who belongs to Christ as if they don't, because they don't agree with you on your view on a secondary issue, Paul says it's like taking a hatchet to Christ.

Again, he's not talking about uniformity. He'll explicitly say later that the body has different parts. But the different parts of the body are supposed to work together, not to pull in different directions. Because to do so is to divide Christ. So it divides Christ, division like this. But secondly, it also denigrates Christ. That's Paul's point with the questions in verse 13.

[7:42] Was Paul crucified for you? He's saying, did Paul give his life for yours in order that you could be redeemed and reconciled to God? No. Or were you baptized into the name of Paul?

In the act of identifying with your Savior that happens at baptism, was it Paul's name that was used? Was it Paul's kingdom that you were drawn into through those waters? No. Here's his sarcasm coming to the fore.

He's using sarcasm to expose the absurdity of these factions. No mere mortal can die and rise for your sins. No eloquent human leader can redeem a single sinful man or woman.

And no sane person would suggest being baptized into their name. In fact, that's why Paul is pleased. Verse 14. Can you see? He actually baptized so few people, he doesn't even remember

who.

And he says that, he emphasizes that, because he doesn't want anyone to attach more worth to him, the Apostle Paul, than he is due. Because to do so is to denigrate the work of Christ.

[8:49] Martin Luther understood this. When Martin Luther heard that the first Protestants called themselves Lutherans, he said this, What is Luther? The teaching is not mine, nor was I crucified for anyone.

How did I, poor stinking bag of maggots that I am, come to the point where people call the children of Christ by my evil name? Luther, the Apostle Paul, verse 17.

They were just messengers. For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, and not with words of eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

He's saying, sent by Christ to preach Christ's message about Christ's cross, such that Christ's power might be spread abroad, and that Christ gets the glory.

If you love a certain theologian, remember they weren't crucified for you. If you feel like only X preacher, whether in person or online, really gets it.

[9:58] Whatever it is, your issue of preference, remember that you were not baptized into their name. One author says this, If Paul did not die for your sins, still less did Calvin die for them.

And if no one was baptized into the name of Paul, still less were they baptized in the name of any of the church fathers or reformers. Whoever it is that didn't die for you, whoever it is you were not baptized into their name.

And this is why Christ hates division in the church. It divides his body, and it denigrates his saving work.

So it's serious business, and that's why Paul's plea for unity is so impassioned. Go back up to verse 10. Can you see? Please, he said, By the name of our Lord Jesus, to whom you're united, and therefore in whom you are united to one another.

Don't be divided. You are one in Christ. Therefore, live as if that is a reality. Live it out.

[11:20] It is a plea to us all. He's saying, Don't have any divisions among you. No tearing of the fabric of this community that God has created in and through the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now, he's not saying that we should all agree on every issue that people fight over. We don't have to agree on, take your pick, music, liturgy, the date of Christ's return, Bible translations, politics, education.

Take, add any issue that you want into that. Important as these issues are, and there is a right view on all of them. But they aren't reasons for division within a congregation. Different churches will have different views on these things, and it's okay to choose your church on the basis of those things.

But if you have chosen to come here and to connect yourself into this body, don't be divisive on these things. I want to say I really appreciate the spirit that we have here.

Because we have a broad range of views on these secondary things. And I want to say it's clear to me that we don't just rub along together. We actually, by God's grace, are a very united body.

[12:34] Praise God for that. And long may it continue. And to be specific about the point in Corinth, if you were that way inclined, I guess you could gather around one of the three ministers that we have here.

You could say, I see there's some differences. I follow X. Or I follow, well, Andrew, Paul, Reuben. They're probably in that order.

But we don't have that. I'm glad to say. And long may that continue. Because the alternative is the kind of division that Christ hates.

It divides his body and it denigrates his saving work. The kind of division that we see in our wider culture, whether it be in politics or wherever else, mustn't be allowed to seep into the life of the church.

But as we read on, we discover that there is a division that we should embrace. Because it is this. Secondly, point number one, the division that Christ hates.

[13:36] Point number two, the division that Christ brings. The division that Christ brings. Do you see the dividing line? It's there in verse 18. For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing.

But to us who are being saved, it is the power of God. All the lines that we draw, all the lines of division that our culture draws are vertical lines. Rich, poor, black, white, young, old, right, left. Is that the right way to run it? Right, left, Mac, PC, whatever it is. But God has drawn a line that runs horizontally through them all. And it is the line of the cross of Christ.

What that means is that the cross of Christ divides the whole world into two. You know people that say, well, there are two kinds of people in the world?

You say, yes, there are those that think there are two kinds of people in the world and those that don't. There are two kinds of people in the world. Those who see the cross of Christ as folly or those who see it as the power of God.

[14:47] Everyone who has ever lived is in one of those two categories. Which one are you? The word of the cross is the story of God coming into the world he created, but that chose to rebel against him.

He came in the person of his son, the Lord Jesus Christ, in order to pay in his death on the cross for the sins of the world. He would bear the wrath that we deserve in our place.

That's the word of the cross.

The wisdom of the world, we don't need to be reconciled to God. We don't need to be forgiven. We don't need new life. We do need wisdom in how to live, but that means life hacks, tips, podcastable advice that we can take on board and act upon when and if we should want to.

And when it comes to the questions of the day, we are awash with wisdom. How do you live well in the world? How do you deal with the questions of identity and self-worth?

[16:15] We have wisdom about that coming out of our ears. Chatter, chatter, chatter. Wisdom, wisdom, wisdom. But no one is suggesting that we take on the word of the cross. Why not?

It's primitive. It's crass. It's irrelevant for modern enlightened people like me. It's a foolish message. But it's the message that God gives us.

And by the way, he doesn't stop with the folly there. How does he want that foolish message to get out? Verse 21. He adds to the foolish message a foolish method.

A man opening God's word, telling you what it says, holding a crucified Christ out as the only hope of the world, and exhorting you to follow him wherever he leads, whatever the consequences.

The Jews demanded signs. They wanted God to do the equivalent of the Red Sea, save them by a miracle, and wash away their enemies. The Greeks, that's shorthand for the Gentiles, those who weren't Jews, they seek wisdom.

[17:37] Give them philosophy. Aristotle, ideas. Jews want signs. Greeks want wisdom. God gives them preaching. Jews wanted a sign in the sky.

God gave them a stone to trip over. Greeks wanted sophistication. God gave them a naked, bleeding, dying Christ nailed to a scandalous Roman cross.

God has given us a foolish message and delivers it by a foolish method, which means that if we see it as anything else than folly, if we see it as his wisdom for salvation, we are on the right side of the dividing line.

One day, God will destroy the wisdom of the world. One day, you'll go into your podcast feed and all the episodes will say, no longer available.

Verses 19 and 20, that's what he's saying. But until then, we must hold to the foolishness of God's message and method. The cross of Christ, the great dividing line, that cross has never been a relevant or inoffensive or visually appealing message by design.

[18:48] Preaching has never been anything other than simple verbal proclamation of this message. Proper preaching has never been appealing by design.

Now, of course, like the Corinthians, we want the church to look and feel impressive. We want them to look at us and say, well, look at that. That's impressive. And we want our message and the way our message is delivered to offend the least amount of people we can.

But here's the thing. Almost every deviation from the truth that the church has made throughout her history, every compromise has come from a refusal to accept this simple fact.

God made Christianity foolish in the eyes of the world. God has written offending the establishment, offending the cool crowd, offending the double first, offending the religious self-righteous.

He has written it into the script. And you can't rub it out. You can't rub it out and still have salvation, and still have good news, and still have forgiveness.

[19:58] You can't rub it out and still have Christianity. So don't try. There is a worldly wisdom that God thinks is folly, and there's the wisdom and power of the cross which the world thinks is folly.

That's the division that Christ brings. It's the line that divides the cosmos. So, choose your folly. Choose which folly you want.

Which will it be? To help you decide, let me just point you to verse 25. Can you see verse 25? The foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. God's folly is still higher than man's wisdom.

God's weakness outstrips man's power. God's folly is still omniscient, and God's weakness is omnipotent. God's folly is still higher than man's strength. That's a folly that I can rest in, and so can you.

So God has designed that the cross brings division into the world. And we have to choose which side we are on, but here's the thing.

[21:11] We need to see that God has introduced this division in order to bring a deeper and truer unity among His people.

Can you see this? It is the paradox of the cross. Why does Paul go from divisions in the church to the division that is brought through the cross of Christ? It is the paradox of the cross.

It divides in order to unite. It brings a kind of division that actually resolves the division that Christ hates. Paul is taking us back to where he started. This division is the answer to the other kind.

The reason God saves us through the foolishness of the cross, verse 29, can you see, is so that no human being might boast in the presence of God, and because of, literally, from Him, you are in Christ Jesus.

Our human instinct wants to be able to contribute something, anything, to God accepting us. But wherever you stand in society, whatever you have or don't have, whatever religious credentials you feel you have earned, you can only come to God on the basis of the cross of Christ.

[22:23] You leave what you have at the foot of the cross. You leave what you don't have at the foot of the cross as well. And when you do this, God unites you to Christ, and He unites you to all who are in Christ.

The cross of Christ divides, but it does so in order to create a community of people who have set aside their boasting, or in fact redirected their boasting away from themselves towards the Lord Jesus.

And unity in Him, unity in Christ is the deepest unity that anyone can know, because it is a unity of equals who know that they're not good enough for God, but who have humbled themselves at the cross.

And let me tell you, when you do that, look at verse 30, look at what happens. Here's what you receive. Wisdom. You see Christ clearly, and you see the world in light of Him. And then trusting in Him, you receive righteousness.

That is a right standing before God. You are no longer God's enemy. He has reconciled you to Himself. Sanctification. You are set apart to God to receive His grace and mercy.

[23:27] He takes you, He puts you aside, and He says, you are the recipient of my grace and my mercy and my love. Redemption. In that you are purchased out of your sin and you're delivered from judgment.

Where is the room for boasting and pride when all of this is given to you as a gift? You've done nothing to earn it. He gives it to you in His kindness. There isn't any room for boasting, and so there isn't any room for looking down on others or feeling in some way that you are less than another. This is the engine of true unity. We are all equal at the cross. And when you grasp that, it should create churches that are diverse in all other kinds of ways, but truly united in the one way that matters.

It should create churches, I'm glad to say, like this one. Like us. And I want to say this morning, if you're here and you're not a Christian, we have room for more in this church.

If you can see what God is doing, if you can hear His voice, if you can see this foolish message of the cross of Christ as your only hope, you can come. Whoever you are, whatever you have, whatever you don't have, wherever you're from, and whatever your life has looked like up to this

point, you can come.

[24:52] Give your sin to Christ. Nail it to this cross that we're talking about, and He will give you grace and mercy in return. He will bring you to Himself and reconcile you to God.

Come and be part of this wonderfully diverse but crucially united body. And to the rest of us, never venture far from the cross.

Never venture far from the cross. Paul will talk to this church in Corinth about a host of problems. From sex, to court cases, to injustice, to gender confusion, to discord about spiritual gifts.

And he starts here at this point. Because those problems and every conflict and division that might come our way, they are all ultimately straightened out at the cross of Christ.

It's especially fitting that we're coming to the Lord's table this morning. And that means we aren't just hearing this, but we get to see it in the bread and wine. Elements that speak to us of the body and blood of Christ, divided so that we could be united.

[26:01] He was divided on the cross that we might be united in Him. This meal that we're coming to in a moment is the visible word of the cross. And it is a word that makes us one.

Let's prepare our hearts as we come. Let me pray and then we'll pray.