

## **1 Corinthians 1:1-17**

### **Introduction**

There are many examples in life where things need to be recalibrated from time to time, checked over to make sure everything is functioning as it should be.

This was certainly the case in my former profession as an orthoptist. We had to, from time to time, recalibrate all the eye testing equipment to ensure the results were accurate.

Take the Goldmann tonometer – a machine used to check a person's eye pressure and screen for glaucoma. If that was to start giving an inaccurate reading, it could lead to disastrous effects. It could mean the difference between someone receiving needed treatment and simply walking out the door thinking they're fine. Over time it could mean the difference between vision saved and vision irreversibly lost.

Sometimes, even if things seem okay, it's vital that we take the time needed to do a recalibration.

And the same thing is true when it comes to a church community. Every church has the capacity to go off kilter – out of whack with how Jesus wants us to live. Every church needs to be regularly recalibrated by the word of Jesus so that it keeps functioning in line with Him and His way.

The ancient church of Corinth was one such community in need of some recalibration. God had used the apostle Paul to establish this church during his second missionary Journey. We heard about his experience there in the first bible reading [Acts 18]. Corinth was located at the crossroads between the eastern and western parts of the RE. It was a religiously diverse

city. A sex-saturated city. A home to many rich people. A home to many poor people. Though a prosperous city, Corinth had its fair share of moral issues. One ancient visitor to Corinth wrote of the “sordidness of the rich and the misery of the poor... A place abounding in luxuries but inhabited by ungracious people.” Corinth had its problems.

But as one writer comments, “the issue for Paul’s audience is not that their church was in Corinth, but that Corinth was in their church.” The prevailing attitudes and behaviours of the pagan culture around the church had been allowed to seep into the lives of its people and throw the church off kilter. Pride and competitiveness had seeped in. Sexual immorality was rearing its head. People were thinking too much of themselves and not enough about others.

And yet, despite their challenges, Jesus doesn’t give up on this church which He loves. Through His apostle Paul (the writer of this letter), Jesus seeks to recalibrate this church – to bring it back in line with the way of God not the way of Corinth.

As we go through this letter together, we need to let Jesus recalibrate us too. Like the Corinthians we capable of allowing our wealthy, sex-saturated, self-focused culture to seep in and distort the way we do life together as a church. It’s good that we take time to check in with God’s word, and allow this letter to make sure we are thinking, acting and relating in accordance with what Jesus wants for us.

And to begin that process, tonight’s passage begins with fundamental questions of church identity. This passage gets us to recalibrate how we think about who we are as a church.

And there are three things we need to know about our community:

- We have a holy identity. (Sanctified in Christ)

- We are richly blessed. (Enriched in Christ)
- We are deeply connected. (United in Christ)

### 1. We have a Holy identity.

The first thing we have a holy identity.

When you think of something that is declared holy, what comes to mind first?

- Maybe it's the image of some of a special person, like a priest.
- Maybe it's the image of a special building, like a church or a temple.
- Maybe it's the idea of a special place or territory, like the "Holy land" of Israel.
- Maybe it's the idea of special festivals, like Easter or Christmas day [O "Holy" night].

Most religions of the world have their special things they deem to be holy. But notice right at the beginning of this letter, what Paul is saying is truly Holy in God's. Not some special individual, or building, or place or day. It is a group of regular people like us, and like the Corinthians – that who God says is Holy. A group of people, known collectively as the church, who believe in Jesus and gather together in worship of Him. Look at what Paul says in verse 2:

*<sup>2</sup> To the church of God at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, with all those in every place who call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord—both their Lord and ours.*

To be sanctified means to be set apart for God. It's a way of saying that something is Holy and acceptable in His eyes. But how did regular people like the Corinthians or like those of us gathered today, get to be Holy and acceptable? Well, Paul says that we are sanctified "in

*Christ.*” It is through our faith in Jesus – His death for sin and powerful resurrection – that God cleanses us from the stain of sin, declares us righteous in His sight and makes us His own people who are fit to dwell in a wonderful and lasting relationship with Him.

That’s why Paul doesn’t just describe them as the “church [lit. “assembly”] at Corinth”, but the Church of God at Corinth. It is not just the Church at Bundoora, but the church *of God*, at Bundoora. We are *of God* – Sanctified in Christ Jesus.

So Paul says the Corinthians have a holy [sanctified] identity, but notice that he also adds that they are called as saints. Another translation reads “called to be saints.”

Sometimes when we hear “saints,” we think “very special religious figures pictured in stained-glass windows.” But the term, “saint” or “holy one” is the way the NT actually describes every believer.

Paul, therefore is saying that a church is made of up of people already made Holy, but also called to be Holy? Which is it? Well, the truth is both. The NT uses the term Holy/sanctified in both a past and completed sense, but also in an ongoing and future sense. Put simply, God calls us to be who we already are in Christ. Our status as holy people has lived-out implications. Because we have a holy status we pursue holiness in our lives, saying no to sin and yes to Christ. This is the note Pauls starts on because it is a bedrock truth that will guide so much of Paul’s application to the Corinthians throughout the letter. “Be who you are.”

You will see it in chapter 6 for example, when Paul is exhorting some members to turn from sexual sin and selfishness. He tells them:

*11 And some of you used to be like this. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God.*

“Why are you acting like you used to act? That’s not you anymore. You’re not of the world, you are of God. You are Holy. Be who you.”

That God views us as Holy in Christ is such a remarkable privilege when you think about how unremarkable we all are! No offense. But it’s kind of true. As people, we’re no better than other group in our wider community. We are unremarkable, imperfect and sinful people. And yet we are wonderfully loved and cherished by a God who sees us as His Holy people – forgiven of sin and stamped with the righteous of Christ.

**App – You have a holy identity so be who you are.**

Let’s keep letting our identity impact our lives.

In our marriages we need to think, “I’ve been made sanctified in Christ, I need to be who I am and treat my spouse with Christ-like love – turning away from anger or laziness.”

When we go to a party we need to think, “I’ve been sanctified in Christ. Set apart from a life of sin. I need to be who I am and show some self-control in my drinking.

When we’re tempted to gossip about someone, we need to think, “I’ve been sanctified in Christ. I need to be who I am, and say no to that loveless act.”

Paul starts with the topic of our identity because, as we’ll see in this letter, it impacts everything.

We have a holy identity.

## **2. We are richly blessed (enriched in Christ)**

The second way this passage recalibrates how we think about ourselves is that it reminds us how richly blessed we are as a community of believers. “You are enriched in Christ in every way” says Paul to the Corinthian church. Look at verses 4-5 in your bibles:

*<sup>4</sup> I always thank my God for you because of the grace of God given to you in Christ Jesus, <sup>5</sup> that you were enriched in him in every way, in all speech and all knowledge.*

There’s no doubt that the Corinthian church had its fair share of issues. But notice that Paul doesn’t start with the issues... He doesn’t speak about how he’s always praying about their issues, groaning over all the things that are going wrong... Sometimes we can think about others or ourselves like that... All we see are the issues... But the issues are not where Paul starts though. He says that he’s first of all *thankful* for them.

And he tells us why. This group of imperfect Corinthians had, By God’s grace, done the one thing that matters more than anything else in this life – They had put their faith in Jesus – they had listened to Paul’s message about Him, confessed Jesus as their crucified and risen saviour and started relating to Him as their Lord. In doing so, they been brought from death to life by God’s grace.

Previously, these Corinthians were spiritually impoverished, trapped in a world of paganism – without hope and without God in the world (Eph 2:12). Paul speaks about the way they

used to be “enticed by mute idols,” when they were pagans [1 Cor 12:1-3]. But now, in Christ everything had changed.

They were no longer impoverished, but had become *enriched* says Paul – enriched in “all speech and knowledge”. They were a community of people who had been spiritually awakened by God. They had turned from their idols and declared, “Christ is Lord!” Christ is who they now spoke of, Christ is who they now knew.”

*<sup>6</sup>In this way, [says Paul] the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you, <sup>7</sup>so that you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Their obvious conversion, the spiritual gifts they now enjoyed, it was all evidence that the message of the gospel did what God had intended it to do. It had saved them and it was changing them. And, as such, they could be confident in the faithfulness of God, that Christ would continue to keep them secure in His care until the great day of His return. Verse 8:

*<sup>8</sup>He will also strengthen you to the end, so that you will be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>9</sup>God is faithful; you were called by him into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

The Corinthian church may have been messy in many ways, but they were still enriched in Christ - Blessed beyond belief. It’s a wonderful reminder of God’s grace to save, change and sustain sinful, broken people who simply trust Jesus – who are in fellowship with Him.

That’s our community too. We, like they, were impoverished without Christ. We, like they are enriched in Him. Saved, transformed and sustained by His grace. We, like they, can look

forward to that great day of judgment, and be confident, that the Holy God will declare us not guilty in Christ and welcome us in His eternal kingdom of unimaginable blessing.

And if you're not a Christian, please know that there is always room for one more among Jesus' people. You can also be enriched by His forgiveness and salvation, for as Paul has already told us in v.2, this is an offer for those in every place who call on the name of the Jesus Christ – who trust their lives into His hands.

Paul's gratitude to God should remind us that we, too, must be a community marked by thankfulness.

My kids love the story of Charlie and the chocolate factory. Many of you will know it, you have a handful of kids who each win a ticket to meet the famous Willy Wonka and enter his amazing chocolate factory (every kid's dream). Just consider for a moment the difference in gratitude between the character, Veruca and the character Charlie in that story.

Veruca is depicted as a thankless rich brat. Never satisfied with all that she's been given and always demanding more – even in a chocolate paradise. Charlie, on the other hand comes across as awestruck and utterly thankful for where he is. He had come from poverty, now he was in paradise with the big man himself.

We need to be a church full of Charlies – people who stand awestruck and thankful for where we are now. Thankful for the privilege and blessing of being called into the kingdom of the big Lord Himself.



I am thankful that I think we do have many Charlie's in our church here. People, genuinely thankful for the ways God has enriched them in Jesus. I was talking with someone who was a little newer to the congregation. He shared how thankful he was for the way God had grown Him during his time at Church and in the Christian union at his uni. He was deeply thankful that He had come to see Christ as the source of such rich blessing. For the most part of his life, Christ had been put on the sidelines, now he occupied centre-stage. Now he was the topic of conversation with friends and colleagues.

That's the kind of thankful attitude that comes when you can see clearly the grace of God given to you in Christ.

But how do we keep cultivating that kind of deep thankfulness within our community here? Well, I think it starts by simply talking with each other about how God has enriched us as believers within our 5pm community. The way we cultivate gratitude is to hear more stories of how God has saved us and is continuing to transform us by His "grace given to us in Christ."

There is a simple question that you can ask someone after a church service that I think helps is this:

"How did you become a Christian?" That question almost always makes for great conversation, but above all, it lets you (and hopefully the person you chat with) leave church with a bigger view of God's grace to His people.

We need to remember how enriched we really are or else we'll slip into becoming a thankless community, a joyless community – one where we get more excited about the news of hot chips than the news of our saving Christ.

We are richly blessed, so be thankful.

### **3. We are deeply connected (united in Christ).**

The final way this passage recalibrates how we think about ourselves is that it reminds us how deeply connected are in Christ.

Every believer in a church community has been united to Christ through faith in Him. In this way, whether we like it or not, we are deeply connected with each other – for “Christ is not divided” (v.13).

Jesus unites us spiritually together in Him and calls us to live that out practically in our community together – by avoiding unhealthy factionism. Look at what Paul says in verse 10.

*<sup>10</sup> Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.*

So, Jesus wants us to be united with the same understand and the same conviction... about what though? Are members of a church community supposed to be united with the same understanding and the same conviction about:

- The style of music and the length of sermons?
- The practice of baptism.
- The management of Covid?
- The visionary goals of a dynamic leader?

A few years back one of the biggest mega churches in the US started giving the kids colouring pages which had a picture of the main pastor and a message that said “Unity, we

are united under the visionary.” And then in the fine print it this “church is built on the vision that God gave pastor Steven.” Is that the kind of unity we should have? Unity around a dynamic leader.

Paul makes it clear throughout this entire letter that a community of believers are to be united primarily in the gospel of Jesus. That’s the big-ticket item that Jesus commissioned Paul to pass on to the churches he established. Look ahead to verse 17:

*17 For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.*

You see, Baptism, like other things in the life of the church, is something important that the bible speaks about and is worth thinking about... But, even baptism is not the thing that a church community should rally around – it’s the gospel. The message of the cross which brings forgiveness of sin and imparts life to those who believe. In fact, in 1 Corinthians 15, Paul will call this gospel message the thing of “first importance” in the church, the message upon which the Corinthians have rightly “taken their stand.”

As we are spiritually united in Christ, so we must be practically united in Christ by being united in the message of His gospel.

But that’s not always easy, because consciously or unconsciously we can start to put other agendas, ideas or beloved leaders in the place of first importance.

This was starting to happen in the Corinthian Church. Instead of being a church united in Christ and his gospel, they were a community divided around and devoted to big-name preachers. Read with me verses 11-12:

*<sup>11</sup> For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. <sup>12</sup> What I am saying is this: One of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ."*

So let's think about the appeal each one of these factions for a minute:

In the first corner, you had those loyal to Paul. We could theorise, that they were the ones who held him dear in their heart as the one who had first evangelised them. They had been converted under his ministry and they would always be loyal to him.

In the second corner you had the Apollos fan club. Apollos had visited Corinth after Paul left [Acts 18:24ff]. He was famous for his dynamic preaching ability and debating prowess against the Jews of Corinth. You've seen those YouTube videos labelled, "such and such speaker *destroys*, such and such opponent." I could imagine Apollos being featured in such a video. Where Paul's preaching was seen as perhaps a little long-winded and dry, Apollos was engaging, eloquent and vigorous. And in a culture which valued such charismatic attributes, Apollos naturally had his followers.

In the third corner you have the Cephas (Peter) crew. It could be argued that in the eyes of some, his great draw card was that he was one of the original twelve – a real-deal apostle who spent three years close to Jesus himself. He was someone who could give you a more intimate, behind the scenes picture of Jesus, perhaps.

In the fourth corner you have the “I follow Christ” faction. Now these guys are intriguing. On the surface you think, “that’s good right?” But their issue is that they were viewing themselves as belonging to Christ *distinct* from their fellow believers – as if their fellow believers somehow didn’t quite belong to Him? This group may have been those who saw themselves as super-spiritual, super gifted, and enlightened. Those who, in 2 Cor 12, declare themselves to belong to Christ, but actually question whether Paul does.

Can you imagine the rivalry that would have been at play here? Each camp casting doubts on the authenticity, or spirituality, or power of the other camp.

“You’re still following Paul?! Wow, if you want something a little more engaging come and check out our guy Apollos.. He’s so good with my pagan neighbours, he knows just how to reach them.”

“You’re still following Apollos.. He’s pretty dynamic but not that deep. Not as deep as our guy Peter.. He’s seen things Apollos could only dream about.

The Corinthians had put the likes of Paul, Apollos, Peter, on unhelpful Padi stools. They had become more focused on a specific preacher than on the Lord they were all preaching about. And in doing so, they had splintered off into their respective “tribes.”

And I think we can do this as believers today? We can make preachers or leaders who we’ve grown to love the main deal. We too can start to think, only this pastor really gets things. I’m really only going to listen Him. I’ll only come when my guy’s preaching.”

And in the age of the pod casts and youtube, it's easy to make modern day big-name preachers the main deal too. Hence, you have t-shirts being sold that read: "John Piper is my homeboy." But what does a T-shirt like that say? Doesn't it say something similar to verse 13: "I belong to Piper." When we speak like that, we unintentionally foster a sense of disunity with other believers in the congregation. We create barriers (rivalrys?) with others who maybe don't agree with *every* point Piper makes says or simply don't know him – and feel confused by that allegiance .

But the truth is, that as a Christian, you're not primarily in the tribe of Piper, or Paul, or Apollos, or Pastor Neil, or Chris. You are in the tribe of Christ. That's what gives you and the believers you gather with a deep and abiding connection. Other preachers and pastors may well be Shepherds, but they, like you, are still only sheep of Jesus. They are weak and fallible and can easily disappoint us. So don't run to them as champions or saviours. Let's have the same understanding and same conviction that the only champion we have, our only Messiah is Jesus. This is Paul's point in verse 13:

*13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in Paul's name?*

Christ is not divided and nor should you be. Paul's not your saviour or the one who you confessed as Lord in baptism, so don't treat Him or anyone else like that!

And there is a message in this for the leaders among us too. Whether, you're a pastor, elder, GG, kids or youth leader, you will do well to remember that you are not the saviour.

Sometimes, you may think you need to be the saviour of those in your care. You may think

you have to have all the answers to their big questions. You may think you have to fix all their problems. You may think you have always be available and ready to help them.

But, if you start to see yourself as the saviour, you will not only be crushed at your own expectations, you'll end up teaching people that they need to come first to you, not Jesus.

But a good leader, always does what Paul does here – he or she, points away from themselves to Jesus. Paul is kind of saying that in verse 17, “I didn’t come to draw you to myself, but to preach the gospel, to point you guys to the one who died for you.

We as a community must know the only true source of unfailing help and salvation comes from Jesus. He is the One we are called to trust, He is the One who joins us together in gospel unity.

### **Conclusion**

God’s word tonight has given us a chance to recalibrate how we think about ourselves as a church community.

- We have a holy identity (sanctified in Christ).
- We are richly Blessed (enriched in Christ).
- We are deeply connected (united in Christ).

When I had to recalibrate the eye equipment in my former profession, it would often require a bit of effort. I had to consult the manual, pull things apart, tinker away. But then I could be sure, that the machine was functioning as it should be.

As we work our way through the rest of 1 Corinthians, there will likewise be a degree of effort involved. You will need to come each Sunday prepared to think deeply about what

God is saying to us in this letter. You will need to tinker away at some heart application – figuring out if/where things need to change for you. Above all, we will need to remember that God is faithful verse 9. He loves our church far more than we ever could. And he will help ensure that as we bit by bit we are functioning as we should be. Let's pray.