

The Power of the Cross

This week, we start a three-part series on 1 Corinthians 1. Today, we look at 'Unity in the Cross'. One thing I appreciate about our church is that the leaders and staff do want the church to be about 'them' or even about their ministry. From week to week, we do not hear much about what they are doing, yet they are quietly working away, ministering and serving among us. Hebrews 12:2 talks about us "fixing our eyes on Jesus" (NIV) or "looking only at Jesus" (NASB). We need to keep focussed on Jesus, who initiated our faith, who will perfect our faith and in whom we must trust, each and every day. In doing that, we can concentrate on serving God, serving each other and making disciples. The writer of Hebrews tells us that Jesus focussed on the end result, "the joy set before him". It brings Christ great joy when we are saved and become children of God. He wants us grow to maturity in our faith and becoming more Christlike / 'conformed to the image of the Son'. (Rom 8:18-30) For that, he "endured the cross, scorning its shame".

GETTING STARTED: In every generation, there are people we admire or even put on a pedestal. Who is a person that you admire, revere or have great respect for? This might be a favourite sporting hero, performer/ popstar, world leader or person from history. It might be a family member, teacher or friend.

READ: 1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-17

🗨️ What did you notice/ what things stood out, as you just read the passage?

🗨️ What things did you take away from the sermon this week?

🗨️ Steve commented that even he and Kelly might find it hard enough to agree about a simple decision. Yet, in 1 Cor 1:10, we read "*I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.*" Think of one close friendship – and conflicts you have had. If you are committed to a long-term relationship with a person, but disagree about an issue, how do you respond differently, to intentionally maintain the relationship?

❗ As this chapter opens, Paul addresses his letter to the "*church of God that is in Corinth ... sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours.*" Paul is talking to a group of people, corporately, who are "in Christ". He notes they also have a common bond with people, they don't even know.

🗨️ A former colleague received a letter from International Red Cross, asking whether her maiden name was "xxx". She rang this organisation and was shocked when told that she had a half-sister in USA, who was trying to contact her. The two women were linked by a common father. How do you think you would respond if you were in this situation? How do you think you would respond, if you walked into a church in Africa, India or Europe – and you didn't even share a common language – but suddenly realised that these were your 'family' – and you had a common bond, 'in Christ'?

❗ In 1 Cor 1-4, Paul addresses the first issue of this book. He talks about the focus of apostolic ministry, which is the preaching of the gospel. He in no way diminishes the ministry of his co-workers: Cephas (who we know as Peter) and Apollos. Instead, he highlights that they are all on the same team, with the same focus and goal, even if they are doing different jobs. Paul defends his ministry, including his faithfulness and diligence in ministering to them. He also admits that he is not the most eloquent or charismatic preacher. Compared to Greek philosophers, he is not a master of rhetoric and wisdom. It seems he was not the most confident speaker, with Paul admitting he came "in fear" and "much trembling". Yet, that did not stop him from doing ministry. In 1 Cor 2:2, he says that "I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified."

🗨️ Paul was effectively saying: "it's not about me. What I want you to know, is about Jesus". In any ministry team, there are people who do different tasks, with different skill levels. Who is someone you serve alongside, who is gifted, but who is also humble and encourages your team?

🗨️ Paul obviously had some impediments to being in ministry, and maybe even was nervous when it came to public speaking. How is that an encouragement for us, in 'having a go' at speaking up about Jesus?

① Over the last couple of weeks, as we studied the book of Ruth, we talked about the Hebrew concept of 'chesed', which we discovered includes the ideas of covenant faithfulness, loyalty and lovingkindness. This is very much a 'relational' word and in 1 Cor 1, we see Paul appealing to the Corinthian church, on the basis of their relationship with God, their relationship with him and their familial relationship with each other. **God is faithful** (1 Cor 1:9); **ie: God is relationally committed to his church.** We were called into fellowship/ communion / relationship with Jesus. (1 Cor 1:9) Paul addressed those in the Corinthian church as his brothers and sisters.¹ (1 Cor 1:10,11)

🗨️ Read again the words of 1 Cor 1:4-9. (Below) God has also equipped his church with all sorts of gifts, to help us maintain an attitude where we keep Christ central to all we do and help us make our relationships work. What do these verses say about God and about what he has done / given us? What mindset and attitudes do we need to maintain (plus what things do we need to remember about our relationships), so that we intentionally remain relationally committed to each other for the long haul, even when we have different views on things?

4 I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. 5 For in him you have been enriched in every way - with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge - 6 God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. 7 Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. 8 He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

① In 1 Cor 1:10-17, Paul says that the Corinthian church had splintered into factions, based on which leader they followed. Then, in 1 Cor 2-4, he highlighted what people should look for in a leader, including diligence in ministering and faithful proclamation. Consider the following comments:

"Humans are sinful, and one of our weaknesses is idolatry. Acting upon this weakness, we have a tendency to raise some people to a superstar status. When we consider that these superstars are beyond the reach of criticism, we have fallen into a logical fallacy called star power. ... Closely related is the version of star power in which we believe an assertion, adopt an opinion, or take a particular side in a controversy because a popular person holds that position. This is especially so if we are a devoted fan of the celebrity. Specifically, this is the cult of personality. ... Additionally, fans will often attribute to their idol positive moral qualities such as impartiality, honesty, altruism, and general goodness. Such misguided thinking is closely associated with politics, especially during political campaigns. But it's also common in many other areas of life. ... What happens, then, when star power or the cult of personality comes into Christianity? Simply put, people take a pastor or teacher or evangelist who is a persuasive speaker and writer and make him or her into an idol. Using the word idol might sound excessive, but when loyalty to these people takes precedent over faithfulness to God's Word, idol is an appropriate description."²

Steve commented that issues arise when we bring worldly culture into the church. This writer thinks that we have a tendency to bring practices from pop culture and politics into our churches, by making idols out of our leaders. Paul knew this. After healing a lame man in Lystra, the people had tried to "to make Paul and Barnabas celebrities", but they wouldn't tolerate this. (Acts 14:8-20)³

🗨️ Paul knew that there were groups of people in the Corinthian church, who either supported him or who had major grievances and criticisms about him. What do we learn from how Paul responded to the 'cult of personality' that was evident in the Corinthian church? How do you think a Christian leader should respond, if there is evidence that a group of people are amassing in their church, either as a 'political lobby group' or who have a list of complaints about them?

🗨️ In 1 Cor 1:17, Paul wrote: "*For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel - not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.*" Many of us work in secular workplaces and are not doing 'full time ministry'. Many of our work colleagues might not have any knowledge of the Bible – so using church jargon won't make any sense to them. What are some phrases that you use, to communicate your faith in everyday language?

HOMEWORK: Over the next three weeks, memorise the words of Rom 1:16-17 and meditate on a phrase each day. Eg "I am not ashamed", "the gospel is the power of God", "salvation to everyone who has faith".

The Power of the Gospel ¹⁶ *For I am not ashamed of the gospel; it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith, to the Jew first and also to the Greek. ¹⁷ For in it the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith; as it is written, "The one who is righteous will live by faith."* Rom 1:16-17

¹ https://krusekronicle.typepad.com/kruse_kronicle/2007/08/household-pau-1.html#.X7oHIWqzblU

² <https://www.worshiphisgrace.org/wp/dangers-christian-personality-cult/>

³ <http://www.kneillfoster.com/aar/1997/AAR1997-8.php>