

## “The Church” 2023 1 Cor 1

I’ve always known the Church is a complex topic to speak or teach on. We can hardly agree on the terms – are we talking the building, the congregation, the denomination, or all believers? It’s complicated because you constantly have to qualify everything. “You should go to Church.” “Yes, but... Pastor, you don’t have to go to Church to be a Christian.” OK you got me, though scripture often speaks of its benefits. “The Church is a gift of God.” “Yes, but... Pastor, that one pastor was really bad, and this one member said that horrible thing to me once.” Yes, true, the Church is made up of sinners. “God wanted a Church.” “Yes, but... Pastor, human sinfulness has fractured it into dozens of denominations.” Ok, yes, there is going to be division when you try to be faithful... And on and on it goes.

Yet, I thought (in hubris of foolishness) I would take the opportunity here as we read a few parts of 1 Corinthians to write up a quick sermon on the Church. And so I did, and right about where I told myself, “Ok lets take a page or so to wrap this up,” I looked down and I was already at seven pages! I’ve never preached a half hour sermon in my life, I don’t think, and that’s what we were staring down.

Because the Church is a complex topic to talk about.

I think that reality is shown in Corinthians. Paul writes not one, but two, fairly weighty letters to them, describing, yes among other things, what it means to be the

Church. And it is a bit complex, take our reading for example. He calls them in verse 10, brothers. And last week he gave thanks to God for them. And now he's going to chastise them for division. Later he will tell them to kick some people out of the Church. "Paul isn't that the definition of division!?" It's complicated. Which is why they get two letters.

So I will resist the urge to cover every angle and every qualifier today. And will, instead focus on just three things that I think are important and intersect with our text today. They are 1: We are not qualified to mock, disparage, or hate that which Jesus loves, namely, his Church. 2. We are not qualified to divide the Church based on our opinions and preferences. And now we need some Gospel, don't we? 3. Jesus is still the light in a dark world.

Number 1: We are not qualified to mock, disparage, or hate the which Jesus loves, namely, his Church.

Jesus often refers to the Church, all those believers, as his bride. And we men get uncomfortable, but man-up, you can handle it – He is simply showing how unconditionally and promise-driven his love for us is. And to disparage the Church is to disparage his bride. "Hey Pastor Pay, I really like you, but, no offense, I can't stand your wife." Well guess what, offense taken. She is mine, I am hers. You

don't get to disparage her. Yet so often we hear, "I love Jesus, but not the Church."  
Nope. We are not qualified to say that.

Now, I did choose my words carefully. Did I say we cannot criticize the Church?

No. We can. And Paul does criticize the Church in Corinth for their sin and brokenness. But he still calls them brothers. He doesn't disparage, mock, or hate them. He longs for their good.

May we in our congregations long for the good of others. May we put the best construction on things. May we celebrate the unity, small or great, we have with believers around the world. And may we be honest about it's failures. This is not, please don't mishear me, this is not some guilt trip to make you sweep abuses under the rug, no, no, and no. Bring them to light. Talk to those elders of yours. In fact, I would say, when there is a wrong, the loving action is to address it. Not cover it up. But as I mentioned, that's a lot different than hating the Church, or the individuals in it.

One last note on this point, I chose the word "qualified" because I think that's better than saying we aren't "allowed" to "mock, disparage, or hate it." Because if I said we aren't allowed to do those things, well then clearly there is just some rule put down by God or someone, I guess, because they don't want negative press. No, I say "qualified" because whether there is a rule or not about disparaging Christ's

bride, the fact of the matter is that even if it was allowed, you still shouldn't do it. "I hate the Church the people in it are hypocrites." Oh and you aren't? "They were unwelcoming to me" Oh, and you've never said the wrong thing ever in your life? "They overworked me and didn't say thank you." Oh, and you never had a chance to say "no," and have never forgot a thank you?" Yes, the Church militant, still here and fighting, is full of sinners and hypocrites, but guess what, you and everyone else is one too. Which means you are not qualified to disparage it, and it also means, that you fit in perfectly with us, as people who long for grace and need a Savior.

Ok, point 2: We are not qualified to divide the Church based on our opinions and preferences.

You see the "qualified" word again. My reasoning is the same. If there is someone who can divide the Church on opinions, it isn't us, our opinions are often wrong, misguided, or fickle. The implication of this point is that we *can* divide the Church based on *teaching*. And you say, "Pastor, no, look at our text some follow Paul, others Apollos, others Cephas (Peter) some Jesus. And Paul says that's a bad thing." And I say, correct, because, because, which of them was putting out false teaching? Jesus, the Word made flesh? Paul and Peter his apostles? Apollos, who we have every indication in scripture was a faithful pastor? Which of them are the heretic? None of them. So the fact that the Church was dividing because of them

meant they were dividing because they just liked their own favorite Pastor or apostle and they were causing trouble when all of them were faithful. Paul says you don't get to do that. Is your Pastor faithful? Then rejoice. And if not, or if you disagree with the teaching of a Church body, then don't gather with them, go somewhere else. And isn't that more honest than just someone being mad about their opinion on the color of the carpet.

And now come the "Yes, but..." qualifiers. "Yes, but... if there are multiple faithful congregations around do we have Christian freedom to worship in one of our choice?" Answer: of course. As long as you don't sow division among them. "Yes, but... isn't all division bad, even if it's based on teaching?" Of course it is. Because that implies we don't all agree on the teaching, someone's wrong and that isn't good, and the Church gets a little fractured. But what's the alternative? Gloss over our differences, sing kumbaya, and pretend we all believe the same when we don't? No, that's not unity. And not the spirit of what Paul tells the Corinthians at all. And so the eastern church splits from the west, and so the reformation happens and we get kicked out. And So here we are with "Luther" in our name. Are we saying, "We follow Luther?" No we don't. We follow Jesus, the Jesus revealed in scripture alone, and his gifts received by faith alone. And those were tenets from the Bible that a guy named Luther argued for, and so everyone called us that, and it stuck. But those teachings are from the Bible, from Jesus. Not the Jesus that makes

you work your way to him, not the Jesus who makes you crawl out of darkness before you receive his grace, but the Jesus who comes into your darkness and brings light.

Which is point three. 3. Jesus is still the light in a dark world.

In our Gospel lesson Jesus fulfills the Old Testament prophecy that Samaritan lands, with all sorts of false teaching, would finally have light and truth in them and on them. And Matthew tells us exactly when that happens, when Jesus walks upon their land and brings healing, teaching, and gives the promises of life in Him. What joy! What good news! What light in the darkness!

If only, he came to our dark lands, right....? Or has he? How does the light of Jesus shine into dark hearts and homes and cities now? By that person at home who picks up that dusty Bible. But who printed it? By that lady in the nursing home who gets a card of encouragement with a bible verse reminding her she is not alone. But who sent it? By the kid in confirmation, who is kind of bored, and doesn't want to be there, but then suddenly something clicks – “maybe God is real?” But who taught him? Maybe the light shines when someone comes, and doesn't know if they belong but is enthralled by the music? But who sung it? Maybe it's a person who comes all the time, but they aren't really feeling it, and maybe it's a sham, or for someone else, or maybe they don't believe at all, and

they are going through the motions, but then they hear “this is my body, this is my blood, for you.” And they receive that promise! But who put the trays out, who blessed the bread and wine, who ushered the pews up? Who did all of this? Jesus did. How did he do it? Through his Church.

Jesus called apostles for a reason. He told them to go out and baptize for a reason. He told them to “do this in remembrance of me” for a reason. He told them to share the Word. And guess what? We’ve heard it! This is His Church, this is Him shining his light into a dark world still, even now, even as he still lives, even as God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit still work to save.

And so maybe, just maybe, we can begin to see the Church, in it’s broadest sense of all believers, down to the Sunday services, not as one big guilt trip, not as some man-made corrupt industry, but as the goodness of Jesus, won on his cross and empty tomb, coming to the darkness of the world, the darkness of our hearts.

Maybe we can see the church and each other as broken sinners in desperate need of grace and rejoice that the grace of God has come to us in a real Savior who really died and rose. And through the testimony of people just like us, with doubts and fears and sins, who longed to share good news with us, good news that kept them steadfast and forgiven through all things to their Savior’s side. And he will do the same for us, of course he will, and how do I know that? Because you are a part of his Church! And I’m not talking membership, I’m talking faith and baptism and his

gifts which have come to you – you can't deny that they have, and it isn't an accident. And if you are a part of his Church, well, as we already stated, the world (which thinks the cross is foolishness) and the evil one, nor anyone else are qualified to disparage you. Jesus loves you. You are His. And one day you will join, by His grace, the Church washed clean, purified, and triumphant. God be praised. Amen.