

The Church Is One

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[0 : 00] Well, I'd like us to turn back together again to 1 Corinthians chapter 1, and we can read again verses 1 to 2, Paul called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus and our brother Sothsones, to the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. Today I want us to start what's going to be a very short series about the church. We're going to do it in four parts and we're going to do two parts this week and two parts next week, and our series is called Divided, Diluted, Disconnected, Developed. Now that might sound like a bit of a strange title for a series, but the reason I've chosen these is that I think that I think we can all say that in many ways these four words describe the church across the globe, across our nation, maybe in some ways even across our island, and I wanted to pick these four words because they stand in contrast with another four words which for 1,700 years have been a fundamental description of the

Christian church. These other four words, the old four words, come from the Nicene Creed which was written in the fourth century and it's a short statement about some of the core truths of Christianity, and it gives the statement about the church to say we believe in one holy Catholic and apostolic church, and those four words, one holy Catholic and apostolic, have been known as the attributes of the church, and so when we talk about the church we're saying it's one, it's holy, it's Catholic, it's apostolic. Now don't worry if you don't know what these words mean or are referring to, hopefully we'll discover that this week and next week, but what I want us to see first of all is that these words don't just come from the Nicene Creed, they actually come from the Bible, in fact you can see them in the opening verses of 1 Corinthians. Paul is writing to the church of God, the one church of God, he's writing to the part of it that's in Corinth, and so he's recognizing the unity of the church. He describes that church as sanctified, he's talking to the saints, all of that is the language of holiness, sanctified saints, all comes from the Greek word that means holy. This church is connected to all others in other places who call the name of Jesus, that's what we mean when we talk about the word Catholic, we mean it in the sense of universal, connected, not simply local, it extends far beyond an individual congregation, and that church and every other church is built on the teaching of the apostles appointed by Jesus Christ to lay that foundation of gospel truth upon which the church stands. So the Christian church is one holy, Catholic and apostolic, but today in practice the church looks and feels very different. Today the church is much more divided and diluted, disconnected and developed, and not only that often these are seen as a good thing, or at the very least they're not seen as a problem, and I want us just to spend this week and next week unpacking these, thinking about some of these things, and what I hope it will do is press into all of their hearts some of the key truths that the Bible presents in regard to the church, because when we're talking about the church we're talking about us, we're talking about something that we are part of. So this morning we're going to start by thinking about the fact that the church is one, and we're going to do so under two headings, first of all we're going to think about seeds of division in Corinth, and then we're going to think about a harvest of unity in the gospel. So starting here, as you may know the church in Corinth was a bit of a mess, there was lots of tensions and difficulties that had arisen, and Paul is writing to try and address these, and one of the fascinating things about this letter is that it's dealing with so many of the issues that we still face today. What do we do when somebody in the church falls into major sin? What do we do when we are surrounded by a culture that has a different set of ethical standards to what the Bible has? What do we do when people fall out with one another? The Corinthian church faced all of these things, and probably the most acute division, acute issue was division, because that's the very first thing that Paul addresses, and the passage that we read you see Paul saying, I appeal that there will be no divisions among you. He's seeing that in this church the seeds of division are starting to take root.

Some are saying they follow Paul, others are Paulus, others Cephas, others Christ, and as he sees those seeds of division taking root, Paul is horrified, and we probably have to work quite hard to recognize the horror that Paul has. We are much much more used to division and much more tolerant of it than Paul ever was. And Paul writes this letter, part of the reason he writes this letter is to urgently call the church in Corinth away from dividing, and the reason he does that is because he knows maybe maybe better than anybody else he knows that the church of Jesus Christ is one. Now whenever we talk about that there's just there's two questions that we have to ask ourselves at the very beginning, and I'm just gonna ask them, I'm not gonna answer them. When we think about the unity of the church, do we even see the problem in our own context? And if we do, what what are we prepared to do about it? You can't get past 1 Corinthians chapter 1 without recognizing just how serious we should, how seriously we should take the unity of the church. Now as Paul addresses this question in in

Corinth, he does something fascinating and he does something extremely important, and you see it in verse 13. He's asking all these questions, you know, he's challenging them to say, I'm hearing some of you are divided, some of you are following Apollo, some see us, and then he asks a series of questions. He says, is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? What's Paul doing as he asks these questions? Well what he's doing is that he is telling us that that division is not actually a question about the church, it's actually a question about Christ, it's a question about his crucifixion, it's a question about the name of God into which we are all baptized. And I think that's such an important thing for us to recognize that when we talk about division, when we tolerate division, we're not actually talking about the church, we're saying something about Jesus, we're saying something about his crucifixion, we're saying something about the name of God, and this is where we see just how important this issue is, and it's so easy to think that the unity of the church is a bonus, and you know probably an unrealistic one at that, and there's no doubt that our own church context just tends to kind of accept that, and it makes us a bit pessimistic because even here in our island there are so many different denominations, so many churches that meet, but they're living in many ways very separate, separately from one another, and as we grow up in that kind of context and as we see it all around us, it's very easy to think well it was just inevitable, and we might even be tempted to think that it's a good thing, and sometimes you'll get people who do that, they almost sort of think well I'm so glad we're not with them, or I'm so glad we're not like them, and what tends to happen is even though we have churches that agree on almost everything, we tend to focus on the tiny part that we disagree on. Interestingly you know I quoted the Nicene Creed, every church in the Isle of Lewis subscribes to the Nicene Creed, every single one.

Nobody in the churches up here disagrees with anything that the Nicene Creed says, and yet we're so divided. Now I know that that's a wee bit of a simplification, but still it's highlighting a really important point, we tend to focus on the very very small things that we disagree on. All of that serves to make the unity of the church seem like a not very important thing, but what I want us to see today is that the unity of the church is actually one of the most important claims of the gospel, or more accurately what I want us to see is that the unity of the church is one of the most important consequences of the gospel. That's what Paul emphasizes. When the Corinthians start to say you know that they follow Paul or Apollos or Peter, Paul's response is to get them to think about the theology that undergirds the gospel, not to think about which group is following who or who's doing this, but to think about the theology that lies underneath all of this. He gets them to think about the person and work of Christ and he asks three questions all of which have to have the answer no, that's the whole point of what he's saying. And so I want us to do the same as what Paul has done and I want us just to think through some of the big theological truths that lie at the heart of the gospel and to see how these connect to the unity of the church. And what I hope we'll see is that the unity of the church is not just a bonus that we might hope for one day, the unity of the church is actually an inevitable, a beautiful and inevitable consequence of everything that Jesus has done. In other words, the unity of the church is a harvest that comes from all that God has accomplished through Jesus. So let's think about that a little bit more. I'm going to start by giving you a big list of big, a small list of big theological concepts. Here they are, the decree of God, the plight of humanity, the power of the atonement, the headship of Christ, the consummation of the kingdom, the love of our Father, the reality of union with Christ. These are big theological topics and we are going to look at them all very quickly. They all run right through the Bible and they're all found here in 1 Corinthians chapter one and as I said it was going to be roll up the sleeves and whiz through each one. So number one, the decree of God, that's referring to the fact that everything that happens has its origin in God's plans. Everything rests on God's initiative, everything is directed towards God's goal. The old-fashioned language of that is to say that God has foreordained whatsoever comes to pass. Now all of that can sound very complicated, it can sound very deeply philosophical, it's actually really quite simple because it's simply a logical outworking of the fact that God is God. He is the absolute of reality, He's the creator of everything that there is, He is the ultimate explanation for every force, every motion, every cause, every category that exists. It all finds its explanation in Him. Now that does not mean that we are just robots in God's hands and He's just moving around like a chessboard. Part of the miracle of God's creating work is that He establishes our freedom, He gives us our freedom and He accomplishes His purposes through our freedoms. Now I can't fully explain all of that, there's an aspect of that that's mysterious, but what we need always need to recognize is that recognizing that our freedom comes within the framework of God's overall decree is far, far better than any of the alternatives that other

[13 : 36] worldviews give you because resting in the fact that we have freedom within God's plan is far better than the alternatives which leave us as slaves to our impulses, our environment or our DNA. We're all part of God's beautiful plan, His decree. And that's just another way of saying that God's in charge. And what that means for us specifically is that we don't initiate our relationship with Him, He initiates our relationship with us. In other words that you know we come to God because He's come to find us, He's come to get us. And that's why this chapter and the whole Bible will use the language of God calling us. God is calling us, calling us, calling us. At the heart of God's purposes and stamped on the eternal decree of God is His determination and desire for you to be His, for Him to have a people. From all eternity God has purposed to have a church, to have His one church. Number two, the plight of humanity. The whole reason we need God to come and get us is because we're not where we were created to be. Sin has left us in a mess, alienated from God, under the power of sin and the result is a humanity that is perishing as Paul describes in verse 18. And in that regard everybody is in the same boat. Sin affects everyone, death hangs over the lives of everyone. And that means that every single person who hears God's call and every single person who comes to faith in Jesus has come from the same place. We have the same problem, we've got the same need, we're in the same crisis and when we come to Jesus, if you have come to Him or if you do come to Jesus even today, we all receive the same remedy. You could look at Corinth and say you know there's loads of problems in that church, you could look at us and say well there's loads of problems in this one. Ultimately there's only one problem. It's the problem of sin and every single person who comes to Jesus comes from that same starting point. The plight of humanity is uniform. In the Christian church there has been a massive variety of patient histories but there has only ever been one diagnosis. With all sinners and every single believer in the church of

Jesus is united by the fact that He has forgiven us, He's healed us. The plight is the same, the solution and the healing is the same. And the reason He can heal us is because of the power of the atonement that's highlighted so clearly in this chapter as Paul addresses the people who are aligning themselves to their favorite minister. He is absolutely adamant that their salvation has got nothing to do with him. He's disgusted at the idea that they're following Paul. He's saying it's got nothing to do with me. It's all about the power of the cross and I don't speak with words of eloquent wisdom. He says it's all about the power of the cross of Jesus Christ and that power, the power of Christ's atonement is what lies at the heart of the gospel. On the cross Jesus confronts the power of sin and He conquers. On the cross Jesus takes all the debt of our sin and He pays it.

On the cross Jesus takes all the stain of our guilt and it's wiped away. On the cross Jesus comes under the power of death as He is sacrificed for sin and on the third day He rises in unstoppable resurrection power. And that power is the power that brings back the lost. It raises the dead. It gives sight to the blind. It reconciles the alienated. It cleanses the guilty. It atones for every single mistake that you've made. And that cross brings us all into one church family together. It's so important to remember that when you think of the cross, the shape of the cross has a vertical aspect and a horizontal aspect. The effect of the cross is exactly the same. Vertically it reconciles us to God. Horizontally it reconciles us to one another restoring all the damage that sin has done. We are freed from its power and we are able to live a whole new life. And the reason we can do that is because we've got a new master which is what we're referring to when we talk about the headship of Christ. Now that phrase there, the headship of Christ, doesn't appear in 1 Corinthians chapter 1 but it's mentioned again and again and again. It's actually mentioned seven times in the first ten verses. Headship of Christ is mentioned seven times in those verses because it's all captured in one word that comes up again and again and again. The word Lord. Lord. Lord. Lord. Lord. That word

Lord. That we see everywhere in the New Testament. That we're so familiar with that we can easily forget what it means is the word that is telling us that Jesus reigns. Jesus is our master. Jesus is the one who has authority. And as Christians we recognize and delight in his lordship. We bow before Jesus and worship him and we want to follow him. As we said to the kids, he's the way. He's the truth. He's the life. He's the one that we are looking to. And if he is our Lord, that means that the church is his. And he's not dividing it up.

He's not categorizing his lordship. He's not several different heads of several different bodies. He's the one head of the one body. There is only one Lord. That means that has got to be only one church. And that's through now and it's through as we look to the future. The consummation of the kingdom. What we mean by that is looking ahead to God's ultimate purposes being fulfilled when Jesus returns.

[20 : 33] 1 Corinthians chapter one is very typical of Paul, especially the opening verses. He does stuff in these chapters that he does in nearly all his letters. He starts with this introduction. He sends a greeting to the church, grace and peace. He has thanksgiving. He does this in all his letters virtually and then he does something else that he does all the time. He starts talking about the day when Jesus will return. And you see that constantly in Paul. He's writing for specific needs, but he's always, always getting them to think about eternity.

Paul never loses sight of that goal. Everything he doesn't know is in light of what will happen when Jesus returns. And when Jesus returns, that is when we see God's decree, his plan being fully realized. Because there on that day he will gather his people. And the one church of Christ will become the one bride of Christ. And from that moment on we have an eternity of beautiful togetherness. And all of that is driven by the love of our Father. Paul speaks of that in verse three, not simply by talking about the word, using the word Father, but by using the word grace. Pointing us back that the love warmth that we share as brothers and sisters in greeting one another as Paul does here, all rests in the relationship of love that we have with our Father. At the heart of the Gospel is the unending, relentless love of God towards people who don't deserve it. That's what grace is, unending, relentless love towards people who have not earned it, who don't deserve it. That is what the

Gospel is all about. And the amazing thing about the Gospel is that people who are sinners, who don't even deserve to be God's lowest slaves, become his children. And that's why the New Testament is saturated with the language of family. Paul is writing to his brothers as he writes to them. That's so so important. Paul is really giving them a row in this letter, but he's giving them a row as brothers. He's not cutting them off. He's extending his love to them.

When he speaks about Father, it's our Father. The language of family saturates it all. And all of that rests on the reality of our union with Christ. You're doing very well. This is very fast. You're doing very well. That phrase there, union with Christ, that's really the thing that holds the whole Gospel together. If you want to ask what's Christianity all about, those three words are your answer. God's great decree is that we will be saved through Christ. The plight of humanity exists because we fell in Adam and our salvation comes through our union with the second Adam, with Jesus Christ. The power of the Atonement has an effect on us because we are united to him by the Holy Spirit. We have a new life under his lordship bound to him, protected by him.

When he returns, he will take all those who are united to him to be with him forever. And the wonder of the Gospel is that the love which the Father has for the Son is extended to you and to me. The Holy Spirit who from all eternity has been carrying the love of the Father to the Son and from the Son to the Father is now pouring that love into your heart and into mine. And by the amazing grace of God, you are united. If you're a Christian or if you become one, you are united to Jesus with a bond that can never be broken. That's why Jesus can talk about how nothing can snatch you out of the Father's hand. And when we think of that, I tend to think, you know, I think of that image of nothing being able to snatch me out of the Father's hand. I think of myself in the Father's hand. And you know, I think I imagine myself there and protected. And I think that that, and that's so beautiful. It's only half right.

[25 : 12] Because in the Father's hand is not me. In the Father's hand is us. All together.

Held and loved by him. God's not just holding you, he's holding us. He's holding everyone who's united to Jesus, everybody next door, everyone across our island, everyone across the world, across the ages of history. He's holding his church. And what I want us to see is that all of these great theological truths are resulting in the same thing. They're all resulting in one church. And that's where we see it's that one church is not a bonus. It's a harvest of everything that Jesus has achieved. There's two key points that arise from this that I wanted to think of it as we close. The first is to just recognize, and I say this to myself before anybody else, to recognize that when we disregard the unity of the church, or when we don't think much of the unity of the church, or when it's kind of put secondary, we are at risk of undermining all of these truths. Or maybe more accurately it raises questions about how seriously we take them. Because all of them result in the same thing. Sometimes division has to happen, and that does have to happen, but it happens. It's only justified in happening when it's these core truths of the Gospel that are being undermined. When people stop believing these things about God, about

Jesus, about his salvation, that we have to recognize that far too often, we have to recognize that far too often the church today divides over things that would leave Paul just gobsmacked. I think we have to acknowledge that. But secondly, and even more importantly, if we don't think about the unity of the church, about the one church that Jesus is establishing, if we don't think about that much, or if we neglect it, we are missing so much of the beauty of the Gospel. The harvest of the Gospel is a beautifully united church. And if we kind of press that harvest even a little bit further, Paul does that. He speaks about, you know, I planted a pollus watered, but God gave the growth. If you think about it, you know, if you've got a garden, you could spend all winter digging, and you could spend all spring sowing and feeding and weeding and watering and nurturing. And then in the summer, you never go out into the garden to have a look. Maybe you take a wee pot of one type of flour and you have it beside you in your living room. But out there, there is just this spectacular bloom of amazing variety of flowers in one beautiful garden. And you know, that is so true of how we are as a church. And I'm guilty of it myself. I, you know, we stick to our own wee corner, we have our own wee pots, and we love them and we're loyal to them. But out there, you know, across our country, across the world, there is just this incredible, this amazing beauty and variety of people who are united together with the one Savior. Now, yes, we'll do things differently, and there'll be lots that's different, but we are all one together. And it's reminding us that every time you look at a fellow Christian, whether that's here today in our church family, whether it's when you look at someone who worships next door, someone who works worships on different church, different part of the world, whatever, whenever you look at a fellow Christian, you are seeing the outworking of God's decree. You're seeing the restoration of a broken humanity.

You're seeing the power of Christ's atonement. You're seeing the indisputable headship of Christ. You're seeing the first fruits of the new creation. You're seeing the object of the Father's love. You're seeing the eternal bonds of union with Christ. And the amazing thing is that if you're a Christian or if you become one, everyone else can see that in you as well. So, let us never forget that the church is one. Amen.