

Text: 1 Cor 1.10-17
St Stephen's

Sept 7th, 2008
Sun

Life Goes Better Together

1 Corinthians is **a letter for our time**. All of **the issues** facing the American church and the Anglican Communion are here. Authority. Independence. Behavior. Sex. Marriage. Super Spirituality. Lawsuits. Apostolic Leadership. Styles of Worship. And in it all, Gospel.

In this letter, Paul is engaging what is arguably his **greatest pastoral challenge**. He is heartbroken about what has happened to this church, and for the sake of healing and correction he writes. He is a shepherd tending his sheep, a physician caring for his patient.

The Church at Corinth had developed a bad reputation:

Strident Individualism: they had a problem with any kind of authority. They thought they heard straight from God and they didn't need any leaders, any Apostle telling them otherwise.

Spiritual Pride: They knew they were really spiritual, anointed, 'hot' – but they weren't so sure about Paul – or about his gospel.

Immoral Behavior: Paul said they were doing things even the pagans wouldn't do – and they were proud about it!

They thought they were better than everyone else, they thought their behavior didn't matter, they fought with everyone including Paul, and they were rejecting the gospel that gave them life.

The Problem: Church Fights!

Some members of Chloe's household have told me about your quarrels, my dear brothers and sisters. Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ."

1 Corinthians 1:11-12 (NLT)

The Corinthians were judging and criticizing each other, lining up behind their

favorite pastors. Some liked **Paul**, who had planted the church and stayed with them for 1½ years as their first pastor. Some liked **Cephas** – that is St Peter, who had probably made a visit to the church at one time. Some liked **Apollos** – we met him in Acts. He was an eloquent speaker who became a great teacher. And that phrase, “I only follow **Christ**” – those were the ones who thought they **didn’t have to follow any human leader** because they **heard directly** from Jesus. They kind of lifted their noses at everyone and trumped them all.

Probably **the key** to understanding their problem is to note that the most **frequent word** in the report from Corinth is **the word, ‘I’**. Somehow their faith in Christ had been twisted into spiritual pride, where they had fallen into judging each other in the name of their favorite leaders. Underneath it all was a sense of self-importance and arrogance. **“It’s all about me. My ministry. My leader. My judgments. My spirituality”**.

To get them through their fights, Paul will have to **deal with the “I” factor**. The “It’s all about me” factor. How does Paul do that? He does two things, and the first one is a surprise...

Paul Makes A “Kingdom Ask”

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

1 Corinthians 1:10 (NLT)

It is a big ask – to live in harmony with each other. I will come to the content of it on a moment, but I want you to notice the form of it. **It is not a command, but an ask; not a requirement but a request.**

I want to point this out to you, because you might not catch it as you quickly read it. And because **it isn’t the way we try and resolve** relationship difficulties. In relational problems there are **several approaches to fixing** things.

- You can **ignore it**, and hope it goes away. We call that ‘enabling’, and it cripples people.
- You can **push it**, making demands and criticisms and judging people

– and that will push them away.

- There is a third option. You can **ask it**; you make **an appeal, a request**.

You might **think that an ask is nothing**, but an “ask” is **a powerful thing** in the Kingdom of God. And Paul starts with a powerful thing.

Do you remember what Jesus taught about healing relationships?

"Do not judge others, and you will not be judged. For you will be treated as you treat others. The standard you use in judging is the standard by which you will be judged.

Matthew 7:1-2 (NLT)

He said '*Do not judge others*'. That means don't make your primary approach to people **criticism and negative opinions**. Quit pushing. **Don't pick on people, don't criticize their faults and go around pointing out their failures**. Unless you want people to treat you in the same way.

His alternative was a 'Kingdom ask'.

"Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.

Matthew 7:7 (ESV)

We think this verse is primarily about prayer, but it is not. Go look at it again; it is in Matthew 7. It is **about relationships** – with God and with people.

These are **my dogs**.



I showed this picture a couple of years ago, and I want to show it again. They are sitting at my feet, **asking**. Have you ever noticed that it is just plain **hard to eat** in the presence of your dogs? Mine will just sit there like this - looking, waiting, hoping, asking. I can't eat in front of them without giving

them something. I love those dogs. **My heart is connected to theirs**, and they know it. So **they wait and hope and ask**. And got their crust of pizza.

This is **a Kingdom thing**. Jesus says: "*How much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him.*" (Matt 7.11) Because that is the kind of God he is. That is the kind of Father he is. His heart is connected to ours. And in the Kingdom, that is the way love works, Jesus says. "*Ask, and you will receive*" is true of all relationships in Jesus' Kingdom.

So there is **a better way** to heal relationships than ignoring people or pushing people – it is **the way of asking**. Not criticisms or complaints or demands - but requests, **made in a special way**. Look again at how Paul appeals...

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

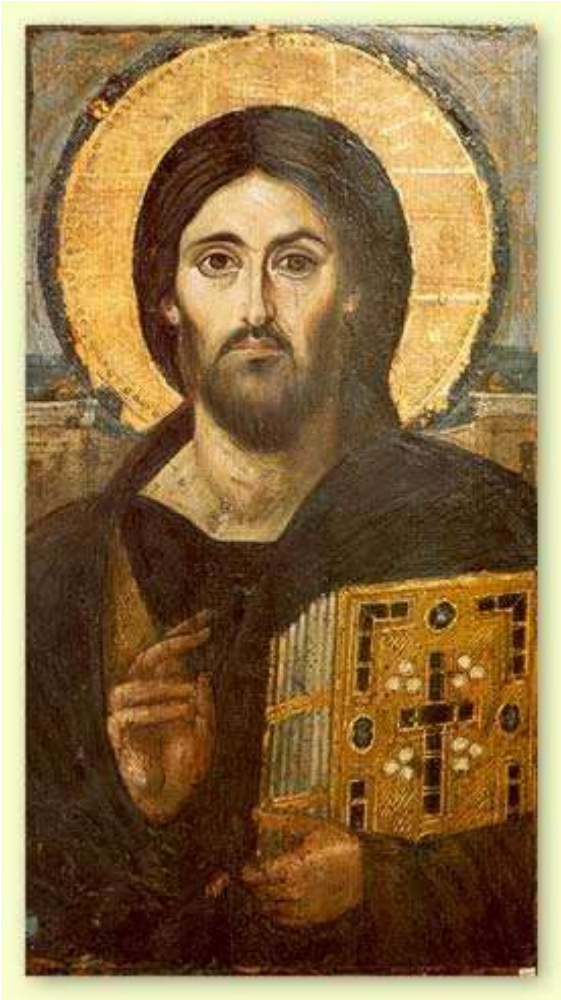
1 Corinthians 1:10

Paul calls them *'dear brothers and sisters'* – he calls them beloved friends, he calls them family. He **stands alongside them** – not **over** them – not **against** them – and asks.

Have you ever noticed that **when you stand against** people and pick on them, criticize their faults and go around pointing out their failures – that you always get the **same reaction**? Just about 100% of the time it brings out the worst in them. Isn't it uncanny??? A 'Kingdom ask' **stands alongside** people.

And he speaks to them **in the 'name of Jesus'** – which means with Jesus standing there.

This is one of the most remarkable icons of Jesus that I have ever seen.



It is found on the wall in St Catherine's monastery in the Sinai, and dates from the 6th or 7th century. Orthodox priests often use it in confession, partly to help believers **sense the presence of Jesus**. It is quite remarkable, isn't it?

The ask that Paul makes is **this kind of ask**: He **stands alongside** beloved members of the family, not over them, not against them. He **stands in the presence** of the risen Jesus. From that place, he appeals:

live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

My beloved brothers and sisters, **I join his appeal**.

Live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

This kind of ask can get more done for the kingdom than our demands or criticisms ever will.

This is the kind of ask that was made at Lambeth to the American and Canadian churches: no more consecrations of homosexual bishops. No more blessings of same sex marriages. The Episcopal Church was asked to step back.

The 'I' factor is strong stuff. And in the end it will take deeper healing than a 'Kingdom Ask' to get this church past its pride. So Paul finishes his appeal with a second word.

Stronger Medicine for Deeper Healing

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.

1 Corinthians 1:17 (ESV)

Paul's analysis is that the Corinthians are infected with spiritual pride... The **headline** for their pride was the word '**wisdom**', which in ancient Greek culture was shorthand for an **exalted and secret knowledge** of God and the mysteries of spiritual life.

They came from this culture, and then Paul brought the gospel it seemed to many of them that this gospel was exactly the **secret knowledge** that (and watch out, here's the **poison**) **made them better**. Better than everyone else. Better than their leaders. Better than each other. And so they fought and quarreled, and ripped up the church.

It is very much like the American Church saying to the Anglican Communion, 'We know better than you'. We know better than the whole church has ever known. We know better than the Bible. And so we judge and quarrel and split up the Anglican Communion. "We know better than you" is a phrase the Corinthians would have been comfortable with.

Paul goes right to the heart of it here: the **real wisdom is found in the cross**. In Christ crucified!

To many people it looks like foolishness

But really it is God's deepest wisdom.

And it will be **the healing of a broken, divided church.**

Because at the cross, in the death of Jesus, we find **God's power.** The power to bring our **old life to an end**, the end having to be right, of having to be better than everyone else.

We find the **forgiveness** of our old life.
And the **gift of new life.**

A life where I can
 bless, not curse;
 love, not judge;
 give myself away for him who gave himself for me.

At the cross of Jesus

I come to you today with an '**Ask**' – do not be divided
And with an **invitation** – to come back to the cross, the place where our pride is humbled and our divisions are healed.