

“The Church of God in Corinth”

5 September 2021 - Led by Rev. Sam Mawhinney

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: Come, People Of The Risen King!

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Baptism

Aaronic Blessing

Praise: Az Ûr az èn Pásztorom (Psalm 23)

Praise: Because He Lives

Reading: Acts 18:1-17

Sermon:

We read and studied 1st Corinthians, chapters 1-10 in January to June 2019, with a break for Easter. My plan and prayerful hope this morning is to remind us of the church in Corinth and reintroduce us to what Paul said to them, to encourage us of its relevance as we prepare to study chapters 11-16 this term from September to November 2021.

I. The Significance of the Church in Corinth

It was a church planted by the Apostle Paul and this is described for us in Acts 18 in 17 verses. He arrived in Corinth from Athens, while on his second missionary journey about AD 50-51, he met there a Christian Jewish couple called Aquila and Priscilla and he teamed with them in work, making tents and preaching weekly in the synagogue.

He chose Corinth under the guidance of the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2) and because of its strategic importance, located on the isthmus or bridgeway between Achaia and mainline Greece or Macedonia. It was a beautiful city, newly rebuilt by Julius Caesar in AD 46. It was a religious city, with large temples to Aphrodite, Apollo and Melicertes (deity of the sea and navigation) and with a prominent synagogue. It was a cultural city with numerous people groups and the Isthmian games (an ancient type of Olympics), it was a large urban centre of approximately 250,000 people - not unlike Dublin.

Paul experienced significant opposition from the Jews there as Acts 18 recounts. He was opposed, abused, and brought to court by them. What is very significant is the legal ruling of the proconsul, Gallio, who found that Paul had no case to answer, (v.15) he told the Jews he had no jurisdiction in their matters of religion and he dismissed the case and in effect he gave legal protection to Paul and his message and it was because of this ruling that Paul was able to stay in Corinth for some time (v.18), which is probably the 1 ½ years noted in v.11, until he moved to Ephesus, another large and significant city.

The vision and words spoken to him by Jesus and recorded in v.9-10 surely were extremely helpful and encouraging for Paul. The opposition must have dented his confidence and made him question if Corinth was the right place for him to be in, should he retreat, move on, stop making the situation more volatile? The words spoken by Jesus answer all those

questions. Keep speaking, continue to proclaim that Jesus was the Christ (v.5) and know that I am with you, and you will be protected. This is the message of assurance and encouragement God has given us as a church in the pandemic, Dublin is our city, and we should also hear these words as a clear encouragement to continue in our worship and proclamation of Jesus.

Knowing the seriousness of the opposition helps us understand, despite the assurance from God, that Paul did not find it an easy task, as we note in Ch 1-2 of 1st Corinthians. These words penned by Paul (Ch 2:1-5), come alive when we know more of the context. So, having reminded us of the background to the planting of the Church of Jesus Christ in Corinth, let us note some lessons for our encouragement as we seek to be God's people in Dublin.

II. Lessons from Paul's Time in Corinth

Being the church in a city is difficult. Paul felt the weakness of his message and himself in ministry. However, note:

The encouragement of Jesus. In opposition, continue knowing that God is with us. He depended on the Spirit's power.

The importance of team ministry. (Acts 18:5) Aquila, Priscilla, Silas, Timothy, Crispus, Titius Justus, (Gaius), the support of other churches, financial aid, prayer.

The method of Church growth. (Acts 18:5) Preaching the gospel, persuasion, testimony alongside the positive relationships and commitment to one another.

The centrality and importance of the church. To the church of God in Corinth. If we were to think of ARPC as the church of God in Dublin would that help us see the significance of what we do here day by day and week by week.

As we emerge from lockdown, many people are thinking about engaging with church or not, and leaders, including our own, are having to reassess everything, why we do what we do and can we and should we be doing those things. Is the church important? What is the church all about? Jesus reassures Paul about the importance of the church and that is why Paul writes his letter to the church of God in Corinth, because they are significant and important. We can learn a lot about church from a careful study of this letter.

We are of course not the first to note the importance of the church. I discovered to my surprise that I have 25 books specifically on the church and the latest one I've just read and found helpful is by Tony Merida called "Love your church" "eight great things about being a church member" The premise for all these books is the central significance of the church. It is my prayer that we will engage actively in thinking through what God's plan for the church is and that we will increasingly realise the importance of what we are and where we are situated in ARPC.

III. Problems in the Church in Corinth

The church in Corinth had many gifted people, but also lots of problems! However, it is important to observe and learn the principles of how those problems are tackled - the appeal to scripture, the appeal to love, the appeal to unity and the appeal to the importance of the church to God and his blessing of her. Paul knew this church well and though he is away from Corinth and in Ephesus (AD 53) he retains a deep interest of love and concern for them. 1st Corinthians was written in response to reports he received (1:11; 5:1) and the first 6

chapters are written to address those reports. Paul has also received correspondence from Corinth, in which they ask questions of him about the issues, concerns and problems they face, and these are contained in Ch 7-16 (see 7:1)!

So we will look at these under the headings of personality and culture.

A. **Problems of personality (Ch 1:10-17)**

Divisions based on personality and emphasis in ministry.

Paul party: the founder, they first heard the good news through him, their lives had been transformed through that message and they were very grateful. Paul - a thinking academic professor with a great mind. Paul was a great advocate of freedom! He was in our sense a previous minister and the way things used to be.

Peter (Cephas) party: Peter had clashed with Paul over Jewish food laws which probably appealed to the Jews in the church. He is the founder of the church in Jerusalem, very Jewish. Perhaps more of a legalist. He is Moderator, the PCI, the denomination.

Apollos party: Apollos (Acts 18:27) is the new kid on the block, he comes from the best university city of the day, Alexandria in Egypt, he is passionate, a fantastic apologist and he certainly puts the Jews in their place and has tremendous personality and speaking skills. He is the conference speaker, the book writer, the youth pastor and social media person whom the young people love.

Christ's party: They don't like this nonsense of personalities and leaders, they simply follow Christ, they do not listen to any leader and Christ alone is their leader. It sounds great and very spiritual, they thought they were superior, super Christians who looked down at their fellow Christians if they even thought of them as Christians at all. Some think they probably formed their own church eventually.

Lessons on divisions of personality and emphasis:

(1) Agree on the gospel (Jesus and the cross 1:18-2:16)

(2) Stay together, wrestle with the issues for the sake of unity, work together and not allow undoubted differences or even difficulties become conflicts. If there are conflicts, pull back from them for the sake of our unity in Christ and the gospel. This was Jesus's encouragement for the sake of our witness and the conversion of others

- John 13:34-35, (*so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.*)

And his prayer for the church before his death

- John Ch 17:21 (*That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.*)

Differences are to be expected, difficulties are to be worked at, and conflicts are to be avoided for the sake of the name of Jesus Christ. The Church of God, in ARPC, is to be no different. Different personalities and gifts are to be a blessing to the church as we will see in Ch 12 -14.

B. **The challenge of culture:** We are always influenced by the culture around us. When I first went to live in Tipperary I very quickly had to learn and understand the culture of the GAA. The importance of the county colours, the blue and gold, the title of the premier county, the significance of the Munster and parish rivalry and learning that what I thought was football was really soccer. That was fun!

I struggled a little more with the fact that people told me what I wanted to hear rather than the truth, not wanting to disappoint me or hurt me, yes Ill come to your meeting without the slightest intention to do so, or as one tradesman looked me in the eye and said when I needed him to do a job, are you in tomorrow yes I am, about 6pm yes that will do fine see you then he said and I was reassured. He came 6 weeks later, and I rang him once a week to remind and encourage him how urgent the task was. When I spoke with other tradesmen, they said he didn't want to disappoint you, he told you what you wanted to hear. That's the culture.

Becoming a Christian is a very radical thing, calling Jesus our Lord, changes the dynamics of who has the real authority in our lives. This inevitably leads to clashes with the world (culture) and working out what is right and best often leads to differences of opinions within the church. This was the reality in Corinth.

Corinth's culture of dualism: Corinth was strongly influenced, being in Greece, by the Greek thinking of dualism. Unlike the Hebrew thought of the unity of the body, mind and spirit, Greek thought separated body and soul, believing the soul to be of greater importance. How you think, what you believe is obviously important and if you believe the body isn't important you believe you can do with it as you want. Corinth had many prostitutes and sexual promiscuity was not considered wrong because they thought the body and its experiences had no effect on the soul. When sexual sin is prevalent in the society it becomes a source of conflict and temptation for the church. Such thinking and behaviour led to problems of sexual sin (addressed in Ch's 5 and 6) which affected their thinking on marriage and singleness (addressed in Ch 7) which affected their interaction with society and culture in general as seen in the question they asked about eating food sacrificed to pagan idols and the incorporation of some of the aspects of pagan culture in their church activities, such as the fellowship meal (addressed in Ch.8-10)

IV. Approaching 1 Corinthians

All of this is exactly what we have faced and will face. The PCI has been heavily criticised for its stance on marriage, and ARPC have differences of opinion over and conflict over how best to relate to the world. So what help can we receive from this letter?

Paul has Jesus' authority: There is an important point to note for the church and for us, namely that Paul speaks with Apostolic authority. In our culture authority tends to make us bristle and church authority particularly so, many would say for good reason regarding past experiences. However, Paul is very clear about the authority he has! (1:1) Appointed by the Lord Jesus, he speaks with Jesus authority, and his words have weight and should be followed, he says he has the mind of Christ (2:16) and he boldly calls the church to follow his example as he follows Christ (11:1) Therefore these words in his letter have the authority of Jesus, and we are to carefully read, think and follow them as a church.

Paul's fatherly love: When Paul speaks, he does so as one who loves them deeply, is concerned for them and thankful to God for them. He is passionate and concerned (1:10) he speaks with the wisdom of the gospel (2:1ff) to give them the mind of Christ (2:16) he is forthright and honest (3:1) "not spiritual but mere infants in Christ" he is not unaware of how difficult this might be for them to hear (4:14) with clear instruction (5:11) at other times giving advice which is not fully a command, which he believes to be the best course of action (7:6) at times he feels the need to defend himself (9:1-3) and at times he has to teach them (10:1) and call them to make their own judgement on what he says (10:14-15)

Paul's biblical wisdom:

Example - the specific question of food sacrificed to idols in Ch. 8

In Corinth, lots of the food sold in the market or served by your friends and family had been sacrificed to pagan gods. The Christian believers asked, '*should we eat this food?*', some said yes, others said no, and that led to conflict in the church family. The church in Corinth wrote to Paul about this and his reply is given in chapter 8. It is a brilliant example of using biblical truth with an overriding ethic of love. The wisdom and truth is self-evident and the ethic of it is self-sacrificing. Should Christian believers eat food sacrificed to idols? Paul's answer!

(1) There is only one God and therefore all pagan gods are not the true God. (v4-6)

(2) food doesn't affect our relationship with God, (v8)

Therefore, you are free to eat food previously offered to idols without a guilty conscience

However, (v9-13) always follow an ethic of love and abstain from such foods if it offends or harms your brother or sister in Christ, to do so would be a sin against Christ. Note again how high a view of the family of God, the church Paul advocates.

- Corinth is a city like ours, the church there was God's church and ARPC should have a similar view.
- Problems of people and personalities and differences in how things are done are to be expected and Pauls offers us authoritative, loving, biblical wisdom to help us navigate these difficulties.
- Post Covid we have an opportunity to restart, remodel and recommit ourselves to ARPC which is our calling in Christ and the letter to the church of God in Corinth can be our guide.
- May God help us journey with him as we seek to follow Christ as the church of God in Dublin

Prayers for Others

Announcements

Closing Hymn: Hear The Call Of The Kingdom

Benediction