

United we stand

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[0 : 0 0] Well good morning to everyone in the hall and also those watching on the live stream. Again it's a great joy for me to be able to open up God's word to you. As you know we've just started a series in 1 Corinthians. We're in our second week this week of looking at chapters 1 to 4 in particular of this book and as Paul has just read to us we are actually looking at chapter 1 verse 10 to 17 today. Can I also encourage all of you to make sure that the Bible is open in front of you and if it's helpful an outline is also available on your order of service. But let's pray and let's ask God for his help.

Father as we gather together again Lord I just pray Lord that your word indeed would come Lord and it would come and achieve the purpose for which you sent it. I pray Lord that you will open our ears and open our hearts and cause us to be good soil Lord so that when the word of God lands on the soil of our hearts it would produce good fruit. So all this we pray in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen. Now this past week our family had an outing to the state library. It's quite pleasant, it's very spacious, there's nice scenery and outdoor activities, even the coffee is reasonably priced. We went there via the Petra Jaya way, you know the one that passes by Norma Hospital and as we approached the roundabout there was a huge sign that proclaimed City of Unity and that made me go oh yeah that's what we are, that's what we were, the country's first city of unity. Our former Chief Minister, the late Tan Sri Adenan Satem was really proud of that fact. In his speech back in 2015 he said this, We are indeed honoured to be chosen as the city in our country to be the number one in terms of how to live in harmony with one another. Let us be an example to the rest of Malaysia that we believe in unity in unity and in diversity. Well God's plan has always been to create a city of unity. He has always wanted a united church family. You might remember that a month or so ago we looked at the very end of the Bible at Revelation 21 and 22 and we saw a great city, one filled with people from every tribe and tongue and nation. And the people are united. They are united by their citizenship as those written in the Lamb's Book of Life. And they are united by their focus as they all worship the same Lamb. They will be his people and God himself will be with them and be their God. Now this is where all of history is heading.

As Ephesians chapter 1 verse 10 puts it, God's plan in the fullness of time is to unite all things in Christ, things in heaven and on earth. But what this implies is that this world is presently disunited. [3 : 1 7] The United Nations might exist. We might have said Salam Satu Malaysia for a while. We might even have shared the optimism of Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, who several years ago predicted that social media would unite us. But of course, the opposite is true. You can't go on Facebook or Twitter nowadays without encountering strong opinions and political firestorms, made worse by algorithms which reward and amplify negative reactions like anger. You can't read a Malaysian newspaper without reading about how our governing coalition just can't get along. You can't look back at 2020 and see a world retreating into a tribalism like I have never seen before. But sadly, it isn't just the world.

You see, God has always planned to bring about a city of unity. And in his plan, he has always wanted to make the church the pilot scheme for this city of unity. Our former chief minister wanted Kuching to be an example to the rest of Malaysia. Well, God wants his church to be an example to the rest of the world.

But sadly, all throughout history, the church itself has at times also been torn apart by strife. And this is not new. Even in New Testament times, ungodly disunity has always been a threat. Here is a sampling from different New Testament churches. Here is James counselling the diaspora Christians. What causes fights and quarrels among you? Don't they come from your desires that battle within you?

You desire but do not have. So you kill. You're covered but you cannot get what you want. So you quarrel and fight. Or here is Paul pleading with two Christians in Philippi who are evidently quarrelling.

[5 : 30] I plead with you, Odea, and I plead with Syntyche to be of the same mind in the Lord. Or here is Luke recording what happened in the early church.

In those days, when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Ungodly disunity has always been a threat. And so, in light of this persistent threat, how can we be this city of unity?

How can we embody this God-given identity within the Christian community? Well, if we are serious about this, we must take two actions.

Firstly, reject ungodly divisions. Reject ungodly divisions. Now, in verse 11, we're told about what's happening in the Corinthian church.

[6 : 39] There are quarrels. There are disputes. There are strong emotions that have bubbled up and overflowed like volcanoes that have exploded. That's the kind of thing that we're talking about here.

It's not just a friendly disagreement. It's full-blown fights. Later on, in 2 Corinthians, chapter 12, verse 20, which is the follow-up letter to 1 Corinthians, we're given a possible clue as to what kind of dynamics are at play.

Paul writes, it should be on the screen, Now, the word discord there is actually the same Greek word translated, the quarrels back in 1 Corinthians 1.

And these quarrels appear to come as part of a package deal. In verse 10, we are told that they seem to stem from what Paul calls divisions among you.

Now, the Greek word for division here is the word schismata, from which we get the English word schism. Now, in my hand here, I'm holding a piece of paper.

[8 : 14] It is the very first page of my sermon. Now, watch me do this. What am I doing?

I'm tearing it apart. I'm actually performing schismata on this material. It is tears of this very nature that are beginning to appear in the church.

The very fabric of the church is beginning to be torn apart by these divisions. Sounds terrible, doesn't it?

Now, imagine if this piece of paper wasn't just the first page of my sermon, but it was a very precious letter that was written to you by your dad on his deathbed.

Well, your heart will be torn to see that letter being torn apart, wouldn't it? Well, the church is like God's precious letter to the world.

[9 : 20] But in Corinth, it was getting torn apart. And every time any church suffers from divisions like the Corinthians, God is grieved.

And so no wonder God doesn't approve of this package deal. In Galatians chapter 5, Paul lists a representative list of the acts of the flesh.

And it includes this in verse 20. Idolatry and witchcraft, hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions, and then we have a very similar list to the one we saw earlier in 2 Corinthians.

And these are opposite to the fruit of the Spirit. And yet it was rampant amongst the Corinthians. That's the situation.

Now, let's be clear about what sort of divisions or factions we're talking about. There is no hint in this letter that this is a division over doctrine or truth.

[10 : 31] The New Testament as a whole makes clear that doctrine is important. So important that occasionally there are times where we do need to divide over it to protect the integrity of the gospel.

Titus 1 tells us that, in fact, false teachers, by their very nature, are actually divisive because they disrupt entire households by sowing confusion.

And so to oppose and even silence false teachers is a good thing, for it's a way of protecting the unity of the church, not a way of introducing disunity into the church.

But this is clearly not what is at play in the Corinthian church. There is no sense that a theological controversy is dividing them.

Rather, it is all about the elevation of personalities. Look at verse 12. What I mean is this. One of you says, I follow Paul.

[11 : 39] Another, I follow Apollos. Another, I follow Cephas. And still another, I follow Christ. Basically, the Christians were rallying and aligning themselves with various preachers and leaders whom they thought were great and powerful and influential.

And so just imagine the conversation after a Sunday service at Corinth Evangelical Church as they have coffee and tea. You know, they don't have to worry about COVID-19.

Well, there's the long-time member of the church, one who has been there ever since its founding. And she says, Oh, you know, isn't Paul the best?

I mean, he's the one who got our church up and running. He spoke with authority. He's an apostle after all. He knew what he was doing. He really knew the DNA, the history of our church.

Oh, there's never been another pastor like Pastor Paul. And the days have never been the same since he left. Well, I still follow Paul.

[12 : 50] Meanwhile, in another corner, a younger man says, man, man, when Apollos got here, that's when the spirit really worked.

What a learned man, coming from the Cambridge of the ancient world, Alexandria. And what an amazing speaker. To this day, no one can preach like this guy.

No one can persuade like this guy. You know, the problem with Paul is that he's so dull and old-fashioned. He only lectures. He doesn't preach.

And Paul, you know, he wasn't much to look at. Yeah, lousy social skills, awkward mannerisms. And we all know about his dodgy personal history.

Well, I follow Apollos. Yet another group cuddles behind the church, maybe, and says, man, Cephas.

[13 : 48] That's another name for the apostle Peter, by the way. Well, he was really something, wasn't he? I mean, okay, Apollos can preach. I'll give him that. And Paul, yeah, he's an apostle.

But he's not an apostle. Like, Peter is an apostle. Peter is one of Jesus' closest friends. Oh, and the thing about Paul and Apollos is that they are ivory tower theologians.

Always talking, talking, talking in very academic language. I cannot connect with the common people one. Now, Peter, this man takes action.

He tells it straight and blunt. And he's a proper organizer. And you know, this guy has a very big following in Jerusalem too. Oh, I follow Peter.

And so this was what was going on. Based on mentions of them elsewhere in the letter, Paul, Apollos, and probably even Peter had visited and ministered to the Corinthians at some point.

[14 : 56] But now, people were beginning to take sides against each other by using their names. Now, there is no evidence that Paul, Apollos, and Peter had instigated or encouraged these kinds of rivalries.

rather, it was the Corinthians themselves who brought about these state of affairs. They were vocal about their preferences.

And their preferences were more to do with prestige, personality, and the public speaking skills of each name being invoked rather than with the content of their teaching.

And that's why the last section in Corinth Evangelical Church is arguably the most divisive of all. Look at you guys, they say, following mere human leaders.

But look, we are the really spiritual guys. We don't just follow Paul, Apollos, or Peter. We follow Christ.

[16 : 07] We belong to Christ. But we're not so sure about you. But invoking the name of Christ directly, this group of people showed up their own identity as the special chosen ones.

It's similar to how someone today might claim, oh, God gave us a vision directly and so we don't need anyone else. We alone are part of the true Jesus Church.

These divisions are grievous. But it's important to recognize that they are the symptom, not the cause.

You see, what were the Corinthians doing by engaging in all these power plays, in promoting these rivalries, in boasting in various leaders.

They were mimicking the culture around them. In Corinth, orators and public speakers were highly esteemed. They were publicly honoured and given exalted status.

[17:19] And so competition amongst the various orators was stiff. they would compete to see who had the most number of followers, the most loyal students, the best awards, so much so that they would quarrel with one another.

Our trash talking was commonplace. And the church in Corinth, instead of setting themselves apart, followed them.

they had the same culture. They were taking on the values of the world. Remember last week how we said that was the underlying problem?

Here we see it pop up again, as we will in subsequent weeks. The Corinthian Christians said they were following Paul and Apollos and Peter, but really, they were following the world.

Even those who said that they were following Christ. And so the implication for us today is clear. Don't be a Corinthian.

[18:30] Reject worldly divisions. Reject following the ways of the world. But it's easier said than done. How can we do this?

One way to make a start is by asking ourselves, what worldly attitude could we be in danger of taking on?

What worldly value might contribute to such divisions? One potential danger in the 21st century is the celebrity syndrome.

In the wider culture today, people are often listened to, not necessarily because they have the qualifications to speak on an issue, or because they have something substantial or meaningful to say, but simply because they acquired fame in some way.

And such celebrities have real power. They exercise influence when they endorse a political candidate, or they take a position on some cultural controversy.

[19:36] their many followers can be expected to fall in line simply because their favourite celebrity has pronounced it so.

That's nothing to sneeze at. And such thinking can easily find its way into the church. In today's world, you can listen and even interact with a bewildering number of pastors and preachers online, including those with large platforms.

You can directly participate in Q&A; with Tim Keller on Twitter. You could probably Facebook live Rick Warren. You can listen to John Piper podcasts.

And there's nothing wrong with that in itself. Many such pastors are faithful servants of Christ who have been used by him to make known the gospel and to build up the body.

And who would be horrified to be identified as a celebrity? I listen to such pastors sometimes with profit. But you know you're being shaped by celebrity culture when you begin to turn only to them as your primary source of authority.

[20:55] X or Y says it, that settles it. You know you're becoming Corinthian when you use these online authorities to turn against your neighbour in the pew or even your own local church pastor.

You know you're starting to take on the values of the world when you begin to see yourself as a recipient of a higher knowledge because you know the right YouTube channel to listen to compared to everyone else.

These are some of the telltale signs. Now, remember, we're not talking about true versus false teachers here. And neither are we talking about whether you are identifying with the people who are cool or have megachurches.

Rather, this worldly attitude is fundamentally about aligning yourself with certain personalities in such a way that it feeds our pride.

And so you could still be infected by such worldly values even if you are following the unknown speaker who, by criticising so-called celebrity preachers and movements, has gotten a niche following himself.

[22:16] You could be infected if you are overly identifying yourself with a Bible study leader or a certain elder in such a way that showcases your exclusivity, that makes you think, oh, that you are definitely more mature than everyone else.

Is that what we are doing? If so, we need to repent. another related danger in the 21st century is the politicisation of everything.

In our world today, everything is seen through a political lens. So every action you take is interpreted to mean that you support a certain party platform or another, leading to increased polarisation.

religion. And again, the church is in danger of being infected with similar attitudes. Increasingly, it seems as if Christians don't just congregate around certain big-name pastors, but around political personalities.

And it's sometimes implied without any nuance that only real Christians will vote for this or that candidate. It's as if that candidate has become more significant than Christ.

[23 : 37] Our political judgements have divided us. Now when it comes to politics, there should be room for debate and discussion, of course. But we need to recognise that political issues are often complex.

One distinction that I found helpful in such discussions is to acknowledge that they are straight-line and jagged-line issues. Now this distinction was first developed by the Lutheran theologian Robert Benny.

A straight-line issue is where there is a straight line between the biblical text and its policy application. A jagged-line issue is where there are multiple steps from a biblical or theological principle to a political position.

And many political issues are jagged-line issues, not straight-line issues. And so it's no surprise to find some diversity amongst Christians in their political approaches.

And so two Christians, for example, both might want to fight poverty. They recognise from the Bible that they should care for the poor. But they might disagree about the best economic policies that would achieve that aim.

[24 : 56] Two Christians are pro-life. They know that God cares about the unborn. But one might prefer a more combative stance, while another might prefer to take a more persuasive approach.

And so on. And we know that we have taken on the values of the world if we think that, oh, if that other Christian doesn't take my exact position on education reform or environmental issues or whatever it is, he or she must be heretical and we must immediately break fellowship.

Or if that other person doesn't employ my exact political strategy, hmm, I guess he's lost his salvation. You see, we immediately label the other person as liberal or not serious without trying to understand where the other person is coming from.

Now, of course, once in a while there are straight line issues, clear-cut issues that all Christians must oppose, like Hitler exterminating Jews, for example.

But the majority of the time, it's doubtful that it is so straightforward. It is more likely that we have confused our political preferences for doctrinal fidelity.

[26 : 26] Now, if you're interested in exploring more about this, let me just recommend to you a book from our church library. This one, by Jonathan Lehman and Andy Naselli. It's called How Can I Love Church Members with Different Politics?

It's short, readable, and timely. And so I made sure we had this in our church library and that's the place to go if you want to unpack more of what I've just said.

But here's the text's main point. Reject worldly divisions. Reject ungodly divisions.

You see, whenever ungodly divisions reign in the church, three things happen, as a speaker I heard so helpfully points out. Firstly, it dishonours the name of Christ himself.

If the world sees Christians splitting into factions of personality and fighting over who supports who, why would they think that Jesus is different or that his message is any different?

[27 : 35] Secondly, it delights the enemies of Christ. Satan and all those aligned to him will love nothing more than to see chaos rather than the great commission being fulfilled.

And thirdly, it discourages the servants of Christ. It's one thing to see the world fighting. It's another to see Christians dividing over worldly things.

If I remember correctly, the number one reason why full-time workers leave the ministry is conflict. And often, is not conflict over things like doctrine or truth.

It's conflict over what colour the fouling cabinet should be. True story. And so that's one action. We must reject worldly divisions.

But Paul also prescribes another action. And so that's our second action for today. Secondly, retain a cross-shape allegiance. retain a cross-shape allegiance.

[28 : 48] Now look at verse 10. 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.

Now what is the solution to any worldly divisions that might pop up? the answer is to remember whose name we actually carry.

Now, sometimes we hear the name of Christ so much that it kind of loses its impact. Our songs are full of statements about how beautiful his name is, how his name is above all other names, that we don't stop to think about what we are singing.

but by invoking the name of Christ here, Paul is reminding us whose name we carry. Now, Paul is not just some postman neatly delivering a postcard with the name of some unknown sender on it. No, he is a royal messenger, an ambassador who carries the full weight of the king's authority as he makes his appeal. stop it in the name of Christ the king, he says.

[30 : 14] Why? Because of who Christ is. Look at verse 13. Is Christ divided?

Is he a piece of cake that you can split up? Of course he isn't. And anyway, if Christ is split up, how can any of you say that you alone have awe of Christ?

That's the logic Paul is employing. And by the way, was Paul crucified for you? Was Apollos? Was Peter? Am I your saviour, Paul was?

Did I die for you? Or John Wesley? Or John Calvin? Or John Piper? It's a ridiculous question, of course. Only Christ alone died for his people.

And if he did so, then he belongs to all Christians, not just one group. And the third question is just as ridiculous.

[31 : 19] Were you baptised in the name of Paul? Was he the one you pledged allegiance to when you became a Christian? Did you sing, I have decided to follow Paul?

No turning back, no turning back. Or the answer, of course, is no. No. The people of God only answer to one name, Christ alone.

And so they are one family. that's why the question over who baptised who is both ridiculous and grievous.

Now, it appeared as if some of the Corinthian Christians were boasting that they were baptised by one of the big names, whether that was Paul, Apollos, or Cephas.

And so that's why in verses 14 and 15, Paul ironically gives thanks that he only baptised a handful of believers so that he wouldn't have to put up with even more ridiculous boasts like this.

[32 : 31] Because what is baptism after all? Now, we tend to think of baptism in individualistic terms, in terms of making a public declaration of our faith in Jesus.

But actually, we should see baptism in corporate terms. For baptism is really God's way of saying, you are in Jesus' family now.

And we are all one big family. Notice Paul deliberately addresses his fellow Christians, these divided Corinthians, as brothers and sisters, back in verse 10.

Because we are Jesus' family. family. And Jesus' family should never be broken apart by silly factions. Yes, we are not all the same.

We are not all clothes. God's family is not monochrome. There will be differences. Our physical characteristics are different. Our biological family histories are different.

[33 : 41] Our personal testimonies are different. Our giftings are different. That's what we found out last week, didn't we? We are enriched in every way.

And as Paul would say later in 1 Corinthians 12, we are one body with many parts. Some of us are eyes, some of us are hands, some of us are feet.

We are not all the same. But though we are not uniform, we are to be united. Social psychologists sometimes talk about the phenomenon of categorization.

What they mean is all human beings naturally categorize. Historians divide time into eras. Biologists classify animals into species.

And all of us categorize people into particular groups. Now, there is nothing wrong with that in itself. It saves mental energy.

[34 : 48] For example, if you were to walk into this church for the first time and you are approached by a person wearing a badge that says usher, then you would automatically assume that the person is going to welcome you, offer to bring you to a seat, and know where the toilets are.

you have placed that person into the category usher, and that helps you to know what to expect and how to interact with that person.

So, categorization reduces stress and anxiety. But the problem begins when we categorize, not just to describe, but to demonize.

Now, in Jesus' day, you might know, the Jews categorized a certain group of people as Samaritans, not merely to describe them, but to disparage them.

It was the way the Jews reinforced that they were the in-group, the people favored by God, and the Samaritans were the outsiders, those not favored by God.

[36 : 02] But Paul says, in God's family, we only categorize to describe, not to demonize. There might be Jews and Samaritans, West Malaysians and East Malaysians, Josephians and Parisians, musicians and non-musicians, older generations and younger generations.

Now, whatever it is, but there is no more us versus them. Now, in God's church, our identity in Christ overrides everything else.

Our common category is that we all belong to Christ. We are baptized into his family. We've pledged allegiance to him.

And if that's truly the case, then Paul's appeal in verse 10 makes complete sense. Agree with one another.

Be perfectly united in mind and thought. Now, actually, verse 10 can be more literally translated like this. All of you are to speak with one voice.

[37 : 20] Amidst all this diversity, amidst all those categories, we have to be united on one thing. And that one thing is the gospel.

What we say and do should make evident, loud and clear, that we are all about the gospel of Jesus Christ.

That is what, with one voice, the entire life of the congregation should scream out. And that's why Paul says in verse 17, For God 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.

Now, notice how Paul is concerned, not just with the content, but the form. Remember, wisdom and eloquence here would have been referring to how polished and sophisticated somebody sounded, exactly what the Corinthian culture valued, style, not substance.

But Paul says, if we preach only with a concern for style and status and social standing, then there is a fundamental mismatch between the message and the messenger.

[38 : 46] That's what Paul means when he says the cross is emptied of its power. Not that the cross really loses its power to save, but that credibility is lost when what we value does not match what we say.

for to bear the name of Christ is to bear the cross itself. It's to embrace weakness, service, humility. That's what the cross represents. It's never to boast in strength, control, superiority.

And so that's what should characterize the Christian community. That's why I didn't just say that we should retain a Christ shaped allegiance, but more specifically, a cross shaped one.

For just as baptism without the gospel is just an empty sign, so the church without the cross shaping its family dynamics is also just an empty sign.

[40 : 04] And so we must reject worldly divisions. Now, that doesn't mean that there are never any occasions for godly confrontation. That is exactly what Paul is doing here, after all.

That doesn't mean that any and every decision must be unanimous, or that we don't stand for truth. But we must never handle our diversity and disagreements in the way the world does.

If we want the world to take the gospel seriously, we don't do so by showing how wise, or how strong, or how powerful our leaders or representatives are.

Paradoxically, we do so by speaking of the very symbol of weakness and powerlessness and foolishness, the cross.

Now, what does that mean? What might that look like? Well, that's what Paul will talk about next week. So, come back for that. But for today, Paul simply calls on us to retain a cross-shaped allegiance, rather than to declare our loyalty to earthly figures of power and influence.

[41 : 30] peace. And so, let's pray that will be true of our church. Let's not take on the values of the world, but the values of the cross.

Let's pray. Father, as we come to you, we thank you that you have rescued us by the name of Jesus, and that you have brought us into your family.

Father, we thank you for all the brothers and sisters in Christ that we have when we came into a relationship with you. And so, Father, help us to have good sibling relationships.

Help us indeed to be people who are of one mind, who are of one purpose, and that is to stand firm for the gospel, to contend for the gospel, and to live in light of the gospel.

Father, indeed, if there are any amongst us, any listening online, who might be divided from someone else in their fellowship, I pray that you would help them to do the work of reconciliation, to agree with one another, so that they can indeed testify to the reconciling power of the cross. [43 : 11] So, again, be at work in our fellowship, be at work in our church, I pray. All this we pray for your son's glory. Amen.