

## ECF 5<sup>th</sup> December 2021 1 Corinthians 16:5-24 What Christian Fellowship Looks Like

Early one Sunday morning about 10 years ago, 7-year old Preston Scarborough took his dad's car out for a drive. He'd only ever watched people drive before, but he managed to get the car started and drive at speeds of up to 40 mph.

After receiving reports of a child driving recklessly, the police caught up with him and tried unsuccessfully to stop him. Amazingly, with the police still chasing him, Preston drove back to his house, parked the car safely on the driveway and ran into the house to tell his dad, "The cops are outside." Then he went downstairs and hid in the basement.

So why did Preston do all of this? Well, when his dad asked him, he said that it was because he didn't want to go to church in the hot weather.

Now, usually people don't go to such great lengths to avoid church, but lots of people have reasons to stay away.

But the apostle Paul was not like that with the church in Corinth. As we've seen over the past 8 months of studying Paul's letter to them, this church was in a real mess.

- There were deep divisions over their favourite leaders.
- They'd turned a blind eye to serious immorality.
- They were suing each other in court.
- They'd warped view on marriage and gender.
- They were arguing over what food they were allowed to eat.
- People were getting drunk at their communion services.
- Their ideas on spiritual gifts meant that some of their services were incomprehensible.
- And some of their teachers were destroying their hope in the resurrection.
- And to top it all off, some in this church were harshly and unfairly criticising Paul, the one who had brought them to Christ in the first place!

If anyone had a reason to stay away from a church, surely Paul did. And yet, in this last section of his letter he again expressed his deep love for them and his longing to be with them. And through this he gave us a glimpse of what Christian fellowship should look like.

1 Corinthians 16:5-24: "After I go through Macedonia, I will come to you—for I will be going through Macedonia. <sup>6</sup> Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go. <sup>7</sup> I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you, if the Lord permits. <sup>8</sup> But I will stay on at Ephesus until Pentecost, <sup>9</sup> because a great door for effective work has opened to me, and there are many who oppose me. <sup>10</sup> If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am. <sup>11</sup> No-one, then, should refuse to accept him. Send him on his way in peace so that he may return to me. I am expecting him along with the brothers. <sup>12</sup> Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers. He was quite unwilling to go now, but he will go when he has the opportunity. <sup>13</sup> Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong. <sup>14</sup> Do everything in love. <sup>15</sup> You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. I urge you, brothers, <sup>16</sup> to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labours at it. <sup>17</sup> I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. <sup>18</sup> For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. Such men deserve recognition. <sup>19</sup> The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house. <sup>20</sup> All the brothers here send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. <sup>21</sup> I, Paul, write this greeting in my own hand. <sup>22</sup> If anyone does not love the Lord—a curse be on him. Come, O Lord! <sup>23</sup> The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. <sup>24</sup> My love to all of you in Christ Jesus. Amen."

### 1. Show Love

It is obvious that Paul loved this church.

#### a) Speak lovingly

In fact he finished his letter with a declaration of his love. "My love to all of you in Christ Jesus." 1 Corinthians 16:24

Paul wasn't one of those guys who think it's wrong to express their feelings. Instead, he was up front and clear about them. Despite all the hardship and heartache this church had caused him, Paul loved them and cared about them. And he wanted

them to know that.

And he knew that this was crucial for a church. He said, [“Do everything in love.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16: He knew that Christians need to express their love for each other.

#### b) Share greetings

And so he sent greetings from [“The churches in the province of Asia... Aquila and Priscilla.”](#) (who worked alongside Paul in planting the church in Corinth) [“The church that meets at their house... all the brothers here.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:19-20

He wanted these believers to know that they were part of a wider Christian family who loved them and cared about them.

But he also wanted them to express this love to each other. He told them, [“Greet one another with a holy kiss.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:20 That was a common way for friends and family to express their affection for each other. And Paul wanted them to express this to each other – to declare clearly and unequivocally that they were united together in love.

In the middle of a pandemic that’s a bit more difficult. But even if we can’t hug or shake hands this morning, we need to keep trying to find ways to express our love for each other.

#### c) Spend Time

And one of those ways is by spending time with each other. Paul wrote this letter from the city of Ephesus on his third missionary journey. He was going to stay there a bit longer, but he wanted them to know after travelling through Macedonia, he was planning to come and visit them and to stay for a while: [“Perhaps I will stay with you awhile, or even spend the winter, so that you can help me on my journey, wherever I go.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:6

There was a practical reason for this. Travel on the Mediterranean Sea was too dangerous in the winter months. So staying in Corinth made sense.

But there was another reason. Paul wanted to spend time with these believers. [“I do not want to see you now and make only a passing visit; I hope to spend some time with you.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:7

Paul had a real passion as a pioneer missionary to keep on going to new areas where the gospel had never been preached before. This was his calling, his God-given mission. But Paul also loved spending time with his Christian family. He loved hanging out with them, encouraging them and being encouraged by them.

And this is what Christian fellowship looks like. Our love should lead us to want to spend time with each other. It was one of the characteristics and strengths of the early church that [“Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts.”](#) Acts 2:46

Of course we all have so many other things to do, other priorities and responsibilities, and in the middle of this pandemic spending time together is especially difficult. But it is so crucial for us to do what we can to be together as a body of believers.

## 2. Share the Gospel

But spending time together isn’t our only priority. As Paul said here, these travel plans of his were only [“If the Lord permits.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:7

He understood that our lives are in God’s hands and it is ultimately God who decides what we do. As James told us to do in his letter, we ought to say, [“If it is the Lord’s will, we will live and do this or that.”](#) James 4:15

But this uncertainty was also because Paul’s desire to share the gospel was deeper than his desire to do what he felt like.

#### a) Opportunity

Paul was longing to see the Corinthians, but he was willing to stay in Ephesus for a while more, [“Because a great door for effective work has opened up to me.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:9

Paul recognised that God had provided an amazing opportunity to preach the gospel in Ephesus and so he wanted to take full advantage of that. And as a result, his ministry in Ephesus was incredibly effective. [“He... had discussions daily in the lecture hall of Tyrannus. This went on for two years, so that all the Jews and Greeks who lived in the province of Asia heard the word of the Lord.”](#) Acts 19:9–10

For two years, in that hall, people heard for the first time the good news that Jesus died on the cross to save them. And they put their trust in Jesus and were welcomed into God's family. And then they took that good news and carried it with them right throughout the province of Asia.

And that is what we are called to do too. Christian fellowship is not just about loving each other – it is also about expressing God's love for the world by taking the gospel to those who don't know Jesus.

And there are so many ways that God gives us to do this. It could be through literature, like the John's gospels or the calendars. Or it could be through inviting people to events like our Christmas services. Or it could just be by taking some time to chat to friends, family and neighbours.

The crucial thing is that we need to have eyes to see those opportunities and faith to take them. Paul wrote to the Colossians: [“Be wise in the way you act towards outsiders; make the most of every opportunity. Let your conversation be always full of grace, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how to answer everyone.”](#) Colossians 4:5-6

### b) Opposition

Of course this is not easy. Open doors don't usually lead to pain-free ministry. In Corinth, Paul didn't just have amazing opportunities, he also had incredible opposition [“And there are many who oppose me.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:9

You can read Acts 19 if you want to know the details, but those who opposed Paul included the Jewish leadership who rejected Christ and the silversmiths who rioted because people were giving up on their idols.

Working effectively for God does not mean that everything will go smoothly. The presence of opposition does not mean that we have moved out of God's will for our lives!

And so as a Christian fellowship we're not just called to speak for Christ. We're also called to suffer for him. [“Everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.”](#) 2 Timothy 3:12

## 3. Stand Together

Maybe that is why Paul challenged the Corinthians to stand strong: [“Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be men of courage; be strong.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:13

Paul knew that these believers faced incredible opposition. There were people outside of the church who were ridiculing their faith. There were false teachers in the church who were trying to lead them away from the truth. And there was Satan and all the spiritual forces of evil who were trying to tear this young church apart.

And so they needed

- To be alert to the danger.
- To reject any teaching that was contrary to the gospel of Christ.
- To be courageous in the face of danger.
- And to be strong enough to keep standing no matter how difficult it got!

### a) In the Spiritual Battle

And we're in that spiritual battle too. [“Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms.”](#) Ephesians 6:12 And so we need the courage and conviction to stand in the truth of God's Word, to be unshakeable in our faith and to give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord no matter what!

### b) In Partnership

But we don't need to try to do this on our own. God has united us as a body to help us to stand strong together!

Paul asked the Corinthians to welcome Timothy when he visited them: [“If Timothy comes, see to it that he has nothing to fear while he is with you, for he is carrying on the work of the Lord, just as I am.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:10. Timothy was Paul's son in the faith, and this church could benefit from his ministry, just as it had done from Paul's.

Paul also spoke about Apollos: [“Now about our brother Apollos: I strongly urged him to go to you with the brothers.”](#) 1 Corinthians 16:12. Some people were fighting over whether Paul or Apollos were better preachers. But Paul refused to be drawn into that competition. Instead he knew that Apollos was his partner in ministry and believed that he could help this

church, just as he had.

We can't do the Christian life alone. We need other believers to speak into our lives and minister to us.

Of course that unity can only be expressed if there we are united in the truth. Paul said, ["If anyone does not love the Lord – a curse be on him."](#) 1 Corinthians 16:22

We cannot be united with those who are not united with Christ or teaching the truth of Christ! But the Bible is clear that we will only be able to stand strong, if we stand together!

#### 4. Submit to Leaders

But it is not just partnership that helps us to live for Christ. It is also leadership. God had provided this church with amazing leaders. And Paul here called this church ["To submit to such as these."](#) 1 Corinthians 16:16

He wanted this church to recognise those whom God had appointed and allow them to lead them and guide them. Submission to leadership is always a characteristic of healthy Christian fellowship.

##### a) As They Serve

But this first of all requires that those leaders are following Christ's example. Jesus said that leaders in his church should not lord it over others like leaders do in the world. ["Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,"](#) Matthew 20:26 Christian leadership which is always servant leadership.

And that is what these leaders in Corinth were doing. The household of Stephanus were the first people to come to faith through Paul's ministry in the Corinth area. And Paul had baptised them himself. But Paul said about them here: ["They have devoted themselves to the service of the saints."](#) 1 Corinthians 16:15

This literally means that they appointed themselves, but not in the sense of pushing for position or power. Instead, they saw a need, and so they stepped into serving this church without needing to be asked. And they worked hard at it. They laboured, they worked to the point of exhaustion!

And this is the kind of leadership we need in church and this is the kind of leadership we need to be willing to submit to. If we do, then we will all benefit – as Paul and this church did – ["They refreshed my spirit and yours also."](#) 1 Corinthians 16:18

#### 5. Seek Christ

But there was something more that this church needed; something more than partnership with others or good servant leadership. They needed Christ himself. And so as Paul often did at the end of his letters, he brought his readers back to how he started.

His greeting at the start of this letter was ["Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ."](#) 1 Corinthians 1:3

##### a) His grace

And here at the end, after all that he had written to them, his desire was that ["The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with you."](#) 1 Corinthians 16:23

This is what they needed most of all. More than teaching from Paul, or encouragement from Apollos, or ministry from Stephanus and his friends – this church needed the grace of Christ. The free gift that only Christ could give – his love, his forgiveness, his restoration, his power, his strength, his Spirit!

##### b) His coming

And ultimately, his presence with them in the fullest reality. And so Paul declared ["Come, O Lord."](#) 1 Corinthians 16:22. This is the Aramaic prayer, Marana tha. It expressed Paul's eager longing that Christ would come again as he described in chapter 15.

And this is what our Christian fellowship should look like – a longing for Christ to work in our lives today, to experience more of his grace right now, but also a deep desire for him to come again, to reign supremely in our hearts and in his world, and to take us to be with him forever!

#### Conclusion

So the Corinthians had huge problems. And yet, Paul still saw their value and worth. He still believed that they were the church of God in Corinth. And so he was committed to doing whatever he could to help them live out who they were in Christ!

And I pray that despite all the issues we have, we too will be committed to being the church of God in Enniscorthy.

- That we'll show love to each other, as we've been loved by Christ.
- That we'll share the Gospel, making the most of every opportunity.
- That we'll stand together in unity in the face of all the challenges we face.
- That we'll submit to leaders, as they serve us in humility.
- That we'll seek Christ first in our lives as we wait for him to come again.

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