

A Divided Church

Sermon preached by Jonathan Huang for Houston Chinese Church
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❖ Introduction

- About five years ago, I was at a Christian conference in Louisville, Kentucky, known as T4G, Together for the Gospel.
- I don't know if you've ever been to a conference like this. But for someone like me, it's hard *not* to be star-struck when you've got speakers coming up on stage the likes of John Piper, or Al Mohler, or David Platt.
- Imagine being in a stadium of thousands of people. People who are there "together for the gospel." But deep down, you can't help but just get excited about the next big-name preacher who's about to get up and speak.
- At conferences like these and even other situations, it's hard when you spot someone well-known on the streets when walking and *not* get a little enamored by the fact that you're standing really close to someone who's *famous*.
- Now, just for the record, I'm a fan of T4G. And I'm grateful for these Christian conferences where we can gather to fellowship with other believers, to hear solid, biblical teaching, and to be encouraged in our walks with Christ.
- So please, don't, in any way, hear me dogging on Christian conferences.
- But I think it's good to pause and wonder: what exactly is driving us to be so infatuated by celebrities, even Christian celebrities?
- You know in our day and age, it's a *thing* now for people to become what's known as "influencers."
- If you're not familiar with that term, an influencer is someone who uses social media, like Instagram or TikTok, to gain a large following and to garner influence in everything from cooking to fashion to travel—you name it.
- Our society is so obsessed with celebrity. Movie stars, sports stars, rock stars who can wow the crowds and capture both our attention and our applause.
- And then there's this phenomenon among churches in America: the celebrity pastor. There was even this book written recently, called *Celebrities for Jesus: How Personas, Platforms, and Profits Are Hurting the Church*.

- In a podcast talking about the book, the author, Katelyn Beaty, points out how easy it can be for churches to wrap their identities around a key leader—maybe it’s a founding pastor or someone who’s made a name for himself because of the books he’s written or the influence he’s gained over the years from different platforms.¹
- But what can happen then is that when pastors or church leaders have moral failings, Christians in local churches are reluctant to keep them accountable because there’s a reputation, a “brand,” or “image” that needs be protected.²
- And, sadly, this is a reality that’s come up again and again in churches led by well-known figures around the country in recent years.
- But something must be off here. There’s got to be something feeding our need to be associated with influential people. In the church, there’s only one name that ought to be lifted up and that’s Jesus.
- But how have we come so far away from that? And what will get us back on track to making Christ the center of our attention?
- Well, this morning we’re kicking off a new sermon series on the book of 1 Corinthians, which is a letter written by the apostle Paul to the church in Corinth.
- And from this first section that we’ll be looking at, I want us to tackle these questions head on.
- What you’ll find is that the world surrounding ancient Corinth was much like what we’re experiencing nowadays here in America.
- In fact, we’re much more like the church in Corinth than you might realize.

❖ **A Troubled Church**

- Now just to give you some background, Corinth is located in what we know today as Greece.
- So think modern-day Europe, the Mediterranean Sea, with Greece right there to the north of the sea, just east of Italy.
- Back in Paul’s day, Corinth was the capital of the Roman-controlled province of Achaia, which made up most of the southern and central parts of Greece.³

¹ Julie Roys, “Celebrities for Jesus,” interview with Katelyn Beaty, December 7, 2022, in *The Roys Report*, podcast, 1:00:01, <https://julieroys.com/podcast/celebrities-for-jesus/>.

² Roys, “Celebrities for Jesus.”

³ John D. Barry et al., eds., “Achaia,” *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

- I think we can relate to a city like Corinth. It was a place where the core of city life was, as one commentator describes, “*trade, business, and entrepreneurial pragmatism in the pursuit of success.*”⁴
- So think Silicon Valley or even a city like ours where people strove to make it big, to get their name out, to start up the next venture.
- One’s standing in society really mattered to the average Corinthian. And in Corinth, one important way to boost your place in the world was based on how well you could speak in front of public audiences.⁵
- This was a city where people would travel into town and get paid to speak to large crowds.⁶ This was a city enamored by gifted celebrities and easily swayed by influencers.
- So it’s in this kind of city that Paul plants a church on his second missionary journey.
- In Acts 18, we learn that Paul travels from Athens to Corinth, where he meets a couple, named Aquila and Priscilla. Now this couple had just relocated from Rome to Corinth because all the Jews were kicked out of Rome by Claudius, who was the Roman Emperor at the time (18:2).⁷
- Paul shared a common trade with Aquila and Priscilla. They were all tentmakers. And after period of time of ministering the gospel to the people of Corinth, we read that “many of the Corinthians hearing Paul believed and were baptized” (Acts 18:8).
- Paul actually writes what we know as 1 Corinthians as a letter to the Corinthian church from a city called Ephesus on his third missionary journey.⁸
- Now, this can get a little confusing, but there was actually a letter that Paul wrote to the Corinthians *before* 1 Corinthians that we see referenced in 1 Corinthians 5:9.⁹
- Apparently, after hearing an “oral report” and after receiving a letter from the Corinthian Christians, Paul was convinced that the church he had planted was in dire need of clarifying much confusion.¹⁰

⁴ Anthony C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, The New International Greek Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2000), 4.

⁵ David E. Garland, *1 Corinthians*, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2003), 4.

⁶ Frank S. Thielman, Notes on 1 Corinthians in *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2187.

⁷ Benjamin D. Espinoza, “Claudius, Emperor,” ed. John D. Barry et al., *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

⁸ Thielman, Notes on 1 Corinthians in *The ESV Study Bible*, 2190.

⁹ Thielman, Notes on 1 Corinthians in *The ESV Study Bible*, 2187.

¹⁰ Thielman, Notes on 1 Corinthians in *The ESV Study Bible*, 2187-2188.

- So he pens this letter we know as 1 Corinthians to respond to this troubled church. It was a church that was tolerating sexual sin within its ranks. A kind that wouldn't even be tolerated "among pagans" (1 Cor. 5:1).
- It was a church that struggled to stay united because some thought their spiritual gifts were better others' gifts.
- And it was a church that became so enamored by celebrity that it was becoming fractured.
- Conflict and jealousy and strife were making their way into this young church (1 Cor. 3:3-4).
- So with all that as background, let's get into our text for today.

❖ **The Root of the Division**

- I'm going to spend most of our time looking at verses 10-17. But let me start out at the beginning of the chapter. Look down at verse 1 with me.
- We see a greeting here going like this: "Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes" (1 Cor. 1:1).
- The Sosthenes here may be the same Sosthenes who, in Acts 18, was "the ruler of the synagogue" in Corinth while Paul was there.¹¹
- As we get into this passage, I want you to notice how Jesus is so central to Paul's thinking. If you count it up, Paul mentions "Christ" fourteen times in just the first seventeen verses. There are only 3 mentions of Christ in the rest of chapter.
- The word "Christ" shows up a total of 64 times in 1 Corinthians, which means that almost 30% of the total mentions of Christ show up in this introductory section of Paul's letter.
- I think that says something about the centrality of Christ in Paul's mind as he addresses the Corinthians here.
- In verse 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians that the church he planted among them was completely a work of God calling them together as saints. They were "sanctified in Christ Jesus."
- And they were "called to be saints" in order to "call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul was lifting up Christ at the center of it all. And no one else.

¹¹ John D. Barry et al., eds., "Sosthenes the Christian," *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

- So what was the problem? The problem was that the Corinthians were fractured along the lines of who they apparently followed.
- It wasn't as simple as: well, I'm a Christian, I follow Christ. No, things were getting messy as people started acting as if they were in any other part of Corinthian society.
- Look down starting at verse 10 with me: "I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment" (ESV).
- The Greek word for "united" here is used in the sense of "becoming ready, suitable, or equipped...for a particular purpose or for some use or event."¹²
- There's a greater purpose for unity and that's the mission of God. Jesus says in Mark 3, "...if a house is divided against itself, that house will not be able to stand" (ESV). A divided church can't move forward on mission because it's so busy fighting within itself.
- What was driving this division? Look down at verse 11 with me. "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brothers. What I mean is that each one of you says, 'I follow Paul,' or 'I follow Apollos,' or 'I follow Cephas,' or 'I follow Christ'" (1 Cor. 1:11-12, ESV).
- Now there are different ways to interpret this situation here. But one way to understand this is to just take Paul's words at face value. The Corinthians were dealing with a situation where there was division along the lines of well-known personalities in the church.
- In this case, there was Paul, the great missionary of the early church. The infamous persecutor of Christians who had the Damascus road experience with Jesus. The author of almost half of the books of the NT.
- Then there's Apollos. A well-spoken, eloquent man of God. A master of apologetics who defended the faith brilliantly.
- There's Cephas (also known as the apostle Peter). You know, one of the three closest disciples of Jesus. A pillar in the early church who personally witnessed Christ after his resurrection.
- People were associating themselves too much with particular Christian leaders, not necessarily because of theological differences, but because of the role baptism played among the Corinthians. One scholar suggests there may have been factions that developed around the people who baptized them.¹³

¹² Logos Bible Word study for "καταρτίζω."

¹³ Thielman, Notes on 1 Corinthians in *The ESV Study Bible*, 2193.

- Which is why Paul goes on to say in verse 13, “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, so that no one may say that you were baptized in my name. (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized anyone else.)” (1 Cor. 1:13-16, ESV).
- What’s happening in Corinth is that people were expressing a sort of spiritual pride in the way they made much of who they were baptized by and who they identified with. “I’m with Paul” or “I’m with Apollos.”
- That’s my man. *I’m with him.*
- You might be thinking, “Well I don’t feel that way about the pastor who baptized me.” Well, are there people you know that you just like being associated with because it makes you feel good about yourself? Maybe it’s a well-known preacher or a favorite author or it maybe even your small group leader.
- What’s at the root of the divisions in the church at Corinth lies in the hearts of humans in every age. It’s this struggle to feel a need to attach ourselves to influential people in order to feel a sense of significance or to feel good about ourselves.
- In the podcast I talked about earlier, there’s this concept of “refracted light,” which can be described as the “glow” we get from being associated to “powerful celebrity figures.”¹⁴
- Even from afar, you can feel this sense of significance when you look up to certain people. There can be a sense of superiority from being connected to a certain figure that helps us feel like we have a purpose in this world.¹⁵
- Just think about the Calvinism versus Arminianism divide. Both schools of thought take their names from either John Calvin or Jacobus Arminius. These camps have definitely caused a lot of friction among Christians over the centuries and on into our day.
- Yes, there’s a place for reading Scripture and forming one’s own convictions on what the mechanisms are behind people being saved. Yes, there’s a place to say I think the way so and so theologian put it is probably most aligned with Scripture from what I can tell.
- But there can be really unhelpful ways to express your convictions. Calvinists can be known to be theological jerks. No wonder there are books out there with titles like, “Humble Calvinism,” and internet articles written with titles like, “Be a Kinder Calvinist.”

¹⁴ Roys, “Celebrities for Jesus.” The concept of “refracted light” is from Diane Langberg.

¹⁵ Roys, “Celebrities for Jesus.”

- I remember when I first began learning more about Calvinism. It was exciting to form my own convictions about election and how God went about saving people. But following this or that theologian can also become a source of spiritual pride where you look down on people who don't think the same way you do.
- I think there's room in the name of Christian unity to have differences in theological convictions. But maybe it's more about whether you can love others *despite* those differences.
- Later on, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13, "...if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing" (13:2, ESV).
- So Christian, do you see any place in your life where spiritual pride has crept in? Maybe you think you're better than someone else because you're a fan of this pastor or you can quote that spiritual hero.
- Or maybe you've put your sense of identity in someone who's influenced you greatly, where that person's become more of who makes you feel significant rather than Christ himself.
- If that's you, let this be an opportunity to repent. Some of you need to repent of the ways you've let people other than Christ himself become who you find your sense of worth in. You care more that people know you're associated with so and so rather than be content with simply being a follower of Christ.
- But other than repent, is there anything that can be done to fight against these selfish ambitions, these tendencies to make a name for ourselves or to gain something from being associated with others?
- How do you actually work towards killing the pride that leads you to want identify with gifted and influential people?

❖ **The Road to Unity**

- Paul goes on to model what this might look like for us. Look down at verse 17 with me: "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" (ESV).
- Paul wasn't out to make a name for himself. By indicating that he was sent to preach the gospel, plain and simple and without words of eloquent wisdom, he was bearing his heart. He had no intention of being a crowd pleaser or to garner influence or to gain a following for himself.
- He had one intention and one intention alone. And that was to preach the gospel and let the message of the crucified Christ—alone—shine brightly.

- Listen to what he says in 1 Corinthians chapter 2: “And I, when I came to you, brothers, did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God with lofty speech or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified...so that your faith might not rest in the wisdom of men but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:1-2, 5).
- All Paul cares about is preaching the gospel and seeing people be saved. He’s not worried about who’s “following” him. He’s not anxious about how many people like him. No, he’s anxious to see people be saved through the preaching of the word, and that the power of the cross of Christ be made known to the world.
- This is the road to unity. If all of us, including the Corinthian Christians, would follow in Paul’s example, *none* of us would be clamoring to be at the top.
- *All* of us would be content to serve the Lord in exactly the way he wants for us and not care a minute about if we’d get recognized or not.
- *None* of us would be trying to selfishly vie for power or influence or connections with influential leaders.
- *All* of us would be willing to go unnoticed for the sake of the gospel.
- There’d be unity in the church. Not fractures based on who in the church we know or who we’re connected to.
- I relate to this so well. Because one of the things I’ve struggled with over the years is a need to be recognized. It’s a bit of a strange thing. But in the medical world, I care nothing about what people think of me. But I’ve seen in me a selfish, sinful desire to be known, to be somebody, in the ministry world.
- I still remember back in 2014 when I was in the middle of my medical residency years, I read this book by Martyn Lloyd-Jones. And in it, he writes about people who want to go into the ministry for selfish motives. I want to read this to you just so you get a flavor of what was convicting me way back then:
- "It has often happened that young men with certain gifts who listen to a great preacher are captivated by him and what he is doing. They are captivated by his personality or by his eloquence, they are moved by him, and, unconsciously, they begin to feel a desire to be like him and to do what he is doing. Now that may be right, or it may be quite wrong.
- They may only be fascinated by the glamour of preaching, and attracted by the idea of addressing audiences, and influencing them. All kinds of wrong and false motives may insinuate themselves.”¹⁶

¹⁶ D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones, *Preaching & Preachers*, ed. Kevin de Young (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 117.

- And so I wrote a journal entry on February 20th, 2014 about the state of my heart: “I see in myself two competing forces at work: selfish desires and godly desires...The selfish desires within me include the following: my infatuation with the celebrity status of pastors I admire (eg. John Piper and Matt Chandler), the name recognition of various seminaries that I want to be associated with, and the idolatry of seeking my significance in ministry accomplishments.”
- You know, looking back, I really do think that part of the reason God had me go through medical school and not go down the pastor or missionary route right after college was to help me die to my need to be recognized in the ministry world.
- It might sound strange to you, but I needed to learn to serve God in obscurity, as a medical student and later as a doctor, before I could move towards becoming a pastor in true humility.
- I love what Dave Harvey says about this: “We need to do ministry without acclaim so that we won’t be acclaim addicts when it comes. Anonymity is the ground from which pastors are harvested. Obscurity fertilizes the man with humility so that what he grows into can really bear fruit.”¹⁷
- So, what does this look like for you?
- Maybe you’re here today and wouldn’t consider yourself a Christian.
- But I wonder if you can relate to this kind of constant urge to be somebody in this world. You crave name recognition. You want to be well-connected. You want to know influential people.
- And maybe this shows up at your workplace. Or at school. Or among your friends.
- Have you ever stopped to consider the idea that you might looking for your sense of worth and significance in all the wrong places? You see, Christians believe that all of us were meant to find our greatest sense of worth and significance in knowing the God who created us.
- We believe that being in a relationship with Jesus will satisfy all your needs to be known and to be recognized, because you’re known and recognized by the God of this universe.
- But what gets in our way is sin. There’s this constant push against the idea that somebody other than ourselves is supposed to be in charge of our lives. We want *our* name to be recognized by others. We want *our* achievements to multiply *our* influence in this world.

¹⁷ Dave Harvey, *Am I Called? The Summons to Pastoral Ministry* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 194.

- But the Bible tells us that “no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account” (Heb. 4:13, ESV). Every selfish ambition. Every ulterior motive. Every instance of self-glorification.
- All of us are in the same boat. I’m no better than you. And all of us are headed to an eternity in hell in order to pay for the enormous debt of sin that we owe to a holy and just God. But this is why the good news about Jesus is *so* good.
- God sent his son, Jesus Christ, to live the perfect life we should’ve live and to die the death we should’ve died, on the cross. Jesus was “slain, and by [his] blood [he] ransomed a people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Rev. 5:9, ESV).
- Jesus was raised to life on the third day after his crucifixion and so he’s alive right now and wants to be reconciled to you. What matters today is that you turn away from your sins and turn towards Christ.
- Ask him to be your Lord and Savior. By coming to Christ, you can be free of your need to find your sense of significance anywhere else in this world. Because what he thinks of you is what matters most.
- Christian, do you, like me, struggle with selfish ambitions? Any of you relate to my story and feel sinful desires to make a name for yourself in this world?
- In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C. S. Lewis describes what meeting a truly humble person would be like. It’s not that the person is always putting himself down as a nobody.
- But what will stand out to you is how much he was truly interested in *you*. Lewis says this, “He will not be thinking about humility: he will not be thinking about himself at all.”¹⁸
- So here’s the call to action. When you’re mingling with others after service or catching up with someone over lunch, begin practicing what Tim Keller calls “self-forgetfulness” and be more interested in learning about the other person, asking questions and listening, than about getting your own thoughts listened to.¹⁹
- I think the more you live like this, the more you’ll die, day after day, to your need to be somebody, to be recognized, to make a name for yourself.
- And as you practice “self-forgetfulness,” I want to leave you with this motto that’s helped me so much over the years in my fight against selfish ambition.
- It’s based on a book written by Patrick Fung.

¹⁸ C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1980), 128.

¹⁹ Timothy Keller, *The Freedom of Self-Forgetfulness* (Chorley, England: 10Publishing, 2012), 36.

- It goes like this: “Live to be forgotten so that Christ might be remembered.”²⁰
- “Live to be forgotten so that *Christ* might be remembered.”
- So let’s die to the need for people to remember *us*. Let’s be about the glory of Christ alone. And let’s be willing to live in obscurity for the sake of the gospel.
- “Live to be forgotten so that *Christ* might be remembered.”

²⁰ James H. Taylor III, foreword to *Live to be Forgotten: D. E. Hoste* (Littleton, CO: OMF International, 2012).