

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

31st October 2004

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2 Corinthians Intro : Fighting for the Gospel

Imagine a time and a place where people are free to do as they please, and so they please themselves. Imagine a time when people jostle with each other to gain more material goods than one-another, where the upwardly mobile pursue their goals with little thought for the downwardly desperate. Imagine a place where entertainment and amusement abounds, where social taboos are themselves taboo, and you are free to indulge all of your appetites without criticism.

Imagine how the faith-communities would react in such a time and place. Tolerance for one another would become widespread, because to do otherwise would be out-of-tune with the society around. And those religions which promised material blessing for its followers would be sure to win popularity as this is the good news that people want to hear.

Now, imagine that you know something which few other people realise, something so important that if others remain in ignorance they are in grave danger. Yet the revelation you have runs completely counter to the surrounding culture, so few will be able to recognise its truth. Imagine that, never-the-less, you have persuaded a group of people to accept your ideas, so that they begin to dance to a different tune, and to head away from the oblivion that everyone else mindlessly pursues.

What joy you would feel that some have seen the light.

Imagine then how you would feel if, in your absence, someone else weeded his way into your group, someone who never really understood the vital difference that your revelation made. Someone who was much more influenced by the desire to make a name and a fortune for himself, than to really care for that group. Imagine how you would react if that person began to draw your group back into the ideas and practices of the surrounding culture, back into the grave danger which they had been escaping from.

How would you deal with that situation?

Imagine how important it must be to you, to put your friends back onto the right road. Imagine how vital it is for you to silence the upstart false teacher so that he does no more harm. Imagine how great your desire is to see the group re-established, not just for its own sake, but so that it can reach out to others and turn them from their peril to a real hope.

Maybe at first it was easy to imagine the culture that I described – it doesn't take much imagination to see that this is the sort of culture we are living in today. People, by and large, are out to please themselves, they have thrown off all taboos, and pursue their own wealth and supposed happiness.

But it is also the culture of 1st Century Corinth, the culture into which Paul was writing in the book we are starting to study together.

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Corinth was an important city in the Roman empire – surpassed only by Alexandria and Rome itself in its importance. It had grown in importance fairly quickly since being re-established as a Roman colony from the ruins of its Greek predecessor in 44 BC. This relatively recent history meant there were no “landed gentry” in the upper classes of Corinthian society. In fact, it was a city where up-and-coming men could climb the greasy pole without a glass ceiling, if that doesn’t mix too many metaphors.

So the most common god to worship was the god of personal wealth. Other religions fitted in around this, content to be paid lip-service and offerings to keep in favour with the gods. Modern excavations of Corinth have provided evidence that as many as 34 gods were worshipped there, though there would be little content to their worship, and little interference with the pursuit of the great god of wealth.

Being a port town, immorality was also rife – to the point that Corinthian girls had a popular reputation much worse even than Essex girls today.

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Corinth was not the sort of place that you would want to plant a church – not if you wanted an easy life, that is! But it was strategically important. Corinth was on the main trade routes from Rome to Asia, and was a good base from which to spread the Gospel north into what Paul famously called the “regions beyond”. So Paul had come to Corinth in AD 50 and had established a church (see Acts 18). After staying for 18 months, Paul moved on – but as was his wont, he kept in touch with the church, principally by letter.

We know that Paul wrote at least 4 letters to them, and what we now know as 2 Corinthians is actually at least 4th Corinthians! The other letters have been lost, presumably they were not as important as the two preserved in the New Testament.

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The sequence of events goes something like this:

- Paul founds the church in Corinth around AD 50.
- After an 18month stay, Paul moves on to Syria via Ephesus.
- Before long, the Corinthian church has lapsed back into the behaviour of the culture it came from – in particular, sexual immorality went unchecked, and disputes between church members were acute and public.
- Paul writes to them to remind them that sexual immorality is out of place for them, and they are not to tolerate such people (1 Cor 5:9).
- It would appear some people took this too far, and would have nothing to do with anyone in Corinth who led an immoral life – which meant that they had an extremely small social circle, and no opportunity to spread the Gospel!
- At around AD 55, Paul wrote again to correct this, and this letter is what we call 1 Corinthians. We studied it 6 years ago, as I’m sure you remember. It is a great pastoral letter, full of advice on how to live for Christ in a society which is very un-Christian; you can see the tremendous love Paul has for the Corinthians as you read it.

- Paul wanted to return to Corinth in person to make sure they understood and applied his teaching, but wasn't able to immediately. In the mean time, he despatched Timothy with his letter. By the time Timothy arrived, the situation in Corinth had got out of hand. Some trouble-makers had come into the church, and had begun to undermine his teaching. These people were most likely from Jewish backgrounds, so to an extent their message would seem respectable to the young Corinthian church. Yet the gospel they proclaimed was different to Paul's, and led away from Christ. Instead of trust in Christ, it would appear that they preached pride in themselves – claiming to be super-spiritual through the exercise of spiritual gifts. This would have obvious appeal to people from a culture of self-aggrandisement.
- Sensing the seriousness of the situation, Paul hastily made his way to Corinth in an attempt to put things right. He thought that a personal visit would have a greater impact than a letter, and that they would see immediately the contrast between his style and that of the false apostles they now followed.
- This visit, however, proved painful and unfruitful, as 2 Corinthians 2:1 records. In fact, the rebellion against his authority had grown, and in the face of open opposition he retreated to Ephesus. This fuelled the campaign against him, as the false apostles saw this as a sign of weakness.
- From Ephesus, Paul wrote a tearful and severe letter (2 Cor 2:3-4), and sent it back with Titus with a call to repent from their rebellion and heresy.

Read 2:3-4

- It seems the combination of the harsh letter and Titus' different style won over the majority of the church. However, in the days before mobile phones, Paul did not know what was happening and spent an anxious few months waiting to hear back from Titus. Eventually he met up with him in Macedonia, and rejoiced to hear the news

Read 7:8-10

- However, the cancer of false teaching had not been fully eradicated, which meant the recovery of the rest of the church would be threatened again in time. And of course, Paul was concerned for the whole church, and not just for those who were quicker to repent. So Paul wrote another letter, and made plans to return to Corinth for a third visit (2 Cor 12:14).
- This is the letter that we are beginning to study tonight. 4 Corinthians!

So, the purpose and background to 2 Corinthians was far different from 1 Corinthians. In 1 Corinthians, Paul took his authority as read and laid out the principles of Christian conduct in a variety of settings.

The rough outline of the book is...

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Some examples of his defence of his ministry are:

2:17; 3:1-3; 4:5-7

We'll look at part of his message to the repentant a little later.

To challenge the rebellious:

10:1-5; 11:2-6; 12-15; 13: 5-10

Paul's authority had been openly challenged, and many still refused to recognise it. The problem was not so much that they did not give Paul honour and respect, though that was his due. The real issue was that they were deviating from the true Gospel, which had two profound effects. Firstly, they were missing out on God's blessing on their lives – not so much in material terms, but in spiritual blessings. And secondly, they were not preaching the true Gospel to those around them, and so others were being denied the change to hear the Gospel, and to find salvation in Christ.

This was a matter of the utmost seriousness. This was something which had to be addressed, at any cost. Hence Paul's lost harsh letter, and hence Paul's robust assertion of his authority as an Apostle.

Right from the outset of the letter, Paul makes his claim to be an Apostle. Now an Apostle means someone who is sent, commissioned by another to go as an ambassador, having the delegated power and authority of the one who sent them. Some people use the term "apostle" today, and in a sense they are right to do so – if they are commissioned by their church to go and preach the Gospel, then they are an apostle of that church.

But Paul's apostleship was of quite a different order, because he was commissioned not by a local church, but by Jesus Christ himself. He was the last of a group of men who were uniquely equipped by God to establish his church. The remaining people were the surviving 11 disciples, and Matthias who was chosen to replace Judas Iscariot. All were witnesses of Christ's resurrection, though in Paul's case this was through the Damascus road experience, some time after Christ had returned to heaven.

These Apostles were sent by Christ Himself to establish his church, to both the Jews and the Gentiles. It is the apostles who wrote the New Testament, and their doctrine which defines the beliefs of the Church. While others, both then and now, might call themselves apostles, they do not carry the same authority, and their words must all be measured against the yardstick of the completed New Testament (and indeed the Old too!).

Paul was acutely conscious of the responsibility he carried as an Apostle. He had the task of ensuring that the true Gospel message, in all its fullness, was made known, understood, preserved and passed on. He was laying the foundation for thousands of years of church history – though he might not have realised it himself. He had to ensure that the truth was not smothered by the Roman culture or bent out of shape by false teachings.

The integrity of the Gospel message is paramount. To tolerate anything else is to put peoples eternal destiny in the balance. While in our day it is the in thing to tolerate different viewpoints, we must stand our ground on this. To do otherwise would be like a maths teacher accepting any old answer to the sum 2+2. Of itself, you might think that does little damage; what does it matter if someone isn't good at maths? But the consequence would be dire – just think of the confusion every time you buy something, when the amount of change you get is quite arbitrary. Or when engineers calculate the required strength of a bridge, but use false maths and so it falls down with devastating results.

If tolerance is about respecting other people, and respect is a mark of love, then it is outrageous to tolerate behaviour which harms other people, and encourages others to be harmed too.

Equally, Paul as an Apostle was concerned about the unity of the church. Besides the principle of the matter, practically speaking it was important for the various churches which he and others had founded to support and encourage one-another. They were a small and radically different group in a large and powerful society. They met in private homes, as they had no synagogue or church building. So each fellowship would be quite small, some estimate the entire Corinthian church at this time had as little as 50 members! So Paul encouraged the churches which were relatively well off to support those who were suffering greater persecution, as we see in 2 Corinthians where Paul encourages them to give to the church in Jerusalem:

8:13-15; 9:10-11

Their survival depended on their unity. And unity could not be taken for granted. A major threat was the obvious divide between Jewish and Gentile Christians, one which often flared up in Acts and which is mentioned in several of the epistles. But also there was the threat of factions arising from those who followed one leader rather than another – this comes across in 1 Corinthians, where some followed Paul, some Peter, and some Apollos (1 Cor 1:12).

So keeping the churches united was a priority for Paul.

These two goals, keeping the Gospel message pure, and keeping the churches united, can seem to be at odds.

We see this all the time today, and it is interesting if alarming to watch how this tension is covered by the secular press. One of the most divisive issues today concerns homosexuality in the Anglican church. Clearly, different people have different views on this, regardless of their own sexual orientation. To the secular mind, the question is absurd. Thanks to the efforts of “light entertainment” TV personalities such as Graham Norton, Paul O’Grady and even the straight Jonathan Ross with his house band “4 Poofs and a Piano”, tolerance for homosexuality is a virtue and intolerance is treated with the same revulsion as sodomy used to be a generation ago. Hence Rocco Buttiglione, the controversial nominee for the post of European Justice Minister, was forced to stand down because of his outspoken views.

So too when portraying the schism in the CofE, those who oppose the appointment of homosexual clergy such as Gene Robinson are made to look out of touch with life, just as those who opposed women priests were 10 years ago. In an age of tolerance, people cannot understand how a church preaching a message of love can divide over such an issue.

It may not be long before the same offence is taken at churches that divide over whether to join in worship with those from other “faith communities” – a popular term these days, designed to erode the differences between religions and promote, you’ve guessed it, greater tolerance.

Although the two goals of Truth and Unity can seem to be at odds, in fact they are inseparable. Unity without truth is hollow and deceptive, while truth without unity is arrogant and lonely.

It is the Truth which unites us in Christ. The unity that we have with other Christians is a bond based on the truth that the Holy Spirit is living in each of us.

I'm always encouraged when we have fellowship with real Christians from other places, because that bond is so strong, despite the fact we may have only just met. This struck me afresh a couple of weeks ago during the town twinning weekend. Thanks to Elder Rydon, we put up the Mayor of Grossalmerode and his son, and so we attended most of the twinning functions. We knew none of the Germans beforehand, and few of the Roystonians either. I made efforts to talk to a lot of people, as is my wont; but those who I was able to talk the most to were fellow Christians, be they from Royston or Grossalmerode. It wasn't that we were talking about spiritual things, at least not that much; but conversations were easier, and a warmth present in our relationship that just isn't there with people who don't have the same Spirit living in them.

This phenomenon was even more evident on the Sunday evening when Peter Boorne from ANCC took the sermon, and brought along his wife and two other couples from ANCC. I was greatly encouraged in speaking to them, even though they were from completely different backgrounds. For instance, Mohammed is an ex-Muslim from Sri Lanka who's conversion experience included what he described as being slain in the Spirit! At one level, we had little in common, indeed there is much we could have talked about where we have different views. But we were and are united in our living faith, and it was a joy to unite with them in worshipping God that evening.

Many of us have been involved with the Champions events this week, where together with Christians from the Royston CofE, Melbourn Baptist, and others, we put on two mornings of hectic activities for children – with the aim of attracting them to Christ. Once more there was unity across a spectrum of Christian backgrounds, and unity with the purpose of spreading the Good News to the young people of Royston.

These are good things to get involved with.

But how far do you go? Although Therfield Chapel fielded many of the workers for Champions, and the Doug Horley event which preceded it, it was officially organised by the Royston and District Churches Together. This organisation is part of Churches Together in England, which exists to promote unity amongst all the churches in this country. On the face of it, a good thing to do.

But just as in Paul's day there were people who preached a Gospel which was not the truth, so today there are churches and people today who stand for things which are not true. We have to be careful that, in the emotion of seeking and experiencing unity, we do not lose sight of the truth of what it is that brings unity in the first place. The Gospel is far too precious to compromise like that; for it is a matter of life and death, and there can be no unity between those two ends.

Paul had a harder task than us here. We can look back to his writings, and use them to develop a "doctrinal basis" that differentiates the true Gospel from heresies. Paul had to put these things into writing, and then to fight to get the truth accepted.

The Churches Together movement has a basis on which they come together, and that basis is (*show slide 19*):

CHURCHES TOGETHER IN ENGLAND unites in pilgrimage those churches in England which, acknowledging God's revelation in Christ, confess the Lord Jesus Christ as God and Saviour according to the Scriptures, and, in obedience to God's will and in the power of the Holy Spirit commit themselves:

** to seek a deepening of their communion with Christ and with one another in the Church, which is his body; and*

** to fulfil their mission to proclaim the Gospel by common witness and service in the world*

to the glory of the one God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

On the one hand, it is clearly a Trinitarian basis, and so cults such as the Jehovah's witnesses could not join. But on the other hand, it says nothing about what the Gospel actually is, nothing about who God is, or how we are saved. It is such a watered down basis that almost anyone could join, and nation-wide this is just what happens.

Now many of the churches in the movement are pretty similar in doctrine to Therfield. They might have some differences in practice, they might even take a different view on secondary issues like the mode and even timing of baptism; but we agree on the essentials of the Gospel. But that is not guaranteed by such a loose basis, and as many of you know a particular issue arises with the Roman Catholic church. They too can sign up to this basis, but the official teaching of that church has a very different view of salvation to ours. Centuries ago, the differences were so apparent that many people in this country died to preserve the truth of the Gospel from the falsehood of Roman Catholic teaching, on subjects as key as the means of salvation, which clearly in Scripture is by grace along through faith alone, but in Catholicism comes through obedience to and absolution from the priests; or of worship – which equally clearly is for God alone, but which is often directed at Mary, the “blessed mother of God”.

There is no doubt that Paul would be writing a letter like 2 Corinthians to us if we began to accept such teachings, because they go to the heart of the gospel, and destroy the Good News of the Gospel, which is that salvation is the free gift of God, not dependent on our works but on our simple faith. We cannot be united with people who promote those views, because there is nothing left to be united about.

Of course this does not mean that we do not associate with Catholics nor that we cannot have friends who believe these things. That would be as absurd as it was for the Corinthians to try to have nothing to do with people in society at large who failed to live up to God's standards of morality. But when it comes to presenting the way of salvation to people, we have to put clear water between our Gospel and theirs. To do any less is to fail to love those to whom we preach, and indeed to fail those who preach something different. How can we, in all integrity, pretend that a false Gospel is OK, when as a result people may be lulled into thinking they are saved when really they are not?

In such matters, we need to have great wisdom and care. We need to be motivated by love first of all for God, and then for his world.

There may well be things that we can stand shoulder to shoulder with Catholics or even Muslims on – issues like abortion, where it has to be said the Catholic church has taken a firm and unequivocal stand while most protestant churches have gone with the flow of opinion.

But as soon as the Gospel message is compromised, we have gone too far. In my opinion, that rules out joining Churches Together because it claims to exist not as a social club or talking shop, but to proclaim the Gospel to the world. So if we don't agree on what the Gospel is, then we cannot in all honesty join.

But it most certainly does *not* rule out meeting with other Christians from other churches – even dare I say it true believers in the church of Rome, for God's grace even reaches into that apostate church.

And where it is clear that the Gospel being presented is the Gospel we love and fight for, as it was last week at the Children's Club, then backing joint events like Champions is a Champion thing to do.