

2 CORINTHIANS 1:23-2:11  
HOW CHURCHES (SHOULD) BEHAVE!

What does the perfect Church look like? *Life and Work* has a new series of stories about growing Churches and it can be inspiring to read about the way in which God is blessing other churches, but the danger is that these Churches seem to be 'sorted' – they only tell you about the good bits, naturally; they won't tell you about the struggles and difficulties in Church life. We'd do the same; we would tell people of the good things of our church and how much we enjoy worship here and how good the prayer support is for one another and how friendly and caring people are, concerned for one another. Unless we're being very honest with someone we know really well, we will not tell them of the struggles we have, or the people that we find hard to get on with, or even that we've fallen out with in the past. Yet, that too is part of Church; there is no such thing as the perfect Church, this side of heaven; we are not perfect people and because we are not perfect, churches will never be perfect.

The Church in Corinth was not perfect; there had been a problem. It seems as if it was just one man who had created these problems and caused the Church in Corinth a whole lot of pain and because the church was pained, Paul was pained too. We're not sure what that problem was; in 1 Corinthians 5 we know that Paul talks about a Christian who had behaved badly, who had been immoral, "*A man has his father's wife*" (1 Corinthians 5:1) The man probably was in a sexual relationship with his step-mother and Paul advocates putting the man out of Church for a time and he is full of grief because of the pain this whole situation has caused. In today's reading we see the Church being pulled in two directions: they say "we don't want to weaken our godly moral standards on the one hand and yet on the other, we want to exercise a loving concern for people who are hurt and repentant". How do churches deal problems, with people and situations that are disruptive? How do churches deal with failure?

Our passage from 2 Corinthians is all about a Church wrestling with these questions and there are some hugely rich insights here. We see what made Paul tick as a church leader, what was in his heart. There are ways of behaving that churches should avoid like the plague here. There are qualities that we should embrace wholeheartedly, but are really hard to achieve. This matters because churches can tick all the boxes: we can believe the right things, we can teach the right things, we can make plans and strategies for future, we can have the best music in world, we can use all-singing and all-dancing technology, but... Imagine the choir singing a song: Florence is playing it in a certain way, but one choir member decides to sing it faster, another sings it in a different key, another musician plays a different tune altogether, and the rest of choir members sing different words. How would it sound? "In a similar way, if everyone in the church just decided to do things as they liked, things would end up being just as chaotic. Just as a choir sings best when they are following their choirmaster, the church works best when they are all following Christ. It is really quite simple!" (Lightlive)

Have you ever come across some of these in Church?

- *Bullying*: or as Paul calls it "*Lord it...*" (1:24) people who tell you that 'this is how it will be' and they make sure that everyone behaves in way they want; decisions in leadership meetings are made in the way that this person wants and everyone defers to this person because he (or she) will make their life a misery if they don't.
- *Power struggles*: times when someone else takes on bully or tries to introduce change and a power struggle develops – who's going to win and these power struggles can mark every decision, every aspect of Church life, people who want 'their way' regardless and when there are two groups who want their different

ways, wanting different things, vying for power and control of the church's life, the church is simply pulled apart.

- *Keeping grudges*: how do we deal with failure? Someone else's failures, I mean? Do we cast it up to them at every available opportunity? That's how some people behave; it's how people in churches can behave at times. Along with that...
- *Vindictiveness*: we take every available opportunity to put that person down; we remind them of their failure and remind them that you know their failures! You're better than they are anyway!

It need only be one person; it was one person in Corinth that had disrupted the peace and well-being of the Church and Paul had to help the Christians mend the situation. It is important that the situation is mended because right at the end he says: "*in order...*" (2:11) More Churches are destroyed and disrupted by people falling out than they are by wrong teaching. The devil loves to disrupt churches by people falling out; in the place of love and the spirit of oneness and fellowship there is bitterness and division. The whole point of this part of Paul's letter is to show the Christians that there are other qualities that they need to have and there are ways in which as Christians they need to behave in order to mend the situation that was threatening to disrupt them completely.

There are four qualities:

**1. Christians belong together.** This is simple, but more profoundly true than we recognize at times. Churches are more than just a collection of individuals who happen to meet here together for worship on Sunday, or who do other things together at other times. We belong together; we are made to care for one another. As human beings we are social animals; we are made to love and be loved; it is part of our being human. Christians are to take that a stage further and learn to love and care for one another strongly and in a committed way because that's what Jesus has done for us. This is a complicated piece but: "*if I...*" (2:2f) Their grief and Paul's grief are tied up together; their joy and Paul's joy are completely connected. If they are unhappy, Paul is unhappy; if they rejoice, Paul is full of joy. There is a connection there that is more than friendship; there is a family connection, a partnership, a shared love that means Paul's life and the church's life are connected. We are challenged elsewhere to rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep. We are connected to one another by bonds of love and Christians are meant to understand these bonds and feel with and for one another. Does what grieves your Christian brother or sister, grieve you?

**2. Love one another:** Paul had to deal with this painful issue and had to write a letter to Corinth about this issue; that letter seems to have disappeared, but: "*I wrote...*" (2:4) Paul isn't a bully; he's not telling them what they must do; he loves these people and wants the best for them and from them. Sometimes that's painful. The pastor sees people behaving wrongly; what does he do? Ignore it? Or try to correct it? Trying to correct it, the good pastor feels the pain of person to be corrected. Sometimes that leads to tears as the pastor's concerns for the best and highest interests of the people are born out of love for them. It is easy to tell people off; it is easy to make the most of people's faults and mistakes, it is easy to make people feel guilty! It is much harder to feel their pain and love them and care for them and seek their best. Try that! It is not just the pastor who loves like this; Christians are to love one another like this, caring for the best welfare of the other.

**3. Repentance:** "*Godly sorrow...*" (2 Corinthians 7:10) It seems that the person who had done wrong had realised and came with repentance, changed their ways, took the correction and set things right. It takes humility to see that. Two women lived next door to each other; one had offended the other's husband and for twenty-five

years, till one died, they never spoke to one another. I'm sure there were faults on both sides, but one would not even talk about the other. Pride was injured; pride stopped them from making up. There are times when our attitudes have been bad, our behaviour wrong and first step to setting all of that right is repentance. Repentance is two things: first of all, it is the realisation that we have made mistakes and got things wrong; then, secondly it is a change of behaviour, we do things differently, for the Christian becoming more like Christ. Make an apology to the person that we've wronged, and set things right; that may mean a new set of attitudes, Christian, Christ-like attitudes.

**4. Forgiveness.** Jesus was once asked how many times we should forgive people who do us wrong. He told a story about a king's servant who owed his master a lot of money, a lottery-winning amount of money. The king decided to be merciful; he forgave the servant, cancelled his debt and let him go. The same servant went outside and found a friend on the street who owed him a teensy-weensy amount in comparison, but he had his friend thrown in jail till he paid that tiny debt. The King was angry; he changed his mind, and threw the servant in jail. *"Shouldn't you..." (Matthew 18:33)* The forgiven man should have been forgiving! The person in Corinth has become the repentant man, has acknowledged his sin, has changed his ways; now says Paul *"Instead..." (2:7)* Restoration, reconciliation – begins with forgiveness; we should treat the person who has wronged us as if they had done nothing wrong, to love and comfort them, to support and stand alongside them as people who together enjoy the grace of God. We believe in the forgiveness of sins; we are people who pray that God will forgive us our faults and failings and mistakes; so believing that, we should learn to forgive those who wrong us.

"If you want to give an open door for the devil into your marriage, or into your relationship with your children or grandchildren, or into a congregation, be hesitant and slow to forgive, hold things against people, be embittered, touchy and testy, be a bit cold to somebody who did you wrong, but has apologised. Then you are opening the door wide open for the devil to come in and wreak havoc... If you want to drive the devil out, forgive, forget and ask God to give you the grace to love and go forward." (Kelly p.38)

Bullying? No! Power struggles? No! Keeping grudges? No! Vindictiveness? No! These ways of behaviour have no place in Christian Church, ever! Instead, we need to develop a sense of being connected so that what grieves you, grieves me and what grieves your Christian brother or sister grieves you. We need to develop a deep love and concern for one another. We need to develop a humble, repentant spirit in our hearts when we make mistakes, even to make an apology to the people that we hurt. We need to learn forgiveness, treating those who have wronged us as if they had done nothing wrong. This is what the Church should be; this is how you and I should behave; don't sit there and expect people to behave like this towards you; make up your mind that this is how you will behave towards others. 2 Corinthians is like a cautionary tale – this is what Church is like when just one person is out of step! People snipe at one another; say thoughtless things to one another and bear grudges – the devil is laughing all the way to the bank. We belong together; we are to love one another, repent, forgive – these are the Christ-like qualities to which we should aspire. This is how Churches should behave.