

The Church in which I grew up – St Stephens Anglican church at Normanhurst – was founded in 1920, a fair few years before I arrived there. It was originally an austere brick building, and the small congregation worshipped together in a conventional low church way.

In 1958, a new senior minister arrived, and he introduced a small brass cross on the communion table. This move divided the congregation, with many parishioners decrying the display of the unadorned cross: to them a cross wasn't a symbol of Christianity, rather, as local historian Keith Percival put it, they considered it "a sign of insidious popery"!

It seems odd today that there was ever a conflict over displaying a cross in a church. There were huge arguments within the congregation, some people sided with the minister, some with the tradition.

No resolution could be made locally and the dispute was escalated, the local bishop couldn't resolve the matter, and eventually the archbishop, Archbishop Mowll was called on to adjudicate. The archbishop resolved that there would be a one year cooling off period, with the cross remaining on the table, after which the parish council would vote to make a final decision.

Everyone simmered down. A sort of peace had been achieved. Sure enough, a year later, the minister had gone, and the dispute was forgotten. The parish council never made a final decision. But the brass cross remained on the table.

A few years later, when St Stephens built a new church building, it incorporated a timber cross on the front wall. Not an eyebrow was raised. And the construction of the new building also included the installation of a 15 metre tall steel cross outside the building facing Pennant Hills Road. Not a single objection was made.

"United we stand, divided we fall," is a common saying, and it's something that we probably all agree on... but people aren't good at living it out. We like having our own opinions, our own preferences, and we don't like to change them. We're not good at accepting other people might have opinions about things that our different to our own – and, boy, do we think that they should change them.

People in churches have lots of different opinions about all sorts of different things. Not just the display of crosses – but things like crosses and carpets and paint colours, candles, chairs, music, ministers' clothing, sermon length, baptism, communion, marriage, divorce, bible translations and so on. And on. And on.

As time goes by, the ways of doing things become entrenched, and sometimes even the reasons for the differences are lost. Newcomers are pressured to one side or the other – or, more likely, simply scared away.

Our reading from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians shows that the church in Corinth was experiencing similar issues. People within the church were quarrelling among themselves. Sides were taken. Harsh words were spoken. Some people were probably scared off. It was a church in crisis - a church divided.

The church in Corinth wrote to the apostle Paul for help. The church in Corinth had, after all, been founded by Paul during his second missionary journey in around AD 51 (Acts 18). The church had begun in the synagogue, and then moved to a mostly gentile base after Jewish opposition.

If anyone could help the people of the church solve their issues, they would have thought that it was Paul. The future of their church was at stake, and so they wrote to Paul. I think it's pretty likely that Paul would have received many letters from people from different factions within the church and holding a diverse set of views.

As we read through Paul's letters in the New Testament, we find that his aim was always to build up the church – both as what we would call today congregations, and as individuals. I'm pretty sure he wouldn't have had an interest in what colour carpet a church adopted, rather he would be interested in the people who would walk on that carpet.

And so it was that Paul wrote to the church that he'd founded in Corinth, "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." (1:10)

The issues dividing the church had to be resolved, and instead of focusing on the disagreements that they had, and picking a 'winning side', he instead called them to unity: "agree with one another... no divisions... perfectly united in mind and thought."

It's good stuff, isn't it? But I can imagine the early Corinthians reading that, and thinking something like, "Paul says the others have to agree with me."

If that was where Paul ended his letter, you might think that. But instead, Paul is just getting started – he's reminding the people of what ties them together, what the church is about, and who the church is about. He gets back to basics, and instead of focusing on what divides them and on what is threatening the church in Corinth, he reminds them of what makes them the church in the first place. He's rekindling their passion for Jesus. The appreciation of Jesus who died for them, who loved them, their fervour for sharing the good news of Jesus.

The basis faith and their church, Paul was saying, is so much more powerful than those things which were now dividing them. Keep that at the forefront of everything you do, he effectively says.

Sometimes we all should go back to the beginning. To why we are here as individuals, as a congregation, as a denomination, and as a church. We can so easily become sidetracked or preoccupied. So easily be completely focussed on being right – whether it's doing the right thing, or treating people the right way, or having the right theology.

Go back to the new commandment from John 13:34-35, "A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another." Jesus loved us so much that he laid down his life for us; we need to be prepared to lay down our lives for each other. How much of a lesser call on us is it to give way to others on our preferences?

As the Corinthians became Christians, they claimed Jesus as their saviour, just as when people become Christians today, we claim Jesus as our saviour. In this letter, Paul is calling the Corinthians – and us – to remember that. Remember who we are, and to whom we belong.

Of course, there will be times when there will be disagreements among members of the church. There will be times when people do not see eye to eye. From time to time there are issues that find people on opposite sides.

But when those differences arise, we have to continue to be people who follow Jesus – people prepared to lay down our lives for each other. People prepared to set aside differences. People prepared to let others' preferences prevail. People who love and respect each other through whatever our differences may be.

We are all created in the image of God, but we are all different. We have different gifts and callings and preferences, but we are all parts of the body of Christ. Paul says in chapter 12 of this letter that, "There are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit distributes them. There are different kinds of service, but the same Lord. There are different kinds of working, but in all of them and in everyone it is the same God at work. (12:4-6)

Diversity within the church is a good thing, something to be celebrated, and shouldn't be a cause of division.

Later in chapter 12, Paul compares the human body with the church, the body of Christ. Just as the human body has various parts, each performing different functions, so too do the individuals within the church. We don't all have the same gifts, and we shouldn't feel bad because someone else has different gifts. When we use our gifts together, united in our mission and purpose, we make a whole. The church would be a boring place if everyone was alike and thought the same way.

Paul was the founder of the church in Corinth, and he had wonderful gifts to share. But after around eighteen months, his call took him away from Corinth, and the next pastor brought different gifts to the church there.

There were some that liked the new guy, as we heard in our reading, they declared, "I follow Apollos", while others preferred the original, and declared "I follow Paul". Still others looked to the wider church, "I follow Cephas" they said. The last one had it right, though, when they declared "I follow Christ".

Cephas is, of course, the apostle Peter, and it is interesting that Peter is mentioned since there is no record that he ever visited Corinth – but clearly he was known to the church there.

It would have been easy for Paul to say, "Stick with me" or "I am the right one", but he didn't. In the face of these divisions within the church, people holding up these various leaders to follow, he says there's no place for that.

The ministry and mission of the church don't come from its leader or its pastor, they come from Jesus. The situation in the Corinthian church was putting its future – and its people at risk.

In the face of this division, Paul asks three questions, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (1:13) The obvious answer to those questions is of course "No", but in asking them, Paul seeks to show the absurdity of what was taking place.

But after that, Paul gives us an aside: "I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name." (1:14-15) I'm sure, that if you were baptised by the Apostle Paul, that would be something that you might drop in conversation from time to time. People do mention where and by whom they were baptised, if they were a significant or important places or people. They are interesting things to know – but one baptism isn't better than another, and being baptised by an apostle or an archdeacon or a bishop doesn't make you a better Christian than others.

Paul recognises the problem that may arise. And then we have this wonderful verse that I think really shows Paul's humanity when he remembers, "(Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) (1:16).

The purpose of Paul's mission as he shares here wasn't to baptise, it was to preach the gospel. It was to share the good news of Jesus who lived and died and rose again for us. The news of, as we heard last week, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

That was the entirety of Paul's mission. That's why he went on those journeys – to share the gospel. Many other things happened, but that was always his motivation.

He tells us, "For Christ 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." The power of the gospel to lead people to Jesus, isn't in worldly wisdom or clever arguments or melodious or booming speaking voices or even brilliant PowerPoint slides... because those things can easily become a distraction.

The last verse in the reading from 1 Corinthians today is my favourite verse in all of scripture: "For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." It tells us what the most important thing is – the message of the cross – but also highlights how easily it can be swept aside – it can easily just become foolishness, if you don't know its truth.

For those people in 1950's Normanhurst, the display of the cross in worship was something that was divisive. Clearly, it was a very, very important issue for the people in that time and place – even if we today might roll our eyes at their concern. But think about the things that divide the church today... maybe not us here at St Ives Uniting, but the Uniting Church generally, and the wider church across the world.

As part of the Ku-ring-gai Interchurch Fellowship we have good relations with other denominations who have different views and preferences and who worship differently than we do. But it is in the most important things – the life and death and resurrection of Jesus, the message of the cross, the gospel or the good news – that binds us together, not just as organisations that work together – but as the body of Christ.

We know that there are people across the world today who need to know the power of the cross in their lives – who need to know Jesus who loved them so much that he laid down his life for them.

May we, and our sister and brother Christians, whoever and wherever they may be, stand united in our mission to share the good news, not boasting in our position or heritage or eloquence, but celebrating and using the gifts of each person who is called to be part of Christ's body.

To the glory of God

Amen