

Who Do You Belong To?

2 – High Stakes !

Last time, we looked at our own personal relationship with God as a result of the fact that we have been ‘bought with a price’, along with how that works out in some of our close personal relationships with other people.

Now we need to explore some ‘high stakes’ areas that follow on as we extend relationships beyond ourselves and our immediate close family circle.

The first follows on from our personal relationships. The second is a high priority area where the purposes of God are bound up with our ‘belonging’.

In each case, the stakes are high and the dangers are real.

“Is any belonging ‘off limits’ for a Christian?”

In other words, are there any close ‘belonging’ relationships that won’t fit with the fact that we belong to the Lord Jesus Christ?

Well, there’s one fairly obvious one, summed up in a well-known verse, and we probably remember the Authorised (King James) version best: *“Do not be bound together with unbelievers; for what partnership have righteousness and lawlessness, or what fellowship has light with darkness?”*¹ The old translation is ‘unequally yoked’, which is the literal meaning of the Greek word, and the picture is graphic: trying to get two different types of animal harnessed side by side to pull a cart or a plough!² Out of balance, maybe pulling in different directions, with two completely different approaches. An obvious non-starter!

But where do we draw the line? And does that apply retrospectively? In other words, when we first come to trust in the Lord Jesus Christ, if we are already in a close relationship or partnership with someone who is not a believer, do we need to break it off? The closest relationship is marriage, and Paul is very clear that a believer should not split from their unbelieving spouse if their partner is willing to stay with them in the marriage (**1 Corinthians 7:12-16**). In fact, a more accurate translation of ‘do not be bound together with unbelievers’ would be to say ‘do not become bound together with unbelievers’. So it seems that the same principle may apply: not necessarily pulling out of existing close relationships with non-Christians, but avoiding getting involved in fresh ones. But these are guidelines, not rules, and there may well be circumstances in which we do need to pull out of close partnerships that are potentially, or actually, damaging.

This does NOT mean that we have nothing at all to do with non-believers! Some ‘Christian’ sects have gone that far, and some Jewish ones too. We only have to look at the reaction of the Pharisees to Jesus mixing with ‘tax collectors and sinners’ to see that very clearly. And also, of course, to see that Jesus did not agree with them!³ Paul makes it very clear in **1 Corinthians 5:9-11** that associating [literally, ‘being mixed up together’] with non-believers with all sorts of undesirable lifestyles is unavoidable. It’s those close partnerships which can be dangerous, in which we begin to ‘belong’ to each other.

“What about other Christians? Do I belong to them? Do they belong to me?”

In a word, YES ! Both! But let’s look at a little more detail . . .

We belong together because we are one body and are individually members of that body (**Romans 12:5**). What body is that? The body of Christ, the Church. That doesn’t mean any one organised

¹ Read the whole passage: **2 Corinthians 6:14-18**

² There was even an Old Testament commandment against this, in **Deuteronomy 22:10** !

³ **Mark 2:16, Luke 5:30, 15:2.**

group that calls itself a church, but **all** those – and **only** those – who belong to the Lord Jesus Christ. We saw last time that each one of us who is a disciple of Jesus has been **bought with a price** and we are not our own. We belong to him and **we belong to each other because we belong to him** and our individual lives have been joined to his. In a very real way, we have a shared life source. Just like a human body needs all its parts to be working properly in order to enjoy healthy life, so it is with the body of Christ.

How did we become members of that body? Not by joining an organisation, not by agreeing to a 'statement of faith', not by signing anything, not by going through any ceremony, not even by believer's baptism. No, we became members of the body of Christ by being given new life, by being re-born by the Holy Spirit of God: *"as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, to those who believe in His name, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God."*¹ And it is God himself who has joined us to the Lord Jesus, as Paul says so succinctly in **1 Corinthians 1:30**: *"by his doing you are in Christ Jesus"*.

It's tempting for us to try to work out and define who is **in** and who is **out**, but there is only One who really knows: *"the firm foundation of God stands, having this seal, 'The Lord knows those who are His,' and, 'Everyone who names the name of the Lord is to abstain from wickedness.'"*² Let us join with those who 'name the name of the Lord' and leave to him the judging of who is really his!²

Paul has a lot to say about the Church in all his letters, but in **Ephesians 4:15-16**, as he is writing about our need to grow up and mature in Christ, he writes these amazing words: *"... we are to grow up in all things into Him who is the head, Christ, from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love."* So, clearly, each individual part needs **both** to be fitted together with all the other parts **and** to be working properly, so that it causes the growth of the 'body' (the Church). And, as he so graphically writes in **1 Corinthians 12:14-26**, we all need each other. No part of the body can say that it doesn't need all the other parts, nor that it is somehow not part of the body itself.

Let's not forget to whom Paul wrote that letter! It was to the believers in Corinth, who had quite a few problems in their fellowship, not least the fact that they had started dividing into special 'loyalty groups'. It's the first problem he addresses, from **1 Corinthians 1:10** onwards and again in the whole of **ch.3**, and he comes back to it in **ch.12** as he writes about the proper functioning of the Church as the Body of Christ.

Back in **1:10-13** and **3:4-9, 21-23**, he refers to some believers there who had been saying "I belong to Paul", "I belong to Apollos" or "I belong to Cephas (Peter)". Was Paul flattered by the 'loyalty group' who said that they followed him? Very definitely NOT! Surprisingly, perhaps, he was also not impressed by another group who said "I belong to Christ", and we can only guess that probably it was because they had set themselves up as **another** separate group who said "We are the only really spiritual ones, WE belong to Christ – not like the rest of you who are following men!"

Paul, Apollos³ and Peter were all genuine and valuable preachers and teachers, each one bringing their own important contribution to the growth of the whole Church, and specifically to the church there in Corinth. Instead of taking all that the Holy Spirit was giving them through each of these different individuals, at least some of the Corinthian believers made the big mistake of choosing to 'follow' just one of them, and then formed their own groups and separated from the others. Were any of those three men 100% complete in what they taught? Probably not. Had they all seen the same truths as clearly as each other? Definitely not! (Just compare Paul's letters, Peter's letters and the letter to the Hebrews and you will see some significant differences in emphasis, but they are consistent with each other and all valuable!)

¹ **John 1:12-13**. See also Jesus' conversation with Nicodemus, **John 3:1-21**.

² **2 Timothy 2:19**

³ Apollos is probably less well-known to most of us. Catch up on his history in **Acts 18:24-28**. Some scholars believe that he **may** have written the book of Hebrews. Paul definitely appreciated him! See **1 Corinthians 16:12** & **Titus 3:13**.

Can we see the close parallels with the situation that we seem to accept as ‘normal’ in our own situations? Different groups with different names, often following specific teachers or doctrines, and finding all sorts of ‘good’ reasons why we couldn’t possibly join with those other people with different loyalties but who also ‘name the name of the Lord’? I fear that Paul’s diagnosis would be the same for us as it was for the Corinthians: Not spiritual; infants not adults; ‘fleshly’. (**1 Corinthians 3:1-6**) Should we be surprised at our lack of spiritual progress?

“No,” Paul says, “you have got it the wrong way round. You don’t belong to me or to Peter or to Apollos – all three of us belong to you! Come to that, all things are yours, you belong to Christ and he belongs to God the Father!” (**1 Corinthians 3:21-23**)

This would all be important enough if we were simply thinking about the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ in our present-day situations, the effectiveness of our communication of the Good News to those around us, and the way in which we are enabled to grow and develop as we function properly together in the Body of Christ. That is vitally important, but there is a whole extra dimension that we can all too easily miss – God’s eternal purpose and where we fit into it.

Last time, we looked briefly at **Revelation 5:1-10**, and just caught that tantalising last statement in **v.10** “*You have made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth.*” These words are written about those who have been purchased with the blood of Jesus out of every ‘tribe and tongue and people and nation’. That’s us! One of the important reasons we were purchased was to bring us into the kingdom of God, “*For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to the kingdom of His beloved Son*” (**Colossians 1:13**). This is both a present and a future kingdom, and in neither case is it a passive kingdom, but one in which we have responsibilities. We don’t know the details of the future kingdom, only that we shall share in the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ when he returns. The parable he told about the nobleman and his slaves gives us some clues! ¹

So, this “*growth of the body for the building up of itself in love*” that Paul writes about in **Ephesians 4** is not only about making the Church more effective here and now. It is also about preparing and training us together for our responsibilities in the coming kingdom and, as we have already seen, that growth and development requires the proper working of each individual part in the **building up of the whole body**. If (like the Corinthians did) we choose to separate ourselves from other members of the Body of Christ, how can that process work properly to cause the growth of the body?

We have an Enemy who wants to frustrate God’s plans and purposes, both for the Church here and now and also for its future role in the reign of the Lord Jesus Christ on this earth. ² Obviously, from his point of view, he will try to do anything he can to limit the effective growth of the Body of Christ. Perhaps we have not realised how vital it is that we begin to function more and more on the basis of being members of that Body, and not on the basis of belonging to the loyalty groups and labels that we have grown used to?

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Are we ready to start discovering this glorious freedom? To begin to recognise that the labels we have adopted are meaningless? To find that we are already ‘members of one another’ simply on the basis of the fact that we are joined to the Lord Jesus Christ? ³ We need to take to heart Paul’s clear instructions about accepting each other even if we do not necessarily share exactly the same convictions – **Romans 14** is not just about food offered to idols!

Dave Taylor May 2024

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¹ **Luke 19:11-27**. See also **Daniel 7:13-14,18,22,27**. Here’s a link to a talk on the parable (sorry, no printed notes): <https://www.justonecandle.uk/Recordings/ReadyForTheKingdom.mp3>

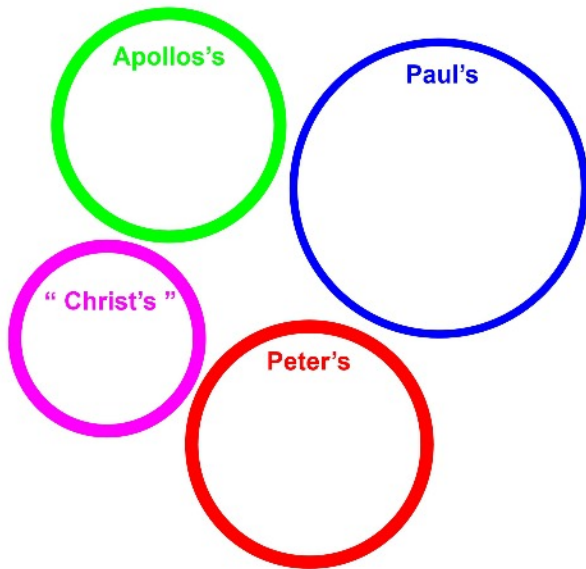
² **Ephesians 6:12**

³ **Romans 12:4-5, 1 Corinthians 12:22-27, Ephesians 4:25**

4 simple diagrams to illustrate the Church in Corinth

The Church in Corinth

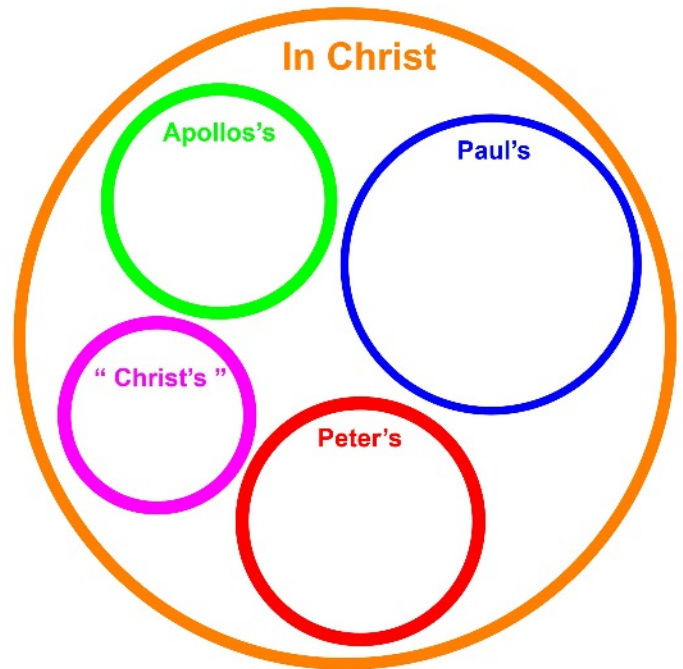
1. How they saw themselves



'Belonging' to separate loyalty groups,
not to each other

The Church in Corinth

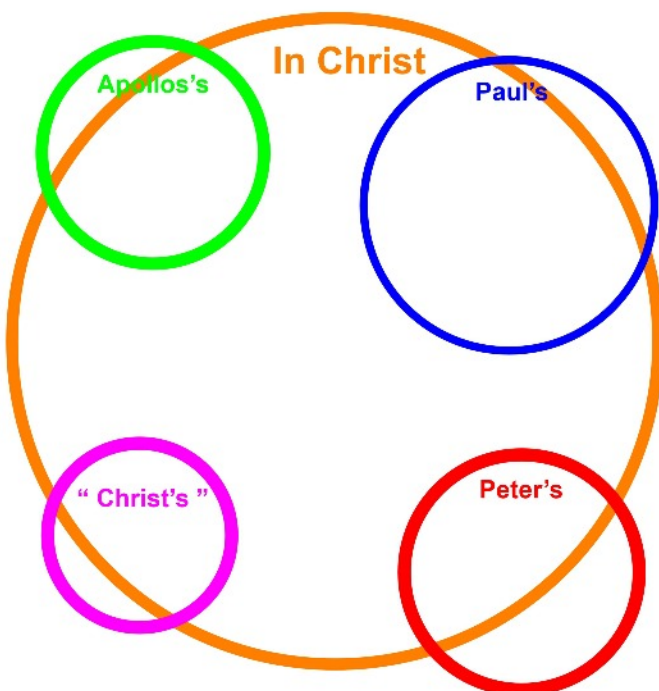
2. "Is Christ divided?" NO!!



Paul draws a line around the separate groups:
"God has placed you in Christ!"

The Church in Corinth

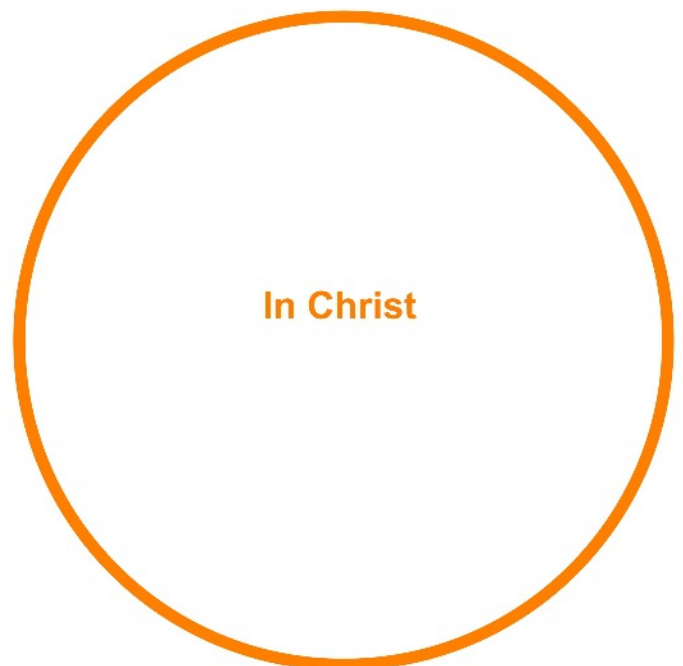
3. What often happens



Possible to belong to a loyalty group
without belonging to the Lord Jesus Christ

The Church in Corinth

4. The real situation



In reality, from God's viewpoint,
the separate loyalty groups don't exist.
Believers are already one in Christ.