

A Church in Court

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 21st of November 1999. The preacher is Brad Lovegrove.

His sermon is entitled A Church in Court and is from 1 Corinthians chapter 6 verses 1 to 20. Well, we're looking tonight at 1 Corinthians chapter 6 and you may find it easier to follow if you do have that open in front of you in the church Bibles.

It is quite a difficult passage and an intricate argument so that might help if you have that there in front of you. I don't know if you've ever been in a situation where you've overheard a phone conversation and you've only heard half the story.

You're hearing one side of the discussion only and you're trying to guess what's going on and to make sense of it. Well, it's a bit like that here with Paul's letter to the Corinthians because he seems to be answering a letter of theirs at some points.

And it's hard sometimes to work out from the answer exactly what the question was. And sometimes it's hard to know whether he's actually repeating something they've said or whether he's making a statement himself.

[1 : 1 5] So it's an interesting sort of passage to look at and to try and understand what's going on from both sides, only having the one side of the conversation to work with.

The first part of the chapter is about Christians going to court against each other. And this is a situation that in the church we're not unfamiliar with, unfortunately. You may recall a few years ago we had some difficulties in a church at Vermont here in the diocese.

And at one stage it looked like the minister there who was removed from that church might have taken the archbishop to court and we might have seen Green Tree versus Rainer in the courts.

Others may remember that when women's ordination first went through, because it hadn't been approved by the National Synod, one diocese in Sydney took that matter to court and sought to challenge it in the courts.

And that situation may in fact be reversed because Sydney itself has recently passed a motion about lay presidency at the Lord's Supper. And it will be interesting to see if that actually gets challenged in the courts as well.

[2 : 1 9] Paul's saying here to the Corinthians who had taken each other to court, this is Christians here together going to court against each other, he says this is not ideal, this is not a good thing.

And he says that part of the problem here in Corinthians is that they were used to going to court. The Greeks were very litigious people. They were used to sort of taking each other to court, a bit like the Americans really when you look at some of the TV shows where they're suing each other over almost ridiculous little things.

The Greeks were like that as well. And Paul says they've carried over these non-Christian, these worldly habits from before they were brought to faith. Let me read to you about the Corinthians and the Greek attitude to courts.

The Greeks were naturally and characteristically litigious people. The law courts were in fact one of their chief amusements and entertainments. In a Greek city, every man was more or less a lawyer and spent a very great part of his time either deciding or listening to law cases.

The Greeks were in fact famous or notorious for their love of going to law against each other. Not unnaturally certain of the Greeks had brought their litigious tendencies into the Christian church and Paul was shocked at their behaviour.

[3 : 29] So here's the situation with the Corinthians challenging each other in court. Paul challenges them about this though. He takes them up on this attitude and he says, look, it's your worldly habits from before you were brought to faith that are leading to this.

It's your insistence on your own rights and your freedom to insist on your rights that's leading to this. It's your selfish desires and your greed that's causing this action.

He just finished writing to them in the chapter that we looked at last week in chapter 5 and he said to them, don't judge people outside the church. Instead, judge those inside the church who are part of the church.

And he was referring particularly to a case of incest amongst the Corinthian Christians and saying they should have judged that and thrown that person out of the church. He now goes on to talk about another case where they've misjudged or failed to judge and that's this case of Christians taking each other to court over a case of fraud.

So he's actually running on the theme of judgment and saying, look, you failed to judge properly in both these cases and we're picking up the second one here, a case of fraud. What he says to them basically is, don't wash your dirty linen in public.

[4 : 40] This is not a helpful thing, taking each other to court. Keep the affairs of the church inside the church and it's never right for Christians to end up in court against each other because that in itself is a failure from the start for that to happen.

Not only that, but he challenges them because the matters that they were seeking to sue each other over were trivial. They were minor matters. If you like, they were trivial pursuits, these lawsuits.

And he's saying, look, wouldn't it be better just to put up with these things that have gone wrong instead of taking each other to court? After all, he says, don't you realise that you yourselves are going to judge the world and you're going to judge the fallen angels in the future kingdom of God?

That's in verses 2 and 3. Don't you realise what's going to happen? You actually are going to be judges yourselves of huge important matters like the fallen angels and of the world in the coming kingdom.

Why do you actually take each other to court about little matters like this? The Corinthians claim to be very wise, but Paul turns that argument round and he says to them in verse 5, you claim to be wise, yet isn't there one amongst you who's capable to judge some of these trivial cases that you have amongst each other?

[6 : 01] You claim to be wise, but it seems there's no one there that can actually act as a judge between you. And in fact, by going to the secular courts, to the courts of the society around them, what was happening was quite ironic because Paul points out that because they're going to judge the world, they actually would be judging these judges themselves one day.

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying, why go to a court in front of a secular judge when you yourselves one day will be judging people like that in the coming kingdom of God?

Basically, he says, you should be ashamed of yourselves. This is not on. This is not right. How can you care so much about trivial things? Firstly, and then secondly, how can you take these matters to those outside the church who have no authority and no standing with the church?

To end up in court is to be defeated already, whatever the result, whether you win or lose. It's to be defeated already because you're breaking fellowship and it's also a bad example to the non-Christians around you, a bad example of what the faith is about.

He actually addresses the two people who were involved in this court case in verse 7 he says to the one that has been wronged, who's been taken in a situation of fraud, he says, why don't you rather put up with being wronged?

[7 : 24] Why not rather put up with being cheated than to take such a matter to a court? And he says to the other person, the person who's committed the fraud, you yourself are a cheat and you've done wrong and you do this to your brothers inside the church in verse 8.

You yourselves cheat and do wrong even to those within the church who are your brothers in Christ. And he goes on to say, don't you realise that the wicked won't inherit the kingdom of God?

What he's saying here is that by cheating and defrauding in this case, this person was putting at risk their future inheritance in the kingdom of God.

After all, God is a righteous judge and someone who's unrighteous, who acts in an unrighteous way, is excluding themselves from the presence of a righteous God.

They're taking a risk of putting themselves outside the kingdom, outside of heaven. Instead, the church ought to reflect the kingdom's values, God's values.

[8 : 26] And church discipline, Paul says here, needs to be based on the future judgment that's coming, the last judgment. And that is a judgment that these believers will be taking part in.

Paul then goes on to put together a long list of wrong things, wrong actions that people can do. And he's got a similar list that we looked at last week in chapter 5, but here he adds a couple of new examples.

There's four new examples. Three of them are sins of sexuality, which he says are sins against yourself. And the fourth one is a sin against other people, which is the sin of being a thief or defrauding others, which is the particular case he's looking at here in the beginning of chapter 6.

The sins are adultery, which we're going to look at a bit later on because Paul goes into a bit more detail in verse 12. Homosexuality or male prostitution, which is basically both sides of the homosexual relationship, and also being a thief.

What Paul says in these situations is he says, in terms of the homosexuality, he says it's very much a reality in the world around you, but it's not something that ought to be part of the kingdom.

[9 : 34] The world the Corinthians lived in, Greek and Roman society, actually looked on relationships between older and younger men in a homosexual way as being something of value, something important.

In many ways, they're not that different to our society today. It was commonly accepted of practice. Socrates, for example, who's a Greek philosopher, had a young homosexual boyfriend.

Plato wrote a book about love, which is considered one of the classics of literature. It's actually about homosexual love. Fourteen out of the first 15 Roman emperors had young lovers of the same sex, and in fact Nero married a young boy called Sporus, who he had castrated, and then he had a wedding ceremony, and he married him.

And Nero is actually the emperor at the time that Paul's writing this. So you can see it was common practice in the Roman and Greek world, but not amongst the Jews, and certainly not amongst the Christians.

So Paul's writing against this here, and saying don't be conformed, or don't fit in with the way the world around you lives. In regard to being a thief, or defrauding, which is the particular situation that's gone to court here, this was a real issue in the ancient world, because you didn't have windows, proper windows, or proper locks on your doors.

[10 : 52] So you can imagine with no home security how hard it was to find anything where you left it, unless you nailed it down. And this is a real situation here, a real issue here that the ancient world was concerned about.

In fact, their biggest problem was because they had public baths and gymnasiums, and they usually bathed, of course, naked, but they also tended to do their workouts and their fitness regimes in the nude.

And the real problem was that they'd get their clothes knocked off while they were off doing this. You can imagine them going off to the gym and putting their mobile phone and the keys and everything in the locker and coming back and it's all been knocked off. So it was a real problem in the ancient world.

And so thievery was actually fairly severely punished. And there was more strict punishments for that than anything else because it was such a problem. Well, Paul says, think about what's going on here.

Think about these sins you're involved in. You're not only risking your future inheritance in the kingdom, but you're also forgetting the fact that you've been redeemed in the past. You're forgetting what it means to be a Christian.

[11 : 49] He calls them back and he says, but remember, this is what some of you were like yourselves. But you were washed. You were sanctified.

You were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and the spirit of our God, he says in verse 11. This list of sins he talks about, he says, this is what some of you were yourselves.

These exact sins he's mentioned, he says, were committed by some of the Corinthians. But it's not the end of the story because they were converted to be Christians.

They came to faith. And they were cleaned and they were becoming holy through the Holy Spirit. They've been forgiven through Christ's death for them. He's saying, don't live like the world anymore.

Remember what's happened in your life. You've come to faith. You've made a clean break with the past. You're living a changed life now. You're living under God's grace.

[12 : 48] You're no longer living as part of that moral cesspit around you that is the Corinthian society that you're living in. You're no longer part of that. Come apart from that. There may even be an allusion here to their baptism because it talks about being washed and it also talks about being in the name of Jesus and the spirit and God, which is a sort of a Trinitarian formula which we're instructed by Jesus to baptise people in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

So there may even be a bit of a reference to their own baptism there once they've been converted and come to faith. Paul's going back over here the basic teaching that he'd given them when he visited them when he was part of this church, when he established it.

The same teaching, the same core truths that he taught to all his churches and he's having to go back over it, go back over the basics with them because they're failing in such a dramatic way to live like Christians.

He's got to go back over the risk they're making to their future in the kingdom and he's got to go back over their past that they've forgotten when they came to faith. Well, having dealt with that whole area with going to law against each other, going to court against each other, Paul goes back to talk about sexual sins.

Now, we've had that in the chapter last week. Chapter 5 was all about incest. This chapter tonight is mostly about adultery. And next week we go on to sex in marriage, sex after marriage.

[14 : 10] So this is a bit sort of sex before marriage tonight and sex after marriage comes next week if you want to come back for more. It's pretty racy stuff, really. I guess some of you didn't know the Bible's a bit like this, but it doesn't duck any questions in the Bible.

It faces them squarely. So Paul goes back to dealing with a case of immorality. And first of all, he deals with the principle. The Corinthians in verse 12, it sounds like Paul's quoting them and perhaps they were even misquoting Paul himself.

They're saying, everything's permitted for me. But Paul says, but no, not everything's beneficial. Once again, everything's permitted for me. But Paul says, no, but I won't be mastered by anything.

He's challenging their attitudes about freedom. Basically, the Corinthians are saying, if it feels good, do it. Doesn't that sound like a sort of modern attitude to life? If it feels good, do it.

And they may, as I said, be misquoting Paul here. But what he says to them is, you've misunderstood. You're becoming slaves to that freedom I talked about. And you're not really free like you think in the way you're behaving.

[15 : 12] Because when Paul said it, when Paul said, you're free to do anything, he would have put on one proviso. He would have said, you're free in Christ. You're free to do anything as long as it's in Christ.

In other words, you're free to do anything that shows love to God and love to other people. That would have been the proviso that Paul put on that. And the Corinthians may have forgotten that and they're misunderstanding Paul or misquoting him.

Another problem here is the Corinthian attitude to life and to spiritual life and to the body, the physical life. You see, the Greeks believed that your body was actually like a tomb or like a corpse and your spirit was trapped inside it.

And that led to an attitude where they actually thought the body didn't matter. And you could do anything in your body, you could please your body, you could sin, do anything you liked and it wouldn't affect your spirit because your spirit was simply trapped in the body and it was your spirit that went on to be saved, that was eternal.

Now as we'll find out in a little while, that's actually not what the Bible says at all about the way we're made up. But that's what the Greeks believed. Paul challenges this and he says, no, that's not right.

[16 : 23] Our bodies do matter and we'll go on to find out about that in a little while. But first of all, he says, everything is permitted to me but first of all, we need to apply some tests to our freedom.

The first thing, is it beneficial? Will it help other people? Is it something positive? Is it something that's beneficial to our witness to others, to our work, to our walk in the world as Christians?

Not everything is beneficial, says Paul. We need to test it and see if what we're choosing to do or thinking about doing is actually helpful and positive. The second test on our actions, on our freedom, Paul says, will it enslave me or will it addict me?

Will I become addicted to this behaviour? Will it overpower me? He's virtually saying in the verse, I have power to do anything I want but I don't want anything to overpower me.

I don't want anything to master me. I don't want to become a slave to any behaviour. He's challenging the Corinthians again about their demand to have their rights and to be free.

[17 : 29] No, he says, freedom's good but you're actually freed for a particular purpose. You're freed to be a slave to Christ. A slave to Christ. And it talks about, or someone's quoted that being a slave to Christ is to serve one in whose service is perfect freedom.

Where you can find perfect freedom in obeying Christ. But still Paul says here, you're not totally free. You're freed from your past life and you're freed from all sorts of things but you're freed to be a slave to Christ.

To honour him and to serve him. They give an example and once again it seems like Paul's quoting them here. Food is for the stomach and the stomach is for food. But God will destroy them both Paul says here.

Now what he's probably getting at is an attitude amongst the Corinthians that sex was just like eating. It was just another bodily function. Food, you eat it, it passes through your body and it doesn't affect you permanently.

And I think the Corinthians had this same attitude to sex. Because their spirit was the only thing that went on and it was trapped inside their bodies therefore sexual behaviour wouldn't affect them.

[18 : 35] and they could do whatever they liked. But Paul disagrees very strongly with them. He actually says sexual behaviour affects the whole person. Yes, the belly is for food and food's for the belly and eventually they'll both be destroyed.

They're both perishable in the most extreme sense of that word. They'll both be destroyed. But he goes on to say that the body is different when it comes to sexual relationships. The body is for the Lord and the Lord is for the body.

But the body is eternal because it will be resurrected. It will be raised up again. Therefore what you do now in your body does matter because your body is eternal. It lives forever with God.

Now this is a very high view of the body that we get from the Bible. The Bible actually says as far as our bodies are concerned first of all they were created good. God created everything and he looked down and he said it is good.

He created Adam and Eve and he looked at them and he said they are good. Secondly, the body is important in the Bible because Jesus himself, the Son of God, came in a human body as Jesus of Nazareth.

[19 : 45] He came in bodily form. And thirdly, the Bible teaches that the body is important because Christ's body was raised again from the dead and so will our bodies be, says Paul in this passage.

They'll be raised again to be eternal in heaven with God. Our bodies are instruments for evil or for good and they're eternal because they'll be raised again.

Well, Paul goes on to spell this out in a bit more detail in verse 13, the second part of verse 13. He gives five reasons why the body is important. The first one is because the body is for the Lord.

We belong to God. We're to serve Christ. We're to honour and glorify God in our bodies, to do good, to serve him. In fact, as Paul says elsewhere, to be living sacrifices to God.

Secondly, the body is important because as we've just mentioned, the body's destiny is to be raised again and to be glorified and made perfect and to exist eternally in heaven.

[20 : 49] Thirdly, the body is important because the body's head is Jesus himself. He's the head of the body and we're limbs or members of that body. Paul's saying here that we're spiritually united to Christ.

He's the head of the body and we're the parts, we're the limbs. And that makes our bodies incredibly important because we're caught up and united with God.

But there's a particular problem that Paul now reveals he's writing against. He actually says, shall I then take the members of Christ's body and unite them with a prostitute? Never.

Paul's actually here addressing a situation where the Corinthians were practicing using prostitutes and Paul sees a basic problem with this because what is done in the body does matter and is of eternal significance.

And he says there's a real problem here because firstly, we're united to Christ as Christians but also, in the act of sexual union, the two become one flesh and for someone to visit a prostitute is to become one with a prostitute through that act of sexual union, that sexual intimacy.

[22 : 00] And that gives a huge problem. How can you be both united to Christ and united to a prostitute? Those bodily sins do affect your spirit. How can you have one flesh, a physical union with a prostitute and at the same time have one spirit, a spiritual union with God?

And he talks about it in very strong terms because the word he uses is actually literally to be glued together. He says we're glued together with Christ in a spiritual union and someone that visits a prostitute is glued together with her in that physical union.

To marry a non-Christian or to have sex with a prostitute, Paul suggests, is to take Christ and to join him to that other person, to join them to Christ.

And that can't be, says Paul, because the two are mutually exclusive. You can't be united to God spiritually and united to a prostitute physically as well. He goes on in verse 18 to talk about sexual immorality and he says, flee from sexual immorality.

All other sins a man commits are outside his body but he who sins sexually sins against his own body. What he's saying here is that adultery, sex outside marriage, before, during, is wrong because of that union that comes through that physical relationship.

[23 : 27] So adultery, premarital sex, they're both wrong because they take a oneness there, the one flesh, and they have a union that doesn't have real spiritual oneness, doesn't have true oneness between the two people involved.

It's like having physical communion without an appropriate level of commitment to that person. Paul says, no, don't be involved in immoral sexual behaviour.

In fact, he says, flee temptation and perhaps the best example of that, the best image, is that of Joseph in the Old Testament who, when he was serving in Potiphar's household, Potiphar's wife came on to him and tried to tempt him to have sex with her, to have adultery with her and Joseph was so keen to honour God and to be faithful sexually to God, to remain a virgin, to be pure, that he actually fled leaving his clothes behind.

She had a hold of his gear and he took off and left it behind and fled naked rather than be involved in adultery. So there's an example there from the Bible of what Paul might be referring to. Flee temptation like Joseph did when he was a virgin.

As a young man, he fled and left his clothes behind. Paul talks about sinning against your own body and it's not exactly clear what he means just reading that but some of the commentators actually are suggesting that what is being said here is that it's not so much a sin against yourself that's being talked about but it's a sin against your salvation, a sin against your body as saved by Christ.

[24 : 59] And what it's saying is don't be overpowered or mastered by a prostitute because the Lord is your rightful master. He's the one that you ought to serve and allow to have mastery over you.

So it's sinning against your own body because your body is saved and is eternal in Christ. Your body is raised up like Christ was or it will be raised up like Christ was. Well the fourth one, Paul says the body is important because God's Holy Spirit dwells in us.

We're the temple of the Holy Spirit Paul says. God's own spirit is part of our lives. I actually think there's two profound truths in Christian belief that I always wonder at.

They're two of my favourite beliefs to think about and to ponder on and to wonder and I really look forward to finding out more about how it happens and how it works when I get to heaven because they're profound truths that you really can't understand.

The first one is that on the right hand of God in heaven sits a human form. The son of God who became Jesus of Nazareth and who was raised up from death and now sits at God's right hand.

[26 : 06] Imagine that. There's a human being now eternal sitting at God's right hand. Jesus of Nazareth the son of God incarnate. The other one is this one here.

It's just as profound a fact that the Bible tells us that as Christians God's Holy Spirit lives in us. Isn't that amazing to think about? The Holy Spirit part of the Trinity the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit the Holy Spirit lives inside each Christian.

God in us God with us. Incredibly profound truths to understand. Paul describes it this way here that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit God's Spirit lives in you.

There's also perhaps a reference to this sexual behaviour here this prostitution it's maybe implying a situation where in fact the prostitutes that were being referred to were cult prostitutes involved in the worship of Aphrodite the goddess of love who was the goddess in Athens and in Corinth and for anyone that's watched Zena or Hercules on TV they know Aphrodite she's the spunky looking one she's the goddess of love and it's suggested here that maybe it wasn't just adultery with a prostitute that was being referred to here but it was in fact idolatry because to be involved with these particular prostitutes meant in a sense honouring an idol something that wasn't related to the true God.

Well the last point that Paul makes about the body he talks about the body's price he says the body is important because the body has been bought at a price on the cross Jesus ransomed our bodies from slavery to our sinfulness and to our selfish and to our selfish natures Christ paid the price to free us as slaves he bought us off the slave master and Paul says now that you're free through Christ's ransom don't abuse your freedom you're not free you're not free to do absolutely anything you've been bought off that slave owner but you're now a slave to Christ instead and this means to honour God to glorify God to do good to serve God and to serve others to flee temptation to be holy to be living sacrifices honouring God is the positive side fleeing temptation is the negative side Paul's saying the same thing Christ has bought you therefore serve Christ glorify Christ he's bought you don't go and buy a prostitute services and through that serve an idol and give glory to an idol

[28 : 45] Christ has bought you honour him and serve him well to sum up Paul's saying these things to the Corinthians in regards to taking each other to court he says shame on you how can you do that how can you care so much about trivial things trivial pursuits and secondly how can you take them to those who have no standing in the church to secular courts to those people who one day you're going to judge in the coming kingdom he says to go to court is to be defeated already whatever the result whether you win or lose to go to court is to be defeated already and it's a poor witness to those around you he then challenges the Corinthians on their views about sexuality and he challenges a whole lot of views they have here that affect their behaviour first of all he says you've got a false view of freedom everything isn't permissible you're not free to do what you like you can't just do something if it feels good secondly you've got a false view of the body it won't be destroyed and so the sins that you do in the body will affect you eternally will affect your soul your spirit instead realise that your body is there for the Lord to master you're there to serve God he owns you through him your body's been crucified raised again is becoming holy through the Holy Spirit who in fact dwells within you so therefore to sin against your own redeemed body is to sin against yourself he challenges them also in their false view of sex when a man and wife come together the two become one so for someone to go to a prostitute is for the two to become one and that's mutually exclusive for someone who's united to Christ and he challenges their false view of what it means to be a convert to be a Christian you join to the Lord as a Christian you've been bought by God therefore honour him with your bodies let's close with a word of prayer

Lord we thank you for your word and for the truth you teach us help us to realise Lord that what we believe does affect how we behave and how we act at a deep level and we ask Lord that you'll help us to read your word and to have minds like Christ so that we can be conformed to your spirit as living sacrifices and not take the shape of the world around us we ask this Lord that we can take away these truths and learn from them in the strong name of Christ Amen Well we're now going to sing Salvation Belongs to Our God and this is the offering song so if you're a regular member the plate will come round and you'll know what to do when it reaches you if you're a visitor then feel free to just pass that plate along in

Jesus and we're now going to see you again through our chúng here us