

Marks of a Faithful Church

(1 Corinthians 16:15-24)

Introduction

- There are few things in this world I love to do more than go to church (of course, not always). Like most (if not all) of you, I cannot imagine what life would be like without church. In many ways, the church is a little slice of heaven. By God's design, the church is to be a visible illustration (representation) of the realities of heaven. Our worship here together – which includes much more than just the singing – is a physical and temporal foretaste of the spiritual and eternal worship that awaits us in heaven (and is currently happening in heaven).
 - ✓ **Illust:** “John Calvin declared that it is the task of the visible church to make the invisible reign of Christ visible to the world” (RC Sproul, *The Glory of Christ*, p.187).
 - ✓ **Illust:** “... the church is a foretaste of heaven. Though imperfect, the church represents the only place, the only place where you could honestly say heaven comes to earth, because the activities of heaven are reflected in the life of the church. In the church, God's people desire to worship Him. God's people love Him. God's people submit to His moral will as expressed in Scripture. They seek to obey Him out of devotion. This is a taste of heaven. In heaven, believers will serve Him perfectly. And now we serve Him to the best of our ability, even though imperfectly, in the anticipation that someday it will be perfect when we see Him face-to-face” (John MacArthur; sermon “[Heaven on Earth \(part 1\)](#)”; July 23, 2023).
- Of course, the church here on earth is not perfect. How could it be? It is made up of Christians who are imperfect. It is unfortunate to hear so many professing Christians today complain about and disparage the church [it seems to me that most of the time this comes from “Christians” who are hyper-critical and self-centered, as they expect the church to serve them while they do very little (if anything) to serve others]. Most of the time, this comes from people who are trying to find an excuse to not attend – let alone be committed to – a local church (they would rather “worship God in the woods” or “spend quality time with their family”).
 - ✓ **Illust:** “Once upon a time a voice came wafting from the kitchen, through the living room, upstairs to the bedroom. The voice said, “Johnny, it's time to get out of bed! It's Sunday morning. It's time to go to church!” Johnny responded, “But, I don't want to get out of bed. I don't want to go to church.” “Johnny it's time to get out of bed. It's Sunday morning and you have to go to church!” Johnny said, “I don't want to go to church!” The voice said, “Johnny, why don't you want to go to church?” Johnny said, “The people there are mean to me. Nobody listens to what I have to say. And the sermons are boring.” The voice answered, “Johnny, you have to go to church ... you're the pastor!”
- As we have seen, quite repeatedly and quite vividly, the Corinthian church was far from perfect. But that did not disqualify them from being a church, and (thankfully) imperfection does not disqualify Christians from heaven/salvation. Every Christian is “under construction” and “in need of instruction.”
- Throughout this letter, with all his rebukes and admonitions, the apostle Paul relentlessly affirmed his love for the Corinthians and commanded their love for one another. In his concluding remarks, in his letter to the Corinthian church (which he wrote in response to the questions and problems that arose in the church), the apostle Paul continued to give them biblical instruction and exhortations.

1 Cor 16:15-24 ~ “Now I urge you, brothers – you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints – ¹⁶be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. ¹⁷I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, ¹⁸for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people. ¹⁹The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. ²¹I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand. ²²If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come! ²³The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen.”

➤ From this passage, we can identify four commands given by the apostle Paul (words inspired by the Holy Spirit of God), which serve as distinct and universal marks of a faithful church.

1. **Submit to those who faithfully serve in the church (vs.15-16)**

➤ One last time, in this letter, Paul exhorts (“*urge*”; vs.15, *parakaleō*) the church to “*be subject*” (*hypotassō*) ... “*to every fellow worker and laborer*” (vs.16). That is, the church is to be submissive to the godly and spiritual leadership in the church. However, as we have repeatedly seen, this leadership is not political or nominal (in name only). The leaders in the church are not to lead out of some “ivory tower” sense of superiority, not hypocritically commanding others to do that which they themselves are unwilling to do or commanding others to not do that which they do (“do as I say not as I do”). Arrogant and hypocritical Christians should not be leaders in the church. Spiritual leadership in the church is reserved for those who humbly and sincerely (not perfectly) lead by godly example and instruction.

Heb 13:7 ~ “Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”

Heb 13:17 ~ “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

1 Tim 5:17 ~ “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

➤ Paul gave two descriptions of such leaders: “*to every fellow worker* [*synergeō*] *and laborer* [*kopiaō*]” (vs.16). Rather than only sitting in board-room meetings making decisions for the church, true spiritual leaders are workers and laborers in the church. They work with other spiritual leaders [*synergeō*], and they work hard [*kopiaō*] in ministry – “and to everyone who cooperates in the work and labors hard” (vs.16; NET).

I would say, be very wary of “spiritual leaders” who do not work and labor in the church, who do not want to “get their hands dirty” in ministry (they want to make decisions, but not serve the church; they want to be on stage, but not in the trenches).

✓ Illust: G. Campbell Morgan comments: “Paul has in mind the kind of toil that has in it the red blood of sacrifice, the kind of toil that wearies and weakens along the way” (*The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: 1 Corinthians*; 16:5-12).

Col 1:28-29 ~ “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. ²⁹For this I toil [*kopiaō*], struggling [*agōnizomai*] with all his energy that he powerfully works within me.”

1 Thess 2:9 ~ “For you remember, brothers, our labor [*kopos*] and toil [*mochthos*]: we worked [*ergazomai*] night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you, while we proclaimed to you the gospel of God.”

1 Thess 5:12-13 ~ “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor [*kopiaō*] among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, ¹³and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work [*ergon*]. Be at peace among yourselves.”

➤ Paul also gave two examples: “*you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints*” (vs.15). Achaia was the southern province of Greece, in which the cities of Athens and Corinth were located. Stephanas was an important person in Paul’s ministry to the Corinthian Church. Besides being one of Paul’s “*first converts*” (vs.15), he also was one of the few Corinthians that Paul baptized (1 Cor.1:16). In addition, it

appears that while Stephanas (Fortunatus and Achaicus; vs.17) were visiting Paul in Ephesus they hand-delivered the letter to Paul from the Corinthians.

All this had extreme significance to what Paul was trying to teach the Corinthian Church. For *“they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints”* (vs.15). Notice the language Paul used: *“devoted ... service ... saints”* (vs.15). The Greek word translated *“devoted”* (*tassō*) literally refers to “the act of arranging, appointing, or setting things into order.” Here, however (since it refers to *“themselves”*), it has the intensified meaning of being resolutely devoted to the work of ministry (“addicted”, KJV). Again, their leadership was a ministry of *“service”* (*diakonia*), not prominence or elitism. And their work was not self-serving, nor merely benevolent. Their ministry was in service *“of the saints”* (*hagios*). That is, they were Christians working with Christians serving Christians. That beautifully and biblically describes the work of church ministry.

✓ **Illust:** Robert Murrey M’Cheyne, a Scottish minister of the 19th century, said, “It is not great talents God blesses so much as likeness to Jesus. A holy minister is an [awesome] weapon in the hand of God” (as quoted in Charles Spurgeon’s, “Lectures to My Students”; ch.1).

➤ Paul exhorted Christians to *“be subject to such as these”* (vs.16).

2. **Encourage and honor those who faithfully serve in the church (vs.17-18)**

➤ These three men – *“Stephanas ... Fortunatus and Achaicus”* (vs.17) – were particularly helpful to the church, and to the apostle Paul and his ministry. Paul was glad (*“I rejoice”*; vs.17) to have them join him again in ministry. It is important to note here that even the apostle Paul did not engage in “Lone Ranger” ministry. While sometimes he was forced to work alone, or in solitary confinement, Paul enjoyed the companionship of other believers – especially other leaders who would co-labor with Him in ministry.

Again, let me editorialize: be wary of spiritual leaders who insist on working alone or who – for whatever reason – do not work well (or get along) with others.

➤ Paul noted that these men were encouraging to him as he and the Corinthians were apart: *“they have made up for your absence”* (vs.17; or “they have supplied the fellowship with you that I lacked” [NET]). But these men were not only helpful to the apostle, they also were an inspiration to those in the Corinthian church: *“for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours”* (vs.18). These men were encouragers – *“refreshed”* (*anapauō*; to cause to rest).

Matt 11:28 ~ “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest [*anapauō*].”

These men were a delight to be around, and were edifying to others. They were a respite for the weary; strength for the weak; courage for the fainthearted; and an encouragement to the discouraged. Like a glass of cold water for a thirsty soul, they had a positive impact on the life and ministry of the church. Obviously, the church needs such people. In fact, we all should seek to emulate this attribute in our lives (see 1Thess.5:11, 14; Gal.5:22-23).

Unfortunately, some Christians are chronically negative, pessimistic, and critical. As if they have the spiritual gift of *discouragement*, they relish any opportunity to find fault or to point out mistakes. Rather than encourage, they discourage; rather than inspire, they weaken; rather than help, they hinder; rather than refresh, they burden. Typically, such people are insecure, arrogant, and/or not engaged in ministry (e.g., Statler and Waldorf from The Muppets). Such people are not to be followed as leaders, but rebuked for their selfishness and immaturity.

➤ Spiritual leaders who faithfully serve the church should be identified and appreciated: *“Give recognition to such people”* (vs.18). This *“recognition”* (*epiginōskō*) is not applause and accolades, but refers to acknowledgment. In other words, the church needs to be aware of those who serve and edify the church. They should not go unnoticed or unappreciated, and they certainly should not be attacked or disrespected by those in the church. As we’ve seen, we are to *“be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer”* (vs.16).

Heb 13:17 ~ “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

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3. Show godly affection to brothers and sisters in Christ (vs.19-21)

➤ Again, we see the godly affection that exists among brothers and sisters in Christ. The loving fellowship that should occur between Christians. In his concluding comments, Paul gave a litany of “*greetings*” (*aspazomai/aspasmos*; met. “to embrace mentally”) – five times in three verses: “*The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord. ²⁰All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss. ²¹I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand*” (vs.19-21).

This “mental/emotional hug” was given to the Corinthians by “*the churches of Asia*” (vs.19; a Roman province, roughly the western third of what we now call Asia Minor), by “*Aquila and Prisca*” [or Priscilla] and their church in Ephesus (vs.19; see Acts 18), by “*all the brothers*” (vs.20), by the apostle “*Paul*” himself (vs.21), and by a command of Paul for the Corinthians to “*Greet one another with a holy kiss*” (vs.20).

✓ Illust: There is something quite remarkable, extraordinary, about meeting other Christians in other parts of the world! I have been blessed to be in many different countries in the world, preaching and teaching and doing various missions work. Consequently, I have been so blessed to meet countless brothers and sisters in Christ (i.e., pastors, preachers, missionaries, servants). When they are introduced to there is an immediate Christian affection I feel for them, even though they are strangers. Even though I know very little about them, what I know of them is the most important thing to know – they are faithful followers of Jesus Christ.

One such particular encounter happened when I was in the Philippines (for three months in 1990). I met a small community of nomadic and impoverished Christians – mostly a multi-generational family. They earned what little money they had by moving from field to field picking rice. They were always on the brink of starvation, with no house to call home, no transportation, and the only clothes they owned were the ones they wore. Yet, according to the local pastor, they (almost) never missed church on Sunday mornings. Since they had no money, they had to walk wherever they went. The pastor told me of one time when they had to walk five miles to church. He then told me that at the service they attempted to give him their weekly offering – not much money, but all they had. Knowing their circumstances, he encouraged them to use the money for bus fare to take them home. They reluctantly agreed. Upon seeing these people, and hearing of their faithfulness, my heart was immediately and completely affectionate toward them.

Sometimes it is easier to love Christians whom we do not know (from another country), than it is to love Christians whom we do know (from within our own church). Nonetheless, we are commanded to love one another, and to be devoted to one another in love (see Jn.13:34-35; Rom.12:10; 1Thess.3:12; 1Pet.4:8; 1Jn.4:7-8, 11).

➤ The command to “*Greet one another with a holy kiss*” (vs.20) can be a bit awkward to hear in our contemporary (hyper-sexualized) American culture. But this was a normal and godly exchange in Ancient times (much as it is in other parts of the world today). This is the same command Paul gave to the church in Rome (Rom.16:16), the same command Paul gave to the church in Thessalonica

(1Thess.5:26), and again to the Corinthians (2Cor. 13:12). It is the same greeting commanded by the apostle Peter (1Pet.5:14). It is the same greeting Judas gave Jesus in the garden (Matt.26:48-49), and the same affection the Ephesian elders gave the apostle Paul (Acts 20:37).

The *“holy kiss”* (*hagios philēma*; vs.20) is a non-romantic (non-sexual) kiss – which is why it is referred to as a “holy” (saintly/sacred) kiss. This kiss was given on the cheek or the forehead and was essentially the same gesture as a non-romantic hug or handshake today. The point of the passage is not the act of kissing, but the godly affection that ought to be shared between brothers and sisters in Christ.

4. Be devoted to Christian unity and purity (vs.21-24)

➤ Paul typically employed a “secretary” – known as an Amanuensis – to dictate his letters. However, as was his custom, he handwrote the end of this letter: *“I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand”* (vs.21). In these closing three verses, Paul gave some short statements. I have categorized them into two main expressions: 1) Paul exclamations, and 2) Paul valediction.

a) Paul’s exclamations

➤ In verse twenty-two, we find two imperative exclamations from Paul: *“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. Our Lord, come!”* (vs.22).

Anathema! (vs.22)

The first is: *“If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed”* (vs.22). The Greek word translated *“accursed”* (*anathema*; vs.22) is a strong and ominous word. It describes someone who has, or will be, bound under a curse or sentenced to condemnation.

Gal 1:8-9 ~ “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed [*anathema*]. ⁹As we have said before, so now I say again: If anyone is preaching to you a gospel contrary to the one you received, let him be accursed [*anathema*].” (see Rom.9:3; 1Cor.12:3; Acts 23:14)

This is both a warning and a command. A warning for those in the church who have no true love for the Lord, for (unless they repent) eternal condemnation awaits them. The command is for those in the church who are true believers to practice church discipline upon those who are false teachers/believers or nominal/carnal Christians (see Matt.18:15-17; 1Cor.5:1-13; 2Cor.13:2; Rom.16:17; 2Thess.3:6, 14-15; 2Tim.3:5; Tit.3:10-11; 2Jn.10).

Our love for Christ may not be perfect, but it must be genuine. To love the Triune God is the greatest commandment (Matt.22:37-38), which includes a love for Jesus Christ who is the incarnate the Son of God (Jn.15:23; 1Jn.5:1). When Jesus restored the apostle Peter, He did so by asking him the most essential question: “Do you love me?” (Jn.21:15-17). A true faith in Jesus Christ will result in a deep love for Jesus Christ. If someone has no love for the Lord, then they have no saving faith in God.

Maranatha! (vs.22)

The second imperative exclamation is: *“... Our Lord, come!”* (vs.22). This phrase translates the Greek transliteration of the Aramaic expression “Our Lord, come!” (*marana tha*) or “Our Lord has come!” (*maran atha*). While it is not absolutely clear what Paul was expressing with this exclamation, we know that both are true: the Lord has come, and the Lord is coming again!

Rev 22:20 ~ “He who testifies to these things says, ‘Surely I am coming soon [*erchomai tachus*].’ Amen. Come, Lord Jesus [*erchomai kyrios Iēsous*]!” (see Rev.22:7, 12)

Phil 4:5 ~ “Let your reasonableness be known to everyone. The Lord is at hand” (see Jms.5:8-9)

b) Paul's valediction

- In his final words, Paul left the Corinthians with two encouraging statements – both can be viewed as his prayer for the Corinthian believers: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. ²⁴My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen”* (vs.23-24). Notice that both of these are centered upon the person and work of Jesus Christ.

“The grace of ... Jesus be with you” (vs.23)

This was a common way for the apostle Paul to close out his letters to the churches in which he ministered: *“The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you”* (vs.23; see 2Cor.13:14; Gal.6:18; Eph.6:24; Phil.4:23; Col.4:18; etc.). God's *“grace”* (*charis*) is His unmerited, undeserved, favor. Paul's statement was not only a prayerful blessing upon the church, but a reminder the heart of the Gospel – salvation by God's grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone.

“My love be with you ... in Jesus” (vs.24)

Although this letter was, in many ways, a serious rebuke Paul never expressed any hatred of the Corinthians. Everything he said – his rebuke, his warnings, his teaching – he said out of love for them. “It takes hard words to break hard hearts.” Throughout this letter, Paul repeatedly assured them of his love for them, even at the very close of the letter (words written by his own hand): *“My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen”* (vs.24).

As Christians, we sometimes need to speak and to hear hard truths. But this must always be done in, and out of, love (Eph.4:15; Jn.13:34-35; 1Jn.4:20-21). God's love is a perfecting love, not a pampering or permissive love. But that love is tethered to God's mercy and guided by God's grace.

Conclusion

- This letter ought to be incredibly encouraging to every Christian. While it is filled with hard teachings, and difficult commands, it is infused with love and grace. As we have seen, the Corinthian church was not a model of a faithful church. The church was fractured by selfishness and hyper-individualism, awash with arrogance and immorality, infested with factions and immaturity, rocked by quarrels and discord. Yet Paul never encouraged them to disband the church or to start a new church (or to “worship God in the woods”).

In many ways, it is hard to see any hope for or spiritual life in this church. Yet, through it all – though their faith be small and weak, though their Christian walk was imperfect, though their love for one another was fickle and fragile, though they were infiltrated by false teachers and false Christians – the faith church (the true Christians) would persevere.

- As Christians, like the Corinthians, we can stumble in our walk with Christ (Jms.3:2). None of us live perfect, sinless, lives. But that does not mean that we stop pursuing holiness and faithfulness. We must not abandon our faith or forsake Christ's church. We are called to be together, and to stay together, as a church. We are called to encourage one another, to admonish one another, and to serve one another. We are called to the church: a visible illustration (representation) of the realities of heaven. We are called to display the love and grace of God to the world.

If there was hope for the Corinthian church (and there was), there is hope for us too. May we persevere in our desire to be a faithful church for the Lord Jesus Christ!