

Our time in 1 Corinthians has been interesting. We have had opportunity to consider many challenging (and sometimes controversial) questions and issues. Above all, we have seen the power of the gospel to shape the local church in practical ways. As we come to the latter half of chapter 16, Paul moves into conclusion mode, talking about future plans and sending greetings to friends—both from him and from friends. If we are tempted to think that there is little for us in sections like this, let us remember that these verses are as inspired by God as the rest of the letter.

This section, in many ways, highlights the reality and nature of church networks. We can learn several things about such networks from this closing section.

The Composition of Church Networks

First, we can learn something about the composition of church networks. That is, the church global is comprised both of church-to-church networks and Christian-to-Christian networks.

Most interpreters think that 1 Corinthians was written to Corinth from Ephesus. There was a church in each of those cities, and the churches knew and apparently cooperated with one another. Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus were members of the church in Corinth, who were sent to Ephesus to meet with Paul and the church there. While each of the churches was an autonomous local assembly, they did not isolate themselves from each other.

At the same time, it was not simply local churches that networked, but individual members within those local churches. These churches, in an age long before social media, were comprised of members who knew one another. The long list of individual names, mentioned in the context of interpersonal greeting, is clear evidence of this. Both churches and Christians knew each other, loved each other, and worked with each other.

TO THINK ABOUT

BBC is a part of a network of churches known as Sola 5. Without cheating, how many Sola 5 churches can you name off the top of your head? How many individual members of those churches can you name? Could you send your greetings, by name, to members of sister churches (Sola 5 or otherwise)? What can we do to better foster relationships with other churches and with individual church members? How can we work together with other churches, and their members, for the furtherance of the gospel?

The Characteristics of Church Networks

What was it that drew churches and their members together in such a way that they could both fellowship with and labour alongside each other in the Great Commission? We can identify at least two things.

1. **They bonded in the truth (v. 13).** Ultimately, it was “the faith” that bonded these churches together. “The faith” is shorthand for the core truths of biblical Christianity.
2. **They bonded in love (vv. 14–18).** Paul urged these saints to do all things “in love.” He did not have in mind abstract, warm, fuzzy feelings for fellow believers, but practical, dirty-hands one-anothering. In this context, love looks like mutual subjection (v. 16). It looks like putting the needs of others ahead of yourself, not always insisting on getting your way, and being willing to set aside your own preferences for the sake of the greater body. In this context, love also looks like mutual service (vv. 17–18). The church exists as a place in which Christians can serve and refresh one another. Churches ought likewise to do this for other churches.

TO THINK ABOUT

If we understand the full import of the New Testament, we will realise that Christians are not to do things for the sake of recognition. We are not motivated to serve others because of the recognition it will earn us. At the same time, Paul writes, “Give recognition to such people” (v. 18). How do we maintain this balance between not seeking recognition, but still giving recognition when it is due?

Reading this text, one gains the unmistakable impression that this kind of community is something all believers must be involved in. Our professed love for God is worked out in our practised love for the local church. Those who do not prioritise such community cannot claim with any integrity to love the Lord. Paul says it as strongly as it can be said: “If anyone has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed” (v. 22). To be “accursed” is to be cut off from God’s blessings and God’s community. This highlights once again that love for the Lord and love for the community of his people are inseparable.

TO THINK ABOUT

In light of the above, how should we think about the profession of faith of those who claim to love the Lord but display little regard for his people—those, in other words, who will not prioritise the local church?

Sadly, we live in an age where many profess love for Christ apart from a love for his people. How do we capture this love once again? Consider some principles.

The Capturing of Church Networks

There are many ways in which we can try to convince church members to serve in the church, but only one sure way to maintain the kind of service that Paul envisions: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen” (vv. 23–24). Communion with other believers and other churches only happens because of our union with Christ. Union with Christ necessarily brings us into communion with one another.

The oneness for which the church must strive—and for which the church is ultimately destined (John 17:22)—can only be obtained in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. As we are united to him, we are united to one another, and then we can begin to serve each other as Paul envisions in this text. When our oneness with Christ is properly understood, the oneness that we experience with our fellow believers will be valued far higher than any bonds that tie us to unbelieving family and friends.

Paul opened this letter with grace (1:3), and he closes it in the same way (v. 23). Grace is what drives the church and binds it together. The following lengthy quote from Stephen T. Um’s commentary on 1 Corinthians is worth citing in full.

In a works-based community, people calculate for fairness. One does not love someone unless he shows himself worthy. One does not subject himself or herself to someone unless he or she knows the other person is qualified. One does not recognize someone unless he does something outstanding.

But in a grace-fueled community one doesn’t calculate, one doesn’t expect anything in return; he or she is not in it for reciprocation. Grace is not equity. Grace is treating others in a loving way though they deserve the opposite. So when they deserve judgment or disdain, rather than responding to them in the same way and taking vengeance into our own hands, we respond with generosity, love, and grace. This means treating somebody in the opposite way of what they deserve. Therefore it is not equity. Equity is just being fair if somebody has wronged another. It’s reciprocating the payment or responding proportionally to the extent of that person’s crime. We might be very fair people. But that doesn’t necessarily mean we are gracious people. Through Christ we can love someone who is unworthy. We can be loved when we are unworthy. We can subject ourselves to someone less qualified than ourselves. We can be empowered to do things that we haven’t previously done. We can share honor and recognition in counterintuitive situations and in counterintuitive ways. Within the common bond of our communion with Christ, all of life is shared! No one is supposed to live in isolation, but rather we all are to live as one.

TO THINK ABOUT

If you were to honestly evaluate your own love for and oneness with this church, how are you doing? How do you think the church is doing, largely, in this area? How can you improve? How can we improve? How can you help us improve as a body so that we can display to a greater degree what it means to live as a compelling community?