

The Ambiguity of the Church

by John Stott

This sermon delves into the ambiguity of the church, highlighting the tension between the divine ideal and human reality, emphasizing the need for holiness, giftedness, and unity within the Christian community. The speaker addresses the divisions in the Corinthian church, stressing the importance of being united in Christ and not divided by human leaders. The sermon concludes with a call to reflect on the church's imperfections while striving for purity and unity until Christ's return resolves all ambiguity.

Scripture: 1 Corinthians 1:1, 1 Corinthians 1:10, 1 Corinthians 1:14, Romans 6:3, Ephesians 4:4, 1 Corinthians 3:1

Topics: "Unity in the Church", "Striving for Holiness"

Description

This sermon delves into the ambiguity of the church, highlighting the tension between the divine ideal and human reality, emphasizing the need for holiness, giftedness, and unity within the Christian community. The speaker addresses the divisions in the Corinthian church, stressing the importance of being united in Christ and not divided by human leaders. The sermon concludes with a call to reflect on the church's imperfections while striving for purity and unity until Christ's return resolves all ambiguity.

Transcript

Friends, I would like to say what a great pleasure it is to be back at Keswick and how grateful I am to the Council for inviting me and to David Coffey for introducing me. Now I think I need to begin with an apology to my good brother and friend, Louis Palau, because apparently he feels intimidated by my presence. But I need to say that I feel intimidated by his.

I mean, wouldn't you like to have even a fraction of his irrepressible sense of humor? Wouldn't you like to have even a fraction of his Latin American eloquence? I certainly would. So Louis and I form a kind of mutual intimidation society. But then one other thing about him, he was rude on Saturday night to Lancastrians, saying that they were unintelligible.

I am a Lancastrian. My great-grandfather Abraham, who, believe it or not, married a lady called Sarah, founded a cotton mill in Oldham called Abraham Stott & Sons. It has long since been demolished.

But I am a Lancastrian. So many, many Keswicks ago, when I must have been talking to first, a man was overheard as he was leaving the tent in his broad Lancashire accent. He is no good trying to take notes from that fellow.

I'll give up. And I was able to reassure him the following morning, don't give up, love. Well, that's enough laughter, perhaps, for the beginning.

Now, I hope you have your Bible open at 1 Corinthians chapter 1. I hope you may have discovered in the convention program that there is an outline of today's Bible reading on page 32. And I hope that you will turn to that. You see that I've entitled this series of Bible studies, Calling Christian Leaders.

And I think all of us, to some degree, are in leadership roles, whether as parents or teachers or pastors or leaders in our local church and so on. So it's Calling Christian Leaders, subtitled Corinthian Studies in Gospel, Church and Ministry. Let me introduce the topic.

I reckon that one of the great things that unites us in Keswick is that we're all committed to the church. Of course, we're all committed to Christ, all one in Christ Jesus, but we're also committed to the body of Christ. Of course, we come from different races, different countries, different nations, different cultures, different denominations, but we're all members of that amazing phenomenon called the worldwide Christian community.

At least, I hope we are. I hope there is nobody present who is that bizarre anomaly, an unchurched Christian, because the New Testament knows nothing of such a monster. If we're committed to Christ, we must be committed to the body of Christ.

And the reason we are committed to the church is that God is committed to the church. His purpose, we're told in the New Testament, is not just to save isolated individuals and so perpetuate our loneliness. God's purpose is to build the church.

And Christ died for us, we're told in Titus chapter 2, not only that we might be redeemed from all iniquity, but that he might purify for himself a people who are enthusiastic for good works. All right. Now, the image of the church which these chapters present is extremely ambiguous.

But there is a paradox at the very heart of the church. It is the painful tension between what the church claims to be and what the church seems to be. Between the divine ideal and the human reality.

Between romantic talk about the bride of Christ and the very unromantic ugly unholy and quarrelsome people we know ourselves to be. It is a tension between our final glorious destiny in heaven and our present very inglorious performance. I call that the ambiguity of the church.

And our text this morning is verses 1 to 17 of the first chapter. Now, our introduction will take us to the first two verses where the Apostle describes both himself as the author of the letter and the Corinthians as the recipients of the letter. He calls himself Paul an apostle by the will of God.

Called to be an apostle of Christ by the will of God. And as to the Corinthian Christians he calls them the church of God in Corinth. So an apostle of Christ addresses a church of God.

And both of them are noble, exalted titles. Look first at Paul's own self description. Did you know that in nine out of the thirteen letters attributed to the Apostle Paul, he identifies himself as an apostle of Christ by the will of God, by the command of God, or by the commission of God.

So how are we to understand this word apostle? So important do I believe this to be that we need to spend a little time on it and see that the word apostle is used in three different senses in the New Testament.

First, it is used once only in the New Testament of all disciples of Jesus. That is in John's Gospel chapter 13 verse 16 where Jesus says the messenger is not above the one who sent him.

And the word messenger is in the Greek apostolos. So the messenger is not above the one who sends him. All of us have been sent into the world to share in the apostolic mission of the church and to share the good news of Jesus Christ with others.

So once it is applied to all believers. Three or four times it is used in the New Testament of the so-called apostles of the churches. Not the apostles of Christ, but the apostles of the churches.

Namely people sent out by a particular church on a particular mission. We would call the missionaries or maybe mission partners. But the apostle called Epaphroditus the apostle of the church of Philippi.

Philippians 2 verse 25 he refers to him as your apostle. The man sent by you in order to minister in this case to me. And in 2nd Corinthians 8 verse 23 there are people called the representatives of the churches.

Literally the apostles of the churches. So once of every Christian three or four times of the apostles of the churches. But the overwhelming number of times in the New Testament the word is applied to the twelve, to Paul who was added to their number, to James who was also added and probably that's all.

They were not apostles of the churches. They were apostles of Jesus Christ and they were a unique group with the following characteristics. First they had been chosen, called and appointed directly by Jesus Christ.

Not by any human being or by any church. Next they were eyewitnesses of the historic Jesus. Either of his public ministry like the twelve for three years, or of his resurrection like Paul.

Paul could be an apostle because he'd seen the risen Lord. 1st Corinthians 9 verse 1. Am I not an apostle? He says have I not seen Jesus our Lord? And he couldn't have been an apostle if he hadn't seen the historic Jesus. And then thirdly they were promised a special inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

As we read in John's Gospel chapters 14 and 16. Both to remind them of what Jesus had taught them while he was on earth and to supplement his teaching adding to it. Now he will lead you into all the truth.

And those great promises were fulfilled in the writing of the New Testament. Now friends it is extremely important in these days to hold fast to the uniqueness of the Apostles of Christ. And to hold their unique authority as the Apostles of Christ and so the unique authority of the New Testament.

For the New Testament is precisely the teaching of the Apostles. It is in the New Testament that their teaching has come down to us in its definitive form. Theological liberals today sometimes are brash and foolish enough to say well that was Paul's opinion but this is my opinion.

And Paul was a first century witness to Christ but I'm a 21st century witness to Christ. And they claim an authority equal to that of the Apostles. But no an American Episcopal Bishop the other day was foolish and brash enough to say we wrote the Bible so we can rewrite it.

But we did not write the Bible. Excuse me Bishop. We did not write the Bible.

The biblical authors did not write in the name of the church. On the contrary they wrote to the church in the name of God. In the case of the Old Testament prophets and in the name of Christ.

In the case of the New Testament Apostles. And that is why we receive their teaching as the Word of God. Not as the Word of men but as the Word of God.

Now all that I think is necessary for introduction because as we study the first four chapters of 1st Corinthians let us not wander through the text like a gardener in a herbaceous border picking a flower here and discarding a flower there. Let us not imagine that the New Testament is a collection of fallible opinions of fallible human beings. Let us rather at the beginning acknowledge and receive these chapters as part of the Word of God.

And let us be ready to humble ourselves under the authority of the Word of God. Determined that we will listen attentively to what he has spoken with a view to believing and obeying it. For the New Testament is the teaching of the Apostles and the Apostles teach the Word of God.

So much then for Paul's self-description. He had been called to be an Apostle of Christ. True he also mentioned Sosthenes but he only calls him our brother.

Sosthenes was not an Apostle like Paul. Indeed I wear my words carefully and I hope I will carry you with me. We need to have the courage to insist today that there are no Apostles in the church any longer.

Now there are I think people who could be described as having apostolic ministries. I would give them the adjective. There are bishops, there are superintendents, there are pioneer missionaries, there are church planters and I think we could say that they have apostolic ministries.

But there are no Apostles comparable to the Apostle Paul or the Apostle John or the Apostle Peter and if there were we'd have to add their teaching to the teaching of the New Testament. But there is nobody in the church from the Pope downwards or from the Pope upwards whichever way around you like to put it. There is nobody with that authority in the church today.

These are the Apostles of Christ and we submit to their authority in the New Testament. So there is Paul's description of himself. Now B, there is Paul's description of the Corinthian church.

Verse 2, to the church of God in Corinth. The word sound innocent enough at first hearing until we reflect upon them. Is it not extraordinary that such a community should exist in such a city? The church of God in Corinth.

Let's think about Corinth. Its distinction is due mainly to its strategic location on the Corinthian isthmus. If you know your geography a little bit.

It commanded the trade routes both north-south by land and east-west by sea. It was a manufacturing city and a trading center. It played host to the famous Isthmian games which were held every two years in Corinth.

It was also a religious city. Its temple to Aphrodite was dominated the Acro-Corinth behind the city and its temple of Apollo stood in the very center of the town. It was also an immoral city so that to Corinthianize in the Greek verb meant to live an immoral life.

And then it had political significance because it was the capital city of the Roman province of Achaia. Thus Corinth was a busy, thriving, affluent and permissive city. Merchants and sailors, pilgrims and athletes, tourists and prostitutes jostled with one another in its narrow streets.

Yet, in this heathen city there lived a small group of people whom the Apostle calls the Church of God. A divine community in the midst of a human community. The Church of God in Corinth.

Those were its two habitats. Simultaneously it lived in Christ and in Corinth. It's a marvelous thought.

It was like a fragrant flower growing in and out of rather smelly mud. The Church of God in Corinth. Well already then in verse 2 we've seen something of the ambiguity of the church, earthly and heavenly.

Its two habitats in Christ and in Corinth. Its two sanctities, actual and potential. And its two callings, objective and subjective.

God calls us to be holy and we call on God to make us holy. God calls us to be the holy people we are and we call on God to be the unique person he is according to his name. Indeed it is only by calling upon God to be himself that we have any hope of becoming more truly ourselves as God intends us to be.

Fundamental then to New Testament Christianity is this ambiguity of the church and of salvation. We are living in between times. We are living in between the first and the second comings of Christ.

Between what he did when he first came to what he's going to do when he comes back. We're living between kingdom come and kingdom coming. Between the now already of the kingdom inaugurated and the not yet of the kingdom yet to be consummated.

And this living in between times is a key to our understanding of 1st Corinthians. The great John Newton, author of Amazing Grace, once said, listen carefully, I am not what I ought to be and I am not what I want to be. I am not what I hope to be in another world but still I am not what I used to be and I am by the grace of God I am what I am.

Well we have looked a little bit at the Apostle Paul, Apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God and at Corinth and now we're going to put the two together and see that Paul had a close, long-standing, affectionate, personal, and pastoral relationship with the Corinthian church. It began in the year AD 50 when he first visited Corinth on his second missionary journey and he founded the church there. And if we use the three metaphors, which he himself developed a little later actually in chapter 3, we may say that Paul planted the church but Apollos and others watered it.

Paul laid the foundation of the church, others erected the superstructure on the foundation. He fathered the church but others were its guardians and its tutors. And over the years Paul visited Corinth at least three times and wrote to the church at least four times, although only two of his letters have survived.

Now there was a very lengthy introduction wasn't it? But I hope you don't think it was unimportant or unnecessary. I think we need to understand the background a little bit before we plunge into the text. So if you have your Bible open, as I trust you have, you will notice first Paul greets the church, chapter 1 verses 1 to 3. Second, Paul gives thanks for the church, verses 4 to 9. And thirdly, he appeals to the church, verses 10 to 17.

In each section, the greeting, the thanksgiving and the appeal, he singles out one essential characteristic of the Christian community. In relation to the first, the greeting, he singles out its holiness. In relation to the second, its giftedness.

And in relation to the third, the appeal, its unity. So let's look at these three. One, Paul greets the church, verses 1 to 3, and in his greeting, he emphasizes the holiness of the church.

What he has called the church of God in Corinth, he now also designates those who have been, it's a perfect tense, those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus. And then he goes on to call them those who are called to be saints, or called to be holy. So there, the ambiguity is obvious, isn't it? The church is already sanctified and it's not yet holy.

Moreover, this is true of all those who everywhere call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. So on the one hand, the Christian community of the church of God, like Israel before it, it was the holy people of God. Its members have been set apart to belong to God.

He had chosen them to be his special people. On the one hand, that is their status, set apart and sanctified to belong to God. But on the other hand, as the coming chapters make clear, much unholiness lingered in the Christian community.

Quarreling, pride, complacency, immorality, taking one another to court, disorders in public worship, boastfulness of spiritual gifts. This holy church of Corinth was very unholy. And there is the ambiguity or the first example of it.

Secondly, Paul gives thanks to the church and in his thanksgiving, verses four to nine, he emphasizes the giftedness of the church. In spite of its many failures, he begins with this positive evaluation. Beginning of verse four, I always thank God for you, he says.

And we can always thank God for one another. But what did he thank God for? Well, first, because God's grace was given to you in Christ Jesus. And that is surely a reference to their salvation.

The grace of God had come to them and saved them. And Paul thanks God that that was the case. Next, verse five, he gives thanks to God because in Christ you've been enriched in every way.

And by what he goes on to say, he's evidently thinking of their spiritual gifts, their knowledge, and their ability to communicate the knowledge which they have been given. And then next, verse six, because Paul's apostolic testimony to Christ had been confirmed in them. So that Christ had proved in their own experience to be everything which the apostle Paul said he was.

And for those things, the grace, the enrichment, the confirmation of the apostle's testimony, Paul gives thanks. In consequence, verse seven, you don't lack any spiritual gift. Well, it's an amazing thanksgiving to God that they'd been given his grace freely in Christ Jesus, in salvation.

They'd been enriched in Christ in every way, and therefore lacked no spiritual gift. This sounds as if the Corinthian church was perfect. In every way enriched, in no way deficient.

In other words, they were complete. Not, of course, that every individual Christian has all spiritual gifts. We know that from chapter 12 in particular, and the wide diversity or variety of gifts that are given to different people.

And if you bring together all the lists of the charismata in the New Testament, there are at least 20 or 21 that are mentioned. So it isn't each individual who has all the gifts, but each local church may expect to have collectively all the gifts it needs. And yet, this is not the end of the story.

For even though the Corinthian church had been graced and gifted and enriched in Christ so that they lack nothing, they were not yet blameless. And that's why they were still eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ. In spite of everything that he'd given them as a result of his first coming, they were longing for his second coming, when they would become blameless.

He would keep them strong until the end, and on the last day they would be blameless in his sight. Now, how do we know that? Well, not because of our faith, but because of God's faithfulness. Verse 9, faithful is the God who called you into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ.

So, one day he will perfect the fellowship into which he has already brought us. God called us is a past reality, into the fellowship of Christ is a present experience, and God is faithful, is the ground of our confidence for the future. So that beautiful verse 9 speaks of the past and the present and the future.

So, here is the second ambiguity of the church. First, the church is holy, but is called to be holy. Second, the church is complete, and yet it is incomplete, which is why we are eagerly waiting for the revelation of Jesus Christ.

And now thirdly, Paul appeals to the Corinthian church, and in his appeal, verses 10 to 17, he emphasizes the unity of the church, but the ambiguity is that this united church was also divided. The very same tension between the reality and the ideal. Just let's look back for just a moment to verse 2 about the unity of the church.

Paul describes Corinth as the church of God, not the churches of God, there may have been several house churches, or house fellowships in Corinth, we don't know for certain, there may have been, but he still calls it the church of God, one and undivided. I've no doubt God says to himself from time to time, I have only one church. It is the body of Christ, it is the temple of the Holy Spirit, there is only one church, my church.

Or again, we might say, as Paul does in Ephesians 4, there is only one family, because there's only one Father. And there's only one body, because there is only one Holy Spirit who indwells the one body. And there is only one faith, one hope, one baptism, because there's only one Jesus Christ, in whom we have believed, for whom we are waiting in hope, and into whom we've been baptized.

So, you see, the one Father creates the one family, the one Christ creates the one faith, hope, and baptism, and the one Holy Spirit creates the one body. And there is only one church, to which we bear witness at Keswick. So, a little later, in chapter three, he will say, you are God's field, you are God's temple, you are the body of Christ.

Collective nouns which all declare the unity of the church. Ah, but, we Christians, who are one, have nevertheless succeeded in dividing from one another. We have divided the indivisible.

We have made God's one and only church into many churches, and we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. So, the Corinthian Christians, as Chloe's household had told Paul, verse 11, that although there was one church, it was torn apart by factions. Paul has given thanks for them, but now he appeals to them.

He's been affirming them, but now he rebukes them. And we need to look at that. What can we learn from his appeal? Well, notice first, that in verses 10 and 11, he addresses them as brothers.

He reminds them of the family of God, in which all Christian people are sisters and brothers. But, unfortunately, although they're all members of the family of God, they are contradicting it by their behavior. Now, notice the basis of his appeal.

I appeal to you, he says, in the name, singular, in the one and only name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the name that is above every name, the name on which all Christian believers call, verse 2, the name into which we have all been baptized, verses 13 and 15, he appeals to us in the one and only name of Jesus Christ. They named human names. I belong to Paul.

I belong to Peter. I belong to Apollos. But as the great Chrysostom, in the 4th to 5th century AD, one of the great fathers of the church, as Chrysostom says in his commentary, Paul keeps nailing them to the name of Christ.

He gets their attention diverted from Paul, from Apollos, from Peter, to Christ, the one and only Jesus Christ. Next, Paul repeats his appeal for emphasis, verse 10, that all of you agree with one another, so that there be no divisions with each other. Already there are quarrels, but he said, let there be no splits, but that you may be perfectly united in mind and in thought.

And then in verse 11, he goes into more detail. Some members, Chloe's household had told him, we don't know anything more about her than this reference. Some members have informed Paul about their quarrels, and he goes on, verse 12, what I mean is this.

One of you says, I follow Paul. Another, I follow Apollos. Another, I follow Cephas or Peter, and still another, I follow Christ.

Now, there is much debate and discussion about the identity of these different groups in the church of Corinth. Some try to find different theologies here in contradiction to one another. The most famous, as some of you, I think, will know, is the theory of a 19th century German theologian called F.C. Bauer, B-A-U-R, who was professor of theology or New Testament at Tübingen in Germany.

He argued that in the early church, there was a fundamental opposition between the Gentile party, headed by the apostle Paul, and the Jewish party, headed by the apostle Peter. And he interpreted the whole of the New Testament in the light of this quarrel and antagonism between Paul and Peter, between Gentiles and Jews in the Christian community. And he found support for his opinion here in this passage that we are looking at.

And he went on to interpret, as I say, the whole New Testament as a tension between these two apostles. But, honestly, as you look at the text here, there is no evidence that these groups were divided by theology or by doctrine. No, they were divided by personalities, not by principles.

And the groups are separated from one another by the cult of celebrities, by pride, by jealousy, by boastfulness of their different church leaders. And all this deeply disturbed the apostle, as we shall see every morning, I think, this week. He was their brother, he says.

He calls them my sisters and brothers. He is not their master, that they should think that they belong to him. No, if anybody belongs to anybody in the church, he belongs to them.

They don't belong to him. So what about the fourth slogan, I belong to Christ? How could one faction in Corinth possibly claim an exclusive monopoly of the Lord Jesus? All Christians belong to Christ, not a clique or faction within the church. And for that reason, some suggest, and I myself believe this is correct, that although the first three were watchwords in the Corinthian church, I belong to Paul, to Apollos, to Peter, the fourth was not a fourth faction, but Paul's own indignant report or retort, that is, you may say you belong to Paul and Peter and Apollos, but as for me, I belong to Christ and not to any human leader.

Well, I think we need to notice the seriousness of the situation, that although the divisions were not doctrinal in origin, they had profound doctrinal implications, especially in relation to Christ, to the gospel, and to baptism. To show this, in verse 13, the apostle asks three leading questions, all of which demand an emphatic no as the answer. Question one, verse 13, has Christ been divided? J.B. Phillips translates it, is there more than one Christ? Are there lots of different Christs? C.K. Barrett translates it, has Christ been shared out? Fragments of him being distributed to different groups in the church? No, no, no.

There is only one Christ. Question two, was Christ crucified for you? Are you trusting for your salvation in Paul and him crucified? Answer, no, no, no. The idea is preposterous.

Jesus Christ is our crucified saviour in whom alone we have put our trust. Question three, have you been baptised into the name of Paul? No, no, of course not. Baptism is into allegiance to Christ.

We're baptised into Christ. As Romans 6 makes clear, we're baptised into union with Christ in his death and resurrection. Thus, you see, the effect of their divisions was to undermine these essentials of the gospel.

It was to deny that there's only one Christ who is the only one who died to be our saviour and into whose name alone we have been baptised. So clearly the person of Christ, the cross of Christ, the name of Christ into which we've been baptised are all at stake when the church divides. The Corinthians were insulting Christ.

They were dislodging him from his supremacy. They were replacing him by human leaders. Now we move on to verses 14 to 17.

Paul lingers on the topic of baptism because they were putting their emphasis in the wrong place. They were exalting the human baptiser, the person who actually did the dipping or the sprinkling. They were exalting the baptiser at the expense of the divine Christ into whom they had been baptised.

Consequently, Paul expressed his thankfulness for what he saw as the providence of God. Gordon Fee calls it a simple, uncalculated historical reality, namely that he hadn't baptised any of them. Oh well, wait a minute, he went on, having had a little lapse of memory.

I did baptise Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, and Gaius, who became the host of the church. Verse 15, so no one can say that you were baptised into my name, Paul. Oh yes, wait a minute, it's a further afterthought or parenthesis.

Verse 16, I did baptise the household of Stephanas, and beyond them I really can't remember if I baptised anybody else. So comparatively unimportant is it as to who does the baptising. What matters in baptism is not the person by whom we were baptised, but the person into whom we were baptised, Jesus Christ himself.

Besides, Paul adds, verse 17, Christ had sent him, literally Christ had apostled him, not to baptise, but to evangelise. Now Paul is not being derogatory to baptism, he knew that baptism had been instituted by Jesus, he knew it was an integral part of the Great Commission, he'd not forgotten that, he had a very high view of baptism himself, as you can tell if you read Romans 6. But Paul's speciality as an apostle of Christ was evangelism and not baptism. He was a pioneer preacher, not a local church pastor.

And his speciality was the gospel, not the sacraments which make the gospel visible. Moreover, second part of verse 17, the evangelism Paul was commissioned to do was not with words of human wisdom, literally not in wisdom of word, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. Now that's a very important phrase, as I hope to show.

It anticipates a developed argument that we shall be looking at tomorrow morning, put together, not in wisdom of word, expresses a double renunciation which the apostle Paul had made. On the one hand, he renounced the world's wisdom in favour of the cross of Christ. That's what he preached, not the wisdom of the world, not the philosophy of the world.

He preached the cross of Christ. And the second renunciation is that he renounced the skills of Greek rhetoric which were so popular in the ancient Greco-Roman world, as again I'll show tomorrow morning, but instead of human rhetoric, he trusted in the power of God, the Holy Spirit. And that double renunciation of human philosophy for content and human rhetoric for form, this double renunciation he elaborated later.

Charles Hodge, in his fine reformed commentary from the middle of the 19th century, said Paul was neither a philosopher nor a rhetorician after the Grecian school. Now I have just a few moments in which to conclude. The ambiguity of the church.

That's the thing I'm anxious that we shall take away from us this morning. And maybe as I finish within just two or three minutes, you'll be thinking of your own church back home, and I will be thinking of the one that I serve and to which I belong in London. We need to reflect on the ambiguity of the church and we need to come to terms with it in this way.

On the one hand, biblical Christians are not perfectionists. We don't dream of developing a perfect church on earth. You may remember that Billy Graham often says, by all means look for the perfect church.

And when you find it, you join it, but remember when you join it, it ceases to be perfect. And that is a wise word from Billy Graham. So biblical Christians are not perfectionists.

On the other hand, biblical Christians are not defeatists or pessimists. That is, we don't tolerate sin and error in the community as if it didn't matter. To perfectionists, we say you're right to seek the purity of the church.

The doctrinal and ethical purity of the church is a proper goal for Christian endeavor. But you are wrong to imagine that you will ever attain perfection in this life. Not until Christ comes will he present his bride, the church, to himself a radiant church without stain or wrinkle or any blemish, but holy and blameless.

So to pessimists and defeatists, we say you're right to acknowledge the reality of sin and error in the church. You're right not to close your eyes to it and pretend that it is perfect when it isn't. But you're wrong to tolerate it.

There is a place for discipline in the church, and even in extreme cases for excommunication. To deny that Jesus is the Son of God made flesh, to deny the incarnation, is anti-Christ. We cannot have fellowship with anti-Christ.

And to deny or contradict the gospel of the grace of God, Paul says, is anathema. He pulled on the judgment of God to those who deny the gospel. So that in these central matters about the person and the work of Christ, we cannot tolerate error or sin for that matter.

So this is the ambiguity of the church. The church has been sanctified, but it's still sinful and called to be holy. The church has been enriched, but it is still defective, eagerly waiting for the second coming of Christ.

The church has been united. There is only one church of God in Christ, but it is still unnecessarily divided. So we are living in between times, between kingdom come and kingdom coming, between the divine ideal and the human reality, between the already and the not yet.

But not until Christ comes will the ideal become a reality and all ambiguity will cease. Hallelujah. Let us pray.

We'll spend a moment or two in silent reflection and prayer. Please let us think about our own church and its ambiguity at home. Let us pray that it may become more holy, more gifted, more united until that great day when the ambiguity passes away.

Let's offer ourselves as instruments and agents in the hand of God for the renewal and the reform and the revival of the church. Let's pray in silence. Now perhaps you'd allow me to lead you in prayer.

Lord Jesus Christ, we want to thank you together for your worldwide messianic community. We thank you that we have the privilege of being members of it. We thank you that many of us have the privilege of being leaders in it.

And we pray for your worldwide church. Thank you for the amazing things you are doing, but we hunger for more, more holiness, more enrichment, more unity in the gospel and in the truth, not compromising the truth and seeking unity, not failing to care for the unity of the church in our pursuit of truth, but pursuing them together. Have mercy upon our own church.

Grant that we may go back to it from Keswick with a fresh determination to be loyal members of it, promoting holiness, enrichment, and unity. Hear our humble prayers in the name and for the glory of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Video: <https://sermonindex2.b-cdn.net/4Ktqe0kfZF4.mp4>

Source: <https://sermonindex.net/speakers/john-stott/the-ambiguity-of-the-church/>

Grow in Your Walk with Christ

Listen and read messages that will stir your heart for Christ and point you to deeper repentance and devotion.

- 50,000+ Sermons from speakers past and present
- 3,900+ Classic Christian Books freely readable online
- 1,200+ Bible Translations and Commentaries
- Over 450k forum posts — Join our vibrant online Christian forum

www.sermonindex.net