

CHURCH IN THE WILD

Part Two: Fences and Ladders

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I attended four high schools before the end of my sophomore year. My family moved a lot. We weren't in the military or witness protection. There's no helpful explanation. I remember the first day of my fourth high school. It was the middle of the school year. I met some administrators and was given a schedule. Someone gave me a hurried tour of the school. Then I was left on my own.

It was lunch. Holding my tray, I walked out of the food line to a blur of faces, and I didn't know a single name. Where do I go? Which group of people should I dare to sit with? I scanned the room, looking for the safest entry point. Maybe you're the kind of person who thrives in that setting. I'm not. My goal was to not be noticed and just survive day one.

You may not have that moment, but I bet you have your own moments, from the catalogue of your past, where you knew you were on the outside, and you wanted to be on the inside. Do you know why that ache for inclusion is so universal? Do you know why it is that some of you can feel the feelings of that moment as you remember it? I can still feel the feelings of that day as if I were experiencing it right now. Do you know why it's universal?

We are **ACCEPTANCE** magnets.

We are hard-wired for inclusion and connection. We're made for relationships. No one thrives alone. Here's something we learn from a young age. The acceptance we ache for requires learning unwritten rules and navigating invisible barriers. We learn this young. Life is full of fences. You can't see them, but you know if you're in or if you're out.

- You know if you're in or out with the team at work.
- You know if you're in or out with your spouse's side of the family.
- You know if you're in or out with your housemates.
- You know if you're in or out at church.

We can't see the fences, but we know they're there. Complicating the invisible nature of the acceptance game is everything that goes unstated.

- If you really knew me, the unedited version of me, would you still let me in?
- How much of me can I be?
- Are my safety and inclusion dependent on not being too different from the majority, not being too different from those with the most influence?

People give up authenticity all the time if they get acceptance in exchange. I bet most of us have made that exchange. Some of you might be making it now. Maybe we don't lie, but we can withhold our full selves, our true selves, because we don't want to be kicked to the other side of the fence. We are acceptance magnets. But that's not it.

We are **APPROVAL** magnets.

It's not enough to be accepted. How does our group perceive us? Life is full of fences *and* ladders. Inside of every fence, included with every grouping of people—there are hierarchies. We may not share a universal desire to be at the top, but none of us wants to be at the bottom. I think this is universal—we all want to avoid being shamed. It's not enough to be accepted. We want to be approved. Again, the hierarchy is invisible. No one publishes an org chart for us. We just know it's there. Life is a series of fences and ladders.

Maybe this is so deeply woven into the fabric of our lives that it feels like a waste of time to talk about it. Am I crazy for thinking that living with these invisible fences and ladders is exhausting? How many of us are tired of living like we are a PR firm? Maybe it's with friends, maybe it's at work, maybe it's with family; it could even be at church. Is anyone tired of having to make sure you say the right things in the right way, or you stay quiet at the right moments so that you don't trigger somebody's weapon system?

Is anyone tired of having to keep what you really think and feel on the down low? Is anyone tired of having to appear, even if you don't lie, but tired of having to appear as though you're in agreement so that you don't get kicked down the ladder and you don't get kicked to the other side of the fence? It's not just exhausting; it can be excruciating. Because that kind of acceptance and approval is contingent on you figuring out invisible obstacles and keeping up with unwritten rules. And the obstacles and the rules are always changing.

That's the way life is. How is it supposed to be? Should it be different than that here? Should we expect it to be different here. Or are we fools for expecting anything different here?

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-17

Will you grab a Bible and turn to 1 Corinthians? It's the seventh book in the New Testament. Last week, we introduced the theme verse. My challenge to you is to memorize this verse.

1 CORINTHIANS 16:13-14 *Be on your guard; stand firm in the faith; be courageous; be strong. Do everything in love.*

This is our summary of that. It is the anthem of this series.

SERIES THESIS: Stand **FIRM** and **FEARLESS**, but let **LOVE** lead.

If we stand firm in the gospel, and we have guts, and we are loving—will there be fences and ladders in our church?

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-17

Let's take a look at what life was like in this church.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1-17 *Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you. Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.*

Here's a quick pop quiz. Is standing firm ultimately dependent on our ability or his ability? It includes our participation but doesn't depend on our power. Jesus is holding more tightly to you than you are holding to him.

God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

They've got a rat. Somebody emailed Paul and told him about the bad behavior that was going down.

What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ." Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul? I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, so no one can say that you were baptized in my name. (Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't remember if I baptized anyone else.) For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power.

What was the problem with the church in Corinth? Fences and ladders.

Corinth was in a Greek region, but it had decidedly Roman culture. It was an honor-shame culture on steroids. It was marked by intense competition for honor. You could get honor by being included in the right associations. You could get honor through wealth. You could get honor through being seen as wise and through being an eloquent, skilled public speaker. To the same degree they craved honor, to that same degree they despised shame. They didn't merely despise shame—they weaponized it.

Corinth was a culture of earning, achieving, and fighting your way into the right groups. And it was a culture of earning, achieving, and fighting your way to the top of the right groups. Corinth was a culture of fences and ladders. The problem was that their church culture wasn't any different.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:11-12 *My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."*

They were building fences around personalities. They were creating tribes in the church based on attaching themselves to certain leaders or teachers. And it was getting ugly. Let's be clear about what this was not. It wasn't someone saying, "I really like and appreciate Apollos. The way he teaches has been so helpful in my spiritual formation." It wasn't that.

They were playing the game of trying to figure out which leader had the most prestige and then attaching themselves to that leader so that they could get prestige by association. And they were competing and fighting with each other about whose group was superior. It was fences and ladders. Who's in and who's out. Who's up and who's down. It's such a stupid game to play. And do you know what happens when you play stupid games. You win stupid prizes. The stupid prize they won for themselves, was divided church with fractured relationships. They were making a mockery of the gospel. Do we have similar vulnerabilities? I think we do.

- I'm a Charlie Kirk Christian.
- I'm a John Mark Comer Christian.
- I'm a Holy Post Christian.
- I'm a Gospel Coalition Christian.

Maybe some of those labels are lost on you. I bet we can all understand this.

The problem isn't agreeing with a prominent person or position, and the problem isn't disagreeing with that prominent person or position. The problem is when we define ourselves by who we agree with and who we disagree with. It is a problem—it is a BIG problem when we define ourselves by a pastor, leader, podcaster, politician, or personality that we've attached ourselves to. The problem grows as we primarily group with others who attach to them also. It

metastasizes into a cancer as we start to think of ourselves as a little bit higher up the ladder and those outside the group a little lower down the ladder.

There are all kinds of ways that fences and ladders make their way into a church. We've got a problem when we start deciding who is in and who is out, and when we start ranking who is up and who is down. That sort of behavior doesn't make us counterfeit Christians. It does make us compromised. And it makes a mockery of the gospel.

SERIES THESIS: Stand **FIRM** and **FEARLESS**, but let **LOVE** lead.

In these verses, Paul gives us a roadmap for standing firm in the gospel, with courage and love. Let's take a couple of minutes to trace it out.

STAND FIRM:

- Remember your inclusion in Christ.

That's the starting point. That's the anchor.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:4-5,9 *I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way—with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge—God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you... God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*

What is Paul saying. Who you are, everything you have is based on being in Christ. It's not about whatever prestigious person you attach yourself to, whatever that means. It's not about climbing ladders. The only thing that matters is being in Jesus, by faith. I want us to wrestle with this.

There's only one **FENCE**—our sin.

If you go back to the very beginning, God and people were in the garden together. That's where heaven and earth came together. There was an unhindered unity between the first people and God, and there was an unhindered unity between the man and the woman. God said, I've only got one rule. If you break it, you will die?

When Adam and Eve disobeyed God and ate the fruit, did they die immediately? (Pause.). Yes! They immediately hid from each other in shame. They hid from God. And they were kicked out of the garden. Death isn't just our bodies failing. Death is being cut off. It's being on the outside. The only reason there is a fence—the only reason we are on the outside with God and with each other is our sin. There's only one fence...

And there's only one **GATE**—Jesus.

There is a way into acceptance and approval with Jesus. There is a way for unhindered unity with each other.

JOHN 10:9 *I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved.*

There is only one fence, there is only one thing that keeps us out—it's our sin. There is a gate, there is a way into life and unity. You can walk through that gate by trusting in Jesus by faith. Paul was saying to the church at Corinth and to us, don't forget your inclusion in Christ. Stand firm. And...

- Remember your identity in Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:2-3 *To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours: Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Last week we talked about our why. We are to be sanctified. More and more and more we are to be formed like Jesus. When you trust in Jesus, you were sanctified. That's past action with ongoing implication. Now, for the rest of your life grow into that status you've been given. Remember and stand firm in that new identity.

- Remember your unity in Christ.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:10 *I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.*

This has the potential to feel confusing. The same guy who wrote this, also wrote in Romans 14 that each person should do what they believe is right in their own minds. Stay united and be gracious to each other when you disagree. So which is it? To one church it sounds like unity means you can disagree. To another it sounds like unity means you can't disagree.

Do you have to agree with everything I say, otherwise you're in this church? Do you have to agree with the person sitting next you, otherwise you're killing the unity in this church? Context is supreme. In the context of 1 Corinthians 1, Paul is talking about agreeing on the gospel. Remember last week when we talked about matters of first importance. There are some things we can get wrong. The gospel is something we can't get wrong. Jesus died for us and he was literally, physically, historically raised from the dead. We must agree on that. Being included in Christ, in what he has done for us—that is the sole basis of unity.

Our unity is exclusively based on **INCLUSION** in Christ, **AGREEMENT** about the most important thing, not agreement on **EVERYTHING**. That's it. In Christ, there are no **FENCES** and no **LADDERS**.

Stand firm on that. What's required to be fearless?

FEARLESS:

- Dare to face the deeper story.

Have you seen those man on the street interviews that late night comedians do? They love to create gotch-ya moments at political rallies. They're skilled at getting laughs by making people look stupid.

A tired technique is to find someone who is clearly a huge fan of a politician. After letting the person make their fanboy statements about the politician, they then ask something like, "Tell me one promise they've kept or a policy they've enacted." Every time the person stumbles and can't name anything. They look dumb and audience laughs.

That person isn't dumb. What's really going on is that most people don't attach themselves to a group or personality because they reasoned through facts and truth. Us humans, we tend to attach to a group or personality because we like the way it makes us feel about ourselves.

We all want **TRUTH**—we're desperate for an **IDENTITY**.

We are all vulnerable to attaching ourselves to personalities and to groups that affirm the story we want to be true about us. We join, and we divide, and we fight in order to preserve the story we're telling ourselves about ourselves.

Years ago, I had an encounter with a man who behaved in a way that he wasn't proud of. And I think he was embarrassed that I saw it. I'm a million miles from perfect. I did my best to be gracious. He ended up dropping his defenses and vulnerably sharing deeper struggles that led to his regrettable behavior. For my part, I cherished getting to share that. It felt like unity.

Have you ever been real with someone and it felt good in the moment. But the next day you can't believe you were that vulnerable? You feel naked and exposed. I think that happened. It wasn't long after that that he met with me to tell me that he was leaving our church because I'm a Marxist socialist, and he was a watchman on the wall, and it was his job to stand up to people like me.

I'm not a Marxist socialist. He's not a watchman on the wall. He was still playing the game of ladders of fences. He felt like he lost face and he had to do something to get place back on the ladder. I wish I was better than him. I play that same stupid game all the time. Every time I'm

around other pastors I'm trying to figure out where I am on the ladder. I hate it. When we play stupid games, we win stupid prizes. All that we win is petty competitiveness, more insecurity, and the loss of unity.

- Repent of the fences and ladders you carry and cling to.

What might happen if we repented of the fences and ladders that we carry and cling to? What if, from the depths of who we are, we truly believed that Jesus carried the cross so that we don't have to carry these things around anymore?

If we stand firm and fearless in the gospel, what will love look like?

LOVE: EMBRACE each other like there are no fences, and **HONOR** each other like there are no ladders.

We might be able to fake this for a while. We might be able effort our way into this for a while. This comes from understanding how loved and delighted you are in Christ. This comes from realizing fences and there are no ladders.

I want you to think about the person in our church who most annoys you. See their face. Don't say their name, just see their face. You are going to be neighbors with that person in heaven. And you're going to love it. For all eternity you are going to experience happy unity. Which is more real: that or the division you have with them right now?

If we act like this isn't possible, we're saying with our lives, what you did on the cross is too pathetic and too weak to make this **[pointing to screen]** a reality. We'd be saying the presence of the Holy Spirit with and in us is too pathetic and too weak to keep the promise of unity.

I've got two invitations:

1. Pick the person you're tempted to kick down the ladder or kick to the other side of the fence, and I want to you to have an honest talk with Jesus and then look for ways that you can embrace them like there are no fences and honor them like there are no ladders.
2. If you've been a large group person only, if you haven't given yourself the opportunity to truly step into unity by circling up in a small group, or class, or Bible study—I want you to take that step. And if you've got some nervousness, which is normal, if you have some nervousness because you're concerned that people aren't going to accept you, would you at least recognize that you're preemptively rejecting them?

I promise you that we will be wobbly. We will get it wrong. I will get it wrong. In Christ, there are no fences or ladders. Let's stand firm, and fearless, and let love lead together.