

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. 1 Cor 11.1.

As we have seen in our journey through 1 Cor, the Christian congregation was a tragically divided and unsettled congregation. Why? Because there was a little group who thought they were better than the rest. They were the elite to whom the usual rules did not apply. They were not only social and intellectual snobs, but, even more deadly, *spiritual* snobs. This smart set thought they could still mix with their old pagan friends at the temple feasts they used to frequent. What harm was there in it? These Greek and Roman gods were only wood and stone. They were only attending these pagan feasts to keep in with their old chums. Was that so bad? If some of the more ignorant people in the congregation thought that wrong, that was their problem. I mean, you can't live your life around what the stupid think, can you, darling?

Paul won't have any of this, largely because it has divided the congregation. When some Christians look down on other Christians, people get upset. It makes them angry and defensive. I'm afraid it's been going on for the past 2000 years. The intellectuals sneer at the simple faith of the ordinary man in the pew. Catholics think they are the true church. Protestants think only they understand the Bible. And the little mission hall with the tin roof down the back street thinks they are the only authentic Christians. This spiritual snobbery destroys the Church, and Paul will have none of it, for where's the love? And isn't Christianity basically about love? Christians shouldn't look down their noses at Christians.

So Paul has to teach these clever-dicks an important lesson. Of course you are free to do whatever you like, 10.23a... But how are

are your actions impacting on others? Are you helping or hindering others? Vv23-24... Is your attendance at pagan feasts doing good to your brothers in Christ or harming them? Is buying meat in the market that was used in the pagan temple sacrifices a good example to fellow believers? Is it worth proving your point, if you upset or even lead astray other members of the congregation, vv27-32...

There is an important point here. We are not isolated individuals. We are joined to each other - to our families, our friends. If I walk out on my wife, that is not just between her and me. Other people are affected. And certainly as Christians, we do not come to church to hear a sermon, just like someone going to the pictures to see a film. You don't go to the cinema to meet others. You have come just for the film. But when you come to church, you are joining a family. Paul calls it the Body of Christ. The whole idea of communion underlines out oneness with God and with each other. So Paul is saying to this smart-alec elite: 'stop shewing off. Stop going on about yourselves and your rights and think about others and how your behaviour is affecting them', vv14-17...

Yes, the Greek and Roman gods may be just statues, but others in the congregation are being upset by your attendance at these feasts. So flee idolatry. Stop going to these idolatrous feasts, vv14. Make your choice. If you follow Christ, you can't keep in with the old pagan ways as well, vv18-21... Here is a lesson to us also. We can't keep our Christianity private and limited to Sunday. Of course, we will be ethical at work on Monday, but why are we silent about Jesus in the week? Why do we not mention his name outside Church? Make your mind up who you follow. You can't have both.

This powerful elite in the Corinthian church are giving a very bad example to the rest. They are doing their own thing without any regard to how they are upsetting the rest of the Church family. In our selfish, individualistic modern society, Paul is giving us important teaching. Think about others before self. It's so simple, yet we don't do it - with disastrous consequences. Look at v24... and vv32-33... We should be a help not a hindrance to others. And that's why Paul urges the congregation to follow his example as he follows the example of Christ, 11.1...

We have a real problem in our society with the lack of good examples. Who do our youngsters look up to now? Certainly not to our politicians. The tragic thing is that now we actually *expect* them to lie and put their snouts in the trough. So who is left? Models like Kate Moss. Footballers like Ashley Cole, Rio Ferdinand, and Ryan Giggs. The other day a lawyer was bleating on behalf of his client Rio Ferdinand that it is unfair to expect him to have the morals of a bishop. Well, apart from the fact that a few of our more colourful bishops hardly follow the episcopal qualifications spelt out in 1 *Tim* 3 and *Titus* 1, the reality is that with their fame, riches and undoubted prowess on the field thousands of young men do model themselves on people like Rio Ferdinand. And with so many absent or useless fathers these days, you can't blame these lads. They need to look up to someone. The other day I asked the Junior Soldiers, 'Would you like your father to be like Ryan Giggs?' To a man they all said, 'Yes, sure'. Some of them even said, 'My dad *is* like Ryan Giggs'. They all laughed and thought Giggs was a great man. And then I asked, 'And would you like your father to be sleeping with

your auntie?' They piped down then and went silent.

I sometimes wonder whether we adults have so lost our confidence that we think it is wrong for us to give an example to our youngsters. 'I don't want to impose my views on others'. Very sophisticated, but it is a relinquishing of our duty of care to the young. They need guidance. Parents, teachers, clergy, youth leaders, elders, Sunday School teachers - youngsters are watching us.

Let me end with a moving story I heard the other day from the Army Foundation College. We teach them the Values and Standards of the British Army - Courage, Discipline, Respect for Others, Integrity, Loyalty, Selfless Commitment. A Junior Soldier came to a padre to tell him how his parents divorced when he was two. His mother remarried and his stepfather was a wonderful father to him. When the teenage years came, he rebelled so badly that the stepfather left and had a breakdown. It was only after hearing us teach the 6 Core Values, that the boy realised how vile he had been to his loving stepfather. He has tried to contact him, but the stepfather is naturally very wary. The JS wants the padre to help him write a letter of contrition. He wants to put things right.

People *do* need guidance. People, especially when they are young, *do* need role models. We can't just leave them to work it out for themselves. That lad's life was just moral chaos and dog-eat-dog, until he was faced with some standards from us padres. They *do* respond. The world would be a better place for good examples. And who will be *our* example? The Lord Jesus, of course. He has shewn us how to live and how to love. He was a *real* man, a real person. Why the world thinks it can live without him is utterly beyond me.