

INTRODUCTION

*United Through Christ,
Bound to Each Other*
Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

"Love is patient; love is kind . . . It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things."

"Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it."

"The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and said, 'This is my body that is for you. Do this in remembrance of me.'"¹

Today, Christians participating in a wedding, an ordination, or a service of the Lord's Supper might not realize these words about love and unity were addressed to a church in conflict. Paul had founded the congregation in Corinth himself around the year 50.² He had stayed there about a year and a half before moving on to Ephesus, a few hundred miles away. There, sometime between 53 and 55, he received a letter from the Corinthians.³ It described the doubts they hoped the apostle would clear up, and also the conflicts they hoped (and some may have feared) he would adjudicate.

Clarify and adjudicate Paul did.

The problem Paul saw in the Corinthian church was a lack of love that betrayed God's saving act in resurrecting Jesus Christ. Corinth was a cosmopolitan seaport, an important trade center for the Roman Empire, and a place notorious for valuing

1 1 Cor. 13:4,7; 12:27; 11:23-26

2 J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 773.

3 Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 776.

wealth and showing callousness to the poor.⁴ The Christian congregation there was diverse. It was easy for factions to form. Since there were as yet no dedicated church buildings, small groups met regularly in homes, the whole church coming together only to celebrate the Lord's Supper.

Paul had no patience with factionalism. In this letter, he called his siblings in faith to a loving unity rooted in the reality that Jesus Christ had been crucified and resurrected for everyone. Paul explored and reiterated this theme of unity as he addressed the Corinthians' various concerns. And his letter was preserved within what became the New Testament because other Christians shared those concerns and recognized the Holy Spirit's influence on Paul's words.

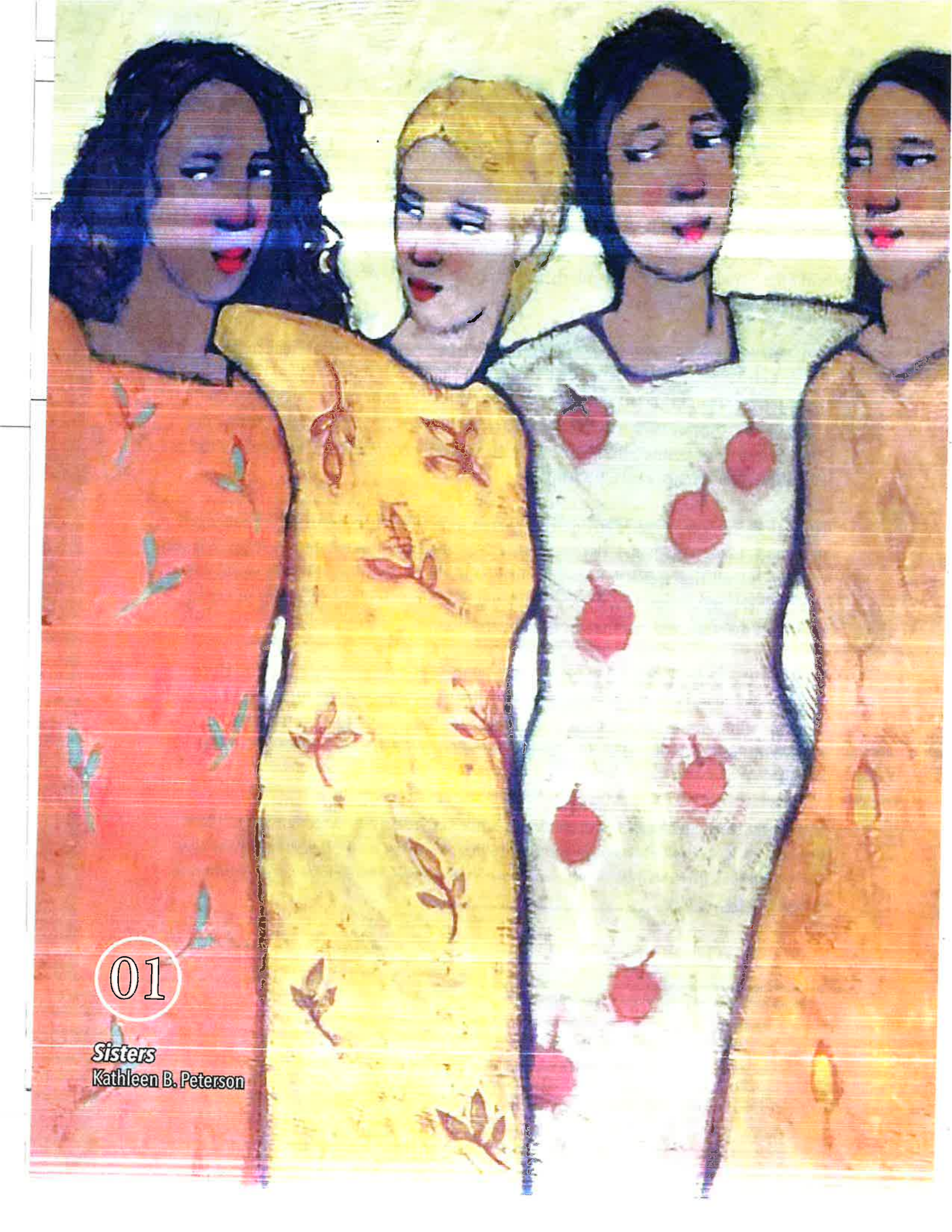
Paul wrote at a time when Christians expected Jesus' imminent return; he challenged his friends to be ready when that day came. Two thousand years later, the church is still waiting, still affirming that Jesus will return, and still proclaiming that this world has already been transformed by God's life-giving love. Our challenge remains to live in ways that demonstrate our trust in the resurrection.

Many of the questions asked by our earliest siblings in faith remain ours, too. How can our lives demonstrate our trust in Jesus Christ's victory over death? What do we do when different understandings of the gospel undermine church unity? How can Christians understand gender and sexuality? When conflict arises, how do we deal with it?

This Bible study will raise many questions while providing few direct answers. Those, you will seek yourself through prayerful reading, thinking, and discussion. I pray that unity in Jesus Christ will guide you and your study group and inspire you, together, to do everything in love.

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4 Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," 775.



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