



Lesson One

UNITY IN CHRIST, WISDOM FROM GOD

SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 1–2

MAIN IDEA

Opening this letter to a Corinthian church experiencing division for a variety of reasons, Paul reminds his friends of the fundamental conflict between the wisdom found in the world and the wisdom we encounter through the grace of God in Jesus Christ.

OPENING PRAYER

*Spirit of wisdom,
who is always with us,
we thank you for constantly guiding us toward truth, love, and unity
in Jesus Christ.*

*Help us learn from our brother Paul
and from the church of ancient Corinth,
flawed saints like ourselves,
whom you love
and will never let go.
Amen.*

INTRODUCTION

From the very beginning of Paul's letter to the church in Corinth, he emphasizes their unity, through Jesus Christ, with each other and with Christians everywhere. More elaborately than in his other letters, he layers on descriptors of unity: "the church of God," "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus," "called to be saints," "together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours."

And then he immediately addresses the fact that he is writing to a church in conflict. Paul emphasizes unity in Jesus Christ precisely because the Corinthian church is not unified. As we read the letter, we will see the various pressures pushing its members apart: class divisions in a city where huge wealth disparities and ostentatious displays of affluence were not just accepted but celebrated; competing understandings of what it meant to be free in Christ; and different views of various spiritual gifts. Reminding his friends of the fundamental and even shocking difference between commonly accepted wisdom and the wisdom God reveals in Jesus Christ, Paul calls his friends to relationships grounded in the love made visible in the cross and resurrection.

LESSON

Often, when Christians think of the Bible, we think of stories.

- God sends a flood—and then, a rainbow.
- An Egyptian princess finds a baby in a basket by the Nile; that baby grows up to lead God's people out of slavery into freedom.
- A young woman, engaged to be married, says yes to the wildly improbable call to bear God's child.

- That child grows up to cast out demons and heal suffering people; to urge people to love God and their neighbor more than money; to turn water into wine.
- A stone seals a tomb; within a couple of days, the stone has been rolled away and the tomb is empty.

These stories of struggle, betrayal, love, and redemption are the easiest parts of scripture to anchor in our minds. You likely have your own favorites: the stories that, to you, most vividly express God's promises.

And then there are the epistles. The oldest parts of the New Testament, epistles are a different kind of writing from the Gospels, or other narrative-driven books like Jonah or Ruth. First Corinthians contains a lot of action, much of it driven by conflict, but when the reader enters the story, that action has already taken place. Keep this in mind as you read, and a picture of the church in Corinth will take shape.

Dropping into a Conversation in Progress

When you and I read Paul's words, we are listening in on his conversation with a community he loves. That conversation included several letters. More correspondence survives from Paul to the congregation at Corinth than to any other church. (Whether he wrote them more often, or more of his letters to Corinth were preserved, we don't know.) The document we call "First Corinthians" is at least Paul's second letter to that church, shown by the fact that in 5:9, Paul states, "I wrote to you in my letter" What we call "Second Corinthians" contains fragments of at least three letters, and references to five.¹

¹ J. Paul Sampley, "The Second Letter to the Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible Volume XI* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 3.

In what is now First Corinthians, Paul replies to a letter that contained his friends' questions and details of their conflicts. In his reply, he reminds them that Jesus Christ's resurrection is the bedrock of Christians' faith, life, and identity, and that love is to be the hallmark of our communities. While clearly Paul loves the Corinthians, he also feels angry and disappointed with them. He had lived among them, teaching them the Christian faith. Now, some members of the church are turning away from that faith.

Notice how Paul addresses the Corinthians: as "the church of God," "those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus," "called to be saints," "together with all those who in every place call on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours" (1 Cor. 1:2). Paul is reminding these siblings in faith that Jesus Christ unites them to each other, and to other Christians and their spiritual ancestors across time and space. Their unity isn't based on any personal affection they might have for each other. Nor are they simply members of a club whose unity is based on some common interest. Their unity is based on their baptism, which unites them to the crucified and resurrected Jesus Christ, and to each other. Paul will develop this theme over the course of the letter, and we will return to it.

Look back over communications from your congregation's leadership, or within a specific group (like Presbyterian Women). What words are chosen to remind readers or listeners of your unity?

Who Are These People in Paul's Letter?

Before we go any further, you might be wondering about a few names that appear in Chapter 1.

The first line of this letter identifies it as a collaboration between Paul and "our brother Sosthenes." That is all anyone alive knows about that man. A Sosthenes is mentioned in the book of Acts, which was likely written forty to fifty years after this letter. He was "the official of the synagogue" (18:17), a Jewish leader in Corinth while Paul preached the gospel there in the early 50s. The incident in which Sosthenes is mentioned is aptly called "bizarre" by biblical scholar Robert W. Wall.² In a conflict between Paul and Jewish leaders in the area, in which Luke says the Roman proconsul or local official stayed neutral, Sosthenes is physically assaulted. We're not told why, or by whom.

Was the Sosthenes of the book of Acts a scapegoat, in the wrong place at the wrong time? Was he a convert to the way of Jesus who also worshipped in the synagogue, as many early Christians did? We don't know. But if Paul's coauthor is the same Sosthenes mentioned in Acts, he did convert to the Way at some point. He may have traveled on from Corinth to Ephesus with Paul, or he may have accompanied the men—Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus—who traveled to Ephesus from Corinth to deliver the church's letter to Paul.

Cephas, mentioned in 1:12, is the apostle Peter. Apollos, who will appear several more times in this letter, is mentioned in Acts 18 and 19 as an Alexandrian Jew who journeyed from Ephesus to Corinth to "help" believers after Priscilla and her husband Aquila had instructed him in

² Robert W. Wall, "The Acts of the Apostles," *New Interpreter's Bible Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 256.



St. Paul writing. From an early 9th c. CE manuscript version of Paul's letters. Ascribed to the Monastery of St. Gallen under the scribe Wolfcoz. The inscription says "he sits here and writes."

How did this letter come to be part of the New Testament? Over time, Christians recognized some letters written roughly between the years 50 and 100 as authoritative for Christian faith and life. Typically, these letters were 1) associated with an apostle; 2) addressed to Christian communities that were considered important; and 3) considered sound in their teaching. Christians trust that the Holy Spirit played a role in the choice and preservation of these documents.

Source: Raymond E. Brown, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New York: Doubleday, 1997), 10–12.

"the Way of God." (Priscilla, also called Prisca, and Aquila will come up at the end of First Corinthians.)

All we know about Chloe is that she was the head of a household, most likely in Corinth but possibly in Ephesus, and had friends or family among the Corinthian fellowship.

Whom does your congregation, or another ministry in which you participate, remember as founding saints, or as significant builders along the way? Are there other people you believe should be remembered and honored? Are there some whose legacies you think are more complicated than is generally acknowledged?

The Cross Is Wisdom? Sounds Like Foolishness

In these first two chapters, Paul lays the foundation for the rest of the letter. He writes to settle some disputes and to remind the Corinthians of what true unity in Christ looks like. With this in mind, he opens by asserting that God called him "to be an apostle of Christ Jesus," a person commissioned by God to share the good news. Having reminded the Corinthians of their membership in the larger church, he urges them to remember their baptism into Jesus Christ.

Paul consistently calls the church to strive not for just any unity, but specifically for *unity in Jesus Christ*. Christians are meant to be people who trust in a reality that to the rest of the world seems completely implausible. We are to stake our lives on a wisdom that looks like utter foolishness. We are to believe that, through

one particular crucifixion among untold Roman executions, God, who freed Israel from enslavement, demonstrated the same divine power by resurrecting the executed man. Writing to a community composed primarily of Gentiles (non-Jews) and steeped in pagan philosophies and religions, Paul insists that Jesus Christ is not just another philosopher or “wisdom teacher.” The wisdom he embodies cannot be separated from the fact that he was crucified. As biblical scholar Richard Hays wrote, “it is the *crucified Christ* who is the wisdom of God.”³ When Christians need to define divine wisdom—the order that sustains creation—we point to Jesus on the cross. He embodies divine wisdom precisely because, after he accepted execution, God raised him to life again. The resurrected Jesus Christ is the person to whom we entrust our lives, present and future.

Paul states this poetically in 1:18: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing”—who do not know the gospel—“but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.” In the following verse, he paraphrases Isaiah 29:14 to point to Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of God’s long-standing promises. (Remember, when Paul cites scripture, he’s referring to what Christians now call the Old Testament. There was as yet no New Testament; Paul doesn’t know he is literally writing it.) No one was prepared for God’s Messiah to be crucified—not Jews, not pagans. When Paul says, “Jews ask for signs and Greeks desire wisdom” (1:22), he means, the very idea that God’s anointed agent of salvation could be crucified was offensive to practically everyone in the ancient world on theological, political, philosophical,

and cultural grounds. God hanging on a cross? God liberating people through an execution by a brutal empire? Honoring someone as Messiah who had been shamed in this way? Foolishness!⁴ Nonetheless, that foolish-seeming idea, which Christians have become convinced is the truth, is the basis of our unity in Jesus Christ. For Christians, “both Jews and Greeks,” he is “the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:24).

How do you explain or summarize your faith to non-Christians? What role do Jesus’ crucifixion and resurrection play in your description?

Who Gave Paul the Right to Write Like This?

Throughout this letter, Paul asserts his authority as an apostle. In these introductory chapters, he does so paradoxically. First, he notes that “not many” of the Corinthians, when God called them to new life in Christ, “were wise by human standards,” or “powerful” or “of noble birth” (1:26). Having nipped possible bragging in the bud, he turns to himself. Paul did not come to Corinth “proclaiming the testimony of God . . . in superior speech or wisdom.” He had come knowing nothing “except Jesus Christ, and him crucified,” preaching “in weakness and in fear and in much trembling” (2:1–3). But in the rest of the letter, he will show that, precisely by knowing himself to be weak, and trembling in awe of God’s wisdom in Jesus Christ, he is able to proclaim the gospel and pattern his life on it. And he expects his siblings in faith to do the same.

3 Richard B. Hays, *First Corinthians*, Interpretation (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1997), 33.

4 Charles L. Campbell, *1 Corinthians*, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2018), 30.

In Chapter 2, Paul reminds the Corinthians that they had seen the Spirit at work in him precisely in his willingness to appear foolish, not speaking “persuasive words of wisdom” (2:4) but proclaiming “Jesus Christ, and him crucified” (2:2). By relying on God’s providence, Paul demonstrated that God’s loving power was the foundation of his faith.

Paul described himself as an apostle; how would you describe him? Who are some apostles you know? How is participation in Presbyterian Women like the work of an apostle?

Paul's Call to Grow Up (in Faith)

Even though God’s love is the bedrock of one’s belief and discipleship, once someone has accepted Jesus Christ, Paul does expect them to keep growing in faith. Writing of “God’s wisdom,” of which he speaks among “the mature” (2:6–7), he implicitly asks, don’t the Corinthians want to be among the mature, the spiritual? Don’t they want to know God more deeply? Not every spirit abroad in the world comes from God; spirits animate the powers that oppose God,

too. Discerning these spirits requires the kind of maturity and wisdom that Paul has tried to impart to the Corinthians and wants them to seek. Only reliance on God’s Spirit can help them with this. Only “the mind of the Lord” (2:16)—the wisdom of the one who gave himself up for the world—can lead Christians to truth.

Have you ever experienced a crisis in a congregation after a long-term pastor or staff member left? What was that like? How did the church move through the crisis?

TAKEAWAY

Over time the Corinthian church forgot what Paul had taught them: that through their baptism, they were united with Jesus Christ *and* with each other. To remember this, and live accordingly, is true wisdom. The Corinthians’ many conflicts stemmed largely from their having forgotten this wisdom. When we are in conflict with other Christians, or when we’re not sure what to do in any given situation, turning our attention to Jesus is the first step to acting wisely.