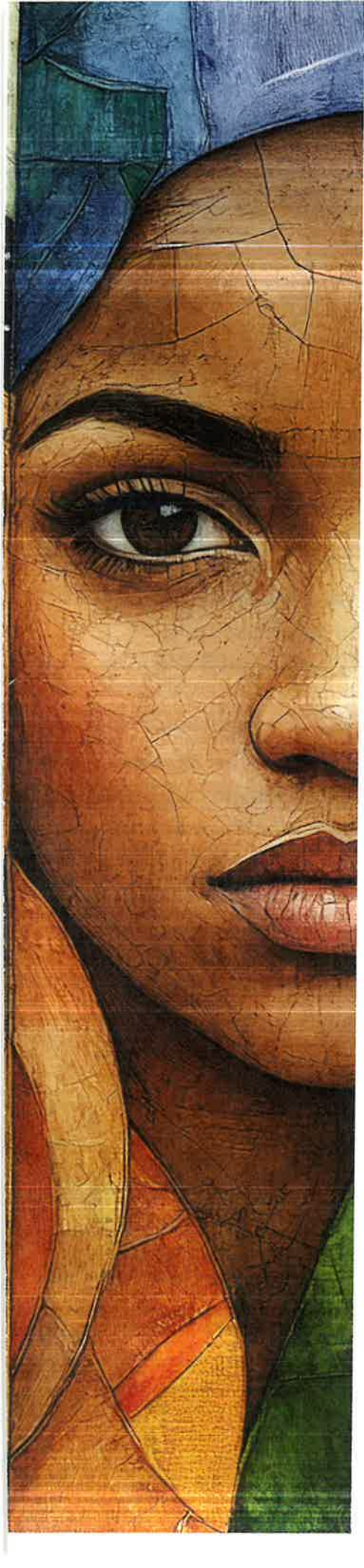




## Lesson Nine

# CONNECTED BY GOD'S LOVE

### SCRIPTURE

1 Corinthians 16

### MAIN IDEA

Conflicts within the Corinthian church endured, just as they do today, but Paul's letter urges everyone to treat each other as the siblings we have become in Jesus Christ, and to let love guide all we do.

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### OPENING PRAYER

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*Dear Jesus,*

*You invite us to abide in love with you and with each other.*

*Help us never to give up on love, on each other, on ourselves.*

*Prepare us for the day when we will meet you face to face,*

*and help us recognize you when you appear here and now.*

*Amen.*

## INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter, as he says goodbye for now, Paul reaffirms his pastoral role. Not knowing when he will next see his fellow Christians in Corinth, he again encourages mutual love. He answers their questions about taking up a collection for the church in Jerusalem, reminding them of their connection to their Jewish Christian siblings, some of whom he mentions by name. And he offers final urgings for them to let love guide everything they do, and to treat each other as the siblings they have become in Jesus Christ.

Sadly, later writings show that the conflicts within the Corinthian congregation endured. Paul's relationship with them continued for some time, as evidenced by the fragments of several letters that were eventually gathered into Second Corinthians. At the end of the first century, Bishop Clement of Rome advised this feuding community to read their letter from Paul again, presumably to lead them back to unity in Jesus Christ. Not every church conflict is resolved, and yet the church persists.

**What similarities and differences do you see between the first-century Corinthian church, your own congregation, and/or Christianity in your area (however you want to define that, geographically)? What do you think first-century Corinthians would recognize if they visited your church today, and what do you think would surprise them? What would you have in common?**

## LESSON

Paul closes this letter as he began it, by mentioning a number of fellow Christians by name.

### Paul's Colleagues

#### Timothy

In 4:17, Paul described Timothy as “my beloved and trustworthy child in the Lord.” Timothy is such a close associate of Paul that he is named as the coauthor of First Thessalonians, Second Corinthians, Philippians, and Philemon, and Paul conveys Timothy's greetings in his letter to the Romans. Timothy is also a named coauthor of two letters attributed to Paul that scholars generally consider to have been written by someone else: Colossians and Second Thessalonians. As is the case for most early Christians, we don't know much about Timothy, but both the Acts of the Apostles and the Second Letter to Timothy tell us that women played a vital role in his journey of faith. He was “the son of a Jewish woman who was a [Christian] believer, but his father was a Greek” (Acts 16:1). Timothy's mother is identified as Eunice, and her mother as Lois, in Second Timothy 1:5, and they are credited with having taught him the “sacred writings”—Israel's scriptures—“from childhood” (2 Tim. 3:15).

In closing, Paul urges the Corinthian fellowship to receive Timothy well, should he be able to visit (16:10–11). Paul doesn't know how the various factions of the Corinthian church will receive this letter. For all he knows, his words might make some members angrier, and liable to take out their anger on his fellow evangelist. He tries to protect Timothy from a distance.

## Apollos

We don't know why Apollos won't return to Corinth "now," as Paul says. The letter's Greek text says "it was not at all the will for him to come now" (16:12). Is that will Apollos's, as stated in both the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition ("he was not at all willing") and the New International Version ("he was quite unwilling")? Alternatively, did Paul and Apollos think it was not God's will for Apollos to visit the Corinthians? Or was "the will" Paul and Apollos's mutually discerned decision? Apollos appears in the first chapter's discussion of factions among the Corinthians, as some say "I belong to Apollos" as opposed to "I belong to Paul" or, most shockingly, "I belong to Christ," as if every Christian didn't (1:12). Paul, however, presents himself and Apollos as being on the same team, partners in ministry. In light of the fact that Paul is unable to travel to Corinth at this time, and the fact that, again, Paul and his colleagues in Ephesus don't know how this letter will be received, Apollos and Paul may have wanted to give the community time to absorb its contents before Apollos returned.

## Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus

Paul raises up several people as particularly devoted "to the services of the saints": Stephanas and members of his household; and Fortunatus and Achaicus. All these men visited Paul to deliver the Corinthians' letter, and presumably, they will travel back to Corinth with this reply. As we might expect in such a conflicted church, Stephanas, Fortunatus, and Achaicus are not universally beloved. Paul sees fit to remind the Corinthians that "members of the household

of Stephanas were the first fruits in Achaia [the Greek province whose capital was Corinth], and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints" (16:15). Therefore, Paul urges the congregation to "put yourselves at the service of such people and of everyone who works and toils with them" (16:16), and to "give recognition" to these three brothers upon their return (16:18).

## Aquila and Prisca

When Paul tells the Corinthians that Aquila and Prisca (also known as Priscilla), "together with the church in their house, greet you warmly in the Lord" (16:19), he is reminding the congregation of their roots. Acts 18:2 says that this married Jewish Christian couple were co-founders with Paul of the church in Corinth, as they had had to leave Rome when Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews. In Paul's letter to the Roman church, likely written within a couple of years of this one, he says Prisca and Aquila—mentioning the wife first, a noteworthy marker of her higher status—"risked their necks for my life." Not only Paul is grateful for them, "but also all the churches of the gentiles" (Rom. 16:4). The gentle and implicit contrast with the Corinthians' factionalism and self-interest is visible in the closing of First Corinthians to anyone who knows Paul and his associates.

## Connections to Jerusalem and Jewish Practices

As he closes this letter, Paul reinforces the Corinthian church's connection to Jerusalem and to Christians there. Earlier in the letter, he had reminded his friends that Israel's ancestors were now their spiritual family, too (see 1 Corinthians 10, for example). Through that inheritance, obtained for them through Jesus Christ, non-Jews



have been made one family with God's covenant people. It's appropriate for formerly pagan Christians, as most of the Corinthians were, to support their family in Jerusalem. In 4:7, Paul had asked the congregation, "What do you have that you did not receive?" Now, they are being invited to offer a gift in gratitude for the heritage of faith they have received from their Jewish siblings, and for God's gift of the Jewish Messiah.

Paul's words offer some markers of Christians' incorporation into elements of Jewish culture. He instructs the Corinthians to put aside funds for Jerusalem "on the first day of every week" (16:2) by the Jewish calendar, what English speakers call Sunday. For Christians, that day was sanctified by Jesus' resurrection—a fact obvious to, for example, Spanish speakers who call it "domingo," meaning the Lord's day. Paul refers to that day in Greek as the sabbath, a uniquely Jewish word and concept, now adapted to refer to the new creation Jesus inaugurated. Also, Paul mentions his plan to "stay in Ephesus until Pentecost" (16:8), meaning the feast of Shavuot (or Weeks), celebrated fifty days after Passover. In time, Christians will come to celebrate their own Pentecost, the giving of the Holy Spirit, fifty days after Easter. As Paul is writing this letter, however, Christians have not yet begun to celebrate a feast of Easter that was separate from Passover, nor a separate Pentecost.<sup>1</sup>

**How can different congregations of the same denomination, or different denominations in the same local community, encourage and support each other?**

**What can lead them into conflict with each other? Do church polity and governance bodies play a role in this encouragement and/or these conflicts?**

### Connections Across the Miles

Paul closes this letter with greetings from "the churches of Asia," as he writes from Ephesus in the Roman province of Asia (roughly equivalent to Turkey today).<sup>2</sup> Again, he reminds the Corinthians of their connections, not only to Prisca and Aquila whom they know, but also to siblings in Christ they haven't met, in a land they will likely never visit. Unity in Jesus Christ is not only a local imperative. This unity is also a universal reality, effected by Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection. Now it's up to the Corinthians to embody it.

**In what ways do you feel connected to Christians abroad, from different cultures, who speak different languages? How do you tend to these connections?**

### Bishop Clement of Rome's Concern

The Corinthian church's troubles weren't just a problem between them and Paul. If they had been, those troubles might have ended when Paul died, likely by execution in Rome in the early 60s. The problems persisted, however. Around the year 96, Bishop Clement of Rome sent his own letter to the Christians of Corinth,

1 According to the fourth-century historian Eusebius, the distinctively Christian feast of Easter had come into being by the second century. Eusebius, *Church History* V:23, [newadvent.org/fathers/250105.htm](http://newadvent.org/fathers/250105.htm).

2 J. Paul Sampley, "The First Letter to the Corinthians," *New Interpreter's Bible Volume X* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2002), 1001.

expressing his concerns about “the [recent] odious and unholy breach of unity among you,”<sup>3</sup> and telling them to “Read your letter from the blessed Apostle Paul again.”<sup>4</sup> By the time Clement wrote, the church had formalized the ordination of elders (presbyters) to lead congregations as the original generation of apostles died. In Corinth, the authority of these presbyters was contested. Clement scolds, “It is shameful, my dear friends, shameful in the extreme, and quite unworthy of the Christian training you have had, that the loyal and ancient church of Corinth, because of one or two individuals, should now be reputed to be at odds with its clergy.”<sup>5</sup> Even non-Christians have heard of this conflict, the bishop says, “so that your thoughtlessness has brought the name of the Lord into disrespect, to say nothing of imperilling your own souls.”<sup>6</sup>

Clement reviews the importance of love with his Corinthian siblings. “If there is true Christian love in a man,” he declares, “let him carry out the precepts of Christ.” Clement does not quote Paul’s ode to love, but its influence on him is clear as he elaborates on the meaning of “true Christian love.”

Love binds us fast to God. Love casts a veil over sins innumerable. There are no limits to love’s endurance, no end to its patience. Love is without servility, as it is without arrogance. Love knows of no divisions,

promotes no discord; all the works of love are done in perfect fellowship. It was in love that all God’s chosen saints were made perfect; for without love nothing is pleasing to Him. It was in love that the Lord drew us to Himself; because of the love He bore us, our Lord Jesus Christ, at the will of God, gave His blood for us—His flesh for our flesh, His life for our lives.<sup>7</sup>

Even though the Corinthian congregation remained in conflict, or notoriously fell back into it from time to time, both they and their fellow Christians recognized the value of the letter we now call First Corinthians. Clement urged them to read it again, because he knew they had preserved it. Not only the Corinthians had the letter in their possession. It was repeatedly copied and widely circulated, as evidenced by the letter’s inclusion in 779 extant manuscripts from the third through the sixteenth centuries.<sup>8</sup> And it is in our Bibles today, for us to appreciate, puzzle over, and argue with.

**Not all conflicts end up being resolved, either in the church or in families or among friends. How do you pray about conflicts that seem intractable? If you are directly involved in the conflict, how do you salvage whatever good you can from the situation?**

3 “The First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians,” Chapter 1, in Maxwell Stamforth, translator, and Andrew Louth, editor, *Early Christian Writings: The Apostolic Fathers* (New York: Penguin Books, 1987), 23.

4 “The First Epistle of Clement,” Chapter 47, in *Early Christian Writings*, 42.

5 “The First Epistle of Clement,” Chapter 47, in *Early Christian Writings*, 42.

6 “The First Epistle of Clement,” Chapter 47, in *Early Christian Writings*, 42.

7 “The First Epistle of Clement,” Chapter 47, in *Early Christian Writings*, 49.

8 Karen Armstrong, *St. Paul: The Apostle We Love to Hate* (New York, Amazon Publishing, 2015), 81.

## United in God's Enduring Love

Paul ends this letter with a final warning and a return to the essentials of Christian faith: "Let anyone be accursed who has no love for the Lord. Our Lord, come! The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you. My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus" (16:22–24). Again, the Corinthians are to behave with the love that demonstrates their conversion. If they lack love for Jesus, their actions will betray that fact, and God will judge them accordingly.

"Our Lord, come," originally "Marana tha," is a rare example of a phrase in Aramaic—the language Jesus and his first disciples spoke together—in New Testament writings. This plea also appears at the end of the Revelation to John (22:20), and in the eucharistic prayer in the *Didache*, a first-century manual for Christian life and liturgy.<sup>9</sup> It was Christians' habit, from early on, to implore Jesus fervently to return. Paul's use of "Marana tha" reconnects the Corinthians to the very first, Aramaic-speaking witnesses to the resurrection, and reminds them, again, of their hope for a new world and a new life in Jesus Christ.

**How do you—or do you—think about Jesus' return? Do you pray for it, look forward to it, fear it? What, if anything, do you feel you need to do to prepare to meet him?**

Paul's final words take him back to his role as mother, nursemaid, or father to this

congregation: "My love be with all of you in Christ Jesus." Over the course of this letter, he rebuked the Corinthians, he has corrected them, he has warned them. Now, in closing, he reminds them that he still loves them. They remain united by love, which by God's grace will endure.

## TAKEAWAY

Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians urged them—urges you and me—to remember we are one in Jesus Christ, and to express that unity by treating each other with love. The love we are to show one another honors everyone's gifts and contributions to the community, even in the midst of conflict. Christian love doesn't replicate the prejudices and abusive patterns of the larger society, and it doesn't give in to our own selfish impulses. Loving like this would be an impossible command if the resurrected Jesus Christ were not with us, but he is. And he helps us to find the most loving path forward, together, in any situation.

Paul's message of unity in Jesus resonated with me as I studied this ancient letter, to which generation after generation of Christians have turned for guidance, and as I wrote about unity for Christians I don't know personally but who are my siblings in faith. I am grateful for each person at Presbyterian Women who has offered their various gifts to put this Bible study together, and I am grateful for everyone who has taken the time to read it. As we consider how best we might live with love, in our own time and places, and through our own conflicts, I trust our risen Lord will be with us. May God give us the grace truly to follow him, together.

9 *The Didache* 10:6, in Aaron Milavec, *The Didache: Text, Translation, Analysis, and Commentary* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2003), 25.