

LESSON ONE

Get Together

FOCAL TEXT

1 Corinthians 1:1–17; 3:1–4

BACKGROUND

1 Corinthians 1:1—4:19

MAIN IDEA

Christians' participation in disharmony, divisions, jealousy, and quarreling is incompatible with the cross of Christ and marks them as being spiritually immature.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

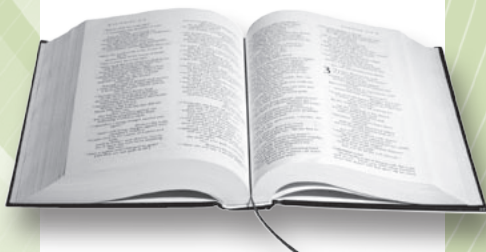
How can we overcome our human tendency to division, disharmony, jealousy, and quarreling?

STUDY AIM

To identify ways to overcome our human tendency to division, disharmony, jealousy, and quarreling, even with fellow Christians

QUICK READ

The first issue Paul addressed in 1 Corinthians was a spirit of disunity. He criticized the Corinthians' boasting and division, and he sought to unify them in Christ.



Physics tells us that the universe operates through four fundamental forces: the strong nuclear force, the electromagnetic force, the weak nuclear force, and the gravitational force.¹ When it comes to humankind, I suggest there is an additional, universal force, woven deeply into our sinful natures. This force exerts its relentless power in marriages, families, clubs, friendships, neighborhoods, teams, governments, and workplaces. If gravity draws bodies together, this force drives us apart. We might call it the *disunifying* force. No one is immune to this force. The workings of this force parody Jesus' promise that "where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst" (Matthew 18:20).² The *disunifying* force promises that *where two or more are gathered*, this force will push them apart.

We find disunity just moments after the fall in Genesis 3. When God confronted Adam with his sin, the response revealed the shattering of relationships: "The man said, "The woman whom *You* gave to be with me, she gave me from the tree, and I ate" (Genesis 3:12, italics added for emphasis).

When Jesus prayed for us in John 17, he set his sights on this force: "I do not ask on behalf of these alone, but for those also who believe in Me through their word; *that they may all be one*; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, so that the world may believe that You sent Me" (John 17:20–21, italics added for emphasis). It would be difficult to find an area where we have let our Lord down so thoroughly.

Church history is filled with disputes, jealousy, discord, and disunity. Denominational groups splinter with regularity (including Baptists). Such disunity has consequences. Paul recognized the destructive power of disunity in the churches within his sphere of influence, and he worked hard in his letters to foster unity and oneness. While we cannot do much about past centuries of Christian division, we can listen attentively to Scripture and strive for unity within our churches.

1 CORINTHIANS 1:1–17

¹ Paul, called as an apostle of Jesus Christ by the will of God, and Sosthenes our brother,

² To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, saints by calling, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, their Lord and ours:

³ Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

⁴ I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus,

⁵ that in everything you were enriched in Him, in all speech and all knowledge,

⁶ even as the testimony concerning Christ was confirmed in you,

⁷ so that you are not lacking in any gift, awaiting eagerly the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ,

⁸ who will also confirm you to the end, blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ.

⁹ God is faithful, through whom you were called into fellowship with His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

¹⁰ Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

¹¹ For I have been informed concerning you, my brethren, by Chloe's people, that there are quarrels among you.

¹² Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, "I am of Paul," and "I of Apollos," and "I of Cephas," and "I of Christ."

¹³ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,

¹⁵ so that no one would say you were baptized in my name.

¹⁶ Now I did baptize also the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any other.

¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not in cleverness of speech, so that the cross of Christ would not be made void.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:1–4

¹ And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual men, but as to men of flesh, as to infants in Christ.

² I gave you milk to drink, not solid food; for you were not yet able to receive it. Indeed, even now you are not yet able,

³ for you are still fleshly. For since there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not fleshly, and are you not walking like mere men?

⁴ For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not mere men?

Prelude (1:1–9)

We may be tempted to rush through the opening verses of Paul’s letters, to get past what we may consider the *fluff* of greetings and thanksgivings, to the heart of the issue. For the attentive, however, these introductions speak volumes about Paul, the recipients of the letter, and the message.

Corinth was a unique place. It had been destroyed by the Romans for rebellion in 146 B.C., but it rose again a century later as a Roman colony under the direction of Julius Caesar. Caesar populated it with Roman freedmen—former slaves who often had education and ambition. Its location on the Greek peninsula provided incredible opportunity. North/south traffic through Greece had to pass through the area, and the dual ports on the east and west made it a major conduit between Rome and the eastern portion of the Empire. Corinth was a melting pot of philosophies and religions, and it was a place where fortune and status were prized. As a wealthy, favored Roman colony, Corinth contrasted sharply with the poorer surrounding countryside of Greece. There was a pride of place to Corinth. Even in these opening verses, Paul worked to remind the Corinthian Christians that they were part of something larger than Corinth and its pagan values.

While Paul addressed many of his letters to the “saints” in the city, he addressed this letter in the first place to the “church” (singular) “at Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2). Corinth would have had several house churches, meeting in the homes of some of the wealthier members.

This certainly provided fertile soil for disunity or conflict. Christians may have been rallying around their particular house church leader—in essence dividing into teams over against the other house churches. We can also detect evidence of splits within the churches along socio-economic lines (1 Cor. 11:17–22). In using the singular “church,” Paul reminded them they were one body together along with “all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1:2). Paul pointed their attention beyond the boundaries of Corinth. They shared a broader unity in Christ with the other churches on the Greek peninsula and with churches around the known world.

Several phrases reminded them of God’s grace in their status in Christ. They had neither earned nor bought their position. Instead, they were “saints by calling” (1:2), given grace (1:4), and “enriched in Him” (1:5). Too, they would be *confirmed* “to the end” (1:8), and they were called into “fellowship” (1:9). While their culture valued status, achievement, the buying of influence through extravagant gifts (called benefaction), persuasive rhetoric, and flowery oratory, Paul emphasized the grace of God in their position in Christ. Just as Paul’s status as an apostle came from the will of God (1:1), so their status as saints came from God’s grace.

Paul’s letters typically included a thanksgiving section. In verse 5, Paul thanked God for their “speech and knowledge.” These two things proved problematic through the course of the letter. In fact, Paul would sharply criticize their love of oratory, their practice of “spiritual speech” in speaking in tongues (chapters 12–14), and their love of human wisdom and knowledge. Paul could sincerely thank God for their strengths, although such gifts misused can become a curse and a barrier to the Christian “fellowship”³ mentioned in verse 9.

A Call to Unity (1:10–17)

Paul addressed the heart of the issue for chapters 1–4 in verse 10. Paul exhorted agreement—“the same mind” and “the same judgment.” He called on them to set aside *schismata*, the Greek word for *dissension*, *schism*, or a *tearing apart*.

Paul had received a first-hand report of such divisions from “Chloe’s people” (1:11). Evidently the church was dividing up behind leaders, and

Paul listed himself, Apollos, Peter, and Christ. While there might have been Christians rallying behind these names, Paul may also have been using these as an absurd example of their behavior. For a letter to be read in the public meeting of the church, perhaps he did not want to name the local leaders who were heading the various parties. Paul may have been tactfully sketching a parody of their behavior under the names of the famous apostles and Christ.⁴

Paul countered this idea by emphasizing that the only one who was crucified and risen as our Lord was Jesus Christ. Paul certainly did not encourage anyone to be a part of a “Paul” party. In the discussion of baptism in verses 14–17, Paul thanked God that not many would be tempted to some idolatrous connection with himself through baptism. The power of the baptizer in the symbolic act is nothing compared to the one behind the symbolism of baptism: Christ.

As we struggle with divisions today, we need to heed Paul’s words. Through the amazing growth of communication and media, we have access to preachers, teachers, and thinkers all over the world. These

WHY HAVE BAPTISTS STRUGGLED WITH UNITY?

Worldwide, more than 1,000 denominational groups have “Baptist” in their name.⁷ If God’s initial command, “Be fruitful and multiply” (Gen. 1:28), was intended for denominations, we could count ourselves quite faithful! A big part of Baptist history, however, is a failure to live in unity. Historians identify the church formed by John Smyth and Thomas Helwys in Amsterdam in 1609 as the first Baptist church. Within months of its formation, however, Smyth and Helwys split over baptism.⁸ Many other splits and fights have followed.

Why? Some observers have pointed to some core factors of Baptist identity: freedom, a high view of the authority of Scripture, and missions.⁹ We cherish freedom, as exemplified by our emphasis on the priesthood of believers, local church autonomy, and religious liberty. Various Baptist expressions of freedom may, from time to time, offend the understanding of Scripture of other Baptists, however. The force holding us together has traditionally been missions. All too often, the pressures of disunity have overcome our common mission as we divide yet again.

certainly provide incredible new ways to reach out with the gospel. It also provides, however, the possibility of cults of personality around charismatic communicators. We, too, must guard against confusing the messenger and the message.

Interlude (1:18—2:16)

At first glance, this section looks like *rabbit chasing* by Paul as he worked through the ideas of God's wisdom, worldly wisdom, foolishness, his own status, and the work of the Spirit in understanding the gospel. Rather, I believe Paul was still focused on the disunity in Corinth and was subtly undermining the ideas behind it.

Paul started by luring in the Corinthians, describing how unbelieving Jews and Gentiles dismissed the power and wisdom of God in the cross as foolishness. As the Corinthians were saying *amen* with him about those unbelievers, Paul turned to their own background in 1:26. They were *exhibit A* of God taking weakness and foolishness and doing something amazing in salvation.

As they digested what must have seemed an insult, Paul turned to himself in the beginning of chapter 2. There was nothing to boast about in Paul's person, status, or rhetoric. He simply came with the message of the cross.

The chapter ends with the necessity of the Spirit. Again, none of us can boast about our spiritual standing or attainments. All of us are in the category of foolishness transformed by God's power. Paul certainly left no room for boasting in leaders or in rallying behind certain apostles, teachers, or house-church hosts.

Grow Up! (3:1–4)

As chapter 3 begins, Paul's careful subtlety ends. The Corinthians' spirit of division and disunity revealed them to be "infants in Christ." Imagine the icy silence in the room when this part of Paul's letter was first read in their assembly! As 1 Corinthians continues, we can detect arrogance in this church. There was a belief that they were super-spiritual (see 4:6–8) and blessed with the advanced gifts (chapters 12–14). However great

EMBRACING UNITY

- Remember that God's grace eliminates any boasting in ourselves or our abilities
- Avoid jealousy by living in gratitude for what God has done for us
- Avoid lining up behind leaders against others
- Remember that Christ is the One we follow in discipleship
- Remember that the nature of our fellowship says volumes about our maturity in Christ

their gifts of knowledge and speech were, Paul claimed that the proof of their station in Christ lay in the spirit of their fellowship. We see later in the letter that they could not even celebrate the Lord's Supper in unity (11:17–34).

As a result, Paul's message to them was milk for infants rather than *grown-up* food. While that language might suggest Paul was holding back advanced Christian teaching from them, I do not think that is the case. Secret teaching and advanced teaching were more at home in the pagan religions of Corinth. Paul's message was consistent from his first presentation of the gospel—the foolishness of the cross and God's power in Christ. That they valued presentations of slick and persuasive oratory revealed more about them than it revealed about the message.⁵ Their response to the gospel and their fracturing into cliques classified them as infants.

Such disunity can fester. Around fifty years after this letter, another church leader wrote these words to the Corinthian church:

We acknowledge that we have been somewhat slow in giving attention to the matters in dispute among you, dear friends, especially the detestable and unholy schism, so alien and strange to those chosen by God, which a few reckless and arrogant persons have kindled to such a pitch of insanity that your good name, once so renowned and loved by all, has been greatly reviled.⁶

I pray that our churches would be free from such discord.

Applying This Lesson to Life

While none of us is immune to jealousy and disunity, we can resist their hold on us, on our relationships, and on our churches. Paul pointed out some steps in these passages.

First, we need to remember that we are saved by grace. This fundamental fact of our faith prevents boasting, arrogance, and pride.

Second, we need to remember that all human leaders and teachers are *human*. Rather than dividing up based on leaders and teachers, we need to carefully evaluate their message or ministry by the gospel and the cross. Jesus is our standard.

Third, we need to seek the mind of Christ. We will never avoid disagreements. As we together seek the mind of Christ, however, we can more closely approach Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 1:10 that we have "the same mind" and "the same judgment."

Fourth, we need to remember the criteria Paul gave for spiritual maturity. Paul would say later in the letter, "If I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but do not have love, I have become a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal" (13:1). Knowledge and eloquence are fine gifts. The measure Paul gives us, however, is our relationship with others.

QUESTIONS

1. What have been some of the causes of church disputes you have observed or experienced?

2. What are some ways we can display unity to the world?

3. Do we allow worldly divisions to creep into the church and our fellowship? How do we keep the cross of Christ as the standard rather than any other ideology or philosophy?

4. Is there a unity of rich and poor in your church? How can we foster unity when people are from radically different backgrounds or situations?

NOTES

1. Richard L. Myers, *The Basics of Physics* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Publishing, 2006), 1.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3 are from the New American Standard Bible.
3. Baptist New Testament scholar David Garland translates “fellowship” in this case as “common-union” to emphasize the depth of their connection. David Garland, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2003), 35.
4. Garland, 44.
5. Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1987), 125.
6. 1 Clement 1:1 in “The Letter of the Romans to the Corinthians commonly known as First Clement,” *The Apostolic Fathers: Second Edition* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 28.
7. See these books by Baptist historian William Brackney: *Baptists in North America: An Historical Perspective* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishing, 2006) and *Historical Dictionary of the Baptists* (Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009).
8. H. Leon McBeth, *The Baptist Heritage* (Nashville, Tennessee: Broadman Press, 1987), 36–37.
9. Bill J. Leonard, *God’s Last and Only Hope: The Fragmentation of the Southern Baptist Convention* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 1990), 43.