

LESSON ONE

Get Together

FOCAL TEXT

1 Corinthians 1:1–17; 3:1–4

BACKGROUND

1 Corinthians 1:1—4:21

MAIN IDEA

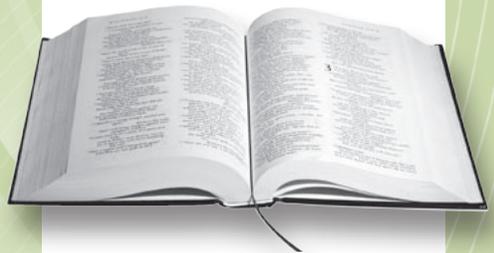
Christians' participation in disharmony, divisions, jealousy, and quarreling is incompatible with the cross of Christ and marks them as being spiritually immature.

QUESTION TO EXPLORE

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

TEACHING AIM

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



1 CORINTHIANS

Reports and Questions

BIBLE COMMENTS

Understanding the Context

The Bible makes abundantly clear that words matter. God spoke (“God said”) the universe into existence (Gen. 1:1–2:3).¹ The Ten Commandments are the words of God by which his people are to live (Exodus 20:1–17). Hebrews 1:1–2 says that God “spoke” in “many and various” ways through the prophets and ultimately in his Son in order to reveal his will and purpose. Jesus is the “Word” of God (John 1:1), the truth by which all other words and stories made out of words are to be evaluated as to their truth. Words matter, and using the words to tell true stories is vital to the existence of community.

As Paul wrote to the church at Corinth, he faced a church laden with a host of issues that fragmented them into bickering parts. Issues about which the people quarreled included factions, a speculative wisdom movement, spiritual immaturity, unethical conduct, marriage and celibacy, food sacrificed to idols, actions of women leaders, the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts, and the resurrection. Our background text of 1 Corinthians 1–4 describes the factions, confronts the wisdom movement, describes their spiritual immaturity, and accents the ministry actions for the church. Paul used words by which the church could shape itself into unity. Most of all, he would bring them to the center of their life together, namely Jesus, in answering the issues they faced. The factions wanted to tell the story of Jesus in their words according to their agendas, and Paul reminded them of the story of Jesus and his cross. That is the story that makes a diverse people into one.

Interpreting the Scriptures

Saints Together (1:1–3)

1:1. Paul followed a Greek letter-writing form that identified the sender first, and he added his Christian identity to his name: an “apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God.” So, Paul acted and spoke on the

authority of Christ. “Sosthenes” was a co-sender of the letter. Sosthenes possibly was the synagogue ruler at Corinth who became a believer (Acts 18:15–17), but it is not certain that the two were the same person. Paul and Sosthenes were *brothers* calling on the “saints” (1 Corinthians 1:2) at Corinth to be brothers and sisters together.

1:2–3. Paul now began to establish the groundwork for church unity. First, the church belonged to God, not the Corinthians, for it was the “church of God that is in Corinth.” Second, they were “sanctified” and “saints” in “Christ Jesus,” which is to say that they were a holy people. The idea of *holy* is that of a people set aside, separated for the purposes of God. Third, they were “saints, together,” with each other in loyalty to Christ.

The church’s understanding of its true identity is vital for life together. Therefore, in verses 1–3, Paul set up the basis and authority by which the Corinthian church could come together in unity.

Guided by Compassion and Prayer (1:4–9)

Paul often included a prayer and thanksgiving section in his letters (see Romans 1:8–15; Philippians 1:3–11), which, as here, expressed support and gratitude for the relationship he and the recipients of the letter had together in Christ. While Paul had stern words for them subsequently, he first demonstrated his acceptance of them. He saw them as those “enriched” by Christ in “speech and knowledge” (1 Cor. 1:5; see 1:18–4:21) and “spiritual” gifts (1:7; see 12:1–14:40). Christ is the source of that which is necessary for being the church.

A Disturbing Report (1:10–11)

Hostility, quarreling, and jealousy stifle Jesus’ work through and in his people. Paul later spoke of the church as the “body of Christ” (1 Cor. 12:27). The body becomes ill in division and needs to be healed just as a human body needs healing in order to function properly. Having heard from “Chloe’s people” about divisions in the church, Paul intended to stop the fragmentation of the body and convince them to come together.

The Factions (1:12–13)

Paul identified four factions. Each faction claimed a champion for its positions. Some reasonable deductions about the champion for each group and the content of the letter itself may supply further identity of the factions. In fact, some interpreters believe that all of the issues that Paul deals with in 1 Corinthians have relationship to each of these factions. Also, we should note that these champions would not have approved use of their identities to cause division.

Some said they were of “Paul.” Paul emphasized grace and not a legalism or prescribed ritual observances for the church. Perhaps an anti-Jewish group, allowing prejudices to surface against Jews and their practices, claimed him as their ally. This group might question certain ethical standards, seeing nothing wrong, for example, with the man living with his step-mother (5:1–5). Paul, of course, renounced such behavior.

A second champion was Apollos. Some members of the church identified with a wisdom movement influenced by philosophical speculation. Apollos was a gifted speaker schooled in Greek oratory and acquainted with Greek philosophy, and so the wisdom faction movement likely touted him as their champion. Paul spoke to this movement in 1:18–4:21. He stated, for example that he did not speak to them before with impressive words and ideas (2:1–2) but came to them with the message of Jesus’ cross.

Another faction had identified their champion as Peter. This group may have had Jewish background leanings. Some interpreters see this group as putting emphasis on certain dietary practices and other regulations. They probably were the group Paul addressed over the matter of partaking food sacrificed to idols (see 8:1–13).

The “Christ” group, although problematic for identification, may have considered themselves to be superior to others, viewing themselves to be spiritually closer to Christ than their fellow church members were. They likely emphasized the “spiritual” Christ, giving little or no attention to his human existence. Some interpreters see them as being connected with the tongues-speaking issue (1 Cor. 12–14).

1:13. None of the factions acted in the interest of the body of Christ, which Paul demonstrated by asking three questions. First, “Has Christ been divided?”—No! If we saw a human body divided, parts scattered

all over a room, our reaction would be one of horror. By asking this question, Paul pointed out that they were dividing up, or mutilating, the body of Christ.

The second and third questions are similar. “Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” —No! Jesus’ death was for the covering of their sins; only Jesus’ sacrificial offering of himself accomplished that. As for baptism, immersion in water symbolizes the death of the old order or way of life, and coming up out of the water symbolizes participation in a new order with Jesus as our Lord and Savior. To be baptized in the name of Jesus is to leave all other causes behind and follow him and take up Jesus’ causes. No baptism into Paul could bring them into the life of Christ. Baptism is important in symbolizing the act of one who has accepted Christ and his way, but it is not saving in itself. Jesus is the one who saves.

Proclaiming the Cross of Christ (1:14–17)

As indicated previously, Paul always brought any difficulty the church faced to Jesus. Paul baptized a few people and was happy he did not baptize the majority. He wanted no acclaim for himself, and so he directed the attention to where it should be: the cross of Jesus. At the cross Jesus offered himself in behalf of all, an utterly remarkable act of service. Those who follow him come into *his* service, not their own service and not that of Paul, Apollos, or Cephas. By coming to Jesus with a cross commitment of their own, as people of service under Jesus’ service, they would come together as a church.

Facing Immaturity (3:1–4)

Paul employed the terms “flesh” and “spiritual” in a unique way. They are both ways of life in which the whole person exists. For the person who follows Christ, that person—the whole person as a human being—lives in the spirit in everyday life. Obviously, then, the person who does not follow Christ lives in an existence called “flesh.” The “flesh” is an existence set over against God.

Note that Paul addressed them as “people of the flesh” (3:1). They were not “people of the flesh,” but they acted like they were. They were simply immature, “infants” (3:1), who could live only on baby food rather

than the adult food of the faith. They exhibited their infancy by “jealousy and quarreling” (3:3) among themselves. They must put their house in order, or else they would act like the flesh, like a mere “human” rather than as the “saints” he referred to in the beginning of the letter (1:2). To be together as the body of Christ, they must be mature in Christ. Their selfish human agendas would not bring them that maturity.

Focusing on the Meaning

Consider these factors if we are to be the body of Christ in unity:

1. *Realize the high calling we have in Christ.* We are called to be *saints* rather than quarreling, jealous infants. As saints we grow in maturity, able to take in what Christ offers us in relationship to himself. If we act as infants, we stifle growth and do not know the blessings of Jesus upon our lives together as his body.
2. *Recognize that we have a human tendency to serve our own interests and agendas.* Notice the emphasis on “human,” here using the term as Paul did, as a way of living characterized by “flesh.”
3. *Remember that we exist as the people of God because we are in Christ Jesus.* This means that the church is not ours, since we corporately belong to Christ. In the plan of Christ, the church is not an add-on to our experience of salvation. We are bound together in Christ. While individual growth in Christ is significant, growth together as his church is no less significant.
4. *Keep the cross of Christ central in the life of the church.* As we see the cross before us, we see love and selflessness at its best. Even the enemy was the object of this love, evidenced in what Jesus said and did. As the church gathers around the cross in mind and action, it will be characterized by this love and selflessness toward one another and toward people outside the fellowship. We become convinced, consequently, that if we are participating in divisive activities that fragment the church, we are helping to divide up, or mutilate, the body of Christ.
5. *Rejoice in the church.* Recognize what a gift the church is to us, for after all we are body of Christ because Christ gave his body. Focus

on and magnify the positive. Expect God's blessing as the people of God come together. Give yourself in some way in service to the life of the church.

TEACHING PLANS

Teaching Plan—Varied Learning Activities

Connect with Life

1. Prepare the following study theme visual for use through the six lessons of 1 Corinthians. Divide a posterboard into two columns widthwise. (You could plan to do a similar poster for 2 Corinthians.) Across the top write this title:

Imperatives for an Imperfect Church
1 Corinthians: Reports and Questions

In column one, list the six lesson titles and Scripture references in this unit. In column two, paste the cut-out of a church made from a sheet of construction paper, but torn apart into four pieces representing the factions in the Corinthians church.

2. As people arrive, provide a half sheet of paper and pose this situation for them to answer. *Suppose some of our church members visit a former (or founding) pastor of our church and report on current happenings. What information might they share? What advice or counsel might they ask of the former pastor?* (Caution them not to use names, but to generalize their answers so as not to offend.) Call for volunteers to share thoughts. (A copy of this exercise is available at www.baptistwaypress.org for this study.)

3. Read the study aim for this lesson and call for a prayer that God's Spirit will help us preserve unity and love.

Guide Bible Study

4. Ask members to find a map of Paul's journeys (perhaps in the back of their Bibles) and to locate Corinth on the isthmus of Greece. Then find Ephesus near the west coast of Turkey. Suggest that Paul was in Ephesus when he wrote this letter back to his troubled friends in Corinth (see 1 Cor. 16:19). Call on someone who has prepared a three-minute summary of the founding of the Corinthian church as told in Acts 18:1–18. Follow the report with these questions (Find enrichment information in the section "A Call to Unity" in the *Adult Bible Study Guide*.)
 - What would be the challenges of a seaport town like Corinth in Paul's day?
 - Since Corinth was a Roman colony and the church was filled mostly with converted Gentiles, what problems would you expect to develop in the congregation?
 - What challenges might come to the young church from the Jewish community there?

Read Paul's warm greeting from 1 Corinthians 16:19–21.

5. With that background, call on a member to read 1 Corinthians 1:1–3 aloud. Invite a second person to continue with verses 4–9. Ask, *What affirmations did Paul give to the young church before charging into the problems that prompted him to write this letter?* (Note his thankfulness for their salvation and spiritual gifts, and his confidence in Jesus to keep them strong.)
6. Instruct the group to read silently 1 Corinthians 1:10–17, searching for the root of the problems in the Corinthian church. Point to the fragmented church on the study theme visual, and ask the group to name the four factions Paul listed in verses 11–12. (Use information in the *Study Guide* and in "Bible Comments" in this *Teaching Guide* to describe these factions.) Ask, *Is following former or favorite leaders still a problem for today's churches? What doctrinal differences can be the basis of this kind of division? Why, according to Paul in*

verses 13 and 17, are these divisions damaging? Refer to and ask questions 3 and 4 at the end of the lesson in the *Study Guide*.

7. Divide into two teams. Ask Team One to search 1 Corinthians 1:17–20 to discover why listening to *know-it-alls* can be dangerous to a church. Instruct Team Two to search verses 26–30 and explain why economic status and background should not prevent equal treatment in our churches. Enrich their answers from the section “Interlude” in the *Study Guide*.
8. Have 1 Corinthians 3:1–4 read aloud. Ask, *How do squabbles in a church affect our image in the community? What effect may they have on youth and newer members? How may problems affect our senior members?*

Encourage Application

9. Read Jesus’ prayer for unity from John 17:20–23. Invite members to use the flip side of their half sheets (see Step 2 above) to write a “Prayer for Unity.” Refer to and read the small article “Embracing Unity” in the *Study Guide*, and ask that the group make it personal, pledging their own intent to foster love and harmony in your church.

Teaching Plan—Lecture and Questions

Connect with Life

1. Open this study of the Corinthian letters by summarizing the introductory article for this study, and also of 1 Corinthians, both found at the beginning of the *Adult Bible Study Guide*. Lead in prayer that the study will challenge us toward greater love and unity in our church.
2. Pose question 1 found at the end of the lesson in the *Study Guide*. Prompt with further questions such as these, as seems appropriate for your class: *What issues have caused division in churches in*

recent years? Why do members sometimes leave one church and join a neighbor church?

Guide Bible Study

3. On markerboard or poster write an outline of this lesson:

Get Together

- Prelude (1 Corinthians 1:1–9)
- A Call to Unity (1 Corinthians 1:10–17)
- Interlude (1 Corinthians 1:18—2:16)
- Grow Up! (1 Corinthians 3:1–4)

4. Lecture from the background material in “Prelude (1 Corinthians 1:1–9)” in the *Study Guide*. Use a Bible map of the Roman Empire to show the location of Corinth, and suggest what Corinth was like in that day. Enlist someone to read 1 Corinthians 1:1–9. Mention Paul’s affirmations of the Corinthians in verses 4–9.
5. Call attention to the heart of the problem in “A Call to Unity.” Request a reading of verses 10–17, and follow with these questions:
 - What might cause church members to favor certain leaders and hold to that loyalty even after the person has moved on?
 - How do these loyalties sometimes hinder current leaders?
 - How might holding these loyalties to previous leaders keep a person from growing and serving in freedom and love?
 - How can former or present leaders discourage people from focusing on them instead of on Christ and his work on the cross?
6. Note from the section “Interlude” in the *Study Guide* these ideas:
 - God does not respect earthly status and background when bringing people to himself.
 - Paul was careful to keep his message centered in Christ and his cross.
 - It is God’s Holy Spirit who helps us discern God’s truth.

7. Enlist someone to read Paul's wake-up call in 1 Corinthians 3:1–4. Ask, *What do you think was Paul's tone of voice as he wrote that? How do you think the members at Corinth received it?* Note the letter written about fifty years later from the section "Grow Up!" in the *Study Guide*. Follow with, *How could the problems of our churches today affect how the next two generations of members treat one another?*

Encourage Application

8. Refer to and summarize the small article, "Why Have Baptists Struggled with Unity?" in the *Study Guide*. Ask, *What does our history of disunity suggest to you?* (For one thing, we need this lesson from 1 Corinthians!)
9. Refer to and summarize the closing statements under "Applying This Lesson to Life" in the *Study Guide*. Then refer to and summarize the small article, "Embracing Unity," in the *Study Guide*, encouraging the class to see which of these actions they need to take. Close by reading the words to or singing "The Bond of Love."²

NOTES

1. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations in lessons 1–3 are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible.
2. Words and music by Otis Skillings.