

Women's Bible Study Spring 2017
Unity in Love: 1st Corinthians
January 18, 2017
Unity in the Cross (1 Cor. 1)~ Gretchen Steer



Today we begin our study of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians. This letter has very familiar and beautiful passages, like 1st Corinthians 13, which is often read at weddings. But it also contains harsh condemnations of sin that may grate on us. The remaining ten chapters answer questions that arose in this young church, such as the conduct of believers at the Lord's Supper.

Our Bibles contain two letters to the church at Corinth. But commentators believe that Paul wrote at least four. The first letter, which no longer exists, is referred to in 1 Cor. 5:9. His second letter is the one we're studying, known to us as 1st Corinthians. The third letter was described as "the severe letter" and contained much rebuke. The fourth letter, warm and full of affection, is known to us as 2nd Corinthians. You can see that Paul loved this congregation and longed for them to succeed. In 2nd Corinthians 7 Paul writes, "I have said before that you have such a place in our hearts that we would live or die with you." (2nd Cor. 7:3). Those are not the words of someone who is just taking a salary. In fact, the church did not pay Paul anything and he voluntarily supported himself through tent making.

Paul wrote this letter from Ephesus in 55 AD. In addition to the four letters he wrote, he lived for 18 months in Corinth, so these were people that Paul knew and loved.

Corinth itself was a busy port town, located on the isthmus of Corinth. This is a narrow strip of land that separates the Greek mainland from the Peloponnese in the south. For years people dreamed of cutting a canal through to save time sailing. In the meantime, however, something almost as good as a canal was created – a paved stone road called the Diolkos. Small ships were dragged out of the water and pulled along the Diolkos to the other side.

On one side of the isthmus was the Aegean Sea; on the other side was the Ionian, and only about 6 miles separated these two oceans. Yet without a canal sailors had to go 140 miles around the Peloponnese to get to the other side. Finally, in 1893, a canal was successfully cut through solid rock. You can see it's narrow, but effective!

All this helped create the busy, international port that was Corinth. There was a constant parade of nationalities coming in and out of the city. It was known for being a party town and in fact the verb "to corinthianize" meant to sexually corrupt someone.

We learn about Corinth from Acts 18:

"After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he reasoned in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks." (Acts 18:1-6)

The town contained at least 12 temples to various gods, and the dominant culture was Greek, so there was interest in philosophy but not in the gospel. Life was difficult in Corinth and it was a spiritually dark place. Paul was tempted to flee. Yet in Acts 18 we learn that Jesus encouraged Paul to remain in Corinth and not lose heart:

“One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: ‘Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.’ So Paul stayed in Corinth for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.” (Acts 18:9-11)

That's the background. So please turn with me to 1st Corinthians chapter 1 verse 1, where we see first that:

I. Christ ordains

When we use the word “ordains” it's usually in the context of ministry. A pastor completes his academic training and is ordained to ministry. Yet the word “ordain” also means to “decree” or “make happen.” And ordaining in both senses is what Christ did for Paul.

Remember that Paul was not one of the 12 disciples. He was a Pharisee and a Jew who was passionately against Christians. He persecuted them until Jesus met him on the road to Damascus, confronted Paul and changed him. After that Paul received the authority of an apostle, someone who was a witness to the resurrected Christ. Within years Paul was recognized as having the same leadership role as others like the 11 disciples, James the brother of Jesus, and Barnabas. That authority is important, for it is the reason Paul can write what he does.

Look at verse 1 of chapter 1:

“Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes...”(1st Corinthians 1:1)

In the middle of Corinth was a synagogue led by a man called Crispus. Crispus and his family became Christians under Paul's ministry. The synagogue leadership then went to a man called Sosthenes. These conversions stirred up the town's Jewish population and in the resulting riot, they ended up turning on Sosthenes and beating him severely. While we don't know for certain, it's likely that this Sosthenes is the same one mentioned in verse one – which means that two very prominent Jews came to Christ under Paul's ministry.

So while there was a lot going wrong, there was also encouragement as well.

Paul continues:

“To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be his holy people, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ – their Lord and ours.

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.” (1st Corinthians 1:2-3)

Paul knows how to use all the available space in his letters to say something important. This is more than just a greeting. It establishes his authority as an apostle to address sin within the congregation. Remember, Jesus has ordained him.

So an apostle is never self created. And many believe that there were no apostles after the early church. We are governed by elders and overseers. But they do not carry the same apostolic authority that Paul had.

Christ is the only one able to confer that kind of authority. And it makes sense that he would call certain people to be leaders. There had to be a way to distinguish the charlatans from the true apostles. Paul's credential was that he was "called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God", but his claim was backed up by the life he led and the words he said. Anyone who made a false claim to be an apostle would eventually be shown up as a pretender.

So how should we view the spiritual authorities of the modern church? We are told to respect them, and look for their lives to back up their words. But any authority granted to anyone comes originally from Jesus Christ, for it is he who ordains.

Next we see that

II. Christ equips

Look at verse 4:

"I always thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus. For in him you have been enriched in every way – with all kinds of speech and with all knowledge – God thus confirming our testimony about Christ among you." (1st Corinthians 1:4-5 NIV)

Now remember that Paul is about to spend the first six chapters rebuking the Corinthians for some pretty spectacular sin going on in their congregation. Yet it is so lovely that he sees the Corinthians not as they are, but rather, as Jesus sees them. Not as they currently behave, but how they *will be*.

You see, Christ equips. And every single church committed to follow Jesus and his holy word is equipped by him today. It's important to step back and get the big picture . Because the big picture is that the local church is part of the body of Christ, and the body of Christ will be his bride, perfect and holy, even if we don't appear very perfect and holy right now.

In another church we saw a wonderful conversion of a young man from a disadvantaged background. He heard the gospel, he embraced Christ, his life changed. But it only lasted for a year or so, and soon he drifted back to old friends and old ways. The last we heard of him was that he was a heroin addict.

Does this mean that the gospel has no power to save? Of course not! We're told in the parable of the seeds that some springs up quickly and withers just as quickly because it has no deep roots.

But in the ministry you have to balance a very discouraging experience like that with the beauty of seeing a church created out of nothing, full of lovers of Jesus. That's what Paul had to do when he looked at Corinth. Instead of being discouraged by the guy who was sleeping with his mother in law, from chapter five, Paul stepped back and viewed Corinth in the same way as Jesus did – in terms of their future and potential as the bride of Christ.

That's why he can go to say:

“Therefore you do not lack any spiritual gift as you eagerly wait for our Lord Jesus Christ to be revealed. He will also keep you firm to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is faithful, who has called you into fellowship with his Son, Jesus Christ.” (1st Corinthians 1:7-9 NIV)

Jesus equips. He has given every church the gifts of the Holy Spirit needed for that time. He preserves and keeps his church. And Jesus is able to do this because God is faithful. So whatever discouragement is happening in the church worldwide, and it's pretty dismal in Europe, we know that Christ equips, and he preserves, and he is faithful to bring his church into holiness....eventually.

That's great on the big picture level, as we can trust Christ to keep our church firm to the end. But it's also very comforting on the individual level, to know that Jesus sees us as we will be and knows the end of the story – that we will be holy and blameless eventually.

Next we see that

III. Christ unifies

Even though Paul wisely started by encouraging the Corinthians, he has to get down to the difficult business sooner or later and so he begins in verse 10:

“I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought.” (1st Corinthians 1:10 NIV)

At first this sounds like a nice platitude. Why can't everyone just get along? Let's be Minnesota nice to each other and we won't have any problems. But Paul is not just talking about superficial manners. Paul is using a medical word that describes joining bones that have been fractured. He's asking the church to be deeply and perfectly united in the important things – the way they think about God. And there's a reason he brings this up:

“My brothers and sisters, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you.

What I mean is this: One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas’; still another, ‘I follow Christ.’

Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1st Corinthians 1:11-13)

It's good to see that human nature hasn't changed in 2000 years. Paul is miles away in Ephesus with no obvious means of communication with Corinth. Yet somehow, some of his friends in Chloe's household have ratted out the Corinthian church and told Paul what is really going on.

Notice Paul's forthrightness. How often do we try to protect the source by saying, “People have told me...” or “I heard that...” If what follows is slander, gossip or even a private secret, it's extremely difficult to defend one's character or get to the bottom of the matter. Worse, these vague descriptions can make a problem seem far worse or more widespread than it actually is. When you're in leadership and someone says, “People have been complaining about this or that...” often what they really mean is “I don't like what you're

doing but I don't have the courage to say it myself." So let's give Paul credit for identifying the source of his information – his friends in Chloe's household.

The nature of the division wasn't superficial. No, it was lot more serious than that. The church had developed factions, deep divisions which centered around three well known teachers.

One was Paul himself. One was Cephas, or the apostle Peter. One was Apollos, the gifted Jew from Alexandria who was both eloquent and smart. And there was even a fourth group who simply identified themselves with Christ. Now Paul didn't want followers! Neither did Peter or Apollos. The group following Paul were probably converted Gentiles who were abusing their freedom in Christ. The ones identifying with Peter were probably Jews who were clinging to legalism. Those following Apollos were probably the self styled intellectuals. The fourth faction were the Jesus group. They had another problem – spiritual superiority. There was always a faint air of one-upsmanship with this group. They looked down on those who weren't as enlightened or spiritual as they were. But it's human nature to idolize a teacher or preacher who has authority, charisma and great spiritual gifts.

Take a look at these three pictures. Many Christians have extremely high regard for these three excellent, solid Bible teachers. The trouble is that regard sometimes spills over into reverence and folks begin to identify with the person rather than the Savior.

Sound familiar? That's one of the sad and wrong reasons we have different churches and denominations. Sometimes it's a legitimate disagreement over points of theology. But sometimes splits are caused by personalities. Fifty years later the church historian Eusebius was still referring to three groups at Corinth, so this wasn't a problem that got fixed during Paul's time. It reflects a church that was still wedded to the local culture, instead of allowing themselves to be "perfectly united in one heart and mind."

When Paul writes, "Was Christ divided?" he is literally asking, Was Christ cut up into parts and distributed among different groups? Of course not. Yet the Corinthians are living as though there are different parts of Christ. This happens in our day, when one group thinks the only important thing about church life is the music. Another group hones in on the sermon. To another group, church is their small group, or MOPS, or Bible study. That's why we have to be careful to see church as more than just the bits I like. And we need to be really careful when groups within a church begin to set new standards for behavior or dress, because it's all too easy to substitute manmade rules for the true process of sanctification.

Then Paul begins harping on baptism, because it caused new believers to identify with the baptizer. In verses 14 through 16 he ruminates about whom he baptized, and the fact that he cannot quite remember who all he baptized shows us that this sacrament was an consequence of Paul's ministry, not its main focus. He was there to bring people to Christ, as he says in verse 17:

**"For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel – not with wisdom and eloquence, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power."
(1st Corinthians 1:17 NIV)**

These words "wisdom and eloquence" mark the transition to his thoughts in the rest of chapter 1. Paul is awfully good with words. When I think of the metaphors he used (like

'We have this treasure in jars of clay...') and his brilliant reasoning in books like Romans, I'd call him eloquent. But remember, Paul lived in the golden era of speakers. The Greeks taught formal logic, elocution and rhetoric – the ability to convey one's ideas with persuasion and passion. Good speakers were everywhere, so Paul knew that words could manipulate instead of liberate. They could take the focus off Christ and on to the speaker's skills.

Instead, Paul says "I've been called to preach the gospel, simply and clearly." Because by presenting the gospel clearly he was effacing himself and letting the cross of Christ do its powerful work. By stepping aside he allowed the Spirit to direct his words and his hearers' response. That is why his work was so incredibly effective.

In the last half of the chapter, Paul makes the point that

IV. Christ Crucified cancels the world's wisdom

Everything that the gospel accomplishes happens through the power of the cross. It's not that these two wooden pieces lashed together have any power on their own. No, it is the fact that the sinless Son of God hung there and died that gives the cross its power.

First Paul shows that the cross is

- **Foolish to the perishing; powerful to the saved**

Look at verse 18

"For the message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing but to us who are being saved it is the power of God." (1st Corinthians 1:18 NIV)

This should help us understand why some people embrace the gospel and others reject it. To those who are seeking God, the gospel becomes the means of life. But to those who aren't interested in spiritual things, the gospel sounds ridiculous. A God who was willing to give up his Son? A God who permitted himself the dreadful, shameful death of crucifixion? No way! Says the wisdom of the world.

So it is foolish to the perishing but powerful to the saved.

The next contrast is that the gospel is

- **Unconvincing to Jews; incomprehensible to the Greeks**

Remember that Corinth is largely shaped by Greek philosophy, although there is a synagogue and a Jewish community there. The Greeks loved philosophy and many of their philosophers disdained the body and concentrated only on the soul. So the gospel, with its emphasis on the resurrection of the body, left the Greeks cold. The Jews were looking for a conquering Messiah. For that reason a Messiah who voluntarily laid down his life in a shameful way was not the Messiah they expected or wanted. Some believed that the crucifixion proved that Jesus was cursed by God for some sin of his own

Look at verse 20:

"So where does this leave the philosophers, the scholars, and the world's brilliant debaters? God has made the wisdom of this world look foolish.

Since God in his wisdom saw to it that the world would never know him through human wisdom, he has used our foolish preaching to save those who believe.

(1st Corinthians 1:20-21 NLT)

Paul knew that people were never going to be able to reason themselves into faith. It is good for us to know basic apologetics about our faith. But if we think that our command of arguments will result in salvation, then we're deluded. If they are convinced, it's because the Holy Spirit draws them. That should encourage us when we're feeling hesitant to talk about Jesus with someone we don't know.

But God gave the church a power tool: the gift of preaching, or as it is sometimes called, prophecy or forthtelling. Paul reminds us in Romans:

“How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them?”

(Romans 10:14 NIV)

Going back to 1st Corinthians, look at verse 22:

“It is foolish to the Jews, who ask for signs from heaven and it is foolish to the Greeks, who seek human wisdom. So when we preach that Christ was crucified, the Jews are offended and the Gentiles say it's all nonsense.” (1st Corinthians 1:22-23 NLT)

The Jews are offended because they are looking for miracles and a conquering hero. The Greeks think the gospel is nonsense because the gospel contradicts human wisdom. Yet we have an inbuilt longing to understand everything because, being made in God's image, we have the desire to understand all things without the ability to do so. King Solomon wisely but sadly wrote:

“I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” (Ecclesiastes 3:10-11)

So the gospel was unconvincing to most Jews, and incomprehensible to most Gentiles or Greeks. Yet in Corinth, two synagogue leaders had been converted along with numerous others, so the gospel was bearing fruit even as it was being puzzled over and rejected by these two ethnic groups.

Paul goes on to explain that the wisdom of God means

❑ **Utilizing the weak; scorning the powerful**

Paul takes it one step further. He says that Christ doesn't just *represent* the wisdom of God. He **IS** the wisdom of God. Look at verse 24:

“But to those called by salvation, both Jews and Gentiles, Christ is the power of God and the wisdom of God. This foolish plan of God is wiser than the wisest of human plans, and God's weakness is stronger than the greatest of human strength.” (1 Corinthians 1:24-25 NLT)

The trouble is that we try to understand the mind of an infinite God with our poor finite minds. But the great thing about the gospel is that it doesn't rely on the intellect or education of the people hearing it. You don't have to have a certain IQ, wealth or background to respond to the gospel, or even to give it out:

Look at verse 26:

“Remember, dear brothers and sisters, that few of you were wise in the world’s eyes or powerful or wealthy when God called you. Instead, God chose things the world considers foolish in order to shame those who think they are wise...” (1 Corinthians 1:26-28 NLT)

“And he chose things that are powerless to shame those who are powerful. God chose things despised by the world, things counted as nothing at all, and used them to bring to nothing what the world considers important. As a result, no one can ever boast in the presence of God.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-29 - NLT)

You don't have to have prerequisites to be saved by God. You just have to be willing to believe him when Jesus says he came to set us free. Paul says that the least important people in this world, ones who were counted as nothing, were going to destroy what the world thinks is so important.

But that totally contradicts the
The wisdom of the world

- I have the right to direct my own life**
- I can learn the answer to anything**
- I am better than others if I am more educated, more powerful or more wealthy**
- I can earn my way to God through good works**

You see how the wisdom of the world is all about me, me, me. I'm in charge. I can do anything. I am better than others. God will want me if I do good works.

But none of that involves the wisdom of God in Christ.

Here is

The wisdom of God

- God chooses whom he will, not based on their achievements or potential**
- Christ is wisdom personified**
- Christ is our righteousness, holiness and redemption**
- The Holy Spirit helps us know the wisdom of God in Christ**

To rely on the wisdom of Christ is much easier than trying to do it ourselves. Instead of seeking God, he seeks us. We don't have to meet some standard, because as Paul told the Corinthians, “Not many of you were powerful or wealthy when God called you.” We get our wisdom from our relationship with Christ, along with our righteousness, our holiness and our redemption. This comes about naturally through the work of the Holy Spirit.

Yet we don't give up our brains nor our natural skills and talents. God harnesses these and puts them to work for his kingdom. He transforms them so instead of selfishly wanting to get ahead we can use them for his kingdom.

Paul finishes by saying,

“God has united you with Christ Jesus. For our benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made us right with God; he made us pure and holy, and he freed us from sin.

Therefore, as the Scriptures say, 'If you want to boast, boast only about the Lord.'" (1 Corinthians 1:30-31 NLT)

Paul makes the process of sanctification, or becoming holy, sound easy. But in fact it takes a lifetime.

We are already praying for our grandchildren every day, that they will come to know Jesus at a very early age. And in fact that process of sanctification appears to be going on under our noses.

On December 9 Charlie, our only grandchild, became a big brother to Philippa Noelle – better known as Pippa. Now Pippa is a classic, mellow second child. She doesn't cry, she's not demanding, and she really likes to eat. You can probably tell by the number of chins she has that she is very good at her chosen pursuit – nursing.

Charlie wasn't quite sure what to make of Pippa. One day Mommy goes off to the hospital and the next day there's a little creature around all the time. In general he's tried to be gentle with her, although as you can see from these pictures she doesn't always appreciate his kindness.

One day Charlie was petting Pippa's hair when he suddenly pulled it very hard. Of course Pippa screamed. And Charlie got in big trouble. You see, when you're a little person learning how to behave, you naturally want to test the limits sometimes. So Charlie hasn't pulled Pippa's hair again, but I wouldn't call him trustworthy yet with her. But gradually he is learning how to be gentle and not give in to his sudden impulses. So we long for the day when all of their interaction will be like this picture – calm and peaceful.

Christ, our wisdom, is in the process of replacing our worldly wisdom with his righteousness, holiness and sanctification. Like Charlie and Pippa, it doesn't happen overnight. But it's happening a little bit every day, and we can take heart from that in our own lives, as long as we're willing to give the wisdom of God a free hand in our lives.

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