

A Bible Study by
Melissa Spoelstra

First Corinthians

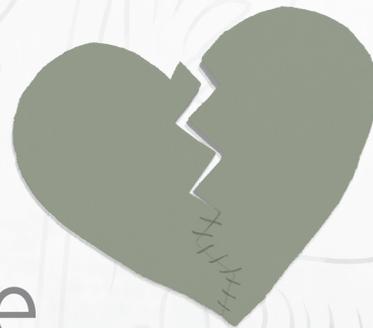


Living Love

When We Disagree

A Bible Study by
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Abingdon Women / Nashville

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Living Love When We Disagree

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Melissa Spoelstra is a popular women's conference speaker, Bible teacher, and author who is madly in love with Jesus and passionate about studying God's Word and helping women of all ages to seek Christ and know Him more intimately through serious Bible study. Having a degree in Bible theology, she enjoys teaching God's Word to the body of Christ, traveling to diverse groups and churches across the nation and also to Nairobi, Kenya, for a women's prayer conference. Melissa is the author of the Bible studies *Joseph: The Journey to Forgiveness* and *Jeremiah: Daring to Hope in an Unstable World* and the parenting book *Total Family Makeover: 8 Practical Steps to Making Disciples at Home*. She has published articles in *ParentLife*, *Women's Spectrum*, *Just Between Us*, and the Women of Faith blog. She also writes her own regular blog in which she shares her musings about what God is teaching her on any given day. Melissa lives in Dublin, Ohio, with her pastor husband, Sean, and their four kids: Zach, Abby, Sara, and Rachel.

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Introduction

Living love when we disagree sounds good on paper, but it isn't easy. We're different—we have different personalities, preferences, and perspectives. And we can struggle to get along, especially when we don't see eye to eye. In the course of a day, we can find ourselves disagreeing or debating with family, friends, coworkers, and even strangers on social media about everything from food choices and parenting styles to politics and religion. Often we find ourselves divided—even as Christians. How can we work out our differences with humility and grace, always showing the love of Christ, while still remaining true to what we believe?

The Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the church in Corinth about this very thing, because they were struggling with their own set of issues. Being one of the few churches where both Jews and Gentiles worshiped together, they had different practices and ideas that threatened unity in the church. Their economic and social diversity contributed to the discord, giving them a reputation for conflict. Rather than focusing on Christ as the head of the body, they formed factions based on various church leaders. Worship practices, the role of women, and sensitive issues of conscience were other topics of concern. Paul addressed all of these divisive issues in his letter, which we know today as 1 Corinthians.

Paul urged the church in Corinth to “be of one mind, united in thought and purpose” (1 Corinthians 1:10). He essentially called them to live love—even when they disagreed. Chapter 13, known as the love chapter, wasn't included to be a nice poem for weddings. Instead, it was written to urge Christians living in a pagan and diverse culture to approach one another with the love of Christ. It calls us to do the same.

Regrettably, we often exercise the opposite of that kind of love, choosing instead to keep a record of wrongs or to make rude comments—whether in person or on social media. The truth is, we can never demonstrate this supernatural love and kindness with those who disagree with us apart from Jesus. Paul acknowledged this truth, mentioning the name of Jesus nine times in the first nine verses of this letter alone! He knew that we desperately need Christ at the center of our personal lives, including our interactions with others. Our unity comes only through Christ and His love.

In the next six weeks, we will dive deep into Paul's letter, exploring how we can:

- Deal with our differences in a loving way without compromising our convictions
- Achieve harmony while maintaining our diversity
- Consider the ways that the surrounding culture impacts our beliefs
- Agree to disagree on matters of preference and opinion
- Humbly listen to others with views different than our own
- Embrace ambiguity in some areas, acknowledging that our view is often partial and incomplete
- Demonstrate to all that love is the greatest thing, which never fails

Together we will learn some practical truths we can implement in our relationships in order to live love even when we disagree. We will see that Paul's call to unity isn't a call to compromise our beliefs. Just as he upheld the gospel of Christ while seeking to help the Corinthians apply it to their relationships, we too will discover how we can stand firm on the gospel while finding and focusing on our common ground in Christ.

Options for Study

Before beginning the study, I invite you to consider the level of commitment your time and life circumstances will allow. I have found that what I put into a Bible study directly correlates to what I get out of it. When I take time to do the homework daily, God's truths sink deeper as I take time to reflect and meditate on what God is teaching me. When I am intentional about gathering with other women to watch videos and have discussion, I find that this helps keep me from falling off the Bible study wagon midway. Also, making a point to memorize verses and dig deeper by looking at additional materials greatly benefits my soul.

At other times, however, I have bitten off more than I can chew. When our faith is new, our children are small, or there are great demands on our time because of difficult circumstances or challenges, we need to be realistic about what we will be able to finish. So this study is designed with options that enable you to tailor it for your particular circumstances and needs.

1. Basic Study. The basic study includes five daily readings or lessons. Each lesson combines study of Scripture with personal reflection and application (**green boldface type** indicates write-in-the-book questions and activities), ending with a suggestion for talking with God about what you've learned. On average you will need about twenty to thirty minutes to complete each lesson.

When you gather with your group to review each week's material, you will watch a video, discuss what you are learning, and pray together. I encourage you to discuss the insights you are gaining and how God is working in your own life.

2. Deeper Study. If you want an even deeper study, there is a Weekly Wrap-up at the end of each week to guide you in reviewing the chapters and themes covered that week. This will give you a better sense of the flow of the letter, which was designed to be read out loud and passed among the house churches in Corinth. Additionally, Digging Deeper articles are available online (see www.AbingdonPress.com/FirstCorinthians) for those who would like deeper exploration of the text and themes. Finally, memory verses are provided for each week of study so that you may meditate on and memorize key truths from God's Word.

3. Lighter Commitment. If you are in a season of life in which you need a lighter commitment, I encourage you to give yourself permission to do what you can. God will bless your efforts and speak to you through this study at every level of participation.

Take time now to pray and decide which level of study is right for you, and check it below:

1. Basic Study

2. Deeper Study

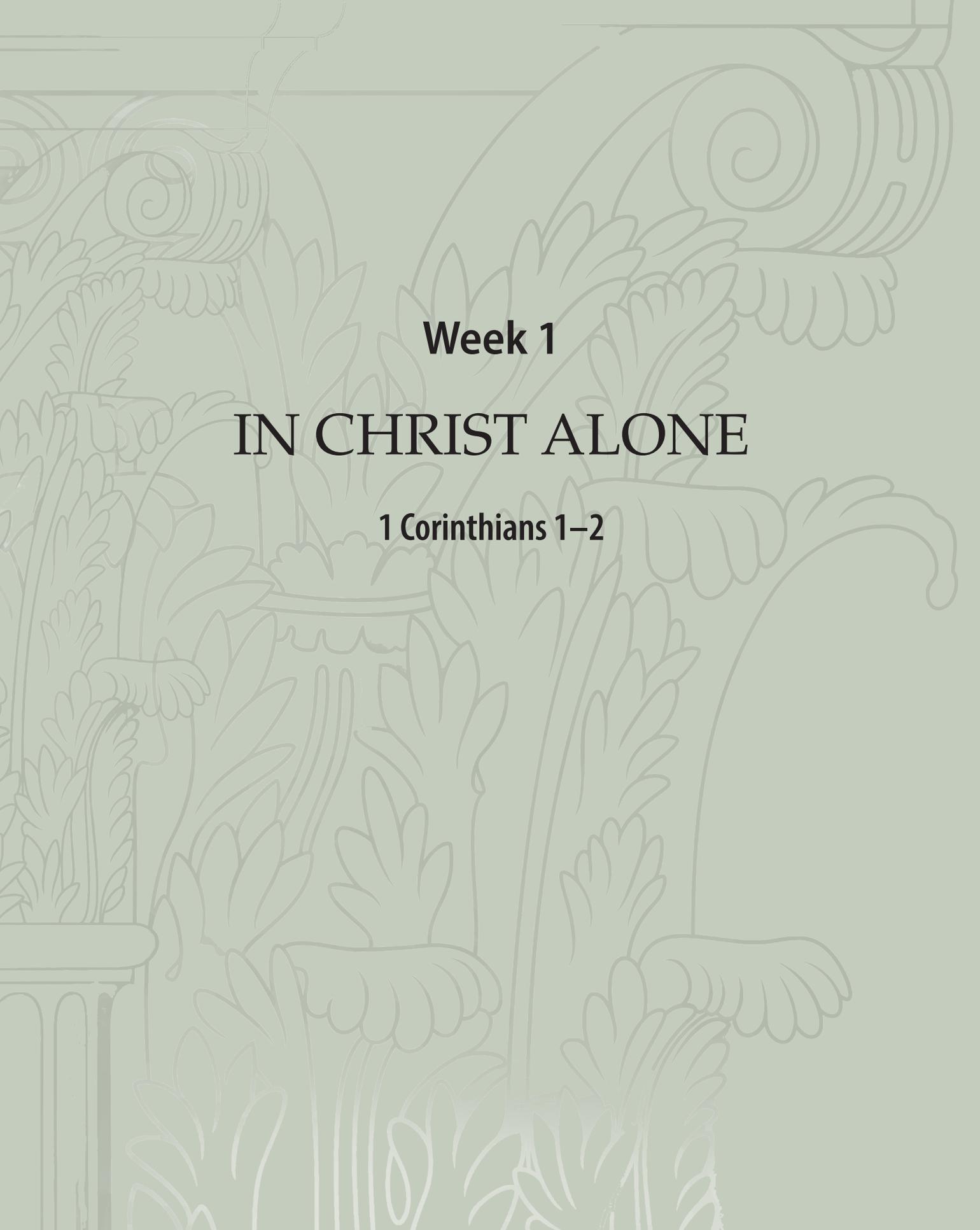
3. Lighter Commitment

Be sure to let someone in your group know which level of study you plan to do so that you have some accountability and encouragement.

Also, I invite you to post some of the insights and experiences you and your group have during the study, using the hashtag #1Corinthians. If a verse or sentence from the study stands out to you, feel free to tweet, Instagram, or Facebook using the hashtag so that we can see what is resonating with you!

A Final Word

As we begin this journey together, keep in mind that the goal is unity in Christ, not uniformity. The body of Christ is made up of unique individuals with different gifts, opinions, and ideologies; and there is strength and beauty in that diversity. Although achieving harmony in the midst of our diversity may be challenging, it is not impossible. God never calls us to do something without equipping us through His Word and His Spirit. With the help of the Spirit of Christ who lives within us, we can learn to deal with our differences in a loving way—even while living in a divided culture. May this powerful truth from 1 Corinthians 13:8 (NIV) both encourage and motivate us: *Love never fails!*



Week 1

IN CHRIST ALONE

1 Corinthians 1–2

Memory Verse

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose.

(1 Corinthians 1:10)

DAY 1: SPIRITUAL IDENTITY

My pastor husband, Sean, and I host a gathering on the second Sunday of every month. We invite new people who have visited our church so they can ask questions and we can share a little about the church's vision and values. It's an informal time when we try to keep it real by mentioning our weaknesses and past mistakes as a church as well as the exciting things God is doing in our midst.

Imagine you are a visitor checking out the church in Corinth. Here are some of the things you might discover by asking questions at a gathering in the home of a church leader:

- People are identifying with certain preferred leaders and teachers to the extent that factions exist within the local body.
- Members are divided over whether the man in the church who is having an affair with his stepmother is exercising newfound freedom from the law or is in need of church discipline.
- Believers are bringing lawsuits against each other.
- There are differing opinions about marriage, men's and women's roles in the church, and abuses of spiritual gifts.

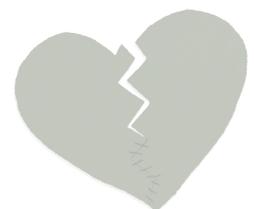
While we might decide to visit the church down the street, the early believers had no such option. They had to learn to work out their differences.

Whether or not they are apparent to everyone, all churches struggle with divisions and difficulties. The church is not only *made up* of sinners but also is *led* by sinners. Until we reach heaven, no perfect body of believers will exist. And sometimes we fight over some of the silliest things!

The Corinthian church had its issues for sure, but our church situations aren't much different. Are there those in your church who are constantly quoting some popular preacher they are enamored with? What about people who disagree about which sins the church should address and which should be left to an individual's conviction of the Holy Spirit? Have disputes ever arisen after two believers saw a business deal fall apart or had different opinions about how a ministry should be run? Though we may not like to admit it, our churches can be just as dysfunctional as the Corinthian body of believers.

Extra Insight

Corinth was located on an isthmus between two seas, which gave it importance as a commercial center as well as a strategic military position.



What are some disagreements you've observed in the Christian community of which you are a part?

Some members of the pilot group for this study mentioned disagreements about:

- contemporary worship
- whether to have a choir
- the layout of the church bulletin
- whether the American flag should be on display in the sanctuary
- what the Bible says about salvation, marriage, and other topics

The question isn't whether we will have disagreements in the church but how we will handle these conflicts.

When the local leaders in Corinth weren't sure how to handle some of these conflicts, they wrote a letter to the man who had founded the church. Paul had helped to plant the church while on his second missionary journey when he stayed in Corinth for a year and a half. He began preaching in the Jewish synagogue but ended up gathering more converts from a Gentile audience. Believers came from all socioeconomic classes and included a minority of Jewish converts. While they were united in Christ, their diversity caused many disagreements.

Though we do not have a copy of the original letter, the Book of First Corinthians contains the Apostle Paul's response to questions written about three to five years after the birth of the church. At this time Paul was ministering in the city of Ephesus while attempting to instruct and encourage the believers in Corinth through his writings. Understanding the context of the letter as well as the backdrop of Corinthian culture will help us make sense of those portions that can be difficult for us to understand today. Despite our cultural differences, the issues the early Corinthian believers faced have continued to cause debate and conflict in the church for two thousand years, resulting in disagreements on subjects such as men's and women's roles and the practice of spiritual gifts.

As we study Paul's letter, we'll find a call to quit majoring in the minors. This reminds me of the motto of the Moravian Church, whose roots date back to the fifteenth century: "In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, liberty; and in all things, love."¹ God used Paul as His mouthpiece to help the early church learn to love each other and work toward unity. Sometimes love meant confronting blatant sin, and other times it meant backing down on preference issues that weren't black or white. As we go through a section of the letter each day, we'll be looking for the original meaning as well as the contemporary significance.

Before we get into the text, let's consider a few facts about the city of Corinth:

- Corinth had been a prominent port city that the Romans destroyed in 146 B.C., and it rose again to prominence when Julius Caesar rebuilt the city in 44 B.C.
- At the time of Paul's writing (A.D. 55), the city was about one hundred years old and had a population of around 80,000 with another 20,000 in outlying areas.
- Corinth was a wealthy and multicultural city.
- A major attraction in Corinth was a temple to Aphrodite (the Greek goddess of love) that boasted 1,000 temple prostitutes.
- The Corinthians held strongly the Greek ideals of individualism, equality, freedom, and distrust of authority.²

In a nutshell, the rebuilt city of Corinth was a melting pot of cultures with new wealth and an emphasis on intelligence and individualism.

What modern cities come to mind when you read about Corinth?

What parallels do you find between Corinthian culture and our culture?

Did you think of cities known for their wealth, sin, or proximity to bodies of water? I believe we will find many ways to relate to the believers in Corinth though we are separated by almost two thousand years.

Before Paul addressed any of the Corinthians' questions, he settled the issue of identity. Over and over he repeated the name of Christ.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1-9, holding your place here for today's study. How many times did Paul mention Christ's name?

Paul began his letter with an emphasis on his personal relationship to Christ and reminded the Corinthians that their source of grace and peace was found in Christ. Two times Paul mentioned the return of Christ to give them an eternal perspective in the midst of their disagreements. Anyone reading just these first nine verses can't help knowing Paul's favorite topic of conversation.



Paul would go on to offer admonishments, instructions, and truths that might be tough to swallow, but he began with encouragement about Christ—knowing that Christ should be the starting point for every discussion and disagreement. Apart from Him we are just blowing smoke with shared ignorance.

Next Paul reminded the Corinthians that God made them holy. The word used here means set apart or different. Then he said that not only the Corinthian believers were holy through Christ, but others were as well.

Who, specifically, did Paul say are holy in verse 2?

If all who call on the name of Christ are made holy, what does that mean you are?

If you have called on the name of Christ for salvation, then you have been made holy. So many times that is not how I see myself. I feel lazy when I don't get everything done on my to-do list. Discouragement can overtake me for no good reason at all. Sometimes I look to people or possessions for validation. On any given day I can be tempted to find my identity in anything from my pants size to my children's behavior. These last few days I've been in a funk, and I'm not really sure why. Rather than celebrate the wonderful things going on in life, I want to crawl under the covers and stay there. I don't feel holy. Yet Christ says that I am.

So the question for me and you is *which posture will we claim today?* Will we find our identity in

- how we feel,
- what we've accomplished,
- our appearance,
- how others view us,
- or what Christ says about us?

Paul wanted so intensely for the Corinthians to remember their holy identity that he mentioned Christ's name repeatedly. He made it clear that they were set apart and special not because of their wealth, talents, or feelings but because of Christ's death on the cross.

No grades of holiness exist. Some people aren't "kind of holy" and others are "super holy." If you are a believer, then you are holy through the blood of Christ—period. Holiness isn't something we attain. Christ imputed it to us through His sacrifice on the cross. Before we embark any further into a controversial letter with topics that threaten to divide us as believers, let's settle the issue of our shared identity.

While we may disagree on many things within the Christian community, the lens we should view one another through is holiness. We and our brothers and sisters in Christ are holy because Jesus Christ set us apart through His shed blood. He paid the highest price so that we could be called holy. Consider what impact that embracing this identity could have on our words, actions, and prayers toward those with whom we are struggling to get along.

Consider the disagreements you have observed within the body of Christ. How could seeing ourselves and one another as holy help with conflict resolution? (Answers will vary; there is no one right answer.)

Paul began his letter to the church at Corinth with a greeting and an emphasis on our shared identity in Christ to set the tone for the sixteen chapters of admonition and encouragement that followed. He also stressed his authority as an apostle because, as we will see, many in the church were rejecting his leadership. How could Paul be so positive about a church full of divisions? He could have let their struggles become a reason to write them off and focus on other churches he had planted that didn't seem as problematic. Instead, he turned his attention to the character of God. He recognized what one commentator has so beautifully expressed: "To delight in God for his working in the lives of others, even in the lives of those with whom one feels compelled to disagree, is sure evidence of one's own awareness of being the recipient of God's mercies."³

A common tendency among many Christians today is to find a new faith community when the human flaws of their church are exposed. As we study 1 Corinthians, I pray we will see other believers for who they really are—struggling sinners like us whom Christ has declared holy. Then we will be able to celebrate one another's strengths before beginning to work out our disagreements.

Talk with God

In the blank below, write the name or first initial of a believer you have disagreed with recently—even if only in your thoughts.

_____ is holy and loved by God through Christ.

Take a moment to pray for this person, asking God to help you see him or her as God does.

Extra Insight

The very last verse in the Bible reminds us that we can view one another as holy. As the final words of God's revelation to us, John wrote, "May the grace of the Lord Jesus be with God's holy people" (Revelation 22:21).

As a follower of Christ, write your name in the blank below:

_____ is accepted by God and declared holy because she has called on the name of the Lord Jesus Christ. "But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

Write a prayer in the margin thanking God that your identity is not based on your accomplishments, feelings, clothing size, or number of likes on social media. Also thank Him for the cross and your holiness found in Christ alone.

DAY 2: DEALING WITH DIVISIONS

Of course, there are going to be times when we disagree with one another as Christians. However, the manner in which we disagree gives the watching world a glimpse of how followers of Jesus are interacting, and often it's not a good picture—especially when our viewpoints don't align on anything from the exposed sins of a prominent Christian leader to our interpretations of a particular passage of Scripture.

Online I read hateful words, witness name calling, and watch Scripture bullies use God's Word as a weapon against fellow believers. The Bible is a sword, but we are called to wield it against our common enemy, Satan, not each other. Through this letter to the church in Corinth, Paul models the need to address conflicts with the recipe for healing divisions among us. Whether we are sparring online, via text, over the phone, or face to face, Paul teaches us that God asks us to strive for unity, especially in the midst of our disagreements.

We don't have to conform and be cookie cutter Christians who agree on every minute point of doctrine. Of course, theology matters. Paul wasn't propagating an "anything goes" attitude toward the Scriptures. On the contrary, his letter sought to help realign the Corinthians in areas where they strayed from sound teaching, resulting in divisions. The key to finding resolution is in separating preferences from absolutes. Many times we squabble over minutia and miss the big picture.

Today we're going to look at two specific dangers Paul addressed that can lead to divisions.

1. Relational Idolatry

The first danger Paul addressed is relational idolatry. Anything that captures our attention more than God can become an idol, including people. And often the result is divisive allegiances.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and rewrite verse 10 in your own words, inserting the name of your church:

What did Paul say was the source of the quarrels between the people in the church at Corinth? (v. 12)

How did Paul hear about the quarrels? (v. 11)

In this instance, *divisions* is translated from the Greek word *schism*, which was a political term for “rival parties or factions.”⁴ Like members of a political party fiercely supporting their candidate, the Corinthians rallied around a particular Christian leader. As we bridge the gap between the church at Corinth and our local bodies of believers today, we recognize that we too struggle with making celebrities out of Christian leaders.

When I was in high school I witnessed a group of people in our church who were mesmerized with a particular leader, resulting in what almost seemed like a cult following. They quoted him often, went to his conferences, purchased his workbooks, and embraced his particular ideas about following Jesus, which emphasized things such as clothing and appearance. I remember wondering why things that had no biblical support had become so important.

In what ways have you seen people seem overly enamored with Christian personalities and their teachings?

Because Paul had to be told about the quarrels, he probably had not contributed to the rivaling groups. Many times the people we venerate after hearing them teach, reading their books, or following their blogs desire only to point us to Christ. Yet we like to attach ourselves to human leaders much as the people in the church of Corinth did. Instead, God calls us through Paul’s letter to seek unity.

Paul called the Corinthians to be of the same mind or thought (v. 10). The Greek word he used is *nous*, which is defined as “the mind, comprising alike the faculties of perceiving and understanding and those of feeling, judging, determining.”⁶ Paul used an additional word to emphasize that

Extra Insight

Most of Paul’s letters begin with doctrinal truth followed by a section of practical application, but in 1 Corinthians Paul “plunges immediately into the problems of the church.”⁵



God wants us to be perfectly united not only in our minds but also in our purpose or judgment. This Greek word is *gnome*, meaning “the faculty of knowledge, mind, reason.”

Judgment has become a negative word today, but let’s remember that God wants us to exercise good judgment. He longs for us to evaluate conversations, statements, actions, and relationships with unity at the forefront. This certainly doesn’t mean checking our brains at the door, but it does mean using our God-given sense to see the harm in getting too attached to a particular human leader.

In verse 12, Paul identifies some of the leaders the Corinthians were elevating. List them below:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

Paul listed himself first. People were drawn to him as the founder of the Corinthian church. He was like a spiritual father to many, having been the one who first preached the gospel to many of the members.

The second leader was Apollos.

Read Acts 18:24-26. Why do you believe some Corinthian believers would have been drawn to Apollos?

Apollos taught eloquently, enthusiastically, and with accuracy. His knowledge of the Scriptures and smooth style would have appealed to educated people as well as those with a desire for in-depth teaching.

The third leader Paul mentioned is Peter. Peter knew Jesus personally when He walked the earth. Peter’s boldness, miracles, and authority on the day of Pentecost would have caused many to be in awe of him. (Can you imagine them bragging, “After all, he *did* walk on water!”)

The last group claimed to follow only Christ. At first this Sunday school answer—“I follow Jesus”—seems like it couldn’t be wrong. However, most commentators agree that Paul was lumping together those who were righteous with those who were smug. The attitude of the latter almost seemed to say, “We are of Christ, but we aren’t so sure about *you*.”

We can see people venerating these same types of leaders today—the spiritual father or shepherd (Paul), the academic teacher (Apollos), and the bold, authoritative leader (Peter). Others are like those in the last group,

who won't look to any human authority—other than themselves. Yet whenever a Christian leader's charisma or celebrity overshadows the cross of Christ, danger lies ahead.

As followers of Jesus, 1 Thessalonians 5:12 calls us to respect our leaders. Some things Scripture admonishes us to do in regard to leaders are to

- provide for their needs (1 Timothy 5:17),
- imitate their faith (Hebrews 13:7),
- obey them without complaining (Hebrews 13:17),
- pray for them (1 Timothy 2:1),
- and share good things with them (Galatians 6:6).

Though God calls us to honor our leaders, we must not idolize them. They are humans who sin just as we do. We must be careful not to magnify the messenger and miss the message.

I have been guilty of listening to a message and being more enamored with the speaking style, illustrations, or delivery than with personally applying the truths presented. My thoughts can turn to grading the speaker rather than asking the Holy Spirit to convict and encourage me. Can you relate?

What are some ways you have been tempted to overly identify with one or more Christian leaders?

We all have heroes in the faith, and this is not a bad thing. We just need to be cautious not to get out of balance. Like a pendulum, we can swing too far to one side and elevate a person to larger-than-life status, making us “sheeple” who follow without question. Or we can swing too far to the other side and demonstrate our refusal to show respect for those with God-given authority, becoming critical skeptics. I've been at women's conferences where a certain teacher actually needed bodyguards because of stalking “sheeples” who demanded attention. On the flip side, I recently received an e-mail through my website from a skeptic who questioned one of my video teachings after misunderstanding the heart of the message. Rather than swinging too far in either direction, the key is to stay balanced in the center.

Take a few moments now to pray, asking God if you are out of balance in relation to any Christian leaders, teachers (including authors and speakers), preachers, or musicians. Consider those you are *drawn to*—in the church, on the radio or television, at conferences or concerts, or on social media—as well as those you are *not* drawn to and may find yourself openly criticizing.



We must be careful not to magnify the messenger and miss the message.

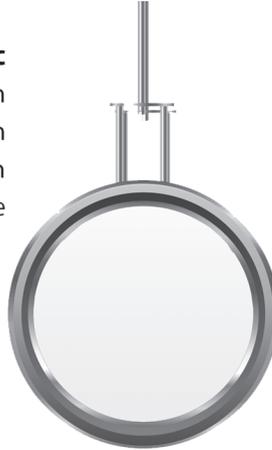
Read the following descriptions. Below **Skeptic**, list any Christian leaders you may be highly critical of. Below **Sheeple**, list any you may tend to put on a pedestal. Finally, inside the pendulum write the names of a few leaders you follow with a balanced approach. Include one of your local Christian leaders in this category.

Skeptic

General distrustful feeling toward them
 Wouldn't receive correction well from them
 Criticize them to others often
 Usually disagree with decisions they make

Sheeple

Quote them often
 Read them more than Bible
 Rarely question what they say
 Mildly obsessed with their ministry



Balanced Approach

You benefit from their God-given gifts
 Want to imitate their faith
 Draw closer to Jesus through their ministry
 You check their words against Scripture when something doesn't sound right
 You can agree to disagree with them on certain points since no one person has all truth

Which tendency do you identify with more—skeptic or sheeple?

Extra Insight

Urban dictionary defines *sheeple* as “people unable to think for themselves. Followers. Lemmings. Those with no cognitive abilities of their own.”⁸

Some Corinthian believers swung to the sheeple side regarding Apollos or Peter, which caused them to swing to the skeptic side concerning Paul's authority. Both of these extremes lead to factions and divisions. God wants us to have a balanced approach toward our leaders. We are to learn from them and honor them, but we also must realize they have feet of clay and sometimes get it wrong. I tend to question everything and find myself with skeptic leanings. But once I've developed an affinity for a certain Bible teacher, my pendulum tends to swing to the other side where it seems he or she can do or say nothing wrong. I'm learning to find balance.

Write a short prayer below, asking God to help you restore balance in any areas where the messenger may have become magnified above the message in your Christian walk:

2. Outward Signs of Inward Changes

The second danger Paul mentioned has to do with arguments over outward signs of inward changes.

Some Corinthian believers sought status based on who baptized them. Though we may not argue about that specifically, church history reveals a lot of schism over the baptismal waters. Some of the greatest theologians in history such as Zwingli, Calvin, Luther, and Wesley argued vehemently for what they deemed the correct methods of participating in baptism and communion. Regardless of our practices and terminology related to baptism and Communion, we must remember that they are a gift from God, not another brand of strife for the church.

On the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed these words:

20“My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, 21 that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. 22 I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one— 23 I in them and you in me—so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me.”

(John 17:20-23 NIV)

Jesus’ prayer was for us. He knows our propensity toward division and the twisting of beautiful expressions of faith into dividing lines. He prayed for us because He understands our weaknesses. Jesus longs for us to have complete unity, and I believe this includes the outward manifestations of inward changes that He instituted during His earthly ministry. While we may disagree about how we practice these observances, we should be unified in the heart behind them, remembering that they point to Christ. Yet often we argue over the very things that Jesus gave us as tangible reminders of His love and sacrifice. We must guard against elevating form over substance.

In His prayer, Jesus said that our unity would showcase Him to the world. When we fight over outward expressions of our faith—such as our preference of worship music, preaching styles, church décor, methods of baptism, modes of Communion, or anything else on the long list of things we squabble about—we don’t draw unbelievers to the incredible truth and power of the cross. As one commentator has noted, “Church should be a place where people who have no other natural reason for associating with each other come together in love, but instead it often remains the most segregated aspect of Western society today.”⁹

How have you seen unity expressed among believers in the midst of differing opinions?

Some examples of this kind of unity might include a Bible study group that includes women from different denominations or a collaboration of believers who disagree on many issues coming together to serve the community. While there are no simple answers to healing fractures among the body of Christ, we can strive to achieve unity without uniformity. Paul didn't appeal to the Corinthians to stop the factions among them based on expediency or tolerance. Instead, he tried to persuade them to be unified based on one reason.

According to 1 Corinthians 1:17 (in the margin), what did Paul say Christ sent him to do?

Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News—and not with clever speech, for fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power.
(1 Corinthians 1:17)

Paul wasn't saying baptism has no value; instead he claimed that all other things recede into the background in light of the cross of Christ. One scholar puts it this way: "Paul says that cliquishness in the church serves to chop Christ up in pieces and parcel Him out. When we identify ourselves only with this piece or that portion of Jesus, we lose our perspective on the whole of Christian theology."¹⁰

When we reflect on the cross and the anguish, sweat, and blood of Christ; the loneliness and pain He experienced when the Father turned His face away; the weight of sin; and Christ's death and resurrection—all on our behalf—all other disagreements take a backseat. The cross wasn't a cute logo the early church came up with to solidify their brand. It was an instrument of torture. Like featuring an electric chair or lethal injection on your website, the cross was an unlikely marketing magnet to draw people to salvation. Yet it was God's perfect plan for atonement. The cross exposes our sins of pride, hatred, and disunity with others. Through the shed blood of Christ we find healing—for ourselves and our fractured relationships in the church.

Typically when I have argued over outward expressions of faith to the point that it causes division, I usually find pride and self-righteousness creeping into my soul. The cross helps us remember who we really are: sinners desperately in need of a Savior trying to get along with other sinners desperately in need of a Savior.

Paul wasn't advocating that the Corinthians throw out all sound doctrine and teaching other than the gospel message itself. As we progress

through his letter, we will find him very clearly confronting all sorts of doctrinal issues. He simply wanted to be sure that they approached differences from the perspective of the cross. We are called to do the same. Then, with an attitude of humility and grace, we can discuss our varied viewpoints without creating factions and divisions within the body of Christ. The cross helps us reimagine who we really are, aligning in unity all who follow Jesus.

Talk with God

Take a moment to reread 1 Corinthians 1:10-17. Then rewrite in your own words the two dangers we identified in today's study that can lead to division:

- 1.
- 2.

Now write Paul's primary focus according to verse 17:

Spend some time in prayer, meditating on what Jesus did on the cross. Thank Him for how He has cleansed you, changed you, and healed you. Then ask Him to help you, as well as your church, dissipate all petty disagreements and complicated divisions through the healing power of the cross.

DAY 3: THE FOOLISH PLAN OF GOD

When my family moved into our first house over sixteen years ago, we quickly discovered that our neighbors had a little girl similar in age to our two-year-old son. Our toddlers became fast friends and played together for years until the whole "I'm a boy and it's not cool to play with girls" thing took effect. This gal's mom and I enjoyed a sweet friendship as we celebrated kids' birthdays, took walks, and encouraged each other through two more pregnancies for each of us. While this family respected our faith, they didn't share it. One summer we had a backyard Bible club in our garage, and their daughter, who I'll call Jennifer, came every day. She was about nine years old at the time. When the stories were told, Jennifer listened intently. On the last day I shared the simple gospel message, and she indicated that she wanted to have a personal relationship with Jesus.

The next day I called her mom, holding the phone in my trembling hands. I didn't want my friend to think we were brainwashing her daughter. I nervously asked if we could meet for lunch. After the small

Extra Insight

The church at Corinth likely was made up of multiple house churches meeting in different parts of town. "The seeds of rivalry could have been sown by those geographical divisions as well."¹¹

Extra Insight

For help in responding to questions similar to my friend's, see Andy Stanley's book *Since Nobody's Perfect: How Good Is Good Enough?* (Multnomah, 2003), which explores God's grace and Jesus' teaching that goodness is not a requirement to enter heaven.

talk about kids and husbands ended, I began to tell her about Jennifer's decision to become a Christ-follower. She inquired what exactly I meant by that statement. I shared with her the basic lesson that had prompted Jennifer to respond:

- God's great love for us. (John 3:16)
- Our sin separates us from this Holy God. (Romans 3:23)
- Christ died on the cross as the payment for our sin to reunite us with God. (Romans 4:25 and 5:8)
- When we personally receive Christ as our Lord and Savior we become children of God who receive eternal life. (John 1:12, Romans 10:9)

I told her that Jennifer said she believed those truths and wanted to have a personal relationship with God through Christ. As I was talking, I could tell that she was really listening and thinking. She said something like this: "Are you are saying that if I live a good, moral life trying to make the best decisions I can and love my family but never admit that I'm a sinner and ask Christ into my life, then I will not go to heaven? But if a rapist or murderer in jail believes these truths and asks God to forgive him through Christ, then he will go to heaven? That makes no sense to me." She had never heard the truths of the gospel that I shared, and she had trouble wrapping her mind around God's plan of salvation.

How would you explain God's plan of salvation to a nonbelieving friend?

Today as we read 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, we will hear Paul reiterating the truth that the intersection of God's plan and what seems logical to us often creates some cognitive dissonance. We will see that he emphasized three key themes that can help us wrap our minds around God's sovereign plans, which often surpass human wisdom:

1. The Message of the Cross
2. The Futility of Human Wisdom
3. Boasting with Humility

1. The Message of the Cross

The first theme we encounter in this section of Paul's letter is the message of the cross. The cross is central to the gospel and God's plan of salvation, yet it can be a cause for confusion and division—even among Christians.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18-25. What are the two outcomes for the two different views about the cross according to verse 18?

View

Outcome

Message of the cross is foolish

Message of the cross is the power of God

Is there a third position, or does everyone fall into one of these two camps?

Read Luke 11:23 in the margin. How do these words of Jesus support or weaken your conclusion?

Now read Romans 1:16 in the margin. How does this verse support 1 Corinthians 1:18?

We find no fence-sitting when it comes to our belief about Christ. Paul delved into the message of the cross because unity is quickly threatened when it's not at the center of our lives.

I'm happy to tell you that when Jennifer's family was about to move out of town, I shared with her mother a little book written by Andy Stanley called *Since Nobody's Perfect: How Good Is Good Enough?* It basically takes the "good people go to heaven" theory that so many people espouse and explains in a clear, concise way why it has a lack of biblical support. I wasn't sure my friend would read it, but she called a few days later and mentioned that she had read the whole thing and felt that she finally "got it." Now it made sense: good people don't go to heaven; forgiven people do. And she too responded to God's invitation of grace.

Paul was reminding the believers at Corinth that the message of the cross must be central to all of life and practice, but it is especially crucial in regards to how we view ourselves and others. We can't count on religiosity, rules, or human wisdom to help us live love when we disagree. Without the message of the cross, all of those things are useless.

*"Anyone who isn't with me opposes me, and anyone who isn't working with me is actually working against me."
(Luke 11:23)*

*I am not ashamed of this Good News about Christ. It is the power of God at work, saving everyone who believes—the Jew first and also the Gentile.
(Romans 1:16)*

When did you make a personal decision to follow Christ? Or if you've loved Jesus since you were a very young child, when did you begin to understand the message of the cross?

How might your life be different if the message of the cross was foolish to you? What might you have done differently regarding certain decisions, attitudes, and relationships?

2. The Futility of Human Wisdom

After focusing on the message of the cross, Paul went on to reference a verse from the prophet Isaiah about God destroying wisdom and intelligence. This idea can be confusing to us rational human beings. Here is what God *isn't* saying: "Leave your brain at the door. There is little value in thinking, investigating, asking questions, furthering your education, dialoguing about concepts, or studying." This portion of Paul's letter is not an out for thinking deeply, asking questions, or taking the time to read and study. In fact, it is through study and investigation that we find context in Paul's reference to Isaiah's words.

As the Scriptures say,
"I will destroy the
wisdom of the wise
and discard the
intelligence of the
intelligent."
(1 Corinthians 1:19)

Read 1 Corinthians 1:19 in the margin. Then read the verses from Isaiah below, underlining the portion that Paul references in 1 Corinthians 1:19.

¹³ *And so the Lord says,
"These people say they are mine.*

*They honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

*And their worship of me
is nothing but man-made rules learned by rote.*

¹⁴ *Because of this, I will once again astound these hypocrites
with amazing wonders.*

*The wisdom of the wise will pass away,
and the intelligence of the intelligent will disappear."*

(Isaiah 29:13-14)

From the prophet Isaiah we learn that God rejects lip service and rules followed by rote but favors authenticity and brokenness over the pretense of human righteousness (see Isaiah 29:13). God isn't calling us to blissful ignorance but is reminding us that His way is always best. God also used the prophet Isaiah to speak this important message: "For just as the heavens are higher than the earth, / so my ways are higher than your ways / and my thoughts higher than your thoughts" (55:9). In other words, what sounds like the most logical plan to us might not be best.

From the perspective of hindsight, when and how have God's plans worked out better than your own plans?

Paul was reminding the Corinthians that the God of Isaiah was still the same God—and He is the same God today. His ways are still much better than ours. Only He knows what is best for us in every situation. Sometimes I exhaust my own ways trying to fix my problems with strategy, logic, and even manipulation before asking God for His wisdom in a situation. Often He asks us to do something that doesn't make sense, such as:

- Be still in the midst of a battle raging around us. (Moses, Exodus 14)
- Trust Him even when a problem seems hopeless. (Hezekiah, 2 Kings 19)
- Speak bold messages of hope even when no one is listening. (Jeremiah, Jeremiah 7:26-27)

What can you add to this list? When has God's wisdom not been in alignment with what made sense or felt right to you?

The Corinthians lived in a culture where intellect was overemphasized. One authority writes, "Corinth paid special attention to people who could speak well, public rhetoricians, lawyers and the like. The wise, the powerful, the noble: these were the 'somebodies' in Corinth."¹² Paul wasn't advocating an abandonment of the pursuit of wisdom. Rather, he was reminding the Corinthians that relying solely on our often skewed human faculties will bring faulty conclusions. We find truth when we humbly recognize that God is the only reliable source of wisdom. This passage isn't anti-thinking; Paul was realigning the Corinthian believers to the superior nature of God's wisdom, which makes human logic and wisdom look foolish in comparison. Because the Corinthian culture was bent toward human wisdom, it was necessary to acknowledge and emphasize the truth of the "foolishness" of the cross.



If Paul had been writing to another church where education wasn't valued, he might have pressed them to study more. Having children with different learning styles, I understand this. I might go into one of my daughter's rooms and talk to her about the need to work harder at her schoolwork and get assignments done. Right next door I could drop in on my overachiever, who puts too much pressure on herself, and tell her to relax and not take her work too seriously. Paul was emphasizing one truth but not to the exclusion of another. He simply knew by the enlightenment of the Holy Spirit what message the Corinthians needed to hear.

As we read the Corinthians' mail, we need to remember who this letter was written to and why. This will help us understand and apply these truths in our own lives. Paul emphasized the powerful message of the cross and the downside of human wisdom. Verse 25 is a great summary statement: "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."

In what area of your life do you need wisdom right now?

Pause now and ask God for wisdom regarding your particular situation. We know from James 1:5 that God welcomes our requests: "If you need wisdom, ask our generous God, and he will give it to you. He will not rebuke you for asking." Take time to be still, inviting God to make His way clear to you through godly wisdom, not your own. Ask Him to use people, circumstances, and His Word to reveal or confirm any next steps you should take.

What I hear God saying to me:

What you hear may not make sense to you. God called Noah to build a boat, Hosea to marry a prostitute, and His only Son to die a painful death on a cross. Trust Him to lead you through whatever situation you are going through right now.

3. Boasting with Humility

After talking about the message of the cross and the futility of human wisdom, Paul went on to address a socially acceptable custom in Corinthian society: boasting. In Greco-Roman culture, students were schooled in the art of boasting about themselves. It was socially acceptable in government and business to use practiced rhetoric to speak about your best attributes and accomplishments. Boasting may have a negative connotation in our

culture, but when it comes to resumes or bios we are taught to put our best face forward. I remember the first time I had to write my own bio, beginning “Melissa Spoelstra is...” It wasn’t fun. It was explained to me that people want to know your background, including where you studied and your accomplishments, in order to decide quickly if they want to peruse what you’ve written. In reality, my bio could read, “Melissa Spoelstra is a sinner, saved only by grace. The only thing she has to boast about is that she knows Jesus.”

Social media can be another place for a brag fest. While we can celebrate our family’s accomplishments and milestones, we must be careful not to present ourselves to the world—virtual or otherwise—in a boastful way.

It’s not wrong to identify our strengths and accomplishments and give God glory for the gifts and talents He has given each of us. Humility is not having a low view of self; it’s recognizing our incredible value and worth because God thought us worth sacrificing His Son to save. So boasting in itself is not wrong, but the content of our boasting is critical.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:26-31 and count the number of times that the word *boast* is used. If you like, underline the word in your Bible whenever you encounter it. How many times is *boast* used in this passage?

What did Paul say many of the Corinthians were *not* like before God called them? (v. 26)

While we know that a government leader in Corinth named Erastus was a believer (Romans 16:23; 2 Timothy 4:20) and the city’s former Jewish synagogue leader converted to Christianity (Acts 18:8), most of the believers were just regular folks.

Look again at verses 27-29. Why can’t we boast in the presence of God?

Paul went on to give a gospel summary statement. Write your name in place of the pronouns by filling in the blanks in the following verse (see the next page):

“God has united _____ with Christ Jesus. For _____’s benefit God made him to be wisdom itself. Christ made _____ right with God; he made _____ pure and holy, and he freed _____ from sin.”

(1 Corinthians 1:30)

Now read the verse aloud, soaking in the full effect of this statement. Write any thoughts or insights you have below:

God is a realist. He loves us so completely that He paid the ultimate price to free us from the penalty of sin, the power of sin, and—one day—the presence of sin.

In the last verse of the chapter, Paul quoted the prophet Jeremiah.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:31 in the margin. Then read the passage below, underlining the sentence that Paul echoes in 1 Corinthians 1:31:

²³ *This is what the Lord says:*

*“Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom,
or the powerful boast in their power,
or the rich boast in their riches.*

²⁴ **But those who wish to boast
should boast in this alone:**

*that they truly know me and understand that I am the Lord
who demonstrates unfailing love
and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth,
and that I delight in these things.
I, the Lord, have spoken!”*

(Jeremiah 9:23-24)

God doesn’t want us to live with a distorted view of reality. He is the only One worth boasting about. He isn’t a megalomaniac who is obsessed with people boasting about Him; He just favors the truth. One author expresses it well: “So the kindest thing God can do is to puncture sinful

*Therefore, as the Scriptures say, “If you want to boast, boast only about the LORD.”
(1 Corinthians 1:31)*

human pride and shatter the illusion of human self-sufficiency. He does that by using the obscure, weak, and foolish things to confound the strong and the wise.”¹³

Later in his letter Paul would help the Corinthian believers work through some pretty serious issues including relational disagreements, doctrinal differences, and how to handle sexual sin in the church. But before answering their questions related to those issues, he helped them build a framework by learning to apply godly wisdom.

Rather than simply giving them answers, he wanted to be sure they recognized three truths that should be the starting blocks for every discussion or disagreement.

Write in your own words the three important truths we explored today:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

God used Paul to challenge the Corinthians with these concepts. They also hit home very practically with us. By keeping these three concepts in mind, we can find unity even in the midst of our diversity.

Talk with God

Remind yourself of these three important concepts throughout the day and evaluate how you might embrace them more fully as you approach your own relationship issues. Pray the guided prayer below or write your own prayer in the margin.

Lord, help me not to lose sight of the message of the cross. I'm so grateful that You died for my sins. Help me to see myself and others as holy and loved because of Your sacrifice. Many times I listen only to my own logic or allow worldly wisdom to creep into my life. Help me to remember that Your wisdom far exceeds anything I can come up with on my own. Jesus, help me not to boast about my job, financial status, ministry position, or any other accomplishment. Instead, help me to be grateful for all that You have provided and boast in You alone. Amen.

DAY 4: BEYOND IMAGINATION

Recently my son came home from college on the spur of the moment to surprise his little sister on her thirteenth birthday. When we sent her to the kitchen to get the cake, he jumped out and hugged her. Overcome

Digging Deeper

The places where we live shape us in ways we may not even realize. Check out the online Digging Deeper article for Week 1, "My Town," to discover how the town of Corinth shaped the original audience of Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (see AbingdonPress.com/FirstCorinthians).

Extra Insight

Every two years the city of Corinth hosted the Isthmian Games, which were an athletic festival second only to the Olympics.

with emotion, she clung to him and cried. My other daughter captured it on video, and I have to admit I've watched it quite a few times. (Okay, maybe like thirty!) It makes me emotional to see them growing up and loving each other so fiercely, especially in light of the years of arguing and discord in our house. We are a family of debaters who like to get our own way. I treasure special moments like this when I get a glimpse into their love before they start bickering over who will get the biggest piece of cake. Most of life is hard, ordinary, and fraught with conflict, so we treasure the flickers of grace when we experience them.

As we open the second chapter of Paul's letter today, we will find him reminding the church that in the midst of their questions, factions, and difficulties, the mystery of God's incredible love and plan for the future should overshadow their doctrinal and relational skirmishes. Paul takes up right where he left off at the end of chapter 1, talking about not boasting in human wisdom.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:1-9 and note how Paul delivered the message when he was with them:

He didn't come with _____ (vv. 1, 4)

He came with _____ (v. 3)

According to verse 5, why did Paul choose to preach the gospel in this manner?

Remember that the Corinthians lived in a culture that worshiped knowledge, intelligence, and human wisdom. Eloquence and special insight could earn status or even fame in a town such as Corinth.

How do you think persuasive words or a demonstrative presentation actually could have been detrimental to the clarity of Paul's message? (Think about times when someone's eloquence was a distraction to you.)

We've already learned this week that the believers in Corinth were prone to attach themselves to particular teachers. Paul didn't want to take anything away from the simple message of the gospel. It didn't need to be dressed up or made palatable or appealing. Let's consider how Paul's approach to the gospel can be applied in our own culture.

Do you think Paul is saying that we should never communicate the message of Jesus any way other than the plain method he used (nothing clever, articulate, or eloquent)? Explain your answer:

Paul says later in the letter that he tried to engage people in relevant ways by being all things to all people so that he might win some (1 Corinthians 9:19-23). So we need context and perspective to understand what Paul is saying here in chapter 2. These verses help us understand that Paul is asking us to know our audience. Rather than outlining a certain method that always is to be used when presenting the gospel, he is highlighting again the superiority of God's mysterious plan over human logic.

Paul reminds us that we don't need to "dress up" the simple message that God's mysterious plan included sending a Messiah to save us. God gave up His only Son to pay the price for all our sins and then raised Him from the dead to new life. Paul states clearly that he preached only "Christ and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2 NIV). Yet Paul isn't saying that we shouldn't do things with excellence, be culturally relevant, or try to persuade people to follow Christ. Given the cultural appetite for knowledge and rhetoric, Paul simply had been careful not to be another teacher people were drawn to initially and then dismissed when they were ready to move on to someone or something else.

Jesus had modeled this straightforward approach to truth before Paul. He drew crowds when he stood up to injustice and talked about loving one's neighbor, but when he taught about eating his flesh and drinking his blood, the crowds began to dissipate (John 6:60-66). The disciples wondered if he should tone down the confusing or offensive teachings, but Jesus didn't come to entertain. He came to speak the truth and give His life for the church.

We certainly live in a culture that worships intelligence. While believing the gospel doesn't mean crucifying our intellect, it does mean taking a leap of faith. And as history reveals, a basic presentation of the gospel message is still effective. One commentator makes this observation:

It is interesting to compare possibly the three greatest evangelists in North America during the last 150 years—D. L. Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham. Neither Moody nor Graham was known for impressing audiences with lofty rhetoric, frequently their sermons were deemed simplistic. Sunday was known for a flashy style, but he still preached a very basic gospel message. But all three centered on the cross and the need for personal conversion. As a result, they gave encouragement to millions of "down-and-outers," and countless came to the Lord through their preaching.¹⁴



What are some ways you have been able to share the gospel message with people in your sphere of influence? What has been effective?

It encourages me that Paul brought his weakness and willingness, and from there the church in Corinth was born.

Take a minute to read Acts 18:1-11 for some more insight into the Corinthian church plant. Answer the following questions:

What husband and wife team did Paul meet in Corinth? (vv. 1-2)

What was Paul's occupation in Corinth? (v. 3)

Where did Paul go initially to preach the gospel? (vv. 4-5)

How was Paul's gospel message received by the people worshiping in the Jewish synagogue? (v. 6)

Who then did Paul preach to? (vv. 6-8)

What message did Paul receive from the Lord in a vision? (vv. 9-10)

How long did Paul stay in Corinth? (v. 11)

What additional insights do you gain from this passage about why Paul chose a simple approach to preaching the gospel to the Gentiles?

Paul's vision encouraged him to stay the course in church planting. Though you may not have received a direct vision from the Lord as Paul did, how has God encouraged you to stay the course in spreading His love to others when you have been discouraged?

It's easy to get discouraged when people reject God's offer of love and salvation. If we aren't careful, our human tendency can be to feel that they are rejecting us along with God's message. The Lord offers Himself freely to everyone and uses us to tell others about His sacrifice on the cross and His love for all of humanity. However, we must continue to listen for His leading concerning when, how, and to whom we share our faith.

Paul faced rejection from most of his own people. While one of the synagogue leaders named Crispus converted to Christianity, as well as Titius Justus who was a Gentile proselyte to Judaism, Paul found more fertile ground for the gospel outside the Jewish community. These Gentile converts might have included workers who spent time alongside Paul, Aquila, and Priscilla on a daily basis. They could have included food vendors, shop workers, or those who unloaded the ships that were constantly passing through Corinth. They were regular folks who heard Paul preach the simple gospel message that Jesus had died for their sins. As we will see, the varied backgrounds of the church members played a role in the dissensions that Paul addressed in his letter.

Have you seen differences in upbringing, culture, and background cause challenges in relationships within the church? If so, how?

The power of the gospel can change any of us—from the most pious religious leader to the worldliest individual. Paul didn't want the Corinthian believers to lose sight of the common ground they shared despite their varied backgrounds. He reminded them in his letter that it wasn't fancy words that led them to decide to follow Jesus; it was the transforming power of the gospel message. God was so *for* them that He rescued them all from their sin by sending His Son to die in their place.

When I meditate on the truth of God's sacrificial love, I am overcome that God loves *me* that much. I have one son. He recently left for college, and I miss him. I can't imagine giving him up for anything—much less watching him suffer for the sake of others. Only a great and incredible love for us could motivate God to give up His perfect, sinless Son. That is how much God loves us. In the midst of all the junk of this life—the conflicts,

disagreements, and hardships—God wants to remind us that He is crazy about us. Even when life stinks, He is good.

As I've mentioned, Paul had spent eighteen months with the Corinthians and had been away from them for about three to five years when he wrote this letter. He knew from the tone of the letter they had written to him, asking questions, as well as the reports he had heard about their squabbles, that they needed a reminder of the goodness of God in the midst of the trials of life.

What about you? Do you need a reminder today of the goodness of God in the midst of your crazy life? Just as I need those glimpses of sweetness among my children, I also need gentle reminders from the Lord that He is for me, that He sees me, and that He has good plans ahead.

I once heard a preacher say that we are like fish out of water. The sea is heaven, and we are fish flopping around on the beach. Sometimes we feel like that, don't we? That analogy encourages me with the reminder that my struggles in this life are normal. I was made for heaven. With that in mind, I can look forward to all that God has in store in this life and the next.

If you were to imagine the best day possible, what sights and sounds would it include? How do you think your "best day" might compare to heaven?

Let's close by looking at the last verse of the section of Paul's letter we're studying today, where he cites another passage from Isaiah. I pray you will get a sweet reminder of God's great love for you and His good plans for your future.

However, as it is written:

*"What no eye has seen,
what no ear has heard,
and what no human mind has conceived"—
the things God has prepared for those who love him—
(1 Corinthians 2:9 NIV)*

Read 1 Corinthians 2:9 in the margin, and write it below in your own words:

Though Paul didn't write an exact quote of Isaiah, most commentators agree that he was drawing from a passage in Isaiah 64. While your perfect day might be a day at the beach or spa, God tells us His plans for us are greater than anything we could ask or imagine.

Now read Isaiah 64:1-4 below, underlining the phrases that are reminiscent of 1 Corinthians 2:9:

¹ *Oh, that you would burst from the heavens and come down!*

How the mountains would quake in your presence!

*² As fire causes wood to burn
and water to boil,
your coming would make the nations tremble.
Then your enemies would learn the reason for your fame!*

*³ When you came down long ago,
you did awesome deeds beyond our highest expectations.
And oh, how the mountains quaked!*

*⁴ For since the world began,
no ear has heard
and no eye has seen a God like you,
who works for those who wait for him!*

(Isaiah 64:1-4)

While Isaiah talks about those who “wait” and Paul talks about those who “love,” the concept is that God has great things in store for us beyond our imagination. Paul says that we can’t even wrap our minds around what God has planned for us! Revelation 21:4 tells us that heaven includes no tears, pain, or death. That is hard to imagine. In the meantime, God calls us to trust Him. We are to love Him and His church with our whole hearts and wait for the day when He returns or calls us home. But until then, He has purpose for us here.

Tomorrow we will finish chapter 2, which offers us encouragement related to how to “flop around on the beach” (live in this world of struggles) with intentionality and hope. Although the gospel may not be flashy, it certainly is beyond all we could ask or think. Let’s end this day thanking God that our future with Him will go beyond our wildest dreams!

Talk with God

Read and meditate on these verses: John 14:2, 1 Thessalonians 4:16-17, and Revelation 21:3-4. Spend a few moments praising God that He is coming back to bring us into His presence forever.

DAY 5: A SPIRITUAL MIND

Yesterday we observed Paul reminding the Corinthian believers that God would knock their socks off in the future with things they couldn’t even begin to imagine. While Paul’s writings affirm that the Lord gives us His presence and so many wonderful blessings here on earth, his reference to the passage from Isaiah had a tone that smacked of that future day when Jesus will return.



So what are we to do here on earth until Jesus comes? Should we huddle up and wait it out? God gives us the hope of heaven to help us through the difficult times, but do we just grin and bear it, getting through the ups and downs of life the best we can? How do we know how to handle disagreements or doctrinal questions? Jesus is no longer on the earth in human form to correct and answer questions for his disciples. Paul and the original apostles are not here so that we may write letters to them when we are confused. In today's reading we will find some answers.

Read 1 Corinthians 2:10-16 and give one insight from each verse related to the Holy Spirit's role in our lives. I've done the first one for you.

<u>Verse</u>	<u>Holy Spirit's Role</u>
10	The Spirit knows everything and helps us understand what God is doing.
11	
12	
13	
14	
15	
16	

Here we see some of the great benefits of the Holy Spirit in our lives. Paul seems to be restating a similar theme in these verses.

How would you summarize in one sentence what Paul is trying to tell us about God's Holy Spirit?

As we continue to make our way through Paul's letter to the believers at Corinth, we will study more specifically the gifts of the Holy Spirit. He is the third person of the Godhead—not an impersonal force in our lives. Even though we don't have Jesus with us in human form so that we may ask Him questions to clarify issues, we have the Holy Spirit. Jesus said this about the Holy Spirit:

¹⁶ “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, who will never leave you. ¹⁷ He is the Holy Spirit, who leads into all truth. The world cannot receive him, because it isn’t looking for him and doesn’t recognize him. But you know him, because he lives with you now and later will be in you.”

(John 14:16-17)

Paul’s words in 1 Corinthians 2 line up with Christ’s own words regarding the Spirit. Paul would go on to address relational, doctrinal, and practical issues. But before he did, he wanted to be sure the Corinthians were aware that they already had access to Someone far greater and wiser than he. He knew he would not always be around for them to write letters to when they didn’t know how to handle certain situations. So he reminded them of the power of the Holy Spirit to guide them.

I’m thankful that God doesn’t leave us to figure things out on our own, aren’t you? He gives us His Spirit because He longs for us to know Him and be close to Him. Yet so easily we can become unaware of His presence, forgetting He is with us—and within us.

One time I was searching the house for something I needed for a conference. I finally had to make do without it. Later I was unpacking the van and found I had put it in the back of the vehicle so I wouldn’t forget. Ugh!

I wonder if God feels the same tinge of frustration when we forget the gift of His Spirit, who lives inside us from the moment we choose to follow Him. Because of this gift, we have everything we need. As 2 Peter 1:3 tells us, “By his divine power, God has given us everything we need for living a godly life. We have received all of this by coming to know him, the one who called us to himself by means of his marvelous glory and excellence.”

What are some of the ways the Holy Spirit helps us live a godly life? A primary role of the Holy Spirit is to illuminate God’s Word and help us understand what God is like (John 14:26). I once heard someone say that memorizing God’s Word increases the Holy Spirit’s vocabulary in your life. I’ve found that to be true. In moments of doubt, God reminds me of Psalm 94:19: “When doubts filled my mind, / your comfort gave me renewed hope and cheer.” When I am afraid, 2 Timothy 1:7 comes to mind: “For God has not given us a spirit of fear and timidity, but of power, love, and self-discipline.” I find that the Holy Spirit brings God’s Word to mind at just the right time.

Other times the Holy Spirit directs my thoughts, gives me discernment, gives me peace about a decision, inspires me with creative ideas, comforts me, tames my wild emotions, and illuminates sin in my heart.



The Scriptures tell us that the Holy Spirit comforts (John 14:26 KJV), teaches or guides (John 14:26; 16:13), equips (1 Corinthians 12:4-7), counsels (John 14:26), convicts (John 16:8), and reveals the future (John 16:13). We also learn about the role of the Spirit in Ephesians 5:18, where Paul contrasts being controlled by the Spirit with being drunk with wine. Similar to the way that wine alters the thinking, attitude, and actions of a person under its influence, the Spirit focuses our minds on God and helps us discern God's will for our daily circumstances.

Throughout church history as well as today, the role of the Holy Spirit has been a cause for spirited debate. However, as we look at Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2, we can all agree that the Holy Spirit helps us understand spiritual things. Where human wisdom fails us, the Spirit gives us insight into our Father's heart.

Paul said the Holy Spirit shows us God's deep secrets (1 Corinthians 2:10). What are some ways the Holy Spirit has revealed things to you personally?

Later in the chapter, as he continues to teach about the Holy Spirit, Paul draws from the prophet Isaiah again, echoing these words from Isaiah 40:13: "Who is able to advise the Spirit of the Lord? / Who knows enough to give him advice or teach him?" Then Paul brings an answer to this didactic refrain with a great truth to encourage all who are indwelt by the Holy Spirit.

"Who has known the mind of the Lord so as to instruct him?"

*But we have the mind of Christ.
(1 Corinthians 2:16 NIV)*

Read Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 2:16 (in the margin). According to this verse, what do we possess?

Take that in for a minute. Say it out loud: "I have the mind of Christ." When you think you'll never figure out what to do next, when you feel stuck in a relationship that seems will never change, when you lose all confidence about the direction of your life—allow the Holy Spirit to remind you that *you have the mind of Christ*. This realization should give us God-confidence, not arrogance.

Let's remember what the Scriptures tell us about the mind of Christ.

Read Philippians 2:5-8. What insights do these verses give us about what Christ's mind is like?

Having the mind of Christ should give us greater confidence, yet this confidence is coupled with the humble realization that the wisdom of the God of the universe resides in us through the Holy Spirit. If anyone ever had a reason to boast about His position and power, it would be Christ. Yet He took on the form of a servant, gave up His rights, and obeyed to the point of death. This is the “mind”—or attitude—that should govern our thinking and decisions. Whenever we are standing at a crossroads or facing a difficult situation, having the mind of Christ should cause us to consider questions such as these:

- How can I look out for the interests of others through this difficulty? (Philippians 2:4)
- What thoughts do I need to take captive to make them obedient to the ways of Christ? (2 Corinthians 10:5)
- What true, honorable, and praiseworthy things can I set my mind on? (Philippians 4:8)

What has been your state of mind recently? When you have quiet moments riding in the car, lying in bed at night, or going about your daily routine, where do your thoughts often land?

My mind often can be a battlefield. My thought life defaults to worry, judgment, and sometimes the land of “what if” or “if only.” I must choose to redirect my thoughts and ask the Holy Spirit to take control. Surrendering to the humility of Christ in our minds requires us to be intentional.

What are some practices that help you stop an unhealthy thinking pattern and yield to the Holy Spirit’s wisdom? Circle any below that you have found helpful:

Listening to uplifting music

Changing your surroundings

Meditating on Scripture

Writing in your journal

Going for a walk/run
or exercising

Calling an encouraging
friend

Thinking about a
person in need

Centering your thoughts
on Christ

Asking the Holy Spirit
to help

Praying for the situation
or people

Reciting a prayer, poem,
or Scripture

Reading a portion of
Scripture

WEEKLY WRAP-UP

This week we studied the first two chapters of Paul's letter by reading them in short sections so that we could focus on understanding each part. However, in using this approach we risk losing the flow of the letter, which was designed to be read out loud and passed among the house churches. So we will finish our study each week by reading in one sitting the chapters we've covered that week. This wrap-up exercise should take you approximately 6-7 minutes for reading the chapters and a few additional minutes for recording reflections.

Take a few minutes to read 1 Corinthians 1 and 2 again—either out loud if possible or silently if you are in a public setting. What new insights or applications did the Holy Spirit lift off the page as you read?

Here are some of the highlights from our study this week:

- Paul knew the Old Testament so well that he could quote Jeremiah and Isaiah and tie them into his message through the prompting of the Holy Spirit.
- Paul used repetition. He really wanted the Corinthians to understand the superiority of God's wisdom over human understanding.
- The message of the cross never ceases to overwhelm and amaze me. The fact that God sent His only Son for *me*!
- The hope of heaven and the Holy Spirit are gifts from God to help us through even our darkest days.

God's Word is alive and active. Paul's letter to a troubled church echoes into my life with such relevancy, and I pray it is resonating into yours as well!

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: WEEK 1

IN CHRIST ALONE

_____ to God, so it should matter to us.

- Jesus prayed for our unity in the church. (John 17:20-23)
- Paul wrote about unity in his letters. (Romans 14:19, Ephesians 4:13, Colossians 3:14, 1 Corinthians 1:10)

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in _____ with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, _____ in thought and purpose.

(1 Corinthians 1:10)

Christ calls us to _____ not _____.

- Unity includes diversity.
- Uniformity eliminates diversity.

Realizing our _____ in Christ gives us the starting point for dealing with disagreement.

- Those who have called on the name of Christ are holy. (1 Corinthians 1:2)

How would that change us—if we looked at the people we disagree with and began to see them as _____?

- We should value and treasure people because they are loved by God and are holy.

VIDEO VIEWER GUIDE: WEEK 1

A New H₂O

H₁ = _____

- We can't imagine what God has prepared for us in heaven. (1 Corinthians 2:9)
- When discerning what to do in a situation, we need to ask ourselves, "Is this going to matter in heaven?"

H₂ = _____

- God has given us His Holy Spirit to guide and lead us. (1 Corinthians 2:11-12)
- We have the mind of Christ. (1 Corinthians 2:16)

O = _____

- We can have joy knowing that the hope of heaven and the Holy Spirit will never change.