

The Book of 1 Corinthians, Teacher's Guide

Lesson 1: Divisions in the Church and the Cross

1 Corinthians 1:1–31

Teaching Aim (Teacher Orientation)

This opening chapter sets the agenda for the whole letter, and what is doctrinally at stake is the gospel itself. The Corinthians were not denying any article of faith outright; they were fracturing the body of Christ by attaching themselves to human leaders and human wisdom. Paul's answer is not better conflict management but a recovery of the cross. The teacher's task is to show that Christian unity is not a matter of taste or temperament but flows from one crucified Lord, one baptism into him, and one gospel that levels every human distinction. Handle the appeal to unity (vv. 10–17) as the call to abandon party spirit and denominational division, and be clear about verse 17: Paul is opposing factions built around who did the baptizing, not the necessity of baptism, which he everywhere assumes (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27).

At the same time, this passage was never meant only to settle an argument. Paul is doing heart surgery. Behind the cliques in Corinth lies pride, the hunger to be associated with the impressive and the important. So the chapter aims at the formation of the student as much as the correction of error. The goal is humility, a heart that boasts in the Lord and not in itself, that no longer needs to win, to belong to the right camp, or to look down on the weak.

So aim at both targets this week. Send students home understanding why the cross is the wisdom and power of God and why it exposes every human boast as empty, and send them home gently convicted about their own party spirit, their own status-seeking, and their own need to find their whole identity in Christ alone.

Question 1

Student Question:

Paul appeals to the Corinthians that there be "no divisions" among them but that they be "united in the same mind and the same judgment" (v. 10). What is the basis of the unity Paul calls for here, and how is it different from simply everyone having identical opinions or tastes?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Begin by anchoring the unity Paul calls for in its true basis. The phrase "united in the same mind and the same judgment" can sound like Paul demanding uniformity of opinion, as though every Christian must hold identical views on every matter. That is not his point. The unity he calls for is rooted in the gospel he has just rehearsed in verses 1 through 9: they are sanctified in Christ, called to be saints, kept by God, and waiting together for the same returning Lord. Their oneness is a given fact in Christ before it is a goal to pursue.

Help students see that the divisions in Corinth were not doctrinal disputes but loyalty to personalities. The cure is not to argue everyone into agreement but to lift everyone's eyes to the one Lord they share. When the center is Christ crucified, secondary preferences fall back into their proper place.

Draw the line carefully between unity and uniformity. Scripture allows for differences of judgment in matters of opinion (Romans 14), but it never allows the body of Christ to splinter into competing camps. The teacher should help students distinguish between the essential oneness of the faith and the personal preferences that should never become party banners.

Tie this to the local congregation. Real unity is costly. It asks us to lay down the need to win, to prefer one another, and to keep the cross at the center of our common life. This is the New Testament pattern for the Lord's church, not a loose federation of factions but one body.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The unity of the church grounded in one Lord, one gospel, and one baptism, not in human personalities (Ephesians 4:1–6)
- The difference between unity in Christ and mere uniformity of opinion
- Division and party spirit as a serious sin against the body of Christ, not a harmless preference
- Matters of faith that bind all Christians versus matters of opinion that must not become test of fellowship (Romans 14)
- The local congregation as a single body called to oneness after the New Testament pattern

Discussion Prompts

- What is the actual ground of Christian unity according to verses 1 through 10?
- Where do we confuse our personal preferences with the gospel itself?
- What would it look like for our congregation to be united in mind and judgment without becoming clones of one another?

Question 2

Student Question:

Think about your own circle in the church. Is there a person, a group, or a "side" you quietly look down on or keep at arm's length? What would it look like this week to treat that brother or sister as someone for whom Christ was also crucified?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the first of the self-examining questions, and the aim is gentle honesty, not guilt for its own sake. Most of us keep quiet little lists of people or groups we find hard, and we rarely name them out loud. Invite students to do that inner work prayerfully.

Connect the question directly to the cross. Paul's whole argument is that Christ was crucified for these very people. The brother you find difficult is someone for whom the Lord shed his blood. That truth, taken seriously, makes contempt impossible.

Move the conversation toward a concrete next step. It is easy to agree in principle that we should love everyone. It is harder, and far more useful, to name one person and one specific act of love or reconciliation to pursue this week.

Be ready to handle real hurt with care. Sometimes the distance between believers comes from genuine wounds, not mere preference. Honor that, while still pointing toward the reconciling power of the cross and the patient work of forgiveness.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Contempt and quiet exclusion as forms of the division Paul condemns
- The cross as the great leveler that makes looking down on others impossible
- Reconciliation as an active pursuit, not a passive wish
- The difference between forgiving a real hurt and merely tolerating a difference of taste

Discussion Prompts

- Who is one person in the body you tend to keep at arm's length, and why?
- How does remembering that Christ died for that person change how you see them?
- What is one concrete step toward warmth or reconciliation you could take this week?

Question 3

Student Question:

When the Corinthians rallied around the names of their favorite teachers, Paul answered, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?" (v. 13), and then, "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel" (v. 17). What is Paul correcting here, and how does this passage exalt Christ and the gospel without in any way diminishing the importance of baptism into Christ?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question carries real doctrinal weight, so give it room. Paul's three rapid questions in verse 13, "Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?", all drive at one point: the church belongs to Christ alone, because Christ alone was crucified for it and Christ alone is the one into whom believers are baptized. To rally around a human name is to forget whose you are.

Handle verse 17 with special care, because it is sometimes misread. When Paul says, "Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel," he is not minimizing baptism or suggesting it is optional. He is addressing the specific problem of the Corinthians forming factions around

who personally baptized them, as if the baptizer's status mattered. Paul is relieved that he baptized only a few of them precisely so that no one could claim to belong to his party.

Make the positive point plainly: the New Testament everywhere assumes that baptism is the God-appointed point at which a believer is united with Christ and receives the forgiveness of sins. Paul himself wrote that we are "baptized into Christ Jesus" and into his death (Romans 6:3–4), that as many as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ (Galatians 3:27), and Peter preached, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins" (Acts 2:38). Verse 17 does not stand against any of this. Paul preaches the gospel that calls people to be baptized into Christ; he simply refuses to let the act become a banner for human factions.

Help students hold both truths at once: baptism is essential because Christ commanded it and joins us to himself through it, and yet baptism must never become a source of party pride about who performed it. The center is always Christ crucified, never the human instrument.

Bring it home pastorally. The same instinct that made Corinthians boast about their baptizer can make us boast about the preacher who converted us, the congregation we came from, or the family name we carry in the church. Paul calls all of that back to the cross.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ alone, the crucified Lord, as the one to whom the church belongs
- Baptism into Christ as the God-appointed point of union with him and forgiveness of sins (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27)
- Verse 17 understood rightly: Paul opposes factions formed around the baptizer, not the necessity of baptism itself
- The danger of turning even a good and commanded act into a badge of party pride
- Preaching the gospel and baptizing converts as parts of one work, not rivals
- The exaltation of Christ crucified above every human teacher or instrument

Discussion Prompts

- Why does Paul ask, "Was Paul crucified for you?" What is he trying to make the Corinthians see?
- How can we honor the importance of baptism into Christ while never making it a matter of party pride?
- What human names or loyalties are we most tempted to wear instead of simply belonging to Christ?

Question 4

Student Question:

Paul refuses to let the church wear his name or attach its identity to him. Where are you tempted to find your spiritual identity in a person, a personality, or a party, a favorite preacher, a particular group, a label, rather than simply in Christ? How does that subtly compete with your loyalty to the Lord?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This self-focused question presses the personality cult in Corinth into the student's own heart. Few of us literally say "I follow Apollos," but most of us quietly tie our spiritual identity to something smaller than Christ.

Help students name the substitutes honestly: a beloved preacher whose every word we defend, a congregation we treat as superior, a theological camp we use to sort people into in and out, even a political tribe we have baptized as Christian. None of these is necessarily evil in itself, but any of them can quietly take the place that belongs to Christ alone.

Point to the test Paul implies. Whatever we would defend more fiercely than we would defend the gospel, whatever we would split fellowship over that the New Testament does not, has likely become a rival loyalty.

End with the freedom this brings. When our identity rests in Christ alone, we can appreciate good teachers and love our congregation without idolizing them, and we can disagree with a brother without breaking fellowship.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Spiritual identity rooted in Christ alone rather than in a person, party, or label
- The difference between appreciating a teacher and idolizing one
- Rival loyalties that quietly compete with loyalty to the Lord
- Freedom and security that come from being defined by Christ

Discussion Prompts

- Whose name or which group are you most tempted to wear as your spiritual identity?
- How can you tell when an appreciation has crossed the line into a divisive loyalty?
- What changes when your security rests in belonging to Christ rather than to a camp?

Question 5

Student Question:

Paul says, "the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God" (v. 18). Why does the cross look like weakness and foolishness to the world, and what does it mean to say that this same cross is actually the power and wisdom of God?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Open up the paradox at the center of the chapter. To the watching world, a crucified Savior was an absurdity. Crucifixion was the most shameful, degrading death the Roman world could imagine, reserved for slaves and rebels. To preach that the Lord of glory died that way, and that this death is the hope of the world, sounded like madness to Greek philosophers and like scandal to Jewish expectation.

Explain why it still looks foolish. The world measures power by strength, control, and self-assertion. The cross shows a God who saves by self-giving, by weakness embraced, by laying down life rather than seizing it. That runs against every instinct of human pride.

Then turn the paradox around. What looks like weakness is in fact the power of God, because at the cross sin is judged, death is defeated, and sinners are reconciled to God. No human philosophy ever accomplished that. The wisdom of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men (v. 25).

Help students feel the personal stakes. Whether the cross looks foolish or glorious to you reveals which side of verse 18 you are on. To those being saved, the cross is not an embarrassment to explain away but the very power that is rescuing them.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The scandal and apparent foolishness of a crucified Messiah in the ancient world
- The cross as the decisive act of God's power, judging sin and defeating death
- The contrast between worldly wisdom and the wisdom of God
- Salvation accomplished by self-giving rather than self-assertion
- Our response to the cross as a revelation of where we stand before God

Discussion Prompts

- Why was a crucified Savior such an offense to both Greeks and Jews?
- In what ways does the cross still cut against the world's idea of power and success?
- How is the cross actually the power of God and not merely a symbol of it?

Question 6

Student Question:

Paul contrasts the wisdom of the world with the wisdom of God (vv. 20–25). Where have you been tempted to measure your faith, your church, or your worth by the standards the world admires, such as cleverness, success, influence, or applause? What would it mean to let the cross reset those standards?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question moves the world's wisdom from the first century into the student's daily measuring stick. We may not bow to Greek philosophy, but we constantly absorb the culture's scorecard: be impressive, be successful, be admired, be in control.

Invite students to examine where they quietly run their faith by that scorecard. Do we judge a church by its size or polish rather than its faithfulness? Do we measure our own walk by how put-together we look rather than by humble obedience? Do we crave applause more than we crave Christ?

Set the cross against all of it. The cross says that God's approval does not run along the lines the world admires. He is drawn to the humble, the repentant, the faithful, not the impressive. Letting the cross reset our standards is a daily, freeing discipline.

Aim for one concrete reorientation. Ask each student to name a single area where they have been keeping score the world's way, and to imagine what changes if Christ crucified becomes the standard instead.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- The world's scorecard of cleverness, success, and applause versus God's measure
- The temptation to evaluate faith and church by worldly metrics
- The cross as the standard that reorders our values
- Humble faithfulness as what God honors

Discussion Prompts

- Where do you catch yourself measuring your faith by the world's idea of success?
- How might the cross reset that particular standard?
- What would change this week if God's approval, not human applause, were your aim?

Question 7

Student Question:

"God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong" (v. 27). Why does God deliberately work through what the world considers weak and lowly, and what does this teach us about how salvation comes to a person?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

Bring out the deliberate strategy of God in verses 26 through 29. He did not, on the whole, call the influential and the impressive. He chose the foolish, the weak, the low, and the despised. This was not an accident of history but a purpose of God.

Explain the reason Paul gives: "so that no human being might boast in the presence of God" (v. 29). If salvation came to the powerful and the clever, they could imagine they had earned it or

deserved it. By calling the lowly, God makes plain that salvation is his gift, received by grace through faith, not a reward for human greatness.

Guard the balance here carefully. This does not mean human beings are passive or unable to respond. The gospel call is genuine and goes out to all; people really must hear, believe, repent, confess Christ, and be baptized into him. What Paul rules out is human boasting, the idea that anyone contributes the decisive merit. God saves the humble who answer his call, and the answering itself is no ground for pride.

Make the application concrete. The same God still works this way. He delights to use ordinary, overlooked people, and he resists the proud. This is good news for everyone who has ever felt too small or too unimpressive to matter to God.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- God's deliberate choice of the lowly so that no one may boast before him (v. 29)
- Salvation as God's gracious gift, never a reward for human merit or status
- The genuine and universal gospel call that people are truly able to answer (hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized)
- The exclusion of human boasting without excluding human response
- God's pattern of resisting the proud and lifting the humble

Discussion Prompts

- Why does God choose the weak and lowly rather than the impressive?
- How does this protect the truth that salvation is by grace and not by merit?
- How is this good news for someone who feels insignificant?

Question 8

Student Question:

Paul reminds the Corinthians to look at themselves honestly: "not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth" (v. 26). How does remembering what you were when God called you guard your heart against pride and against looking down on others?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This question turns verse 26 into a mirror. Paul tells the Corinthians to remember what they were when God called them, and the memory is meant to be humbling and freeing at once.

Encourage students to recall their own story honestly. None of us came to Christ as a finished, impressive product. We came as sinners in need of mercy. Keeping that memory fresh is one of the best guards against both pride and contempt.

Show how forgetting our origin breeds the very division Paul is fighting. Once we imagine we belong in the church because of our merit, we begin to rank others beneath us. Remembering grace levels the ground again.

Invite a posture of gratitude. The right response to “remember what you were” is not shame that lingers but thanksgiving that humbles. We were shown mercy; therefore we show mercy.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Remembering our former state as a guard against pride
- Grace as the great leveler within the body
- The link between forgetting grace and looking down on others
- Gratitude rather than lingering shame as the proper fruit of remembering

Discussion Prompts

- What were you when God called you, and how easily do you forget it?
- How does remembering your own need for mercy change how you treat others?
- How can gratitude, rather than shame, be the fruit of remembering what you were?

Question 9

Student Question:

Paul writes that God is the reason the Corinthians are “in Christ Jesus, who became to us wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption,” so that “let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (vv. 30–31). What does it mean that Christ himself becomes our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption, and how does this truth both humble our boasting and ground our whole salvation in him rather than in ourselves?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This is the heaviest doctrinal block of the lesson, so give it the most room. Verses 30 and 31 gather the whole chapter into a single, breathtaking claim: it is God’s doing that we are in Christ Jesus, and Christ has become to us “wisdom from God, righteousness and sanctification and redemption.” Everything we need, Christ himself supplies and indeed himself is.

Walk through the four words. Christ is our wisdom: the true knowledge of God that the philosophers groped after is found in him. Christ is our righteousness: we stand right before God not by our own record but in him. Christ is our sanctification: he is the one who sets us apart and makes us holy, the source of the transformed life. Christ is our redemption: he has bought us back from sin and death at the price of his own blood. Salvation is not a set of separate achievements we assemble; it is a Person we are joined to.

Stress that this is the answer to the boasting that fractured Corinth. If everything is from God and found in Christ, then no one can boast in a human teacher, in his own wisdom, or in his own

merit. “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord” (v. 31), quoting Jeremiah. The only boast left to a Christian is Christ.

Tie this to how salvation actually comes to us, in line with the gospel. Being “in Christ Jesus” is not a vague feeling; the New Testament describes how we come to be in him. We hear the gospel, believe in Jesus as Lord and Christ, repent of sin, confess him, and are baptized into him, and from that union flows the wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption Paul names here. The life that follows is a faithful walk in him. Be careful to present all of this as God’s gift received by an obedient faith, never as something we earn, and never as a one-time event with no ongoing walk.

Close by lifting students’ eyes in worship. This verse is not first an argument to win but a wonder to behold. Christ has become our everything. The fitting response is not pride but praise.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Christ himself as our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption (v. 30)
- Salvation as union with a Person, not an assembly of separate human achievements
- Boasting in the Lord alone as the death of party spirit and pride (v. 31)
- Coming to be in Christ through an obedient faith: hearing, believing, repenting, confessing, being baptized into him (Acts 2:38; Romans 6:3–4; Galatians 3:27)
- Salvation as God’s gracious gift received by faith, lived out in a faithful walk, never earned and never a license to stop following
- The proper response of worship and humility before the cross

Discussion Prompts

- What does it mean that Christ has become our wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption?
- How does verse 31 put an end to every kind of spiritual boasting?
- How does being joined to Christ shape both how we are saved and how we then live?

Question 10

Student Question:

Look back across the whole chapter. Paul takes a divided, status-conscious church and points them back to one thing: Christ crucified. Name one specific way you sense Jesus forming you through these verses. What is the single truth from 1 Corinthians 1 that you most need to carry into this coming week?

Commentary and Teaching Notes

This capstone question asks students to look back over the whole chapter and name one way Christ is forming them through it. Resist the urge to summarize for them; let them speak.

If discussion is slow, offer the chapter's main movements as prompts: the call to unity, the folly of party spirit, the power and wisdom of the cross, God's choice of the lowly, and Christ as our all in all. Ask which of these has pressed on them most.

Push gently toward the specific. A vague resolution to "be more humble" fades by Tuesday. A named person to reconcile with, a named boast to lay down, or a named standard to surrender to the cross is far more likely to bear fruit.

Close in prayer that the cross would reorder their loves this week, drawing them toward unity and away from pride.

Doctrinal / Christian Living Issues

- Personal formation through the truth of the cross
- Moving from general agreement to a specific, named response
- Unity and humility as the fruit of dwelling on Christ crucified
- Carrying one truth from the passage into the week ahead

Discussion Prompts

- Which movement of this chapter pressed on you most, and why?
- What is the one specific truth from 1 Corinthians 1 you most need this week?
- What named step, person, or boast is God asking you to act on?