

The Book of 1 Corinthians

Lesson 1: Divisions in the Church and the Cross -- 1 Corinthians 1:1-31

Imagine a young church meeting in a wealthy port city, a city famous for its harbors, its money, and its appetites. The members come from every imaginable background. Some were dockworkers, some were slaves, a few were people of standing with nice homes and dinner invitations to protect. They have heard the gospel from Paul, they have been baptized into Christ, and for a little while the wonder of it all held them together. Then, slowly, the old instincts crept back in. People started picking sides. Little camps formed around favorite teachers. You could almost hear it at the door before worship: who are you with, which group do you belong to, whose name do you wear? The church that began at the foot of the cross was quietly drifting into cliques.

Into that drift comes a letter. Paul does not open with a scolding. He opens with grace and thanksgiving. He calls these quarreling believers “sanctified in Christ Jesus,” “saints by calling,” people “enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge.” He reminds them that they are not lacking in any gift as they wait for the Lord Jesus to be revealed. Only then, once he has set their identity in Christ firmly in front of them, does he turn to the wound: “I appeal to you, brothers, that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you.”

What he says next is the heart of the whole letter. The problem in Corinth is not really personalities. It is a failure to understand the cross. When people boast “I follow Paul” or “I follow Apollos,” they have forgotten that no human teacher was crucified for them, and no human name was the one they were baptized into. Paul will not let them shrink the gospel down to a fan club. He lifts their eyes back to the message that made them a church in the first place: Christ crucified, the power of God and the wisdom of God, foolishness to the proud and salvation to the humble.

You know this temptation, even if your church has never split. It is the pull to define yourself by your camp, your preferences, your favorite voice, the people who think and vote and worship the way you do. It feels like loyalty. It is often pride wearing loyalty’s clothes. Paul wants something deeper for us, and it is not a bland sameness. It is a unity that flows out of a shared astonishment at the cross. Read this chapter slowly and let it do its quiet, humbling work. The same Christ who was crucified for you was crucified for the brother you find hard to get along with.

Group Discussion: Paul confronts a church that has split into camps wearing the names of their favorite teachers, “I follow Paul,” “I follow Apollos,” “I follow Cephas” (vv. 11-12). What kinds of things do Christians today gather into camps around, and how can preferences and loyalties that feel harmless quietly start to divide a congregation?

Personal Reflection: Paul says the message 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). When you are honest, are there parts of your life where the way of the cross still strikes you as weak or foolish, where you would rather rely on your own strength, status, or cleverness? Name one of them.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:1–31

Study Questions

1. 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?
2. 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?
3. 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?
4. 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?
5. 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?
6. 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?
7. “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?
8. 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?

9. 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?
10. 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?

Now or Later

Reflect on these passages: John 17:20–23, Jesus’ prayer that His people would be one as He and the Father are one; Ephesians 4:1–6, one body and one Spirit, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit; Philippians 2:1–11, the humble mind of Christ as the cure for rivalry; Galatians 6:14, boasting in nothing except the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ; Acts 18:1–11, Paul’s founding work in Corinth that lies behind this letter