

THE LOOKOUT

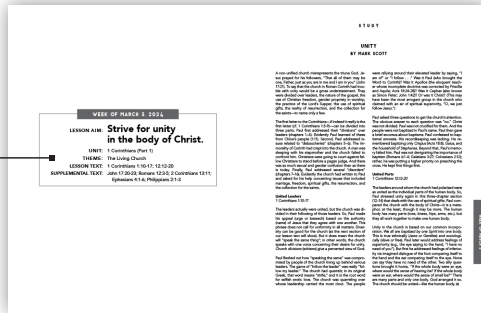
MARCH 2024

Unit: 1 Corinthians (Part 1) Theme: The Living Church

Overview: The church at Corinth had problems, as most churches do... even those that are vibrant and growing. Life was not easy in the pagan Roman culture. Life in the church was not much different. The Corinthian church had problems with unity, leaders, morality, marriage, freedoms, idolatry, spiritual gifts, love, the resurrection, and the collection for the saints. But the church of today can learn to be united from a divided church like Corinth. In this study, we highlight what constitutes unity, the nature of servant leadership, the constraints of freedom, the unifying significance of Communion, and the functioning of the body of Christ.

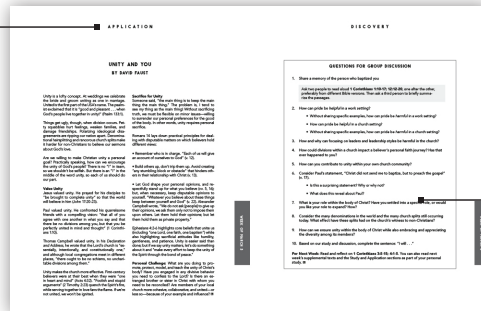
HOW TO USE

Each week has a **lesson aim**, **lesson text**, and **supplemental text**.



Tabs indicate the week of each lesson.

Each week features three sections: **Study**, **Application**, and **Discovery**.



Use the **Discovery** questions to study, discuss, and apply the Scripture passages in a group or class.

WEEK OF MARCH 31, 2024

LESSON AIM: **Weigh your church's ministries and practices by the standard of edifying one another.**

UNIT: 1 Corinthians (Part 1)

THEME: The Living Church

LESSON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 12:12-26; 14:1-12

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Romans 14; Ephesians 2:21; 4:11-16, 29;
1 Thessalonians 5:11

EDIFICATION

BY MARK SCOTT

What constitutes success in the church? The number of seats occupied on Sunday mornings? The number of baptisms per year? Collecting offerings that exceed budgeted expenses? Preaching that really connects? Music that stirs the soul of the worshiper? A leadership that runs like a well-oiled machine?

For the apostle Paul, one litmus test for church success surely was edification. Is the body of Christ at large being built up in a most holy faith (Jude 20)? A form of the word *edify* occurs in our lesson text in 1 Corinthians 14:4 (twice), 5, and 12 (when it is translated as *build up*); it means to build or construct something. The root word in *edify* comes from the word for “house.” The church is God’s building (1 Corinthians 3:9). The house needs constant attention and care to remain strong.

The Church Is Edified When All Parts Work*1 Corinthians 12:12-26*

In First Corinthians 12–14, Paul addresses a third “disorder” within the church at Corinth (see the March 17 lesson for a discussion of the first two disorders). The *English Standard Version* uses the rhetorical device “now concerning” in 12:1 (and also in 1 Corinthians 7:1 and 8:1). Paul had to correct fallacious thinking about the use of spiritual gifts. If the church had truly confessed Jesus as Lord, they would be equipped by the Holy Spirit to use their gifts in ministry to edify the church (12:1-6). These gifts (nine are mentioned in 12:8-10) are given for the common good, and God gives them as he chooses (12:7, 11).

Paul used the metaphor of a body (though some scholars think it might be more than metaphor) to illustrate his point about all parts working together. He specifically mentioned the following body parts: foot, hand, ear, eye, and head. The body is one. The parts are many. The church is one. The members are many. All the church had the same incorporation into this body. Baptism and the Holy Spirit are responsible for helping the people come into the church.

We assume the Corinthians suffered from both inferiority and superiority. Paul addressed the inferiority complex first (1 Corinthians 12:15-20). A foot might not be as glamorous as a hand, but it is needed, nonetheless. An ear does not have quite the appeal as the eye, but Paul humorously said, “*If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be?*” He wrote similarly of the ear (“*If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?*”

Paul also addressed the superiority complex (1 Corinthians 12:21-26). No part can say that it has no need of the other parts of the body. That posture would be arrogant. The seemingly *weaker* parts (a different concept than the weaker believer in chapter 8) have special honor (think *liver, kidneys, etc.*). The seemingly *unpresentable* parts (perhaps meaning private parts) are treated with *special modesty*. Division in the church is kept at bay when each member does their part to edify others. The church lives by the motto of the Three Musketeers, “All for one and one for all.”

The Church Is Edified When Everyone Understands*1 Corinthians 14:1-12*

This is one of the stickiest chapters in 1 Corinthians. Paul teaches about two of the spiritual gifts he had mentioned in chapter 12, namely speaking in tongues and prophecy. When it comes to edifying the church, he clearly prefers prophecy.

Richard Oster (*The College Press NIV Commentary: 1 Corinthians*, 288) contends any effort to read back into this chapter any modern-day pro-Pentecostal or anti-Pentecostal thinking is to misread the text and fail to account for the pagan background from which the Corinthians had come. The pagan practices from Delphi (north of Corinth) which dealt with prophetic oracles and ecstatic utterances are more what Paul was arguing against than anything in the early 20th century of the United States. Is the miraculous speaking of known human languages, as we witnessed in Acts 2, 10, and 19, what was going on in Corinth? Perhaps not. But it does not matter. Speaking a known language or some kind of ecstatic utterance, if people do not understand it, will not edify the church.

Paul did not denigrate speaking in tongues (1 Corinthians 14:1, 5, 18). But he insisted that people needed to be edified when tongues were used. In fact, he laid down rules when tongues were part of the worship assembly (14:27-28). If a person speaks in tongues and no one can understand them, then they are speaking only to God (he has no trouble understanding) or edifying themselves.

Everyone is to bring something to contribute to the church (v. 6), but whatever is brought must be properly understood. Paul illustrated his point with the clarity (or lack thereof) of musical instruments (vv. 7-8). All spiritual gifts are from God. All spiritual gifts are to be used to build up the church. But in some circumstances, certain gifts are preferred over others. ■

APPLICATION

HIDDEN GEMS

BY DAVID FAUST

An inquisitive fellow e-mailed me some probing Bible questions. Fittingly, the doubter's name was Thomas. I couldn't tell whether he was sincere or just wanted to argue.

Not wanting to engage in an email debate, I wrote back, "Would you like to meet in person to discuss your questions?" He took me up on the offer, and I found him to be a serious believer whose questions were sincere. I enjoyed getting to know him, and he seemed relieved as we discussed how the Bible addresses his concerns.

"How long have you attended our church?" I asked.

"About a year and a half," Thomas answered.

Surprised, I said, "Why haven't we met before?"

"Because I sit in the balcony," he said.

Jesus compared his kingdom to a "treasure hidden in a field" (Matthew 13:44). It turns out, there was a treasure hidden in the balcony: a new friend I had previously overlooked.

Under the Radar

Are there any hidden gems in your corner of God's kingdom? Any unheralded servants who quietly build up the body of Christ? Do you know volunteers who teach kids, rock babies in the nursery, lead small groups, operate sound systems, mow lawns, welcome guests, cook meals, set up chairs, visit shut-ins, and pray for the sick?

Do you know elders who faithfully shepherd God's flock? Or missionaries who serve so far under the radar that their whereabouts cannot be publicly disclosed for security reasons? What about Christian counselors who quietly strengthen their clients' emotional and spiritual health, and recovery group leaders who assist those struggling with hang-ups, hurts, and addictions?

Do you know of nurses, doctors, and EMTs who partner with the Great Physician to care for the ill and the

injured? What about teachers, bus drivers, custodians, and administrators who care for their students day after day? What about the faithful professors and staff members who labor without fanfare in Christian colleges?

Vibrant Ministries in Various Places

When was the last time you thanked the Lord for Christian service camps and those who serve in them? From New York to Oregon, from Tennessee to California, I have visited beautiful camp sites where kids and adults learn God's Word, enjoy God's creation, and hear God's call to salvation, ministry, and missionary service.

Hidden gems can be found among rural churches like Pricetown Church of Christ in southern Ohio. Established prior to the Civil War (in 1856), the congregation continues to thrive and serve, and it has had far-reaching kingdom impact over the years, supporting global missions and sending several "Timothies" into ministry. (That is where I was baptized and my young faith was nurtured when I was a boy.)

And what about urban ministries like Reunion Church in New York City? Church planter Russel Rader and his wife, Katie, saw the COVID-19 pandemic delay their congregation's start-up, but now they lead a dynamic group of believers who meet in a rented Manhattan dance studio on Sunday mornings. Urban areas are tough mission fields, but gems like Reunion Church sparkle in cities all over the world.

Do you know someone who brings light to dark places without grabbing the limelight? Have you discovered that "God has placed the parts in the body, every one of them, just as he wanted them to be" (1 Corinthians 12:18)—including those who sit quietly in the balcony?

Personal Challenge: Think of someone you consider a "hidden gem" who serves the Lord faithfully without a lot of recognition and fanfare. This week, send them a note of appreciation and encouragement. **L**

David Faust serves as senior associate minister with East 91st Street Christian Church in Indianapolis.

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. In the recent past, what seemingly minor physical ailment has caused outsized discomfort for you?

Ask two people to read aloud **1 Corinthians 12:12-26; 14:1-12** one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. The first Scripture passage today speaks of both the human body and the body of Christ (the church) being comprised of many parts.
 - In what ways is your church or small group diverse?
 - In what ways does your church or small group lack diversity?
 - What steps could you take to make it more diverse?
3. Consider how Paul compares the human body to the church body.
 - What part (or parts) of your local church body that seems to be weak really is indispensable? (1 Corinthians 12:22).
 - What part (or parts) of your local church body might some people outside your church be surprised to learn you treat with special honor? (v. 23).
4. Paul writes, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it; if one part is honored, every part rejoices with it" (v. 26).
 - How is that true in your church or small group? Share some personal examples.
5. In the "Personal Challenge" at the end of his Application column this week, David Faust writes, "Think of someone you consider a 'hidden gem' who serves the Lord faithfully without a lot of recognition and fanfare." Who comes to mind when you think of a "hidden gem" at your church or another church you have attended?
6. What concerns did Paul express about those who would "speak in a tongue" (1 Corinthians 14:2) during a gathering of the church?
 - What principles can you glean from this regarding our consideration for others in worship?
7. Summarize why Paul prefers prophecy to speaking in tongues.
 - Does anyone have the gift of prophecy today, or do you think that disappeared after the apostolic period?
8. How does Paul seek to "edify" or "build up" the church in today's lesson texts which concern prophecy, speaking in tongues, and the church body being like the human body?
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **1 Corinthians 1:18—2:7** as we continue with Part 2 of our study of Paul's first Epistle to the church at Corinth; the theme for next month is "The Powerful Church." You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. ■