

THE LOOKOUT

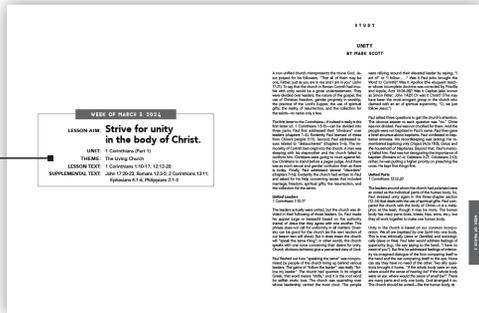
MARCH 2024

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.

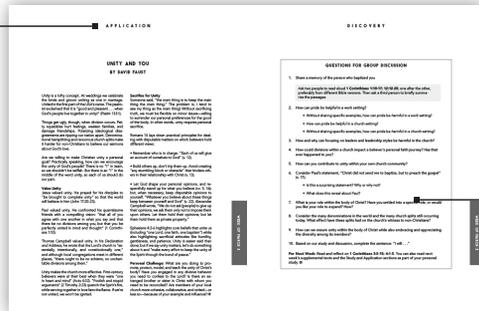
HOW TO USE

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 3, 2024

LESSON AIM: **Strive for unity
in the body of Christ.**

UNIT: 1 Corinthians (Part 1)

THEME: The Living Church

LESSON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 12:12-20

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: John 17:20-23; Romans 12:3-5; 2 Corinthians 13:11;
Ephesians 4:1-6; Philippians 2:1-3

STUDY

UNITY

BY MARK SCOTT

A non-unified church misrepresents the triune God. Jesus prayed for his followers, “That all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you” (John 17:21). To say that the church in Roman Corinth had trouble with unity would be a gross understatement. They were divided over leaders, the nature of the gospel, the use of Christian freedom, gender propriety in worship, the practice of the Lord’s Supper, the use of spiritual gifts, the reality of resurrection, and the collection for the saints—to name only a few.

The first letter to the Corinthians—if indeed it really is the first letter (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:5-9)—can be divided into three parts. Paul first addressed their “divisions” over leaders (chapters 1–4). Evidently Paul learned of these from Chloe’s people (1:11). Second, Paul addressed issues related to “debaucheries” (chapters 5–6). The immorality of Corinth had crept into the church. A man was sleeping with his stepmother and the church failed to confront him. Christians were going to court against fellow Christians to stand before a pagan judge. And there was as much sexual and gender confusion then as there is today. Finally, Paul addressed several “disorders” (chapters 7–16). Evidently the church had written to Paul and asked for his help concerning issues that included marriage, freedom, spiritual gifts, the resurrection, and the collection for the saints.

United Leaders

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

The leaders actually were united, but the church was divided in their following of those leaders. So, Paul made his *appeal* (urge or beseech) based on the authority (*name*) of Jesus that they *agree with one another*. This phrase does not call for uniformity in all matters. Diversity can be good for the church (as the next section of our lesson text will show). But it does mean the church will “speak the same thing”; in other words, the church speaks with one voice concerning their desire for unity. Church *divisions* (schisms) give a perverted view of God.

Paul fleshed out how “speaking the same” was compromised by people of the church lining up behind various leaders. The game of “follow the leader” was really “follow my leader.” The church had *quarrels*; in its original Greek, that word means “strife,” and it is the root word for selfish erotic love. The church was quarreling over whose leadership carried the most clout. The people

were rallying around their elevated leader by saying, “I am of” or “I follow . . .” Was it Paul (who brought the Word to Corinth)? Was it Apollos (the eloquent teacher whose incomplete doctrine was corrected by Priscilla and Aquila; Acts 18:24-28)? Was it Cephas (also known as Simon Peter; John 1:42)? Or was it Christ? (This may have been the most arrogant group in the church who claimed with an air of spiritual superiority, “O, we just follow Jesus.”)

Paul asked three questions to get the church’s attention. The obvious answer to each question was “no.” Christ was not divided. Paul was not crucified for them. And the people were not baptized in Paul’s name. Paul then gave a brief excursus about baptisms. Paul confessed to baptismal amnesia. His recordkeeping was lacking. He remembered baptizing only *Crispus* (Acts 18:8), *Gaius*, and *the household of Stephanas*. Beyond that, Paul’s memory failed him. Paul was not denigrating the importance of baptism (Romans 6:1-4; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:12); rather, he was putting a higher priority on preaching the cross. He kept first things first.

United Parts

1 Corinthians 12:12-20

The leaders around whom the church had polarized were as united as the individual parts of the human body. So, Paul stressed unity again in this three-chapter section (12–14) that deals with the use of spiritual gifts. Paul compared the church with the body of Christ—it is a metaphor, at the least, though it may be more. The human body has many parts (toes, knees, hips, arms, etc.), but they all work together to make one human body.

Unity in the church is based on our common incorporation. We all are *baptized by one Spirit* into one body. This is true ethnically (*Jews or Gentiles*) and sociologically (*slave or free*). Paul later would address feelings of superiority (e.g., the eye saying to the hand, “I have no need of you”). But first he addressed feelings of inferiority via imagined dialogue of the foot comparing itself to the hand and the ear comparing itself to the eye. None can say they have no need of the other. Two silly questions brought it home, “*If the whole body were an eye, where would the sense of hearing be? If the whole body were an ear, where would the sense of smell be?*” There are many parts and only one body. God arranged it so. The church should be united—like the human body. ■

UNITY AND YOU

BY DAVID FAUST

Unity is a lofty concept. At weddings we celebrate the bride and groom uniting as one in marriage. *United* is the first part of the USA's name. The psalmist exclaimed that it is "good and pleasant . . . when God's people live together in unity!" (Psalm 133:1).

Things get ugly, though, when division occurs. Petty squabbles hurt feelings, weaken families, and damage friendships. Polarizing ideological disagreements are ripping our nation apart. Denominational hairsplitting and rancorous church splits make it harder for non-Christians to believe our sermons about God's love.

Are we willing to make Christian unity a personal goal? Practically speaking, how can we encourage the unity of God's people? There is no "I" in *team*, so we shouldn't be selfish. But there is an "I" in the middle of the word *unity*, so each of us should do our part.

Value Unity

Jesus valued unity. He prayed for his disciples to "be brought to complete unity" so that the world will believe in him (John 17:20-23).

Paul valued unity. He confronted his quarrelsome friends with a compelling vision: "that all of you agree with one another in what you say and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly united in mind and thought" (1 Corinthians 1:10).

Thomas Campbell valued unity. In his *Declaration and Address*, he wrote that the Lord's church is "essentially, intentionally, and constitutionally one," and although local congregations meet in different places, "there ought to be no schisms, no uncharitable divisions among them."

Unity makes the church more effective. First-century believers were at their best when they were "one in heart and mind" (Acts 4:32). "Foolish and stupid arguments" (2 Timothy 2:23) quench the Spirit's fire, while serving together in love fans the flame. If we're not united, we won't be ignited.

Sacrifice for Unity

Someone said, "the main thing is to keep the main thing the main thing." The problem is, I tend to see *my* thing as the main thing! Without sacrificing truth, we must be flexible on minor issues—willing to surrender our personal preferences for the good of the body. In other words, unity requires personal sacrifice.

Romans 14 lays down practical principles for dealing with disputable matters on which believers hold different views:

- Remember who is in charge. "Each of us will give an account of ourselves to God" (v. 12).
- Build others up, don't trip them up. Avoid creating "any stumbling block or obstacle" that hinders others in their relationship with Christ (v. 13).
- Let God shape your personal opinions, and respectfully stand up for what you believe (vv. 5, 16); but, when necessary, keep disputable opinions to yourself. "Whatever you believe about these things keep between yourself and God" (v. 22). Alexander Campbell wrote, "We do not ask [people] to give up their opinions, we ask them only not to impose them upon others. Let them hold their opinions; but let them hold them as private property."

Ephesians 4:2-6 highlights core beliefs that unite us (including "one Lord, one faith, one baptism") while also highlighting sacrificial attitudes like humility, gentleness, and patience. Unity is easier said than done; but if we say unity matters, let's do something about it and "make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace."

Personal Challenge: What are you doing to promote, protect, model, and teach the unity of Christ's body? Have you engaged in any divisive behavior you need to confess to the Lord? Is there an estranged brother or sister in Christ with whom you need to be reconciled? Are members of your local church more cohesive, collaborative, and united—or less so—because of your example and influence? ■

DISCOVERY

QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Share a memory of the person who baptized you

Ask two people to read aloud **1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 12:12-20**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. How can pride be *helpful* in a work setting?
 - Without sharing specific examples, how can pride be *harmful* in a work setting?
 - How can pride be *helpful* in a church setting?
 - Without sharing specific examples, how can pride be *harmful* in a church setting?
3. How and why can focusing on leaders and leadership styles be harmful in the church?
4. How could divisions within a church impact a believer's personal faith journey? Has that ever happened to you?
5. How can you contribute to unity within your own church community?
6. Consider Paul's statement, "Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel" (v. 17).
 - Is this a surprising statement? Why or why not?
 - What does this reveal about Paul?
7. What is your role within the body of Christ? Have you settled into a specific role, or would you like your role to expand? How?
8. Consider the many denominations in the world and the many church splits still occurring today. What effect have these splits had on the church's witness to non-Christians?
9. How can we ensure unity within the body of Christ while also embracing and appreciating the diversity among its members?
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **1 Corinthians 3:5-15; 4:1-5**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study. 📖