



1717 BIBLE STUDIES

"Your Word Is Truth" (John 17:17)

OVERVIEW

Study: **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.

INTRODUCTION

Author

The apostle Paul wrote 1 Corinthians, together with “our brother Sosthenes” (1 Corinthians 1:1). Paul founded the church in Corinth during his second missionary journey, staying in the city for a year and a half while he worked as a tentmaker alongside Priscilla and Aquila and taught the Word of God (Acts 18:1-11). Later, the eloquent teacher Apollos also ministered there (Acts 18:24–19:1; 1 Corinthians 3:6).

Audience

Paul wrote to “the church of God in Corinth” (1 Corinthians 1:2)—a congregation made up mostly of Gentiles along with some Jewish believers. Many had come out of pagan backgrounds (1 Corinthians 6:9-11; 12:2). Paul had heard reports of divisions from Chloe’s household (1:11), and the church had also written to him asking about marriage, food offered to idols, spiritual gifts, and other matters (7:1).

Date

Paul likely wrote 1 Corinthians around AD 53–55, from Ephesus during his third missionary journey (1 Corinthians 16:8, 19; Acts 19).

Setting

Corinth was a wealthy, cosmopolitan port city in southern Greece, the capital of the Roman province of Achaia. It sat on a narrow isthmus between two seas, which made it a hub of trade and travel. The city was known for its many pagan temples and its reputation for immorality, and that culture had a way of creeping into the church.

Theme

Paul called a divided church back to the unity it has in Christ crucified (1 Corinthians 1:10, 18-25). Again and again he urged the believers to set aside pride and use their freedoms, their gifts, and even the Lord’s Supper to build one another up as one body.

Why Study 1 Corinthians?

Every church faces problems, and the issues in Corinth—divisions, misplaced loyalty to leaders, the misuse of freedom, careless worship, and rivalry over spiritual gifts—still show up today. This study helps believers learn what constitutes unity, how servant leaders lead, how love limits liberty, why Communion matters, and how every part of the body of Christ is needed.

STUDY CONTENT

WEEK 1:	1 Corinthians 1:10-17; 12:12-20
WEEK 2:	1 Corinthians 3:5-15; 4:1-5
WEEK 3:	1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 9:19-23; 10:23-33
WEEK 4:	1 Corinthians 11:17-34
WEEK 5:	1 Corinthians 12:12-26; 14:1-12

WEEK ONE

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

STUDY: 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 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.

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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?

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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.

WEEK TWO

LESSON AIM: **Lead by being a good servant of Christ and a faithful steward of the opportunities God has given you.**

STUDY: 1 Corinthians, Part 1

THEME: The Living Church

LESSON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 3:5-15; 4:1-5

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 Kings 12:1-16; Matthew 20:20-28; 1
Corinthians 3:1-4, 16-23

SERVANT LEADERSHIP

BY MARK SCOTT

Servant leadership is always admired. The boss who gets in the ditch and digs with the workers, the teacher who stays late to help the student with the science project, and the running back who lets the lineman spike the football after a touchdown all give evidence of servant leadership.

The divisions in the church at Corinth were mostly caused by pride, which ran counter to servant leadership. After acknowledging the church's divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10-17), Paul led the Corinthians back to the gospel which united them in the first place (1:18-2:16). In chapters 3-4, Paul returned to the church's divisions based on how the church was lining up behind their chosen leaders. The problem was not with the servant leaders, but with how divided the people had become based on their undue loyalty to certain leaders. Paul reminded the church the correct way to think about leadership.

Servants Who Lead*1 Corinthians 3:5-15*

Paul did not want the church to have an inflated view of Apollos or himself. He said the two of them were just *servants through whom you came to believe*. The word for *servants* is the normal word for "slave." God gave Apollos and Paul jobs to do. God *assigned to each his task*, so boasting was pointless.

Paul used the analogies of gardening (or farming) and building to drive home his point.

In the first analogy, Paul said he *planted the seed*, meaning the church at Corinth (Acts 18:1-11). Apollos came along later and *watered* the seed that Paul planted (Acts 18:27-28). But God is really who *made it grow*. Think of this as parents who give their children money to purchase birthday gifts for the parents. Paul and Apollos were simply discharging their duties as *co-workers* in the gospel. The church is *God's field*, and God is the real gardener. The best servant leadership conveys humility and "self-forgetfulness." Paul referred to the church in Corinth metaphorically as *God's building*.

In the second analogy, Paul underlined God's grace as the power source for his building of the church. Paul laid the *foundation* (which the apostle said is Christ himself) and Apollos built upon it. Builders in God's kingdom must build with care though. The church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, but Christ alone is the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20).

The strength of a structure is contingent upon the materials the builders use. Paul acknowledged there are materials such as *gold, silver, and costly stones*. Then there are other, less durable materials such as *wood, hay or straw*. Not all materials (i.e., works) are created equal. When the Day of Judgment takes place, works will be judged (purified) through fire. The servant leader's salvation is not in jeopardy, but his or her works will be short-lived or long-lasting. This emphasis is advanced in the next section.

God Who Judges*1 Corinthians 4:1-5*

All people will appear before the judgment seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10). But teachers and leaders will be judged more stringently (James 3:1). The Corinthian correspondence includes what is referred to as the "apostolic *we/us*." Context reveals when Paul was addressing himself and the other apostles and when the "we/us" referred to the church at large. In chapter 4, it seems the "we/us" referred to the apostles. The Corinthians must think properly about the apostles or they would be in danger of dividing over those same leaders.

The apostles were *servants of Christ* and *stewards of the mysteries* God revealed. The key quality of a leader in the church is servanthood. But the key quality of stewards in the church is faithfulness. They must be *faithful* to the God who entrusted to them his revealed secrets.

The Corinthians were making judgments based on who they elevated as leaders (i.e., Paul, Cephas, Apollos, etc.). Paul refused to allow those judgments from the church to have emotional ownership over him. Paul sided with the apostle John who wrote that even when his heart condemned him God did not condemn him (1 John 3:20). God is the ultimate judge—not the Corinthians or some human court or even Paul's self-condemnation. Paul's *conscience* (his moral umpire) was clear. When Christ, our coming judge, returns then what is hidden in darkness will be revealed and motives of the heart will be exposed. Since God will punish or reward at the Judgment, humble servant leadership is the best posture for leading the church.

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LOWERCASE LEADERS

BY DAVID FAUST

Do you know why we refer to capital letters and smaller letters as uppercase and lowercase? When Johannes Gutenberg and other publishers began using the printing press in the 1400s, typesetters stored individual letters in wooden cases or cabinets. The smaller, more common letters were kept in the lower chambers.

Large letters grab attention in posters and ads promoting movies and concerts, but in daily communication, lowercase letters do most of the work. Uppercase letters can be annoying. A text message written in all caps makes it look like YOU ARE SHOUTING.

Don't Try to Look Big

Jesus warned about the danger of pursuing impressive religious labels like *rabbi* and *father* (Matthew 23:8-10). Highfalutin titles may massage a leader's ego, but the goal is to serve, not to elevate ourselves above others.

Uppercase leaders demand attention; lowercase leaders quietly do God's work. Online worship services do a lot of good, but if we're not careful, they turn Christians into viewers rather than participants and preachers into uppercase personalities instead of lowercase servants.

In the church, a title isn't a badge of honor; it's a job description—a call to action. If you are called *pastor*, you had better be shepherding God's sheep. A business card containing the word *minister* reminds its holder to serve the Lord and love his people. Professors should profess Christ, evangelists should proclaim good news, and those called *sister* or *brother* should treat other believers like family.

The Unglamorous Side of Ministry

For most of us, serving God doesn't mean a lot of time onstage in front of TV cameras. The majority of ministry consists of unglamorous but necessary tasks.

Meet with others to plan and solve problems. Pray for and counsel the discouraged. Visit the sick and comfort the dying. Raise funds and manage budgets. Respond to e-mails and phone calls. Answer the questions of

seekers and doubters. Recruit and equip volunteers. Care for widows and orphans. Build relationships with neighbors. Practice hospitality. Study God's Word so you can connect eternal truth with distracted souls who live in a constantly shifting culture. Most of this work is not glamorous—although it could be described as glorious.

Lowercase leaders are in good company, for the King of kings "made himself nothing" (Philippians 2:7) to fulfill his mission. In his kingdom, lowercase doesn't mean lower class. Yes, Jesus addressed big crowds. But out of public view he cared for the sick, trained leaders, and washed his disciples' feet.

The apostle Paul saw himself as a caretaker entrusted with the job of planting and watering gospel seeds in God's field (1 Corinthians 3:5-6). In addition to preaching, teaching, and writing letters, Paul did unglamorous things. He mentored next-generation leaders like Timothy and Titus and helped discordant believers like Euodia and Syntyche untangle their interpersonal conflicts (Philippians 4:2). He made sure the church's offerings were properly administered (2 Corinthians 8:19-21). He weathered the attacks of critics who questioned his leadership qualifications and disparaged his speaking ability (2 Corinthians 10:7-11). And he did all this while bearing "concern for all the churches" and enduring his own thorn in the flesh (2 Corinthians 11:28; 12:7-10).

Lowercase leaders don't aspire to make headlines. They are willing to be footnotes. They realize the titles that matter most are ones like *follower*, *foot washer*, *cup of water giver*, and *servant of Christ*.

Personal Challenge:

What lowercase leaders do you know who serve the Lord humbly without much recognition and fanfare? Pray for them and thank God for them. Write them a note or tell them in person how much you appreciate their leadership and service for the Lord.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Rate your level of experience with gardening or construction, both of which are referred to metaphorically in this week's lesson.

Ask two people to read aloud **1 Corinthians 3:5-15; 4:1-5**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize the passages.

2. Paul and Apollos both played key roles in the early church at Corinth. There is no evidence they clashed with one another or did not work well together. How then is it possible a schism developed among people of the church who had been taught by these men?
3. Paul described himself and Apollos as "servants, through whom you came to believe" (v. 5). Did you ever consider that the leaders in your church are merely servants?
 - How might this cause you to treat your church leaders better?
 - How might this cause some misguided church folks to treat their leaders poorly?
4. If your church leaders are servants, then so are you. In what ways do you seek to carry out your role as a servant in the church?
5. Mark Scott writes in his lesson treatment, "The church is God's field, and God is the real gardener." In what specific ways are you helping to "water" God's field?
6. Paul metaphorically refers to building materials such as "gold, silver, [and] costly stones" used to build God's church. He says these materials ultimately will be tested with fire. Share some examples of what Paul perhaps means when he says "gold, silver, [and] costly stones."
 - Likewise, Paul mentions building materials such as "wood, hay or straw" that are used to build the church. Share some examples of what Paul might mean when he refers to these less substantial building materials.
7. In 1 Corinthians 4:3-4, Paul writes, "I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court . . . [m]y conscience is clear."
 - How was Paul able to have a clear conscience about how he was living his life?
 - What steps can you take toward living life with a clearer conscience?
8. In his Application column this week, David Faust writes of "lowercase leaders" who quietly and faithfully do God's work with little or no attention. Share an example of such a person from your life or experience.
9. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 9:19-23; 10:23-33**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK THREE

LESSON AIM: **Know that you are free in Christ, but use your freedom to help others follow Christ.**

STUDY: 1 Corinthians, Part 1

THEME: The Living Church

LESSON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 9:19-23; 10:23-33

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: 1 Corinthians 8:1-8; 9:1-18; 9:24—10:22;
Philippians 2:1-8

SELFLESS LIBERTY

BY MARK SCOTT

In his book *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, Simon Sinek emphasized that “Great leaders sacrifice their own comfort—even their own survival—for the good of those in their care.” The apostle Paul could have written that line.

The troubled Corinthian church had two overarching problems. Their first “disorder” was composed of two parts. They had an over-realized eschatology (i.e., they thought they already had arrived in an exalted state and therefore they gave themselves to the disciplines of legalism or living in pure license with no restraints). They also had an under-realized eschatology (i.e., they questioned whether resurrection takes place—so what difference does it make how one lives life?). Both misunderstandings caused problems that manifested themselves throughout the Epistle.

Paul also had to address a second disorder. He did this in the “disorder” section of the Epistle—chapters 7–16—marked off with the rhetorical device, “Now concerning” (1 Corinthians 7:1; 8:1; 12:1; 16:1; English Standard Version).

Paul addressed challenges related to eating meat offered to idols in a rather long and involved argument (chapters 8–10). Archaeologists have uncovered ancient Corinth’s meat market. Farmers would bring their meat to town to sell. The meat in the market was expensive. But the cheaper meat was sold in the pagan temples. After the pagan priests got their portion (not unlike the ancient Levites, who received a portion of that which was sacrificed), the meat was prayed over to the idol gods. Believers found themselves in a dilemma—should they eat this meat or not? At the heart of this very specific practice was the issue of Christian freedom.

Forfeiting Freedom

1 Corinthians 8:9-13

Early in 1 Corinthians 8, Paul acknowledged that many “so-called gods” (v. 5) were worshiped in Corinth, but he proclaimed, “There is no God but one” (v. 4), and he is the creator and sustainer of the universe. Some believers, armed with that knowledge, knew that eating food sacrificed to idols did not matter. Others, maybe newer Christians who could be called *weak*, struggled with this freedom due to their pagan past.

Paul did not want the exercise of *your rights* (authority) on the part of the “knowledgeable” Christians to cause others to stumble in their faith. To *wound* (cause to be struck down) one’s *conscience* (the moral umpire) is never good, and Paul did not want weak believers to sin due to the behavior of knowledgeable believers. Paul was willing to become a vegetarian and forfeit his freedom rather than cause a fellow believer to fall.

Leveraging Freedom

1 Corinthians 9:19-23

To drive home his point, Paul used several illustrations about his freedoms, making applicable connections to apostles, soldiers, farmers, shepherds, and the Law (vv. 1-14). People who serve in these ways derive benefits from what they do. Paul chose not to use his rights as an apostle so that those benefits would not get in the way of the gospel. Paul could receive a salary or not for preaching, but he was compelled to preach nonetheless (9:15-18).

Paul’s goal was to be a universal man. He desired to be culturally, religiously, and ethnically agile. He leveraged his freedoms in Christ for the good of his evangelistic cause. To the Jews he became a Jew (Acts 21:20-26 is an example of such). [Those under the Law would also be Jews, but Paul admitted he was not saved by law—cf. Galatians 2:16.] To the Gentiles he could become a Gentile (Galatians 2:11-14). Gentiles were not under the law, but Paul made it clear that he was under *the Christ’s law*. To the weak people he could become a vegetarian. One of Paul’s great missionary principles was to leverage anything to win people to Christ.

Constructing Freedom

1 Corinthians 10:23-33

Not everything Paul had the right to do was “right to do.” He espoused this principle earlier in 1 Corinthians 6:12-20. Some scholars believe these passages are the keys to understanding 1 Corinthians. Christians have been set free (Galatians 5:1) but using freedom in non-beneficial ways is not *constructive*. Loving God and seeking the good of others should always be the goal.

Paul said it was permissible to eat meat offered to the idol gods based on Psalm 24:1. Everything belonged to the Lord in the first place. Paul constructed the model about Christian liberty as it related to conscience. Paul did not want Christians to be at the whim of just anyone’s conscience, but he did embrace letting “conscience be your guide.” When it comes to eating meat offered to the idol gods, give careful thought to the impact you may have on the new believer’s conscience. The unbeliever will not likely have any issue to raise.

For Paul, the most important thing is the glory of God. He desired *no offense* (that which leads to stumbling) be given to Jew, Greek, or the church. He desired to please God and save people. That is liberty at the service of a greater dream.

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EYE CONTACT

BY DAVID FAUST

When you walk down the sidewalk in a big city, do you notice that pedestrians avoid making eye contact? The same thing happens on elevators, buses, and subways. An unwritten rule forbids looking others in the eye. It's creepy if a stranger looks directly at your face.

In some situations, though, the best way to communicate is eyeball to eyeball. Effective public speakers make eye contact with their audience. Husbands and wives nurture affection by looking each other in the eyes and saying, "I love you." When parents correct their kids, they often say, "Look at me!"

Eye contact can be uncomfortable. When Jesus' critics scrutinized his actions because they suspected he was going to heal someone on the Sabbath day, he "looked around at them with anger . . . deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts" (Mark 3:5). In his encounter with the rich young ruler, the Lord "looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21)—making it obvious he cared, although the man still turned and walked away. In a heart-wrenching moment, "The Lord turned and looked straight at Peter" after the impetuous fisherman denied him three times (Luke 22:61).

God constantly pays attention. "The eyes of the Lord are everywhere, keeping watch on the wicked and the good" (Proverbs 15:3). The psalmist David wanted to return the Lord's gaze. He prayed, "Your face, Lord, I will seek" (Psalm 27:8). Eye-opening things happen when we seek God's face. Here are three prayers that can help.

"Lord, open my eyes to understand your Word."

Some Scriptures are difficult to understand, but comprehension improves when a Bible reader prays, "Open my eyes that I may see wonderful things in your law" (Psalm 119:18).

"Lord, open my eyes to see what you're doing in your world."

Strife fills nations and neighborhoods. Violence and victimization, wars and rumors of wars abound. It's

obvious that Satan is hard at work; do we recognize what God is doing?

"Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made" (Romans 1:20).

Even in dark, dangerous times, it's possible to see God's creative artistry in nature, his loving wisdom in answered prayers, his gracious work in transformed lives, and his providential supervision over history's ebb and flow. The songwriter assures us, "This is my Father's world," and "though the wrong seems oft' so strong, God is the ruler yet."

"Lord, open my eyes to see your people."

Spiritual nearsightedness drives us to care mainly about ourselves, but Christ calls us to follow a different rule: "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (1 Corinthians 10:24). When God opens the eyes of our hearts (Ephesians 1:18), we will no longer turn a blind eye to others around us. Instead of regarding our neighbors "from a worldly point of view," we will see their potential to be new creatures in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:16-17). Instead of insisting on our own way, we will sacrifice our personal preferences and remove obstacles that prevent others from hearing and believing the gospel.

After all, everyone is made in God's image—even strangers who avoid eye contact on crowded sidewalks and elevators. Behind those eyes that look away are souls who need to know God loves them.

Personal Challenge:

Pray for God to open your eyes to his Word, his world, and his people—including others you tend to overlook or avoid.

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. Have you ever modified your behavior out of respect for another person's beliefs? What did you do, and why?

Ask two people to read aloud **1 Corinthians 8:9-13; 9:19-23; 10:23-33**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize these passages.

2. What are some ways you have seen people abuse their freedoms in society?
3. Can you think of a modern example of how a mature Christian with good knowledge of Scripture might cause a newer or less-mature Christian to stumble? (Pay particular attention to the stark warning in 1 Corinthians 8:12.)
4. A lesson writer years ago contended that 1 Corinthians 8:13 ("If what I eat causes my brother or sister to fall into sin, I will never eat meat again, so that I will not cause them to fall") was Paul's application of Jesus' second great commandment ("Love your neighbor as yourself," Matthew 22:39). Would you be willing to give up an entire food group so that another would not turn their back on Christ?
5. In 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Paul shares several examples of how he changed his behavior "to win as many as possible." Can you think of examples of how he perhaps . . .
 - "became like a Jew, to win the Jews" (v. 20)?
 - "became like one under the law . . . so as to win those under the law" (v. 20)?
 - "became like one not having the law . . . so as to win those not having the law" (v. 21)?
 - "became weak, to win the weak" (v. 22)?
6. Paul understood that not everyone would follow Jesus (see v. 22), but he continued his efforts to win souls to Christ, nonetheless. What would happen if most Christians adopted Paul's attitude and outlook?
7. What are some behaviors, practices, and habits Christians can adopt that are both beneficial and constructive (see 1 Corinthians 10:23)?
8. Paul wrote, "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (10:24). Does someone you personally know, or have known, come to mind as exemplifying that verse? Who?
9. What is one change you will make in your life this week that will be "for the glory of God" (10:31)?

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FOUR

LESSON AIM: **Share the Lord's Supper
with greater
appreciation for the
body of Christ.**

STUDY: 1 Corinthians, Part 1

THEME: The Living Church

LESSON TEXT: 1 Corinthians 11:17-34

SUPPLEMENTAL TEXT: Matthew 26:17-30; Luke 22:14-23; 1 Corinthians
10:14-22

COMMUNION

BY MARK SCOTT

A secular proverb says, “When all else fails, read the directions.” Sometimes directions can be skipped with no negative consequence, but more typically when we go it alone, we wish we had done a better job of reading the directions. The Corinthian church had trouble following directions . . . although the Greek word translated as “directives” in 1 Corinthians 11:17 is different from the one translated as “directions” in v. 34. The first word means “to pass on an announcement,” and the second word means “to command.”

First Corinthians 11 is really an appendage to Paul’s argument about eating meat offered to the idol gods in chapters 8 to 10. Paul provided the church with principles to guide them in using their freedoms in Christ. It is not a far jump from discussing eating in idol temples to eating in the church assembly. The church was following well some of the traditions/directions (e.g., the propriety of men’s and women’s roles in the assemblies, 11:2-16). Certain cultural constraints were followed in terms of gender to ensure things were orderly. But the partaking of Communion was a disaster. Paul was not pleased at all. He told them their meetings *do more harm than good*.

Bad Practice

1 Corinthians 11:17-22

The way the church was observing the Lord’s Supper served to spotlight the *divisions* (schisms) in the church. These *differences* (factions or heresies) were quite severe. The context for Paul’s remarks concerned what is typically referred to as an “agape feast.” When the church gathered they read the “memoirs of the apostles” (wrote Justin Martyr), prayed, and shared food in something like a basket dinner fellowship. It was in this context that the church observed the Lord’s Supper.

But selfishness, pride, and even money seemed to drive some of the Communion dysphoria. Their lack of unity and genuine care for one another was evidenced in bad practices. People went ahead without waiting for others (some who were slaves probably had to work on the first day of the week). The poorer ones would become hungry while waiting and the rich perhaps would begin to get drunk. Paul rebuked the church by saying that these bad practices mocked the poor people in the church and caused the church to be despised. Paul said that if they needed a snack they should have eaten it at home before gathering together.

Good Tradition

1 Corinthians 11:23-26

This might be the most frequently read passage in Christendom. This paragraph is read more often than even

John 3:16. Paul incorporated the tradition about Communion that came straight from the Gospel record (Matthew 26:26-29; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:14-23). Like Paul did earlier in the Epistle when he addressed their divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10-17) by taking the Corinthians back to the message of the cross (1:18-2:5), so here he seeks to correct their bad practices by taking them back to the night Jesus was in the upper room.

When Jesus instituted the Lord’s Supper on the eve of his crucifixion, he took bread, gave thanks, broke the bread, and then identified the bread as his body. Likewise, with the cup, he identified its contents as the new covenant in his blood. In both cases the disciples were to *remember* Jesus and his sacrifice. While these substances might not change into Jesus’ actual body and blood (as Catholics contend), they probably are more than just emblems. Something rather mystical occurs. This marvelous paragraph of tradition acted as a sanity check for the Corinthians’ selfish practice at the Lord’s table.

Unworthy Manner

1 Corinthians 11:27-34

More than one user of the King James Version understood the word *unworthily* about how one feels in coming to the Lord’s table. But Paul was not talking about what believers feel when they come before the Lord at his table. He was teaching that believers who fail to see the unifying power of the Supper in the church are taking Communion in an *unworthy manner* (i.e., having no regard for their brothers and sisters in the faith).

Therefore, some introspection is demanded. Believers should *examine* themselves (test in such a way as to be approved). These Christians need to *discern* the body of Christ. *Discern* means “to critique.” As church members eat the bread and drink the cup, they should assess their relationships in the church. The untoward way some believers were acting toward other believers had caused such stress that some had become sick and others had died.

Coming to Communion is serious business. God may just use that Supper to judge and discipline people. We should not want to hurt the Body of Christ over the body of Christ.

Mark Scott serves as preaching minister with Park Plaza Christian Church in Joplin, Mo. For 35 years, until 2021, he served as professor of preaching and New Testament with Ozark Christian College in Joplin.

COMMUNION: MORE THAN A ROUTINE

BY DAVID FAUST

Like *route*, our term *routine* comes from the French word for “a beaten path.” A routine is a well-worn path, the usual route we take—our customary way of doing things, like drinking a morning cup of coffee. It’s good if our daily routine includes prayer and Bible reading, but Jesus warned not to pray with “vain repetitions” (Matthew 6:7, King James Version). How can we do something frequently without taking it for granted? How can we keep the beaten path from becoming a rut?

Throughout history, Christ’s followers have placed high value on the Lord’s Supper. Whatever else takes place in our weekly worship gatherings—no matter what the sermon is about or what songs we sing—the bread and the cup focus attention on the central facts of our faith: the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. The church’s Head said, “Do this in remembrance of me,” so Communion should never be relegated to a place of unimportance in our assemblies, nor should it be done mechanically and carelessly.

In this sacred feast, we look backward and remember Jesus, look upward and give thanks, look inward and examine ourselves, look outward and acknowledge God’s family of believers, and look forward to the Lord’s return.

How can we keep from turning the Lord’s Supper into an empty routine? I asked a few Christian friends that question, and their responses (below) were insightful.

Thank God

“Communion is the high point of the service—a ‘garden moment’ to spend with the Lord. The person I love most asked that I remember him this way.”

“Every time I sit down for a regular meal, I say a short prayer of thanks before I eat. When I take Communion, I thank God for providing salvation.”

“During Communion I think about the Trinity and praise the Father who is for us, the Son who is with us, and the Holy Spirit who is in us.”

Examine Ourselves

“Communion provides quiet space to connect with the Lord. I need that!”

“I reflect on the past week and think about how God’s grace helped me make it to another Sunday.”

“It’s a time for introspection. I think about things in my life the Lord might want to change.”

Ponder the Big Picture

“God’s people have been doing this for 2,000 years. I picture myself celebrating Communion in unity with Christians all over the world who serve the same Lord.”

“Even though we’re all from different backgrounds and walks of life, the Holy Spirit brings us together as we remember Christ’s sacrifice on the cross.”

Prepare to Participate

“I think about Bible verses I have read during the week. Without food, we become weak and cranky, and we do not function well. But food tastes better when there is variety and seasoning is applied. A regular diet of God’s Word provides the variety and seasoning to keep our Communion time fresh.”

“It helps when the worship leader reads a short Scripture and offers a few well-planned remarks (focused on one simple thought) to prepare us for the Supper.”

Communion is a well-worn path—a route leading back to the cross. Another friend summed up his approach to the Lord’s Supper by saying, “I focus on what Jesus did, as opposed to what I’m doing. There’s nothing routine about what Jesus did for me.”

Personal Challenge:

Do you participate in Communion regularly, sincerely, and wholeheartedly? What steps could you take to better prepare yourself for the Lord’s Supper?

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QUESTIONS FOR GROUP DISCUSSION

1. What is your favorite passage of Scripture or story from the Bible?

Ask two people to read aloud **1 Corinthians 11:17-34**, one after the other, preferably from different Bible versions. Then ask a third person to briefly summarize this passage.

2. Some Christians contend that partaking of the Lord's Supper (also referred to as Communion) is the most important part of a worship service. What are some reasons to support this opinion?
3. The Lord's Supper, as practiced by the Corinthians, served to spotlight divisions within the church. In fact, Paul said, "Your meetings do more harm than good" (v. 17). What were some of the bad practices and divisions evident in the church at Corinth?
4. Why were Paul's teachings about the Lord's Supper such an important correction to the Corinthian church? Why do Paul's teachings on the Lord's Supper remain important to the 21st-century Christian church?
5. In the Scripture text for last week's lesson, Paul wrote, "No one should seek their own good, but the good of others" (10:24). In what ways was that not occurring with respect to celebrating the Lord's Supper in the Corinthian church?
6. Paul wrote, "Whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner will be guilty of sinning against the body and blood of the Lord" (v. 27).
 - What are some examples today of how we might participate in Communion "in an unworthy manner"?
7. Describe your personal practice for centering your thoughts in preparation for participating in the Lord's Supper in a worthy manner.
8. The Lord's Supper observance among Christians is unique in so many ways. Discuss some of the unique aspects of this memorial to our Lord, especially when compared to other memorials.
9. Lesson writer Mark Scott holds the opinion that 1 Corinthians 11:23-26 "might be the most frequently read passage in Christendom." Why is that the case? What are some other possibilities as "most frequently read passage"?
10. Based on our study and discussion, complete the sentence: "I will . . ."

For Next Week: Read and reflect on **1 Corinthians 12:12-26; 14:1-12**. You can also read next week's supplemental texts and the Study and Application sections as part of your personal study.

WEEK FIVE

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

STUDY: 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.

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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.

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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 these 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: This week’s lesson brings this unit of study to a conclusion. Look for additional “1717: Your Word Is Truth” studies, for use with your Sunday School classes, small groups, or personal studies, at ChristianStandard.com.