

Week 1, 1 Corinthians 1

Hook



Main Point: A believer's identity must be rooted in Christ.

Group Activity: How many times do you introduce yourself to a stranger through the course of a week? In those brief encounters, the objective is to relay information that summarizes your identity. Divide your class into groups of six to eight and challenge them to introduce themselves in no more than three sentences to one another **without including** the following information:

- Marital status
- Family information
- Job title
- Work responsibilities
- Home town
- Current town

Today's lesson will introduce a church that has lost its identity and a preacher who will remind them of what a congregation (and believer) is meant to be.

Have you ever had an "identity crisis"? What brought you to that place? What helped you rediscover your identity?

What identity traits should be similar among all believers in Christ? What identity traits would Jesus use when defining a Christian?

If you were to introduce your Bible Fellowship, how would you do it? What key elements mark your class?

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Book

Main Point: A believer's identity must be rooted in Christ.

Text Summary: Paul goes to great lengths to show the Corinthian church that their lasting identity is in the community of faith, the family of God. The divisions rampant in their local church are not genuine characteristics of God's people. More importantly, these divisions and worldly allegiances have shown Paul that the Christians in Corinth are finding security and identity in the cultural environment and what it affords, rather than in Christ and what He gives. Paul urges a shift in focus for them; to see that Christ, through His Cross, has given them the only eternal point of boasting and to forego the impulse to find value in personal, political or professional gain.

Introduction to Corinthians

The city of Corinth was known for many things: It was a Roman colony, a melting pot of many cultures and religions, an important crossroads and port for sea travel, and a destination for traveling vocational orators.¹ Further, Corinth had a reputation for materialism and immorality. The *ESV Study Bible* describes the city:

... when the author Pausanias wrote about Corinth in the mid-second century A.D., his description of the city read like a tour guide of pagan monumental sacred sites. Corinth boasted an important sanctuary of Asklepios (the god of healing), where people would come to offer sacrifices to the god and to seek medical care.... The famous Hellenistic-era temple of Aphrodite atop the Acrocorinth had been rebuilt as a rather small structure during the first-century A.D. Scholars debate whether Strabo's first-century A.D. account of 1,000 temple prostitutes refers to the earlier Hellenistic temple of Aphrodite or to the Roman one of Paul's day; the former seems more probable. In any case, in Roman times wanton sexuality would have been common at such a port city.²

This is the culture that Paul steps into. The apostle had a history with Corinth; he first visited the city on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1–18), preached boldly, and established a church with the help of Aquila and Priscilla (two fellow believers). After spending about a year and a half in Corinth, Paul, along with Aquila and Priscilla, set sail to Ephesus to minister there. Paul eventually journeyed on, leaving Aquila and Priscilla to their work in Ephesus. It was there

¹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2187.

² Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2189.

that the couple met and instructed a gifted preacher named Apollos who would later be sent by them to minister in Corinth.

While in Ephesus, Paul learned of issues in the Corinthian church concerning sexual immorality and wrote a letter to address the problem (mentioned in 1 Corinthians 5:9). After writing the letter, Paul received news from a member of the Corinthian church named Chloe (1 Corinthians 1:1) that not only did the church misunderstand his correspondence, but other issues had arisen that must be addressed. After hearing from additional church members (1 Corinthians 16:17) concerning questions on issues that are further dividing the church, Paul wrote 1 Corinthians.³

The author faces a challenge. The church at Corinth seems to reflect too much of the world and not enough of Christ; and so 1 Corinthians will focus heavily on sanctification. Specifically, this letter will speak directly to several issues and questions that pertained to the Corinthian church, including: the pursuit of holiness (a message desperately needed for the Corinthians), unity within the church, issues concerning marriage, liberty and responsibility, spiritual gifts, money and the doctrine of the Resurrection.⁴ Although the letter was written nearly 2,000 years ago, its message is strikingly relevant to culture today.

What role should the Church play in culture?

In your opinion, what are some of the pressing cultural issues that the Church is battling in America today? What impact might these issues have on the Church in the future?

1 Corinthians 1:1–17: [Read]

Sub-Point: The Church belongs to God and should be marked by unity.

There are a myriad of issues for Paul to address within the Corinthian church. He begins with the divisions among the congregation. But before he confronts the issue head-on, the author sets the stage by carefully wording the introduction of his letter.

Paul identifies himself as an apostle (v. 1). Paul did not earn his office by demonstrating great skill in oration or obtain the title through cunning political maneuvering; the role of apostle was given by God. This distinction is important, the author did not seek the position for himself; he was not pursuing fame, influence, or wealth. Instead, as will be discussed later, Paul's job was far from glamorous. His humble pursuit of God's will would be an example to the Corinthians.

³ David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 506.

⁴ David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 506.

Further, Paul's God-ordained authority as an apostle positions him to speak hard truths in the lives of the recipients.

Paul identifies the Corinthians as a church owned by God (v. 2). The immoral and divisive behavior of the church demonstrated a self-centeredness and lack of Christian identity. So Paul gives them a definition. They are "sanctified," meaning "set apart" by God for His possession.⁵ They have been set apart from the evils of the world for God's use. Not only are they sanctified but they have Jesus as their Lord, or boss. These facts demand a pursuit of holiness, allegiance to God's will and Word, and a unity with all other believers.

Paul gives thanksgiving for God's grace toward the Corinthians, not their accomplishments (vv. 4–9). Verses 4–9 offer thanksgiving from Paul concerning the church at Corinth. It seems odd that he would give thanks for a church that is struggling so greatly, a group of people who appear to overestimate, self-inflate and choose division. And finding a list of wonderful things happening at the church might have been a challenge; so instead of lavishing compliments on the Corinthians for who they are or what they have done, Paul praises God for His faithfulness and grace toward the church.⁶ Despite the massive failings of the Corinthian church, Paul identifies several reasons to give thanks. These points all are concerned with God's work, not the success (or lack thereof) of the members of the church:

- *The Corinthian believers are recipients of God's grace, making it possible for them to be a part of the Church (v. 4).*
- *Because of their belonging to Christ, God has given them spiritual gifts (v. 5).*
- *The presence of spiritual gifts confirms the truth of the Gospel that was shared (v. 6).*
- *The Corinthians are justified in Christ (vv. 7–9).*

Focusing on God's grace should promote humility on the part of the Corinthians.

Paul identifies and begins to address the first issue in the church: a lack of unity (vv. 10–13). Verse 10 is the first indication in the letter that something is wrong. Paul had set the table in the previous sentences and now he lays an issue bare: There is a lack of unity in the church. In identifying the presence of divisions and separate factions, Paul reminds these dear believers that all identity and encouragement are grounded in Christ. He exhorts them that the Christian's place in the family of God is not self-made or self maintained.⁷ Secondly, it is the result of an outside action done solely by God Himself on the Christian's behalf.⁸ That goes against everything happening in Corinth. During this time period, various philosophers

⁵ David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 507.

⁶ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 16.

⁷ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 21.

⁸ Ibid.

competed for a following of their particular brand of how to live.⁹ Scholars don't know the particular groups or factions that were present that Paul speaks of in verses 10–17, but what is apparent is that these Christians were divided in whom they were following. They were divided in their cultural views and in various competing camps. Paul says this isn't the way of the Christian faith. Christians are to be first and foremost followers of Christ.¹⁰

Paul describes his ministry and his reliance on God's power and wisdom (vv. 14–17). He was laser focused: Paul was called to preach the Gospel. And it is here that Paul distances himself from what the Corinthians would have expected from an orator who is defending a particular viewpoint (like a preacher). In the time period in which the letter was written, professional orators would have been common in cities such as Corinth.¹¹ Paul did not speak like a professional. He wasn't eloquent; he could not persuade people to his school of thought by impressing them with a speech. However, he came with the power of the Gospel, a power that was genuine and changed lives. Unlike followings that are built on the intellect or oratory skills of man, the strength of the Church is in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Eloquent words of men may sway a mind, but only the power of the Holy Spirit wins the heart.¹²

Paul understands that the smoke of disunity and the breakdown of relationships rise from the fire of tension and disconnection found in the Christian's relationship with God the Father.¹³ Paul tells them it is the result of self-boasting and valuing their own wisdom over God's. This group of Christians continues to chase the world's wisdom over their Creator's. They were trusting in the ways of Corinth, not the ways of the Cross.¹⁴ Verse 17 strikes a clear distinction between God's wisdom and that of the culture; this distinction will be explored in more detail as the book progresses.

What particular verses show the struggles of the Corinthian church?

Read Matthew 5:23–24. Why are unity and relational health so significant in the life of the believer?

Read verse 17. What issues might Paul have with "words of eloquent wisdom"? What role does persuasion play in evangelism?

What are the essentials for building unity within a church or Bible Fellowship?

⁹ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

¹¹ Crossway Bibles, *The ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 2193.

¹² David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 508.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 27.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 28.

What does a healthy relationship between a believer and his or her spiritual authority look like?

1 Corinthians 1:18-31: [Read]

Sub-Point: The wisdom of God is in conflict with the wisdom of man.

Imagine attempting to apply the wisdom of the city of Corinth to the church of Corinth. The congregation would be full of members who are self-serving, arrogant and very concerned with their self-preservation. These traits are in stark contrast to the wisdom of God; the work of Christ on the Cross demonstrated humility, a willingness to put self last, submission to God's will, and an openness to sacrifice everything. In this section, Paul brings to light the difference between the wisdom of God and that of the world.¹⁵

Paul doesn't dance around the truth: the way of God is foolish to the way of popular culture. The Gospel doesn't make sense to the world. But Paul says what is foolish to the surrounding culture is power and life for the Christian. What is weak in the world is strong for those in Christ. In these verses, the word group "wisdom" and "power," along with their opposites ["folly," "foolishness" and "weakness"] are used around 20 times.¹⁶ This shows what is of most importance to Paul to address. This shows us what we need to heed from this letter. Paul is setting the stage.

Where are those who are educated and well-spoken, Paul asks. Where are those who are wise? There are none who are wise by the world's standards within the community of faith. Paul is poking the nerve of Corinthian culture. In so doing, he shows that the Cross of Christ doesn't make sense when interpreted through the lens of culture. For these Corinthians, power was the ultimate cultural value and at the Cross, all power was given up. This was a scandal. This makes it a stumbling block.

People in this culture didn't see the Cross in a positive light. It was weak. It wasn't wise at all and didn't make any sense. On the surface, it was a defeat. But Paul knows that the reality of the Cross turns the entire culture upside down. The Cross offers a better way and a better community. The Cross calls Christians to lay down self-effort and trust Christ's effort on their behalf. The Cross shows Christians that nothing they bring will be of any account. The Christian's worth, value, inheritance and achievements are all located in Calvary. There is no room to boast.

¹⁵ David K. Lowery, "1 Corinthians," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures*, ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck, vol. 2 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 509.

¹⁶ Um, Stephen T. [2015] *Preaching the Word Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, p. 32.

This is why Paul says in verse 31 to boast in the Lord. God in Christ is offering a different cultural storyline.¹⁷ The Cross of Christ deconstructs the Corinthian's value system and worldview.¹⁸ This is God's gracious gift, a gift that no one can claim on their own effort. As stated by A. W. Tozer, "Nothing that comes from God will minister to my pride or self-congratulation."¹⁹

In Christ, one's own importance and achievements mean nothing. All is wiped away and broken down at the foot of the Cross. This is Paul's beginning in his writings to these Christians. Throughout this letter to the Corinthians, Paul consistently brings it back to this truth: All that matters in this life and the next has been graciously given, not earned, in Christ.

Read verse 26. How does this show that God transforms cultural standards? Why are verses 27–29 great news for the Christian?

How did Paul attempt to humble the Corinthian believers in verses 26-31? How does a believer cultivate humility in his life?

Explain why the Cross of Christ was foolish to the Corinthian culture.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 35.

¹⁸ Taylor, Mark [2014] *New American Commentary: 1 Corinthians*. Nashville: B&H Publishing, p. 63.

¹⁹ Vang, Preben [2014] *Teaching the Text Commentary Series: 1 Corinthians*. Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing, p. 21.

Week 1, 1 Corinthians 1

Took



Main Point: The believer's identity must be rooted in Christ.

Discussion: Consider how an individual's basic introduction changes over time as his occupation, family, location and hobbies grow and shift.

Discussion Questions: How has your introduction changed over the past 10 years? How has your understanding of your identity in Christ changed as you have grown in your relationship with Him?

Lesson Conclusion: God's gracious provision in the Cross removes the need to build our identity and life in anything other than Jesus and what He has done for us. The Church must realize our greatness comes not from our own power and prominence but through God's endowment.²⁰ This frees us up to serve one another and truly live in freedom, not in slavery to performance-based worth. In Christ, we are called to unity and that unity is going to look countercultural. Move forward in confidence and power, not in your work, but in Christ and His work on your behalf.

Challenge:

Allow God to give you definition. If you are a believer, Christ has done an amazing work in your life. You have been rescued from death, made into a new creation, set apart for God's work, given the righteousness of Jesus, and tasked with hope to a lost world. Refuse to allow insecurities or arrogance remove you from who you are in Christ. Reflect on how you identify yourself. Does your self-perception hinge on your position in Christ or on something else?

Make Jesus your hero. Earthly leaders, whether inside the Church or outside, are often charismatic and exciting to follow. However, choose to follow men with caution, always remembering that you owe your allegiance to Jesus before any other individual or organization. This week, choose to make Jesus your topic of conversation. Intentionally keep His name on

²⁰ Ibid., p. 19.

your lips and discuss others less. Allow your coworkers, friends and family to clearly see the One whom you follow above all others.

Choose confidence. Paul wasn't the best speaker but it didn't matter. Paul's strength was in his ability to allow God to move within him. God brings the power and the success. Perhaps you've discounted your ability to make a difference for His Kingdom because you've been comparing your skillset or giftedness to others. Remember that the same Holy Spirit that worked in Paul's life is the one at work in you. God's desire is to use you to make an impact for His glory; move forward in confidence knowing that He is capable of accomplishing great things through you.