

Unit 2: Dealing with Problems in the Church (1 and 2 Corinthians)

Lesson 9 | January 26, 2025 God's Vision for the Church

Study Text

1 Corinthians 3:1–23

Central Truth

Christian unity is an essential characteristic of a healthy local church.

Key Verse: 1 Corinthians 1:10

Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment (KJV).

I appeal to you, dear brothers and sisters, by the authority of our Lord Jesus Christ, to live in harmony with each other. Let there be no divisions in the church. Rather, be of one mind, united in thought and purpose (NLT).

Learning Objectives

- Students will appreciate that all who have faith in Jesus belong to God.
- Students will evaluate whether they are adding value to the Church through their service.
- Students will reflect on how they live as the temple of the Holy Spirit.

Introducing the Lesson

Say: If you've ever been part of a team, you've probably heard the saying, "There is no I in team." Yet many of those teams also have an award to recognize the most valuable player! So who gets the credit when the team is successful—the MVP or the entire organization? Why do people seem obsessed with determining who contributes the most?

Discussion Starter—The Church Fellowship Dinner

Say: What is needed for a good church fellowship dinner? *(It might be interesting to divide the class into men and women and then compare their responses.)*

Say: Good church fellowship dinners don't just happen. It takes many people to pull one together. Hopefully someone remembers to plan the menu so you don't end up with nothing but mashed potatoes! Church dinners take cooperation and coordination, people working together for a common goal. The same could be said about anything a church does to see God's vision for that body of believers fulfilled.

One of the major issues Paul identified in the church at Corinth was a lack of unity among the believers there. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul dealt with the spiritual immaturity of these believers, resulting from their failure to realize that everything they had come from

God. They needed to be reminded they were God's field, God's building, and God's temple.

Part 1—The Church: God's Field

Disunity Displays Immaturity

1 Corinthians 3:1–4

Say: Paul opened 1 Corinthians 3 with words meant to humble the proud believers in Corinth. They saw themselves as spiritually wise, gifted, and mature. But Paul exposed their smug assessment as being false. The divisions among them—marked by jealousy and quarreling—revealed their true spiritual condition. Chapter 3 connects to the first two chapters of 1 Corinthians, continuing Paul's focus on the contrast between worldly and godly wisdom. The believers in Corinth were relying on human wisdom to build the church, which was causing division and strife. They should have been depending on godly wisdom instead.

When it came to speaking the truth in love (Ephesians 4:15), Paul led by example. The Corinthian believers needed to realize that forming cliques based on certain leaders or teachers displayed spiritual immaturity. Paul used strong contrasts in 1 Corinthians 3:1–3 to make his point: *spiritual versus worldly, mature versus infants, and milk versus meat*. He was disappointed that he still had to deal with the Corinthians as though they were people of the world or new believers rather than mature followers of God.

Growing in the grace and knowledge of Jesus is an expectation for all believers (2 Peter 3:18). Using the analogy of a baby growing to adulthood, Paul reminded the believers in Corinth of how he had nurtured them when they came to faith in Jesus. Early on, he had fed them with milk, or basic truths of the faith. But just as a baby is weaned from milk to solid food, so too should these believers have progressed spiritually. Instead, they revealed their spiritual immaturity by their divisiveness, jealousy, and quarreling.

Church unity is often a difficult topic to discuss. Does it mean all Christians should believe exactly the same things and live out their faith in exactly the same ways? Does unity leave no room for differences in doctrine and practice that fall outside the central messages of Scripture? If Christians are supposed to be unified just like Jesus and the Father are unified (John 17:21), then why are there so many denominations? Answers to these questions do not come easily. But they do point to the need of believers to grow in the grace and knowledge of Jesus, so they become less like people of the world and more like mature children of God.

Christians must agree on the essential Christian beliefs that cannot be compromised. But beyond this, we can make allowances for differences in peripheral teachings and how they should be lived out. Later in 1 Corinthians, Paul instructed believers how to promote unity within the Body when addressing the issue of food sacrificed to idols. He explained that love should temper the actions of those with "superior knowledge," so that those with weaker consciences were not made to stumble (8:9–11).

Discuss

? How is unity different from uniformity?

? How can we determine which Christian beliefs are nonnegotiable?

Resource Packet Item 1: God's Plan for Unity

Sadly, churches have split over everything from carpet color and Bible translations to racism and social justice. Some may think Christian unity is unattainable, but Scripture makes it clear that unity is God's desire for His people. Students will read several Scriptures and note how they promote unity among believers.

You Belong to God

1 Corinthians 3:5–9

Say: The Church belongs to God. Using an agricultural metaphor, Paul explained that believers are God's field, and He uses various laborers to bring in the harvest. Some plant; some water. But God is the One who makes the seed grow. God rewards the workers, but the harvest belongs to Him. New believers' focus should be on God, not the workers who led them to Him.

The lack of unity among believers in Corinth was partly due to their shortsighted promotion of certain leaders over others. The various factions jockeyed for position, claiming their preferred teacher was superior to the others. Some followed Paul, who had brought the gospel to the city and founded the church. Others claimed Apollos, an eloquent and enthusiastic preacher. Giving devotion to the Lord's servants instead of the Lord himself was causing division among these believers.

Paul explained that this partisanship was divisive and misguided. All believers are part of the harvest God is gathering, so all believers belong to God. He raises up workers to serve in His field. Some may plant the seed. Others may water it. But it's God who makes the seed grow. Paul, Apollos, and other leaders were not in competition but were partners in a common task. What they did was only productive because God gave the increase.

Several lessons can be drawn from Paul's field metaphor.

1. There is a diversity of ministry. God gives people different gifts to serve in His harvest field while He does His part to provide the increase.
2. There is a unity of purpose in our work as God's servants: the growth of the Church. As believers remain in Jesus and produce lasting fruit, they bring glory to God (John 15:1–16).
3. Serving God requires humility. We must acknowledge that all who labor are God's servants, and it is He alone who brings the increase.

4. Each worker will be rewarded according to their faithfulness. Human standards of success won't be the measure by which the Lord rewards our obedience.

Worldliness creeps in when Christians begin exalting leaders. Hero worship (a form of idolatry) can lead believers to glorify seemingly successful people and fail to glorify God as the One who is working through His servants. Too often our language reveals this worldly way of thinking. "That pastor built a large church." "That dynamic evangelist saved many souls." When we forget that we are all servants and ministers of one Lord, and the harvest and the field are His, disunity will be the result.

Resource Packet Item 2: Paul's Teamwork Strategy

The New Testament makes it clear that Paul embraced teamwork in his apostolic ministry. Students will read an excerpt from Arthur F. Glasser's *Announcing the Kingdom* and reflect on how they can pursue humility and embrace teamwork as they fulfill their role in the body of Christ. This handout would work best as a takehome page for personal study.

Discuss

? How can Christians avoid hero worship?

? What are ways Christians can promote unity within the local church and the worldwide Church?

Part 2—The Church: God's Building

Jesus Is the Foundation

1 Corinthians 3:9–11

Say: After comparing believers to a field, Paul switched metaphors. He used architectural imagery to remind the believers in Corinth that the gospel was the foundation of their local church. Paul had preached the good news to them, proclaiming the death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus (1 Corinthians 15:1–5), and other ministers built on that foundation. Unless a church is built on Jesus, there can be no unity. In fact, there can be no church at all.

God's field. God's building. These metaphors help clarify the basis for Christian unity. Believers belong to God, entering into faith when He causes the seed of His Word to grow in their hearts. By faith, they become part of the Church that Jesus is building.

Paul didn't give ground to those who wanted to rally under the banner of a particular teacher or leader. God's grace and power had enabled Paul to do his part in laying the foundation for the church. But the substance of the foundation wasn't Paul or his work—it was Jesus and the truth about Him. Paul had proclaimed "Jesus Christ, and him crucified" (1 Corinthians 2:2, kjv). Demonstrations of God's Spirit had confirmed the gospel, so the people's faith was based on God's power, not human reasoning (verses 4–5). No other foundation would allow the church to be God's holy temple in which He dwelt by His Spirit.

Other ministers who followed Paul were to build on the church's gospel foundation. Whatever they taught Christians to believe and do should draw them closer to Jesus and strengthen their faith in Him. They were to lead carefully, knowing their works and words would be judged (James 3:1).

The gospel begins and ends with God. The Church is His. Unity is easier to achieve and maintain when God receives all the glory and credit for His Church. It exists by His grace (Ephesians 2:8), and we who have experienced His grace are to "make every effort to keep [ourselves] united in the Spirit" (4:3).

Discuss

? Why is Jesus the foundation of the Church?

? What can believers do to keep themselves united in the Spirit?

Add Value to God's Building

1 Corinthians 3:12–15

Say: Christianity requires participation. Believers are to add value to God's building, using precious materials that will withstand the fire of judgment. Our efforts don't save us, but we will be rewarded if our works have eternal value and our words carry gospel truth. This is why it's so important for all believers to study the Bible and be ready to share the good news (2 Timothy 2:15).

Continuing the building metaphor, Paul described a variety of materials that could be used to build on the foundation of Jesus Christ. Some were valuable enough to withstand the fires of judgment. Others had no lasting value and would be consumed.

Service is a core value of Christianity and should be motivated by love and performed with humility. Jesus is our example in this (John 13:14–15). It is possible to do good things with wrong motives that result in judgment rather than reward (Matthew 7:21–23). But as we faithfully use our God-given gifts in loving and humble service, we can have assurance that what we're building will last.

Resource Packet Item 3: Valuable Work

"On the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value" (1 Corinthians 3:13). Students will read Scripture passages about works that have lasting value and consider the eternal significance of their own service to God.

First Corinthians 3:15 is sobering. Christians are not saved by works, but our works will lead to consequences on the day of judgment. Perhaps the loss Paul mentions refers to a person's regret that they contributed little to the Kingdom. The imagery is dramatic, depicting someone who has barely escaped a burning building, losing all their possessions in the fire. They may have survived, but they have little or nothing of value to prove that their lives made a difference for the sake of Christ.

Discuss

? How can Christians determine what building materials will be valuable on judgment day?

? What does this passage add to a biblical understanding of salvation and works?

Part 3—The Church: God’s Temple

All Together and Set Apart

1 Corinthians 3:16–17

Say: Paul intensified his argument by narrowing the building metaphor. Believers in Christ are not just God’s building; they are God’s temple. And division undermines God’s plan for His temple. If a believer’s works are burned in judgment, they would still be saved as one who barely escapes from a burning building. However, if someone’s works or teachings “defile” (1 Corinthians 3:17, KJV; “destroy,” NLT) His temple, God would destroy them. Promoting disunity in God’s holy temple is dangerous.

Paul’s “ye” in 1 Corinthians 3:16 (KJV) is plural, as the *New Living Translation* makes clear with the translation, “all of you together.” In other words, Paul is explaining that the Church as a whole is a temple for God’s Spirit. Later in this letter, Paul added that the Spirit lives in individual believers, making each of us also a temple of the Holy Spirit (6:19–20). Believers are essentially unified because of this; each of us is a living stone that is built into God’s temple (1 Peter 2:5).

Note the increasing intensity in Paul’s argument in 1 Corinthians 3:16–17. In verses 12–15, he explained that a bad worker would suffer great loss but would still be saved, if only barely. But verse 17 makes it clear that God will destroy those who destroy His temple. The punishment is more severe, resulting in condemnation.

False teachers were destroying the local church in Corinth. Their teaching and lifestyle were creating division, promoting immorality, and causing confusion on core truths of the Christian faith. These teachers would answer to God, and they were to be rejected by the believers who comprised God’s holy temple.

This dire warning is still relevant today. Don’t mess with God’s people—the ones He has made holy and set apart for himself. Instead, reject anyone whose teachings are based on legalistic self-righteousness or abusing grace to excuse immoral living. We must avoid the temptation to promote our own agendas, which only brings discord and harm to the local church. Instead, we should value others, following Jesus’ example. It is vital that we maintain a healthy fear of God, because destruction awaits those who destroy His holy temple.

Discuss

? How can false teaching in a church be harmful to believers?

? What does it mean to you that God sees believers as holy?

Everything Belongs to Believers

1 Corinthians 3:18–23

Say: The divisions in Corinth that had been caused by focusing on church leaders had to stop. These believers may have thought they were acting wisely, but they were only deceiving themselves. As Warren Wiersbe explains, “The world depends on promotion, prestige, and the influence of money and important people. The church depends on prayer, the power of the Spirit, humility, sacrifice, and service.”¹ Rejecting worldly wisdom might make believers appear foolish to others, but embracing godly wisdom keeps us on the path toward spiritual maturity.

Earlier Paul had said the believers in Corinth were spiritual babies because they were acting like worldly people. By rallying around human leaders, the church was being divided and torn apart. They were deceiving themselves if they thought partisanship and power grabbing would reveal their superior wisdom. Instead, it only showed their foolishness and their lack of understanding of what it means to follow Jesus.

Paul used two Old Testament quotations to illustrate the foolishness of worldly wisdom. The quote in 1 Corinthians 3:19 from Job 5:13 reveals the powerlessness of worldly wisdom to achieve its intended aims. The quote in 1 Corinthians 3:20 from Psalm 94:11 highlights the emptiness of human wisdom. When it comes to spiritual matters, human wisdom is flawed. It is corrupted by our sinful nature and limited by time and space.

Earlier in his letter, Paul pointed out that God’s plan of salvation had been fulfilled in Christ—the power and wisdom of God (1 Corinthians 1:24–25). At the close of chapter 3, Paul reminded the Corinthians that their faith in Jesus meant everything belonged to them. Since each of us belongs to God and to each other, rivalry or competition based on human leaders should never take place. Why settle for less? Why risk losing it all through petty divisiveness that undermines God’s vision for His church?

Discuss

? How can the knowledge that all things belong to us help us overcome worldly wisdom and its effects?

? Why can God’s plan of salvation seem like foolishness to some people?

What Is God Saying to Us?

Say: Unity is an essential characteristic of a healthy local church. It results from a solid understanding of the Christian faith and requires effort to live it out every day. If we thought of ourselves as children of God rather than attenders of a particular church, maybe unity would come easier to us. May we all grasp this precious truth.

Living It Out

Ministry in Action

- Pray together as a class that as you sow the seed of God’s Word it would land on good soil.
- Serve God faithfully so your works will be found valuable when judged.

- Think about the ways you might be putting too much focus on leaders or teachers—even in the church. Commit together to keep your focus on God and glorify Him alone.

Daily Bible Readings

Monday:

United against Opposition.

Nehemiah 4:1–14

Tuesday:

Affirmation of Unity.

Psalms 133:1–3

Wednesday:

The Wisdom of Unity

Ecclesiastes 4:9–12

Thursday:

Jesus' Prayer for Unity.

John 17:11, 20–26

Friday:

In One Accord.

Acts 2:1–4

Saturday:

One Body of Christ.

1 Corinthians 12:4–6, 12–20

1. Warren Wiersbe, "1 Corinthians 3:18–20," *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, Logos Bible Software.