

1st Corinthians



Lesson 1: Paul Condemns Divisions in the Church


Introduction

The bishop stirs from a troubled sleep long before the sun crests the horizon. Before the fog of sleep leaves his mind, he remembers who he is and the responsibilities of his office. He rolls over with a sigh, as he remembers the problems awaiting him, he mutters, "Lord, I trust in you!" His phone will ring, his e-mail box will be full with problems he must handle; sins, divisions, betrayals, liturgical abuses, heresies, jealousies and attacks from within and without. He prays again, "Dear God, I face this new day relying on your wisdom and strength. My diocese is troubled; it is in need of your mercy, and I, your humble servant, will need your help today as I serve your kingdom." Before opening his e-mail or meeting with his staff, he slips out the back, quietly slips into the chapel. He opens his breviary to the daily reading. It is taken from 1 Corinthians; "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren."

He closes his eyes and is taken back two thousand years. He is not alone. He stands with St. Paul, in the world but not of it. He stands in continuity with the first Apostles. They struggled with every sort of problem imaginable and he realizes that he is simply succeeding them in the office of overseer dealing with the same daily problems that they dealt with back then. After an hour before the Blessed Sacrament, the bishop is revived. He walks back to his office with a renewed vigor. Standing in the shoes of his predecessor, with the assistance of the same graces and charisms, he steps back into his office ready for the day.

1 Corinthians 1:1-31

1 Paul, called by the will of God to be an apostle of Christ Jesus, and our brother Sosthenes, 2 To the church of God which is at Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours: 3 Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. 4 I give thanks to God always for you because of the grace of God which was given you in Christ Jesus, 5 that in every way you were enriched in him with all speech and all knowledge -- 6 even as the testimony to Christ was confirmed among you -- 7 so that you are not lacking in any spiritual gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ;



8 who will sustain you to the end, guiltless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. 9 God is faithful, by whom you were called into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord. 10 I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. 11 For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. 12 What I mean is that each one of you says, "I belong to Paul," or "I belong to Apollos," or "I belong to Cephas," or "I belong to Christ." 13 Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? 14 I am thankful that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius; 15 lest any one should say that you were baptized in my name. 16 (I did baptize also the household of Stephanas. Beyond that, I do not know whether I baptized any one else.) 17 For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel, and not with eloquent wisdom, lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power. 18 For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God. 19 For it is written, "I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the cleverness of the clever I will thwart." 20 Where is the wise man? Where is the scribe? Where is the debater of this age? Has not God made foolish the wisdom of the world? 21 For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. 22 **For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, 23 but we preach Christ crucified,** a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles, 24 but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. 25 For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men. 26 For consider your call, brethren; not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth; 27 but God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, 28 God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, 29 so that no human being might boast in the presence of God. 30 He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; 31 therefore, as it is written, "Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord."

ONE OF THE BEST WAYS TO MEDITATE UPON GOD'S WORD IS THROUGH MEMORIZATION, A SUGGESTED MEMORY VERSE IS PRINTED IN BOLD WITHIN THE BIBLICAL TEXT OR YOU MAY WISH TO CHOOSE A VERSE OF YOUR OWN

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Points to Ponder

1st-century Letter Writing

St. Paul lived in the real world. He was the spiritual father of the Corinthians who lived amidst the typical wickedness of a port city in the Roman Empire. He woke up every morning with the same looming problems faced by our modern bishop. Paul even told the Corinthians that he endured incredible problems and suffering, and “apart from other things, there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the churches” (2 Cor 11:28).

As we embark on a study of Corinthians, we step back in time to discover two profound letters in which a 1st-century apostle and bishop openly bears his heart and soul to his beloved Christians in Corinth, and in so doing to us as well. Because these letters are so intensely personal and heartfelt, they are the most loved and read of Paul’s letters -- and the reason why we know him as well as we do.

St. Paul begins his *epistles (letters)* with the formalities typical of his day -- identifying himself, as well as the conveyer of the letter and any co-authors or secretaries. He then prays for his readers to receive blessings from God. In this nine-verse introduction Paul mentions Jesus Christ nine times! There is no question as to the central theme of Paul’s life and this epistle.


Paul is the author of 1 Corinthians, but he did not write it with his own hand. He dictated it to an *amanuensis (transcriber or secretary)*. He did, however, put his own pen to the last lines (1 Cor 16:21).

Paul says the Corinthians have “been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints” (v. 2). In the early third century the great theologian Origen wrote, “Why did Paul write ‘to those called to be saints’ as well as to those who are already ‘sanctified’ and in the Church? Surely this means that the letter is addressed not only to those who are already cleansed from their sins but also to those who still await cleansing, though they are among those whom God has called.” The Greek word used by Paul is the root from which we get the words *holiness, sanctification, consecrated, set apart*. The basic idea of this word is *set apart* and *consecration* for the service of God.

Paul uses this introduction to summarize many themes he will unfold throughout the First Letter to the Corinthians. For example, Paul says: “You are not lacking in any spiritual gift as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ.” He also goes into great detail about spiritual gifts and the resurrection from the dead on the last day when Christ returns. He uses pregnant phrases like “enriched in Him” at a time when the Corinthians were suffering the loss of worldly possessions because of their testimony for Jesus.

Fellowship in Christ

In verse 9, Paul uses the word *koinonía*, which means *fellowship*. In the Greco-Roman culture this word was significant, meaning a *profound sharing* -- of a business relationship, marriage, special meal, legal arrangement, or common citizenship in a country or city. This concept was important to the



Greeks in both religious and civic life. It was considered a great privilege and honor to be a citizen of both Corinth and Rome. Caesar claimed to be divine and was given the title Prince of Peace as he established the *Pax Romana* (*Roman Peace*). Yet Paul begins this letter reminding Corinthian believers that they've been summoned into a greater fellowship, one that supersedes even that of Rome.

Referring to Jesus as “Lord”, Paul audaciously asserts that there is only one Lord and it is not Caesar. He says that God himself calls us to a new community. The word *church* is *ekklesia*, which means *called-out ones*. We have been summoned to an eternal city; our citizenship is now in heaven with Jesus as our only Lord. This is why the Christians were eventually persecuted. In the eyes of the Romans they were disloyal; indeed, Paul’s head was cut off because he was considered a subversive.


Dissensions and Divisions

Paul writes that there are “dissensions among you.” The Greek word for *dissensions* is *schisma* from which we get the English word *schism*, meaning a *tearing* or *rending* as in a fabric; also a *dividing* or *forming of factions*. The church in Corinth was dividing into factions, and internal factions can lead to external schisms. In John 21:11 we see the same root word used for the *net*, heavy and brimming with fish, that did not tear (*schizo*). Paul uses this word twice again while mentioning this problem (1 Cor 11:18, 12:25).

Paul appeals to the Corinthians for unity. Jesus had prayed for unity (Jn 17:23); now Paul exhorts the Corinthians through this same Jesus to be visibly unified. In Greek the word *united* is actually a word used in the gospels for *mending nets* (Mt 4:21; Mk 1:19). The Church is likened in the gospels to a net and the apostles to fishers of men, but if the net is torn, catching fish becomes a problem. Paul is saying: “You are torn; get mended.” A church torn with factions or schisms has a hard time convincing the lost of the truth of Christ.

In addressing this problem Paul refers to the troublemakers as “my brethren.” Why? For two reasons: first, to let them know that he still loves and considers them brethren despite his disappointment in them; second, to show that if they are all brothers, how can the family divide into factions? Some were following Apollos, some Paul, others were loyal to Cephas (Peter), and still others said, “We are followers of Christ!” Apollos was an eloquent new convert from Alexandria who refuted the Jews by proving from the Scriptures that Jesus was the Messiah (Acts 18:24-28).

None of these men—Paul, Cephas, Apollos—instigated these divisions, nor were they themselves divided. They were in total agreement in Christ, but certain of their teachings were taken out of context and used to over-emphasize one aspect to the detriment of others. These lopsided perspectives then provided alleged reasons to separate and divide. Those “following” Paul were probably the Gentiles who emphasized their freedom in the gospel; the followers of Apollos tended to be the intellectuals who emphasized his eloquence and Alexandrian background. Peter’s followers were probably Jews who looked back to Israel, legalism, and the law. Those who claimed to “follow” Christ thought Christ



belonged to them; because they thought of themselves as “balanced,” they became exclusivists. Without condoning those who said they were “of Christ,” Paul begins to demonstrate the centrality of Christ whose body cannot be divided. He challenges the Corinthians with a series of rhetorical questions. Has Christ been divided, dissected? Was Paul crucified for you? Were you baptized into the name of Paul? Christ has only one body, the church, and it cannot be divided. Imagine what Paul would say today if he drove down Main Street in your town and saw Baptist, Lutheran, Assembly of God, Church of Christ, and a host of other divisions from the one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church!

We are Baptized Only in Christ

Paul then recalls those he personally baptized in Corinth. He mentions four names: Crispus, the influential leader of the synagogue in Corinth; Gaius, a well-to-do Corinthian; Erastus, the city treasurer of Corinth; and Stephanas who with his household was the first to believe and be baptized from Achaia, the province in southern Greece.


Paul makes the point that if he had baptized more than these, it might have further encouraged the choosing of sides, such as: “I was baptized in Paul’s name, therefore I am of Paul.” Paul stresses that Christ is the *only* savior, that only in *his* name are we are saved, baptized, and made into one body.

Verse 17 has been used by some Protestant traditions to deny the importance and efficaciousness of baptism. Paul says, “For Christ did not send me to baptize but to preach the gospel ...” Does this mean that baptism is optional and not as important as preaching the gospel?

The fact that 1st-century believers were immediately baptized demonstrates what Paul and the early Christians thought of baptism (Acts 8:36-38; 9:17-18; 16:31; 22:16; Titus 3:5). Baptism does not require a special calling from God which is why Paul usually left it to others just as Jesus did (Jn 4:1-2), and Peter as well (Acts 10:48). The fact that they delegated the actual baptisms to others (as bishops and priests today often delegate to deacons) does not imply a disdain for the sacrament. Paul’s own writings consistently deny any such belittlement (Rom 6:3-12; 1 Cor 6:11). The first Christians had a much higher regard for baptism than many Protestant Christians today, especially because Jesus told Nicodemus that “unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God” (Jn 3:5).

Folly of the Cross

Now Paul diverts to other topics. In one of the most poignant statements in Corinthians, Paul writes: “For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God” (v.18). Of course! For the Greco-Roman citizen a man on the cross was the epitome of weakness, disgrace, shame, dishonor and folly—the very opposite of power, glory, victory and salvation. Those who rejected Christ and were perishing without understanding that salvation was wrought through the cross *would* think that this symbol of utter humiliation was folly — Christians



were fools in their eyes. Yet for those who understood the deep and profound meaning of the cross, it was quite the opposite: it was glorious, the ultimate moment when God revealed his love and power to save mankind.

The Greek culture gloried in philosophy (*love of wisdom*). Proud of Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, the Greeks reveled in thinking, reading, writing, reasoning, and debating. Despite all their wisdom, however, the ancient Greeks did not come to know God, instead developing a pantheon of false gods and idols. All of their learning proved in the end to be foolishness because it failed to bring them true wisdom leading to salvation.

Paul is not denouncing wisdom or debate, only the worldly wisdom that claims to be wiser than God and rejects his revelation. Beginning with Adam and Eve who believed the serpent's lie, it continues to our modern age that denies God's existence, or at least considers him obsolete and irrelevant. But God says it is not the wise man who rejects God; it is the fool who says in his heart, "there is no God." In the big picture of God's plan for the world's salvation, the wisest philosopher, the grandest debater, the most eloquent speaker, all look foolish. What they consider ludicrous and absurd -- the grisly cross of Christ -- is the wisdom of God. But the concept went right over their heads.

Paul praises the foolish, the poor, the simple man who hears and understands; who is not blinded by worldly wisdom and can see beyond to the wisdom and plan of God. To the Jews, the crucifixion was an obstacle because they were waiting for a conquering king, not a suffering servant. Their law said that anyone hanging on a tree was cursed (Deut 21:23; Gal 3:13), that God was not a man, that the Messiah would repel Rome and re-establish the throne of David. How could this crucified Galilean save anyone? This was a scandal and a stumbling block!

To the Gentiles also, the teaching of the cross was foolishness. The idea of only one God, of God becoming man, of salvation and victory through death on a cross and resurrection of the physical body -- all this was unthinkable and intolerable. The Romans ruled the world with unspeakable power and they crucified slaves every day. Now a non-Roman criminal executed on the cross will save us? This was utter foolishness.

The Jews ask for signs (Matt 12:38), and the Greeks search for wisdom (Acts 17:18-21). But the heart of Paul's preaching is about a Jewish man nailed to a cross -- Christ crucified -- which, although they don't realize it, *is the ultimate sign and power for the Jew and the pinnacle of wisdom for the Greek*. As Paul says, "...to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks (Gentiles), Christ [is] the power of God and the wisdom of God" (v. 24).

Bishop John Chrysostom, father of the church, put it this way: "...the philosophers could not achieve what a few unlearned men accomplished, namely, the conversion of the whole world. The philosophers spoke about trivialities and convinced only a few. The apostles spoke about God, righteousness, and judgment, and converted a great many." (*Homilies on the Epistles of Paul to the Corinthians*, 4.6.25)

Conclusion

We can achieve nothing on our own that will stand before the blinding light of the judgment seat of Christ. It is by God's doing that we are summoned to this new *koinonia* and given the grace to see the wisdom of God that appears as foolishness to men. Even with this great blessing, this magnificent calling, we have no room to boast. We did not invent it, discover it, or earn it; it is all a gift from God. It is by his mercy that we are called and received, loved and saved; the basis for it all is the ignoble cross and Christ's gruesome death. As Paul writes, "[God] is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption; therefore, as it is written, 'Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord'" (v. 30-31).

Chapter one ends with a loose quote from the Prophet Jeremiah who said something similar over four hundred years earlier (Jer 9:23-24; Ps 34:2; Sir 39:6-11).



Catechism Connections

- **Learn more about the relationship between sin and schisms and heresies. CCC 817**
- **Discover the true connection between baptism and salvation. CCC 1257**
- **Read more about the mystery of God's apparent powerlessness. CCC 272**
- **Look back and see how God used the weak and powerless to fulfill his promises. CCC 489**
- **Learn the importance of Christ's prayer, "Hallowed be thy Name". CCC 2813**



Rome to Home

“Hope”, in fact, is a key word in Biblical faith—so much so that in several passages the words “faith” and “hope” seem interchangeable. Thus the Letter to the Hebrews closely links the “fullness of faith” (10:22) to “the confession of our hope without wavering” (10:23). Likewise, when the First Letter of Peter exhorts Christians to be always ready to give an answer concerning the logos—the meaning and the reason—of their hope (cf. 3:15), “hope” is equivalent to “faith”.


~Pope Benedict XVI November 30, 2007
From the Encyclical “Spe Salvi”

Study Questions

It’s best to read the entire Scripture readings for this lesson and Points to Ponder before responding to the study questions.

1. To whom in Corinth is Paul addressing his letter? What does “holiness” mean? (See Points to Ponder; CCC 2013-2014)

2. Verse 9 speaks about God’s faithfulness. How do other verses and Church teachings speak of God’s faithfulness? (See Deut 7:9; 1 Cor 10:13; CCC 210, 211)



Voices of the Saints

“Paul’s intention is perfectly clear—to accost the pride of man, that no one should take glory in human works and that no one should glory in himself.”

St. Augustine

Questions for Reflection

The following questions are intended to help you reflect upon ways in which the discoveries you’ve made in this lesson can be applied to your life.

1. Do you see any similarities between the problems and dissension of the early Church and the dissension that is present in the Church today? Why is it wiser to try to work out our disagreements rather than segregate ourselves from those with whom we disagree?
2. We saw in this chapter that the Greeks felt they were too wise to believe in a Crucified Christ and the Jews also found this concept to be a stumbling block. Many people today find the teaching that Jesus is truly present in the Holy Eucharist unbelievable. Some think that it is foolishness, or that they are too wise to believe such nonsense. How could you use what you’ve learned in this chapter to help others understand this truth?



Summary: Lesson 1

In this lesson, we learned that:

- 1. God calls us to a new community: we are summoned to citizenship in heaven with Jesus as our only Lord where we will enjoy holy and intimate union with him.**
- 2. It is only in Christ's name that we are saved, baptized, and made into one body.**
- 3. Christ has only one body, the church, and it cannot be divided.**
- 4. A church torn by factions or schisms is hindered from bringing the truth of Christ to the lost.**
- 5. All Christians are called to be saints, even those who have not yet been cleansed of their sins.**
- 6. Though the world scoffs at the folly of the Cross, Christ's passion and death revealed his love and power to save mankind.**
- 7. We can achieve nothing on our own; it is only through God's mercy that we are called and received, loved and saved.**