

Fellowship with Believers

The Point: A life in Christ is a life of fellowship with other believers.

Session Passage: 1 Corinthians 1:1-13

1 Corinthians 1:1-3

Connection to the Point: Fellowship with other believers comes because of a shared trust and commitment to Jesus Christ.

Overview. Unlike Paul's letter to the Philippians which was written to a healthy church, 1 Corinthians was written to an unhealthy church. This lack of health stemmed from a misunderstanding of one of the Bible's most essential doctrines—the doctrine of justification by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Having understood that justification is by grace alone through faith alone, some Corinthians began to incorrectly think God did not care how they conducted themselves after coming to faith in Jesus. Paul was quick to correct this misunderstanding of the gospel. To address the divisions that had developed within the church, Paul called them to unite in their devotion to Christ. The Corinthians needed to return to the gospel of salvation they had initially received.

Additionally, 1 and 2 Corinthians provide Paul's most extensive interaction with a specific church. As such, both letters are crucial to the understanding of the nature and function of the church. First Corinthians also contains a vast range of various literary devices—irony, sarcasm, rhetorical questions, personification, hyperbole, and other stylistic forms. These literary devices display both God's wisdom and Paul's genius, as Paul gave his original readers and us a deep understanding of what it means to be a local church.

Corinth. Corinth was a large, diverse, and thriving cosmopolitan city in the ancient Roman world. The city was located in the Roman province of Achaia (southern Greece). The Romans chose the city of Corinth to be the capital of Achaia at least in part due to its location along sea and land trade routes. Though not as large as Rome, Corinth was much larger than Athens and was home to an athletic competition known as the Isthmian Games held every two years. Corinth was founded by the Greeks, and it was both a center for business and sinful behavior. In 146 BC the Romans destroyed Corinth, and it lay in ruins until 44 BC, when Julius Caesar re-founded it as a Roman colony. Corinth became known as place of sexual sin with its temple of Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and passion.

The apostle Paul founded the church at Corinth in about AD 50 toward the end of his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-18). One of the unique aspects of the founding of the church of Corinth is that the resurrected Jesus appeared to Paul in a night vision to encourage him to keep on evangelizing and church planting in the city despite ongoing persecution (vv. 9-10). He remained in Corinth for a year and a half (v. 11). Corinth was one of the four major centers of early Christianity, along with Jerusalem, Antioch of Syria, and Ephesus.

Paul, called as an apostle of Christ Jesus by God's will (v. 1). Paul (then known as Saul) was a persecutor of Christians (Acts 8:1-3; 26:9-11). Jesus called Paul to be His apostle to the Gentiles while Paul (Saul) was on the road to Damascus intent on arresting Christians in that city (Acts 9; 26:12-18).

Sosthenes (v. 1). Paul's co-worker and possibly co-author of 1 Corinthians, he may have been the same Sosthenes who was the leader of the synagogue in Corinth who was beaten after the Jews' failed attempt to bring charges against Paul before Gallio, the proconsul of Corinth (Acts 18:17).

Sanctified/Saints (v. 2). The Greek words translated “sanctified” (*hagiazō*) and “saints” (*hagios*) come from the same root. They both convey the idea that Christians are called out of the world and set apart as God’s special people. There is no special category of Christians that are called “saints” in the New Testament. Saints are not super Christians. “Saints” is simply one of the words the New Testament uses for Christians. Despite the fact that the church in Corinth could largely be characterized as unhealthy, they were still a church—a body of believers saved by grace through faith in Christ alone. “Sanctification” is the process by which believers are progressively made holy (grow to maturity in Christ) by the working of the indwelling Holy Spirit (2 Cor. 3:18).

Grace/Peace (v. 3). Throughout Paul’s letters, “grace” always precedes “peace” in his greetings (Rom. 1:7; 1 Cor. 1:3; 2 Cor. 1:2; Gal 1:3; Eph. 1:2; Phil. 1:2; Col 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:2). This is not merely a stylistic preference. Because of the sin that is in the world and in ourselves, there is no true and lasting peace without the grace of God. It is only after God has been gracious to us in Christ through our salvation (Eph. 2:1-10) that we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1-2). Furthermore, it is only after we have peace with God that we truly can have peace with other people (Eph. 2:11-22).

1 Corinthians 1:4-9

Connection to the Point: Fellowship is strengthened and enriched as we let Christ work through us.

Enriched in him (v. 5). We are in Christ, and Christ is in us (1 Cor. 3:23; 1 John 4:13). These truths are equally important for Christians to remember. The reality of Christ being in us through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-17) means we have both the power not to sin and the power to proclaim the gospel to others. The reality that we are in Christ means when we do sin and fail to live a faithful life, God the Father does not see us as we are but sees us as having been permanently clothed in the perfect righteousness of Christ (Rom. 5:1; 1 Cor. 1:30; Phil. 3:9). Paul wrote that the Corinthian believers were enriched in Christ specifically “in all speech and knowledge.” This may be a reference to spiritual gifts (1 Cor. 12:1-11) which Paul discussed later in his letter (chaps. 12–14)

Testimony about Christ (v. 6). The Greek word for “testimony” (*marturion*) is the origin of the English word “martyr.” The word for “testimony” is also connected to the term that is normally translated “witness” (*martus*). Followers of Christ are called to be His witnesses (Acts 1:8). The task of a witness is not merely to argue for a particular point of view or to seek to convince people to accept an abstract idea. Rather, witnesses are to report what they have seen, heard, and experienced (4:20)—which in the New Testament is the reality that God in Christ has provided the way of salvation for all who put their faith in Jesus (John 3:14-18; 2 Cor. 5:19–6:2).

Spiritual gift (v. 7). The Holy Spirit gives every believer at least one spiritual gift (1 Cor. 12:7-11). There is no such thing as a Christian who has no gift and is not being empowered by the Holy Spirit. To be empowered by the Spirit is to be a Christian, and to be a Christian is to be empowered by the Holy Spirit (Rom. 8:9-11; Gal. 5:16-25). The gifts that come with this empowerment are not meant to be used for selfish gain, personal profit, or acclaim. Instead, they are meant for the proclamation of the gospel of salvation through Christ and for the health and upbuilding of the body of Christ.

The revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ (v. 7). The ultimate and final hope for all Christians is the second coming of Jesus—His revelation. The promise of the second coming of Christ should give Christians a sense of patience and urgency. Christians can have patience with suffering, difficulty, and persecution in this world because they know King Jesus will come to make all things new (Rev. 21–22) and their rewards are safe and awaiting them in heaven (Matt. 5:12; 6:19-21; 2 Tim. 4:8; Jas. 1:12; 1 Pet. 1:3-4; 5:4). Christians should have a sense of urgency because millions of people have yet to hear the gospel. Some of those millions are on the other side of the world. Some are in our families, across the street, and in our places of employment.

Strengthen (v. 8). It is through the power of God that believers are strengthened “to the end.” We are kept safe and secure by God’s power (Phil. 1:6; 2:12-13; Col. 1:22; 2 Thess. 3:3). The gloriously good news is that Christians are not called to follow Christ in their own strength but rather in the power of the Holy Spirit to live day-to-day life in Christ, to endure and overcome suffering, obstacles, and difficulties. We are to live in community with other believers, using our spiritual gifts, edifying and encouraging each other in the faith.

Blameless (v. 8). Throughout the Bible, describing individuals as “blameless” does not mean they are or must be perfect. For instance, Job is called blameless (“perfect integrity,” Job 1:8; 2:3), but we know from the wider testimony of Scripture that all people have sinned (Rom. 3:23). One of the qualifications for pastors is that they be blameless (Titus 1:6), but since only Jesus is without sin, this qualification cannot be demanding sinless perfection. Instead, being blameless means the person is mature, reliable, God-honoring, and ultimately, according to verse 9, dependent upon God’s faithfulness rather than their own ability (Col 1:22; 1 Tim. 3:10; Titus 1:6).

Fellowship with his Son (v. 9). The Greek term for “fellowship” (*koinonia*) in this context carries the sense of participation and sharing, of being “in Christ.” Our fellowship with one another begins by being in fellowship with God in Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:10-13

Connection to the Point: Corinthian believers were hampering their fellowship with one another because they were divided over leadership issues.

In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ . . . agree (v. 10). Paul was not merely giving the church at Corinth his perspective, opinion, or point of view. As an “apostle of Christ Jesus by God’s will” (v. 1), Paul was urging with his apostolic authority that the believers who made up the body of Christ in the Corinthian church should be in unity with one another. Unity in Christ is not something Christians manufacture in their own power and cleverness. Only God in Christ can create this kind of unity. The duty of believers is to dwell in, keep, and live out the unity God has given to His people in Christ (Rom. 12:16-18; Eph. 4:1-3; see Ps. 133:1).

The same understanding and the same conviction (v. 10). Paul was not teaching that all Christians must always agree on every detail of doctrine and about how to live out the Christian life. Instead, he was teaching that all Christians should agree on the central message of the gospel (1 Cor. 15) and about the basics of the Christian life (Gal. 5:16-26). Paul further appealed for unity by reminding the Corinthian believers that they were his “brothers and sisters,” part of the same family of God (this phrase also appears in v. 11).

Members of Chloe’s people (v. 11). Outside of this reference, “Chloe” is unknown in the New Testament. From the immediate context, Chloe seems to have either been a leader or hostess of a group of believers who had direct access to the apostle Paul. The reports of Chloe’s people were a source Paul apparently trusted to give an accurate assessment of the situation in the Corinthian church.

Rivalry (v. 11). Throughout Paul’s writings, the word translated “rivalry” (*eris*) always has negative connotations and is consistently treated as a product of immorality (“quarrels” Rom. 1:29; “quarreling,” 13:13; “strife,” 1 Cor. 3:3; “strife,” Gal 5:20; “rivalry,” Phil. 1:15). *Cephas* (1 Cor. 1:12) is the Aramaic word for “rock.” *Cephas* is also the Aramaic name of Peter (John 1:42), Jesus’s disciple and one of His closest followers (Matt. 17:1; 26:37; Luke 8:51). Apollos was an early follower of Jesus whom Aquila and Priscilla taught the way of Christ “more accurately,” after which he ministered in Achaia (Acts 18:24-28). Note that Paul, Peter, and Apollos were not in rivalry with one another. The fact that factions were forming in these men’s names was not honoring to them and their ministries. More importantly, the rivalry between these four factions was professing something about Christ and His gospel that was both false and damaging. It is probable that the

faction that professed to belong to Christ was just as divisive and self-righteous as the other factions in thinking they were the superior Christians. Paul's central point was that division among Christians is contrary to the gospel.

Is Christ divided? (v. 13). This question assumes a negative response. Christ, of course, is not divided. In fact, Christ's physical body was not broken during his crucifixion. Paul may have been using irony here and pointing out an absurd conclusion. Christ's belongings were divided as He hung on the cross for the sins of the world (John 19:23-24), but His physical body remained whole without even one bone being broken (vv. 33-37). Similarly, the church, the body of Christ, was not to be divided into factions. Such factions are contrary to the gospel, in which Jews and Gentiles have been brought into one body of Christ, thereby creating peace and unity (Eph. 2:14-22).

Crucified/Baptized (v. 13). Paul's two questions about crucifixion and baptism also assume negative answers. Obviously, Paul was not crucified for the Christians at Corinth (or for any other Christians). Likewise, the Christians at Corinth were not baptized in Paul's name. The same could be said for Cephas and Apollos. None of those men were crucified for the benefit of the Christians at Corinth. And no Christian was ever baptized in the name of Paul, Cephas, or Apollos (Matt. 28:19-20). By using these rhetorical questions, Paul guided his readers to discover the truth that unity is found in the person and work of Christ and not in any human teacher. Christ is the one who is to receive honor and glory, not any of these human leaders and teachers.