

# Introduction and Christian Unity (1 Cor. 1:1-13)

## Expository Lessons from the Book of 1 Corinthians

### I. Why Study 1 Corinthians?

- a. Since the time of Martin Luther, most Protestant churches have focused heavily on the book of **Romans**. However in the early church, according to David Bercot (editor of the Dictionary of Early Christian Beliefs), it was **1 Corinthians** that received more attention.
- b. The book is very diverse and practical. It touches on real challenges faced by the church at that time, which we can learn from today. The subjects touched on here include:
  - i. Factions in the church
  - ii. Church discipline
  - iii. Miraculous gifts
  - iv. Divorce and separation
  - v. Lord's supper
  - vi. Women's role in the church and family
  - vii. Headcovering
  - viii. What happens after we die
- c. It's easy to skip over unpopular and difficult teachings. However, we will strive to not do that in this series of lessons. Our challenge is to deal with these issues honestly and sincerely. Our goal will be to strive to understand Paul's instructions as he originally meant them, and consistent with the teachings of Jesus and how the church understood Paul's writings (and Jesus' teaching) in the beginning.

### II. Importance of Expository Teaching/Preaching

- a. It's very common for preachers to do topical preaching: select a topic to speak on, and then look for verses that pertain to that topic, to support what the speaker wants to say. The tendency is to seek for Scriptures that can be used to support the speaker's desired points.
- b. Expository preaching is very different. Take the book as a whole, take it all in context, even going through the book, verse by verse. With expository preaching/teaching, the points come out of the text itself, rather than from the speaker. It may take you places you don't particularly want to go, and force you to consider things that you never noticed before.

c. **'The Parable of Whole Grain Bread'**

- i. Whole grain bread (as opposed to modern white bread) used to be what people ate.
  - ii. In 1870s people began refining the wheat and separating the bran (coating) and germ (seed) from the white flour. Later they would bleach the flour to make it look nice and white. The new white flour had the advantage of being light and fluffy, and easier to work with. It could be stored easier and could be transported to other places. Flour made from whole grain wheat is light brown in color, and can go rancid, and spoil more quickly.
  - iii. But, when people started switching from whole grain bread to breads made with the new 'improved' white flour, something unexpected happened. They began getting diseases related to B vitamin deficiencies, since vitamins had been removed from the grain in the refining process. In the 1940's they began adding some things back into the flour, calling it 'enriched' flour! This switch from whole grain to white refined flour has contributed to all types of problems, including: cardiovascular diseases, cancers, type 2 diabetes and obesity. The removal of the healthy part of the grain led unintentionally to a whole host of diseases, as God had put into the whole grain all types of things we really need but were unaware of!
  - iv. Most churches essentially are serving up the 'white flour' today. It is easier to prepare lessons that way, rather than digging into all of the Scriptures (including the challenging and difficult parts) which have been provided for our benefit and spiritual health.
- d. **Deuteronomy 8:3** "So He dealt harshly with you and weakened you with hunger, and fed you with manna, which your fathers did not know, that He might make you know that man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word proceeding from the mouth of God man shall live."
- i. Quoted by Jesus in **Matthew 4:4**
  - ii. Who are we to cut out parts of the word of God and think we are doing people a favor?
  - iii. Churches too often are serving up white flour lessons and serving up the easier parts, which will lead to all types of spiritual diseases, cutting out things that God intended for His people to hear.
- e. Expository teaching is also important because the preacher does not necessarily know what is going on in people's hearts.
- i. Read **Nehemiah 8:1-8**, a tremendous example of expository teaching.

- ii. Ezra was teaching from the Law to the people after they had returned from captivity.
  - iii. The word of God was read, and the other men of God “gave the sense” of what the Scripture meant. This is the essence of good expository teaching!
  - iv. This had tremendous impact on the people:
    - 1. Restored the feast of the tabernacles.
    - 2. Addressed sins: violation of Sabbath, intermarriage with pagans, etc.
    - 3. Brought about tremendous spiritual revival.
  - v. Expository teaching will meet the spiritual needs of God’s people! It also gives people a really solid foundation in their knowledge of the Word of God.
- f. Approach to good expository teaching:
- i. **First.** Read the passage and ask: What is the author’s message to his intended audience? (his concerns, what is on his mind?)
  - ii. **Second.** Then ask: What are the specific points the author is making and how does he make these points? (Jesus, Old Testament, logic, etc.)
  - iii. **Third.** Only after the first two steps above do we then ask questions regarding to personal application such as:
    - 1. “Is there any appropriate application for us today?
    - 2. Something we need to change?
    - 3. Something to learn about God’s character?
    - 4. A sin to repent of?
    - 5. A good example to follow? Or a bad example (something to avoid imitating)?

By doing the above, and in that order, we are less likely to read something into a passage that is not supported by the text.

- g. Expository teaching is also an excellent way to teach young Christians how to read the Bible.
  - i. They watch how the teacher teaches and it gives them a blueprint of how they can study the Word of God on their own.

- ii. Like the proverb: Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach him to fish and you feed him for a lifetime.

### III. Background in Approaching Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians

- a. This letter was written by the Apostle Paul.
- b. The Corinthian church was mostly made up of Gentiles. The city was a port city and very worldly. The church experienced a wide range of problems, including all types of sin.
- c. The book's tone is corrective. This can, in a strange way, be encouraging to us: the early church had all types of problems to deal with. (It wasn't perfect back then! Easy for us to idealize the early church.)
- d. Important that we understand what Paul says, but only in light of what Jesus taught.
  - i. **Matthew 23:8** "One is your teacher and you are all brothers."
  - ii. **John 15:20** "The servant is not greater than his master."
  - iii. Even the apostles themselves were only servants of Jesus, and brothers of one another. We do not look at Jesus' teaching in light of Paul's. Instead, we evaluate Paul's teaching in light of what Jesus said. This is a foundational principle to use whenever reading Paul's writings, to keep us from falling into the classic Scriptural misinterpretations of the Protestant Reformers and others.

### IV. Read the Passage (1 Corinthians 1:1-13)

- a. Summary of main points of the text:
  - i. Paul greeted the people, said some really nice things, and lifted up Jesus.
  - ii. Paul then tackled the problem of disunity first, before any of the other (very serious) problems they faced. Christians in Corinth were identifying with little sub-groups associated with influential leaders, rather than identifying as simply followers of Christ.
- b. Christian disunity
  - i. Question: Why did Paul hit this issue of disunity first?
  - ii. We need to first ask: What did *Jesus* teach about unity and disunity?
    - 1. Read **John 17:20-23**

- a. Background: This is Jesus' prayer right before he was betrayed and later crucified.
    - b. Jesus prayed first for the apostles. Then turned his attention to us, those followers who would come later.
    - c. Jesus prayed for all of us future believers, that we would be as unified as Jesus and the Father are unified.
  2. Why was this so important to Jesus?
    - a. First: This would be a sign to the world that Jesus was sent by His Father. (vs. 21)
    - b. Second: This would be a sign to the world that the Father loves the disciples of Jesus. (vs. 23)
  3. Jesus seemed to understand that Satan's strategy after the cross would include dividing Christians in order to discredit the work and mission of Jesus.
  4. Satan wants to convince the world that 1) Jesus was not sent by God, and 2) that God does not love His people. Satan will accomplish this by spreading disunity among Christians.
  5. There is a third reason unity is important. In **1 Corinthians 12** Paul says the church is a body made up of many parts. If one part is cut off, the whole body suffers.
- iii. The plague of disunity in the church.
1. Consider the state of the Christian world where you are living. (Unity among serious, committed Christians.) Are the Christians united?
  2. In Boston (where we live), there are a number of Christian church groups with different strengths. Each may emphasize (and be strong in) certain specific attributes of Christ and the church; and each may focus on certain teachings of Jesus. Satan's strategy has been to keep these groups from talking to each other; to keep these groups separated and divided.
  3. Satan would rather have the church appearing as a wasteland of deformed partial bodies, missing certain limbs and parts, rather than having a fully functioning body of Christ with all parts present and connected!
  4. What does Jesus want us to do about division in His body today?

5. Let's face it. We are facing the same disunity problem that Paul saw in Corinth, only worse. It is also the same problem Jesus was addressing in **John 17**
  - a. The call to be unified with other committed Christians is *not* about watering down our teaching.
  - b. What would happen if you ignored the artificial man-made boundaries and started reaching out to other sincere committed Christians in other groups?
  - c. Jesus' and Paul's teaching on unity are not relegated to each of us being united only to others within our own denomination!
  - d. This is not about trying to 'build unity' by bringing Christians from other groups into your own sub-group's little pen, either.
  - e. Working for unity means reaching out to other Christians in humility, with an open Bible, and having an attitude that if there is something you are missing in the Word of God, you will learn from others, imitate and start putting that into practice.
    - i. If you try to do this, you likely will face opposition from leaders within your denomination, or from other denominations!
    - ii. People will question your motives.
    - iii. This is threatening to many church leaders.
    - iv. But be assured that if you are doing this with the right heart, this honors Christ by putting into practice His teaching on unity. That is what He was praying for in **John 17**.
- iv. A great example of this desire for unity among all Christians was demonstrated by Barton Stone, one of the early Restoration Movement leaders from the early 1800's, who was one of the authors of a document with a very unusual name, *The Last Will and Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*.
  1. Background
    - a. In 1803 there were 15 congregations in Kentucky and Ohio that had formed an alliance called The Springfield Presbytery. The group was successful and growing.

- b. Only a year later, in 1804 Barton Stone and the other leaders realized that the group was starting to look like a denomination that would add to the problem of disunity in God's Church. They decided to dissolve the group.
- c. They realized this would be troubling to many both inside and outside the group, so they drafted the *Will and Last Testament of the Springfield Presbytery*.
- d. If only the spirit embodied in this letter was present in our churches today!

2. Excerpts from the *Last Will and Testament of The Springfield Presbytery*

"THE Presbytery of Springfield sitting at Cane Ridge, in the county of Bourbon, being, through a gracious Providence, in more than ordinary bodily health, growing in strength and size daily; and in perfect soundness and composure of mind; but knowing that it is appointed for all delegated bodies once to die; and considering that the life of every such body is very uncertain, do make and ordain this our last Will and Testament, in manner and form following:

First, We will, that this body die, be dissolved, and sink into union with the Body of Christ at large; for there is but one body, and one Spirit, even as we are called in one hope of our calling.

Item. We will that our name of distinction, with its Reverend title, be forgotten, that there be but one Lord over God's heritage, and his name one.

Item. We will, that our power of making laws for the government of the church, and executing them by delegated authority, forever cease; that the people may have free course to the Bible, and adopt the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus....

Item. We will, that the people henceforth take the Bible as the only sure guide to heaven; and as many as are offended with other books, which stand in competition with it, may cast them into the fire if they choose; for it is better to enter into life having one book, than having many to be cast into hell.

Item. We will, that preachers and people cultivate a spirit of mutual forbearance; pray more and dispute less; and while

they behold the signs of the times, look up, and confidently expect that redemption draweth nigh.

Item. We will, that our weak brethren, who may have been wishing to make the Presbytery of Springfield their king, and not what is now become of it, betake themselves to the Rock of Ages, and follow Jesus for the future.

Item. We will, the Synod of Kentucky examine every member who may be suspected of having departed from the Confession of Faith, and suspend every such suspected heretic immediately, in order that the oppressed may go free, and taste the sweets of Gospel liberty....

Item. Finally we will, that all our sister bodies read their Bibles carefully, that they may see their fate there determined, and prepare for death before it is too late.

Springfield Presbytery, June 28th, 1804,

ROBERT MARSHALL,  
JOHN DUNLAVY,  
RICHARD M'NEMAR,  
B. W. STONE,  
JOHN THOMPSON,  
DAVID PURVIANCE  
Witnesses."

## V. The Challenge for Us Today: Conclusions from This Passage

- a. In light of what **1 Corinthians 1** says about the sectarian spirit taking over the church in Corinth, we need to have the same concern for unity among all true believers as Christ (and Paul) had.
- b. This is not about being united with those in your denomination.
- c. True unity is much more than having the right name on your church door and being correct on a few key points of Jesus' teaching.
- d. We need to root out the sectarian spirit from within our own hearts and not create a monument to ourselves, as the people did at the tower of Babel. (Gen. 11)
- e. We must be aware of the enemy's strategy to divide. Don't be surprised if you face opposition as you seek to reach out to other groups.



- f. God wants unity and there are many encouraging signs that these are extraordinary times with tremendous opportunity to unify God's Church.
- g. Three years after the *Last Will and Testament*, the leaders of the Springfield Presbytery wrote the *Observations on Church Government*, building on New Testament teachings, including:
  - i. **John 10:15** "... there will be one flock and one shepherd"
  - ii. **1 Peter 2:5** "... you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house"
  - iii. **Eph. 4:13,15** "... till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God... that we... may grow up in all things into Him who is the head – Christ – ..."
  - iv. **John 17:20** "I do not pray for these alone, but also for those who will believe in Me through their word; that they all may be one, as You, Father, are in Me, and I in You; that they also may be one in Us, that the world may believe that You sent Me. And the glory which You gave Me I have given them, that they may be one just as We are one: I in them, and You in Me; that they may be made perfect in one, and that the world may know that You have sent Me, and have loved them as You have loved Me."
  - v. Excerpt from the *Observations on Church Governance* (conclusion to the work)

"But seeing Christians are one and have fellowship with the Father and the Son by one spirit, it is the most unreasonable thing in the world for them to be separated in their external communion. This separation has been the work of the devil, and it is by his means that it is continued in the world.

Let Christians look back to the history of primitive Christianity, as recorded in the New Testament. Let them take a view of the plain and native simplicity which shines out there – the beautiful equality that reigned among the apostolic churches – and let them pant to breathe that native air.

They were all brethren and sisters – met together with one accord – united in one mind and one judgment. They ate their meat with gladness and singleness of heart – they went from house to house, from one love feast to another – were strictly forbidden to call themselves by the name of Paul or Apollos, etc. And such as did, were pronounced carnal, sensual, having not the spirit.

View the churches scattered abroad, planted and visited by the Apostles and others: They had all access to each other, and communion together. And that one spirit of God which lives in every Christian, has made no provision for acting otherwise, till the end of time.

The evangelists went out two and two or in larger companies, and in every place where the word was gladly received, those who gave public testimony of their faith, were baptized, received the Holy Ghost, and were set in order for the admission of others who might afterwards believe. As Christ commanded, go and do likewise. “