

A Better Way

Paul's Guidebook for Church Unity

A Bible Study Workbook by Matthew Allen

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Why This Study?

As I write this approaching the mid-point of 2022, the country is emerging from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. Almost all the mask mandates are gone. The airwaves and social media feeds are filled with ads promoting vaccines. Businesses have reopened. Churches are back to meeting and brought back their worship and communion services to that of before. Life seems “normal” again, but things still feel a little different. It is hard to describe how or why, but I think in the back of many people’s minds is a hesitancy and anxiety over being forced to go back to the lockdowns and restrictions. It feels as if there is a growing cynicism when we hear our governing officials speak. Many people view them with suspicion or simply ignore what they say.

There is a certain angst about the future that perhaps wasn’t as pronounced as before. And how could it not be? Every day the news is filled with troubling headlines. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, Chinese aggression over its neighbors and subsequent human rights violations, the abortion fight, social and racial unrest, mass shootings, a faltering economy, record inflation, and extreme fuel prices lead the news. On top of all of this is the vicious political and social rhetoric fueled by biased media who care only about the number of clicks generated and ad revenue produced. The cultural and political divide is hardening. More than ever, people in our country view those who disagree with them on politics, social matters, and religion as a threat to the country. We see it every day as millions of people parrot their favorite talking points through social media. Those who disagree with them are seen as an enemy. Millions more have simply shut down. They simply can’t handle it. The stress and anxiety is too much. Others simply do not want to endure the cascade of negativity and bile that will surely fall upon them by those who disagree if they do speak out. It is less stressful to simply withdraw and stay away from the fray.

This is all the work of Satan who thrives on division. He lives for destruction of every good thing. Jesus identified him as the father of lies, John 8.44. In the garden, his false and misleading statements drove a wedge between Eve and God. The rest as they say, *is history*. As we examine the story in Genesis 3.1-5, we easily see how he got a foothold by planting seeds of doubt and distrust. As those seeds germinated inside the mind of Eve, Satan was well on his way to destruction. Our world has never been the same.

Inside our nation, Satan’s work is alive and well. He is systematically dividing our nation . . . perhaps like never before. America may well be lost without a shot. It is likely to be destroyed from within because its most basic institutions will implode by the endless pursuit of self. Satan’s work seems to be thriving inside every facet of society. By way of division, he is separating us individually from God, ripping our families apart, dividing our communities, and fomenting cynicism toward our governing and educational institutions. Focusing on the family, think of what the destructiveness of secular humanism has done inside the home over the last 80 years. God and respect for His principles have been completely removed. We see fatherless homes, the endless cycle of teen pregnancy, relentless materialism and debt, the profligacy of sexual immorality, and easy divorce. At least two generations have grown up with trust issues so significant that they fear the commitment of marriage and simply live together all the while having a quick exit strategy if things don’t work out. The birthrate in our nation has reached historic lows. The lack of family stability is crippling our nation.

Weak families make weak churches. The same issues impacting our families are bearing themselves out in the church ... much of it driven by selfish individualism characterized by an exaggerated view of one's opinions, a disregard for the hearts and feelings of others, and the ignoring of basic biblical principles on managing relationships. When disagreements happen some simply do not know how to handle it. A person can go from calm to the height of anger over the simplest things, often without warning. Too often we see a lack of self control, the judging of motives, and a lack of patience with others. When these things are absent in our personal life, it impacts the local church ... especially when stressors appear.

Think back to your congregation's response to COVID-19. Looking around the country we saw many local churches come apart over masking, parking-lot services, social distancing, cancellation of in-person services, how long to follow protocols, choosing not having protocols, or getting the vaccine. If another congregation chose to not meet in person, some felt inclined to judge motives, and even question that congregation's faithfulness. On the other side, there were those who wondered out loud about a lack of love and regard for the safety of their fellow man when congregations chose to defy state mandates and continue meeting. Gossip and suspicion reigned. With decades of preaching to our denominational friends about autonomy under our belts, the way the church responded to COVID-19 exposed our belief on the right of each local church to direct its own affairs was just that ... *talk*.

Meanwhile, inside some of our congregations, there wasn't a lot of talking but there sure was a lot of yelling. Some scoffed at and stormed out of the building in reaction to eldership decisions. Others didn't say much out loud, but spoke in secret, questioning decisions that were made. Again, gossip and suspicion reigned. Some didn't say anything at all. They simply left and haven't come back. And somehow, during it all, politics got inserted, which only further facilitated the growing divide. Instead of viewing fellow members of our congregations as brothers and sisters ... we looked at them through the distorted lens of *MAGA* or *Progressive*, *Trump-lover* or *Never-Trumper*, or *ignorant /uneducated vs. arrogant lovers of science*. It seems like we have a label for everything these days.

The carnage we are left with is real. In a recent breakfast with area shepherds and ministers one church leader said over 30% of his congregation hasn't come back after COVID. Now, *after over two years*, some leaders are reporting they're just now getting down into the single digits of those who haven't returned to worship and active membership. Some have been quick to write off the loss in numbers to the prevalence of livestreaming. Certainly, that is part of the reason. But it is more than that. What about poor leadership that lacks vision and forethought? What about decreased interaction, a lack of true connection, and genuine love between members? What about stale worship and bad preaching? The pandemic exposed massive spiritual immaturity and neglected teaching on basic matters of love for brethren, respect for leadership, patience with each other, and dependence upon God.

The aftermath of church's response to COVID-19 is only the latest matter to expose our great need to give greater consideration to unity in the church. It impacted congregations mostly on the local, internal level. But the church has also experienced division on a larger, inter-congregational level. It is not new, and it is not unique. Like every other religious group in what could be termed as fundamentalist evangelical Christianity, the restoration movement has been fraught with division. Whether it was the missionary society fight of the 1860's and 70's, the struggle over instrumental music of the 1890's and

1900's, or the institutional controversy of the 1950's and 60's, our churches have been plagued by parties, cliques, and various loyalties to preachers, parachurch organizations, or large influential congregations. In my lifetime, within the churches of Christ one of the primary divisions has come over how the church spends money, whether it engages in social and recreational activities on church property, and if it participates in church cooperation/organization. Obviously, there are other matters we have divided over, . . .too many to list here.

Regarding the institutional controversy, who started it doesn't matter. We are now well into the third generation of Christians living after it. Those responsible for causing it have died. And yet the walls remain. Countless brethren on either side do not know each other. We don't know each other's preachers or congregations. In many towns and counties across our land, the only impression we have about the other congregation across town is that they are either "liberal," or "anti." They are either *against everything* or so open minded that *they oppose nothing*. And largely, there are no efforts being made to bridge the divide. We've become content living in our separate camps. For many, the discussion is simply not worth happening, pretending the other side does not exist.

Can we not see we are, in many cases, relying not on firsthand experience, but on a narrative perpetually spawned by the bitterness generated three generations ago? Considering Jesus' teaching in John 17, why do we refuse to see the inherent sinfulness of the continuing state of division? While it is outside the scope of this work to address the specific issues that have divided (enough writing has been done on that already), *the sinful attitudes* that are content to keep the walls erected between *brothers and sisters* in Christ will be examined here.

As we go through our study, we will examine much of Paul's writing to the church in Corinth. Paul spent 18 months at this church teaching and encouraging it. After his departure he received reports of problems. Division, carnality, jealousy, agendas, and confusion over spiritual gifts had this congregation on the verge of upheaval. In his writing, Paul urges them:

- To be one and speak the same thing.
- To come to a proper understanding of the source and purpose of spiritual gifts.
- To develop an appreciation for others within the body and appreciate the diverse set of talents and abilities God had blessed them with.
- To do everything out of love and consideration for each other.
- To place a priority on edification and building up of one another.

We will also examine Paul's writing to the Ephesian and Philippian churches, where he stressed that we have the right attitude toward unity and work to maintain what God has given us. These are principles that must not be ignored. May we all heighten our awareness of them and resolve to live according to Jesus' prayer in John 17:20-21:

"I pray not only for these, but also for those who believe in me through their word.²¹ May they all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us, so that the world may believe you sent me.

Thanks for being a part of this study.

Matthew Allen

May, 2022

Lesson 1

Congregational Oneness

1 Corinthians 1.10-17

Overview

If you have ever been through a church split, as I have, you know the lasting pain and brokenness that comes to individuals, families, and their children. I was 11 years old when it happened, and I've never forgotten what my parents and grandparents went through as they were part of the group who had to leave and completely start over forming a new congregation. Those who stayed at the old congregation were never the same . . . and within ten years that local church folded. Division, cliques, and factionalism can break up the strongest churches. It remains a prevalent problem. Churches today still get divided over what some have called "theological trivia," personality preferences, and political and social agendas.

All these differences lead to jealousy and quarreling. Much of it stems from allowing the attitudes of the world to creep back in where they should not be. Vanity and self-will are almost always the causes of divisions and factions inside a congregation.

The Bigger Picture

During the time of the Roman Empire the church met mainly in homes. Typically, these were the homes of wealthy Christians, whose homes could hold larger numbers of people. The church at Corinth may have consisted of a few house churches . . . creating an atmosphere conducive for division. Coupled with this were the sharp differences in social class, economic position, and cultural background. All of these things led to significant problems within the Corinthian church. Paul writes the first letter to answer a series of questions he received and to set straight the things that had gotten into disorder.

The Text

NLT:

1 Corinthians 1:10–17 (NLT)

¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For some members of Chloe's household have told me about your quarrels, my dear brothers and sisters. ¹² Some of you are saying, "I am a follower of Paul." Others are saying, "I follow Apollos," or "I follow Peter," or "I follow only Christ." ¹³ Has Christ been divided into factions? Was I, Paul, crucified for you? Were any of you baptized in the name of Paul? Of course not! ¹⁴ I thank God that I did not baptize any of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ for now no one can say they were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ (Oh yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas, but I don't remember baptizing anyone else.) ¹⁷ For

Christ didn't send me to baptize, but to preach the Good News—and not with clever speech, for fear that the cross of Christ would lose its power.

CSB:

1 Corinthians 1:10–17 (CSB)

¹⁰ Now I urge you, brothers and sisters, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree in what you say, that there be no divisions among you, and that you be united with the same understanding and the same conviction. ¹¹ For it has been reported to me about you, my brothers and sisters, by members of Chloe's people, that there is rivalry among you. ¹² What I am saying is this: 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 Paul's name? ¹⁴ I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, ¹⁵ so that no one can say you were baptized in my name. ¹⁶ I did, in fact, baptize the household of Stephanas; beyond that, I don't recall if I baptized anyone else. ¹⁷ For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel—not with eloquent wisdom, so that the cross of Christ will not be emptied of its effect.

Explore the Text

1. When beginning to correct the Corinthians on their bickering and quarreling, why do you think Paul invoked the name of Christ? How does Christ bind us together?
2. In the local church, why should divisiveness be strongly resisted?
3. What does it mean to you to be *united with the same understanding*?
4. What type of attitude toward unity must we possess? (Paul says we are to be *united with the same conviction*).
5. What does a party spirit lead to? (1.12)

6. What is the governing principle found in 1.13?

7. What is the priority Paul outlines in 1.14-17?

About the Text

1 Corinthians 1.10 easily serves as the thesis statement for the entire letter. It is as if Paul is coming alongside them and urging them with all his apostolic authority to respond in a positive manner to what Christ has done for them. The tone is corrective in nature. The focus is on the local church. The matter is serious. Each one of them belong to Christ. Each of them should regard each other as brethren and move in harmony with each other. Because they were one in fellowship with Christ, they should be one in fellowship with each other.

I. 1.10: Be one in fellowship with each other.

A. *Agree in what you say.*

- i. This phrase was a popular figure of speech from Greek political life that urged the dropping of the party spirit.¹ This admonition is positive.
- ii. The emphasis was to be on the centrality of Christ and the fundamental nature of the gospel.
- iii. This is seen as we examine 1.18-3.23.
 1. They were to unite around the message or *word of the cross*, see 1.18.
 2. It is also referred to as a message of *wisdom* in 2.6.
 3. The *word of the cross* is nothing more than apostolic doctrine, which serves as the standard we must live by.
- iv. *Keep living by that same standard to which we have attained*, Philippians 3.16 NASB.

B. *Let there be no divisions among you.*

- i. *Divisions* in 1.10 comes from the word we use today for “schism.” The word carries the imagery of tearing or ripping apart, i.e., the “plowing” of a field.
 1. The same word is used in John’s gospel (7.40-43; 9.16; 10.19-21) to describe those who were arguing amongst themselves over their impressions of Jesus, i.e., who He was and what His mission was.

¹ Scholar L. L. Welborn extensively documents the ancient political use of the same word for a “cleft in political consciousness” or “civil strife” and cites *1 Clement* as a confirmation of this sense at Corinth. Clement asks the Corinthians, “Why are there quarrels and anger and dissension and divisions [*schismata*] and war among you?” (46:5). “The terms with which *schisma* is associated make it clear that it is neither a religious heresy nor a harmless clique that the author has in mind, but factions engaged in a struggle for power” (1987:87). See Johnson, Alan F. *1 Corinthians*. Vol. 7 of *The IVP New Testament Commentary Series*. Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2004.

2. Schisms in the church often revolve around differences in judgment and lead to dissension. Those who cause such things are to be avoided, Romans 16.17.
 - ii. In the case of the Corinthians, differing groups in the local church held differing opinions about various church leaders, which was leading to jealousy and quarrels. Cliques had formed and were competing against each other.
- C. *Be united with the same understanding and the same conviction.*
- i. *United* comes from the word we use for being “knit together.”
 1. This word is also found in Mark 1.19 where we read of the “mending or restoring” of fishing nets, bones, or torn garments.
 2. The NASB 2020 translates the word as being *made complete*. The basic idea is to put back together. Grow together.
 - ii. We are to be united in our beliefs, standards, and attitudes toward spiritual life.

II. 1.11-12: Misplaced Identity

- A. Members of the Corinthian church were rallying around their preferred church leaders and disregarding or rejecting others.
 - i. This was quite common in Greco-Roman culture in how ancient political parties were formed. Differing groups would assemble, disagreements would ensue, with each shouting over the other, often with hatred and abuse. This all too familiar practice appears to have been creeping into the Corinthian church.
 - ii. At Corinth, the party spirit was probably being fueled by the cultural differences between Jew and Gentile, 2 Corinthians 11.13. Jews were probably claiming to be of the party of Peter, while Gentiles probably identified more with Paul. Some of these parties may have aligned themselves with culture and quality of preaching, of which Apollos would be in view.
- B. The main problem Paul is addressing is the focus on self and the usage of the word “I”. Below all the quarreling and wrangling was a self-centered, self-willing exclusiveness that is the opposite of unity and harmony.

III. 1.13a: Christ is Not Divided

- A. *Is Christ divided?* The answer is obvious. Christ is not divided.
 - i. He died to bring us together, Ephesians 2.13-16.
 - ii. He died so that *there would be no division in the body, but that the members would have the same concern for each other*, 1 Corinthians 12.25.
- B. A divided church contradicts Paul’s teaching in 1 Corinthians 12.12-13 and Romans 12.5.
- C. The church is one with the Father, Son, and the Spirit.

IV. 1.13b-17: What Matters is the Mission

- A. 1.13b – Paul was not happy that some were claiming allegiance to him over Christ. The only allegiance a Christian has is to Christ.
- B. 1.14-16 – Paul was unsure of the exact number he had baptized at Corinth. Numbers weren’t important to him. What was important was that souls were being saved.
- C. 1.17 – His mission (and ours) is to preach the gospel ... the message of the cross ... with converts coming to a oneness with Christ ... not to build factions around prominent teachers and preachers.

Reaction

1. Why is a unified message around the centrality of Christ and the fundamental aspects of the gospel so important?
2. Why are cliques so detrimental to the life of the local church? What can we do to make sure they do not form?
3. The emphasis in the last part of v. 10 is for the Corinthian church to reject cliques and *grow back together*. As we think about our own diverse group of Christians here, what type of things can we do to facilitate the process of growing together?
4. What types of attitudes fuel divisiveness? What must we do to eliminate these things from our lives?
5. Do we have any loyalties to preachers, institutions, and parties in today's church? While we all may have differing preferences, styles, and approaches, what can we do individually to make sure these do not become sources of division and strife?
6. Why is focusing on the mission of such great importance? What will happen to all the "side issues" as we concentrate on getting out the message of the cross?

For the Christian Today

Unity for His people has always been God's desire. *How delightfully good when brothers live together in harmony,* Psalm 133.1. And who could forget Paul's writing in Romans 15.5-7:

Now may the God who gives endurance and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, according to Christ Jesus, so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one mind and one voice. Therefore welcome one another, just as Christ also welcomed you, to the glory of God.

God wants us to be one in mind, love, spirit or attitude, and purpose, Philippians 2.2. He is the source of our unity. We have been called to maintain it and guard against destroying it. We do so by moving with a spirit of humility and considering the needs of others above ourselves, Philippians 2.3-4. We maintain unity by refusing to insist on our own way, determining not to get into squabbles or bicker, and by focusing on the mission our Lord has given to us and His people.

This is for the glory of God. Unity reflects who He is. It displays His amazing power of grace, mercy, and forgiveness to a dying world. Just as Christ has accepted us for the glory of God, so we are to accept one another to His glory.

Unity must be genuine. Our attitude toward unity should always be sincere. We are not simply *pretending to agree* while stubbornly holding on to our disagreements and objections. Such attitudes limit our productiveness within the congregation and almost always impact our happiness as well as the happiness of others.

Unity does not demand uniformity. A football team whose players all wanted to play quarterback would have uniformity but not unity. It would be impossible for it to function as a team if everyone played the same position. When Paul communicates the need to agree and hold to the same convictions that he does not rule out our own individual uniqueness and perspective. This is clearly seen later in 1 Corinthians, specifically chapter 12. We are all different from each other in personality, talents, and temper. Despite this, the expectation is for us to be of one mind. When differences arise, the priority is to work them out.

Journal

What are some things you can do personally to avoid quarreling and squabbling with brothers and sisters within the congregation? How can you promote congregational oneness?

For Further Reading

Read through the following passages in the New Testament that stress unity with Christ and unity with each other: John 15.1-7; John 17.20-23; Galatians 3.26-29; Philippians 2.1-4. What are some principles you see from these passages?