

129. A United Church Family (1 Cor. 1-4)

Study Guide

Overview

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First Corinthians is the New Testament's "problem epistle." In it Paul deals with a series of problems that existed in that young church, introducing each new issue with the phrase, *peri dei*, translated in our versions as "Now concerning," or simply, "Now. . . ."

The problems sound like a catalog of problems experienced by local churches today:

- Division in the church([1 Cor. 1-4](#)).
- Discipline([1 Cor. 5-6](#)).
- Marriage and divorce([1 Cor. 7](#)).
- Doctrinal disputes([1 Cor. 8-10](#)).
- Misunderstanding of spiritual (charismatic) gifts([1 Cor. 12-14](#)).

In addition, the letter touches on the role of women, the importance of the Lord's Supper, and on the centrality of the Resurrection in Christian teaching.

Within each section, Paul gives us a carefully reasoned discussion of the problem, and how to deal with it, making this letter one of the most practical and important for Christians today.

Wise/wisdom

◆ In [1 Cor. 1-4](#) "wisdom" (Greek, *sophia*) is the perspective from which a person deals with the issues of life. Humans are "foolish" when they fail to realize that their notions must be subjected to divine evaluation. Only when a person abandons what seems wise by human standards to accept without hesitation the divine viewpoint as revealed in Scripture can he or she be truly wise.

Commentary

Near the end of his third missionary journey, Paul wrote a letter to a church in trouble. Some seven years before, he and his companions had founded the church in Corinth. Even though the members of the believing community were richly gifted, the process of transformation toward Christlikeness seemed constantly blocked.

Paul kept in touch with the Corinthian fellowship, as he did with all the churches. Finally, after a verbal report from the family of Chloe, and after a delegation arrived from Corinth asking for Paul's judgment on specific questions, this first letter to the Corinthians was written.

This is an important letter for us to read and to master. It is important because it helps us realize our own struggle for a real and vital faith may be a long one. And it is important because this letter presents principles that you and I and our group members can apply to help resolve problems that continue to plague modern Christian fellowships.

Corinth was an important city and had been from ancient days. It was situated on the isthmus bearing its name, and controlled land and sea trade routes. In New Testament times, it was not only an important commercial city but also the administrative center of the Province of Achaia.

Robert H. Gundry's description of the city (*A Survey of the New Testament*, Zondervan) gives us an idea of the cosmopolitan character of Corinth.

The athletic games at Corinth were second only to the Olympics. The outdoor theater accommodated twenty thousand people, the roofed theater three thousand. Temples, shrines, and altars dotted the city. A thousand sacred prostitutes made themselves available at the temple of the Greek goddess Aphrodite. The south side of the marketplace was lined with taverns equipped with underground cisterns for cooling the drinks.

Noted for its lax morals and scandalous lifestyle, Corinth was a completely pagan society—a society that created many difficulties for the believers who lived there.

Even though the Corinthian church was struggling, and is the only congregation that Paul called unspiritual in one of his letters, Paul began his letter with words of commendation and confidence. He was writing to people who had been "sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ." Paul assured his readers that Christ "will keep you strong to the end, so that you will be blameless on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. God, who has called you into fellowship with His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, is faithful" ([1 Cor. 1:2, 8-9](#)).

What a wonderful thing to remember always. No matter how much our own Christian experience may seem to involve struggle, how slow our growth, it is God who has called us into fellowship with Himself. And God is faithful. God *will* work in our lives, and will keep us strong.

But once Paul expressed his confidence, he plunged immediately into an analysis of the Corinthians' problems. And these problems were serious indeed.

A Method of Study

The Bible contains many different literary forms. There is narrative storytelling, as in Genesis and the Gospels. There is poetry, as in Job and the Psalms. There is the preaching of the prophets—and the carefully reasoned argument of many of the New Testament epistles. Each of

the different literary forms are, in Scripture, a mode of the divine revelation. Yet each is to be studied in ways that are appropriate to its special character.

When we come to tightly reasoned passages of Scripture, the most appropriate Bible study method is to trace the writer's line of argument. That is, we must study carefully to follow his train of thought. This approach will guard us from taking a verse out of context, and interpreting it as if it stood alone. But most important, this method will enable us to truly understand what God is teaching us in a particular book or passage.

First Corinthians is one of the most closely reasoned of Paul's letters. In it Paul dealt with problems—and in it he carefully explained the principles, the very "thoughts of God," which we are to apply to resolve the problems.

It would be appropriate, then, to apply a particular type of Bible study *designed to trace an argument* to your group's study of 1 Corinthians. If you do, you will not only help your group members discover the deeper truths this great book teaches, but will also train them in an approach to Bible study which will enrich their own personal reading of God's Word.

In each of the 1 Corinthian study guides we'll apply this particular method, which you may choose to use in teaching. But we'll also discuss the key truths taught in each section, and provide alternative methods so you will not *have* to use this study approach if you feel it is not appropriate for your particular group.

How then do we trace the argument (the line of thought) of a closely reasoned passage of Scripture?

1. Read and reread a section to determine its subject.
2. Make a one-sentence summary of each paragraph within the section.
3. Rework sentences into a brief paraphrase of the section.
4. Go back and examine each paragraph in the text in more detail.
5. Determine and apply major teachings (principles).

If we apply this method to the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians, here's what may be discovered.

● **Link to Life 1: Youth / Adult**

If you plan to use the direct Bible study method illustrated in this study guide, prepare your group by listing the five steps on the chalkboard. Step 1: Have each read the section through twice, and work together to give some "unity" title to the section. Step 2: In your meeting divide into teams of three or four and assign each team one of the four chapters to summarize. Duplicate the summary sentence material from this study guide, and pass it out so each team can compare its summary sentences. Step 3: Duplicate and pass out the paraphrase developed from the summary sentences. Step 4: Skip. Step 5: Work as a group to determine principles, and discuss how they can be applied to our lives today.

This first study is intended to familiarize your group members with this basic Bible study method. Ask each member of the group to study [1 Cor. 5-6](#) before your next meeting, using only Step 1 (title) and Step 2 (make sentence summaries of each paragraph).

If you do not plan to teach this study method as you study 1 Corinthians, use the alternate teaching methods suggested at the end of this study guide.

The Subject: 1 Cor. 1-4

When we read through these chapters quickly, several things are apparent. First, Paul talked here a great deal about *wisdom*. This word, and *wise*, appear no fewer than 27 times in this four-chapter section!

At the same time, it is clear that Paul is not concerned with an intellectual debate about the relationship between faith and philosophy. Paul immediately expressed his central concern: "I appeal to you . . . that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought." The Corinthians had formed parties, or cliques, based on the supposed superiority of various Christian leaders. There was a "Paul party" and a "Peter party"; an "Apollos party" and a very spiritual type, "Jesus-only party." These divisions had shattered the unity of the local congregation, and created dissension. This whole section is basically about divisions, and how to maintain unity.

So we might give the section a title like this:

Maintaining Unity in the Church Family

As noted, wisdom is somehow critical here. But before we know just how, we need to trace the progression of Paul's thought, paragraph by paragraph. When we do, we will see that something called God's wisdom provides the solution to this very common, very human problem.

A Sentence Summary: 1 Cor. 1-4

The goal here is to capture in a single sentence the main thrust of each paragraph.

For instance:

I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought. My brothers, some from Chloe's household have informed me that there are quarrels among you. What I mean is this: One of you says, "I follow Paul"; another, "I follow Apollos"; another, "I follow Cephas"; still another, "I follow Christ."

[1 Cor. 1:10-12](#)

Now, what is the subject of this paragraph? What is its focus? If we emphasize the problem, we might summarize this way: *The division in your church fellowship is wrong.*

If, however, we emphasize the goal, we'll pick up from Paul's first sentence: *I urge you to resolve your differences and restore unity in your church fellowship.*

Very often in translations of Paul's writings we'll find that the first sentence of a paragraph is a key to his subject. So let's choose the second summary (above) as the summary of this paragraph, though the first is not wrong. In developing summary sentences, there is always room for different ways of stating the same things.

If we work through the entire four-chapter passage, we may come up with summary sentences like those on the [chart](#).

Chart: [1 Cor. 1-4](#) Summary Sentences

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Para-graph	Verses	Summary Sentence
1	1 Cor. 1:10-12	I urge you to resolve your differences and restore unity in your church fellowship.
2	1 Cor. 1:13-17	The central fact is Christ, and that in Him we are one.
3	1 Cor. 1:18-25	God's wisdom as shown in Christ is really at odds with man's "wise" approach to things.
4	1 Cor. 1:26-31	In fact, it is Christ and not some superior wisdom who has brought you righteousness, holiness, and redemption!
5	1 Cor. 2:1-5	I purposely kept my message simple when with you in order that your full reliance might be on the crucified Jesus.
6	1 Cor. 2:6-10	Of course, there is a divine wisdom—but this comes through revelation, and its source is not in man's discoveries.
7	1 Cor. 2:11-16	This wisdom involves a person coming to grasp God's thoughts, something that demands both hearing the revealed words and being enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

- 8 [1 Cor. 3:1-4](#) But you! Your jealousy and quarreling make it clear that you think and act on a merely human level.
- 9 [1 Cor. 3:5-9](#) Who do you think is important—we servants, or the God who works through us?
- 10 [1 Cor. 3:10-15](#) I'm thankful for the privilege of serving, but my foundation is Jesus, and what I build will be evaluated one day.
- 11 [1 Cor. 3:16-17](#) But don't you realize that the true construction is going on in your lives, that *you* are God's sacred temple, and that we all must build (not tear down!) the growing structure?
- 12 [1 Cor. 3:18-23](#) So don't fool yourselves with all those childish arguments about which leader is better; abandon that kind of thing, and focus on all that God has given you in Christ.
- 13 [1 Cor. 4:1-7](#) Grasp this principle: God Himself is the source of all that a man possesses, so how can anyone boast about having "superior" gifts or skills?
- 14 [1 Cor. 4:8-13](#) Rather than trying to build our own little empires, we apostles have abandoned all, having chosen humiliation, weakness, hunger, and persecution as our lot.
- 15 [1 Cor. 4:14-17](#) As your father, I warn you to imitate me in this and get your priorities back into harmony with reality.
- 16 [1 Cor. 4:18-21](#) And I warn you: unity in the family is so vital that in God's power I will discipline you when I come unless you abandon your worldly arrogance!

Paraphrasing: 1 Cor. 1-4

When we have the summary sentences complete, we then read them over and see if the thought of each is closely linked to what precedes it and what follows. Can they be read aloud together, and so follow the apostle's thinking? Does the whole make sense?

In a paraphrase we do just this: we link the summary sentences and, if necessary, go back to any paragraph whose links to what goes before and comes after are unclear to us.

Paraphrasing in this way protects us against a common flaw in Bible study. We all tend to lose sight of the whole. As a result, we may misinterpret single verses or short paragraphs. A good paraphrase will bring the whole passage into clear view—and keep it in view—thus guarding us against "proof texting" or taking a thought out of context and misinterpreting it.

What might a paraphrase of [1 Cor. 1-4](#) look like, and what will it tell us about Paul's line of thought? Here are the sentence summaries, reworked into a paragraph.

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Unity in the Church Family

[\(1 Cor. 1-4\)](#)

I urge you to resolve your differences and restore unity in the church family. Remember, Christ is the center of our lives and in Him we *are* one.

This may not sound like a very "wise" argument, but then the message of Christ and His cross has always been at odds with human wisdom.

And Christ, not some super "wisdom," brought you your righteousness, holiness, and redemption. That's why I kept my message simple when I was with you, that you might rely only on the crucified Lord.

Of course there is a divine wisdom, but it comes by revelation and not human discovery. This wisdom involves learning to think God's thoughts, something that requires both hearing the revealed words and being enlightened by the Holy Spirit.

But you! Why, your jealousy and quarreling make it very clear that you think and act like mere men. Who do you think is important: we servants, or God who works through us? I'm thankful I can serve, but my foundation is Jesus, and one day what I build will be evaluated. (Don't you even grasp the fact that the true construction is going on *in your lives* and that *you* are God's sacred temple? Building up people, not tearing them down, is doing God's work!)

So don't deceive yourselves with all those childish arguments over leaders. Abandon that foolish game and focus again on all that is yours in Jesus, you who are not on trial before any human jury! Can't you grasp the basic principle? God Himself is the source of all. How then can we boast about anyone's superior gifts or skills?

Why, rather than trying to build our own little kingdoms, we apostles have abandoned all that, and have chosen humiliation, weakness, hunger, and even persecution as our lot. So I warn you. Imitate me in this, and get your priorities back in order. And this *is* a warning. Unity in the family is so vital that, in God's own power, I will discipline you when I come unless you abandon your worldly arrogance!

What a powerful passage! And what a vital message for divided Christians today.

Reviewing the Text: 1 Cor. 1-4

At this point, with the overview of the argument in mind, we can go back and look into each paragraph more closely. It is *now* that a verse-by-verse approach to Bible study can be helpful,

for now our understanding of the thoughts and phrases will be guided by an overview of their context.

Often at this point we will make exciting discoveries, and see fresh meaning in verses that have become so familiar that we read over them, without thought. Often too we'll make a discovery that will lead us back to our paraphrase to make a change that brings the whole into clearer focus. In short, *a study of the details of the text is always more fruitful when we have first grasped the argument of the larger unit.*

This very point is one that Paul made in [1 Cor. 1-2](#). He pointed out that man's ways of thinking (human "wisdom") and God's ways of thinking (His "foolishness") truly do *not* correspond. The Cross is given as an example. What human mind would have imagined that God would give us righteousness, holiness, and redemption by means of the execution of His Son as a criminal!

To the Greek mind the whole notion was idiotic: salvation, if there were such a thing, would have to come through some appeal to man's capacity to achieve. Furthermore, the Greek mind viewed God as immutable and unchangeable. The Gospel presentation of Incarnation, the Cross, and Resurrection were simply ruled out; the Gospel contradicted one of the axioms of classical Greek philosophy.

To the Hebrew, the whole thing was foreign as well. Deliverance would come in another Exodus, with God breaking into history to perform miracles and punish Israel's enemies. A suffering Saviour? Never! Israel would settle for nothing less than a conquering king.

While the Greek and the Jew each clung to his own notion of how God must act, God had His own ideas. The Cross meant that each must surrender his own way of thinking, and submit to *a divine wisdom that operates on principles which are basically different from those that appeal to human thought!*

Man is impressed by human accomplishment: 844God chose to use things man despises.

Man is impressed by strength: God chose to use weakness.

Even in the church, the human tendency is to seek to build little kingdoms around differences—different leaders, different doctrines, different ways of baptizing, different likes and dislikes in music. It is *God's* way to reject that kind of thinking, and to build *unity* around the one thing that Christians have in common: Jesus!

Paul's whole argument is a warning to the church at Corinth—and to us—that we must learn to look at issues from the divine viewpoint. We must realize God doesn't think the same way we do. We must be willing to surrender our own way of thinking and earnestly search out His.

How? God has revealed His thoughts "in words taught by the Spirit" ([1 Cor. 2:13](#)). And God has given believers the Holy Spirit to interpret the written Word ([1 Cor. 2:9-15](#)). In the Word and in the Spirit we have been given an astounding gift: "We have the mind of Christ" ([1 Cor. 2:16](#)).

Searching the Word, guided by the Spirit, we are to learn God's way of thinking (His wisdom), and gradually learn to evaluate all things from His unique perspective.

This is why a tracing-the-argument approach to Bible study is so important. We're prone to grasp a single verse or teaching, and try to make it fit our way of thinking. We're apt to use the Bible to try to prove our point of view, or to disprove another's. But Paul here teaches us to study the Scripture so we can learn to *abandon* our own points of view, and submit ourselves instead to God's. By disciplining ourselves to trace the argument of a section of Scripture, we guard against our natural tendency to misuse, and we set ourselves to grasp the very thoughts of God.

Application: 1 Cor. 1-4

When we have understood the flow of thought of a passage, and have gone back to understand details in the light of the whole, *then* we can discern principles and apply them. It is fascinating to see how all that Paul has said in these first chapters underlines two basic principles which are to guide you and me and our groups as well as they were to guide the Corinthians.

Christ is One

Unity in the church is vital, because unity alone can model this reality. A church that is splintered by disputes so that its members are at odds, dividing and competing, ignores Christ's call that we be "perfectly united in mind and thought."

Christ is the Source and focus of our faith

Second, *Christ is the Source and focus of our faith*. The Corinthians had exalted mere human leaders to that position. "I'm a Paulite." "I'm a Peterite." In modern terms we might say, "I'm Methodist," or, "I'm Baptist," or even say, "I'm a Calvinist" or, "I'm a charismatic." Use of any such term to identify us makes that particular association or belief the defining difference—the focus of our identity. Paul argued that Jesus, and Jesus alone, is the basis for Christian self-identification.

To exalt leaders, or denominations, or doctrines, or experiences, to the level where they make us "different" from our brothers and sisters in Christ is to operate on that mere human wisdom which is nothing but foolishness in God's sight. As for leaders, they are merely servants of God. There is no place in the church for pride *in* a human leader, or *by* a human leader. If God blesses us through one of His servants, we are to address our praise to the Lord, and are to be loyal to God, not the leader.

There is one foundation and one only ([1 Cor. 3:11](#)), and that foundation is Christ Jesus. Any person or group that tries to rest its faith, all or in part, on any other is foolish indeed.

How wonderful that Jesus *is* our foundation. And how wonderful that we can live by God's wisdom, refusing to let any of our "distinctives" separate us from heartfelt fellowship with brothers and sisters who, whatever our differences, still own Jesus as Saviour and Lord.

Teaching Guide

Prepare

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If you plan to use the study method suggested here, why not do your own sentence summaries of paragraphs and work out your own paraphrase? If you prefer it to the author's method, use it in teaching your group. This teaching guide is primarily for those who do *not* choose to use the direct study method recommended.

Explore

1. List on the chalkboard: denomination, mode of baptism, view of spiritual gifts, separation, personality of leader. Ask: "What are some other issues that divide Christians?" Add suggestions to the list. Then ask your group members to express opinions: "Which, if any, are *valid* reasons for division?"
2. Or give a minilecture overview of Corinthians, listing the problems it covers (see *overview*). Assign teams *one* problem area, to develop a list of ways their problem shows up in the contemporary church. Record the lists on a chalkboard, and save.

Expand

1. Have your group work together to develop a "subject" statement from [1 Cor. 1:1-12](#) that will sum up the issue dealt with in these chapters.

Then point out the principle in [1 Cor. 1:13-17](#): Christ is One, so unity is essential.

2. List the following passage summaries on the chalkboard. Divide into teams, each of which is to look for insights in one of the assigned passages.
 - [1 Cor. 1:18-31](#): We must learn to think as God does, not as mere human beings do.
 - [1 Cor. 2:1-16](#): God's wisdom is given us in Scripture and understood through the Spirit.
 - [1 Cor. 3:1-22](#): Division over human leaders is worldly, ignoring God's wisdom.
 - [1 Cor. 4:1-21](#): Leaders are merely men who are servants of Christ, whose commitment merits imitation but not exaltation.

After about 15 minutes, come together and share insights gained.

3. Sum up the key principle which God's wisdom affirms: *Christ is the Source and focus of Christian faith*. We are never to exalt any person or doctrine or practice to the place where it, rather than Jesus, defines who we are, or sets us off as different from our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Apply

Return to the list of differences that your group evaluated at the beginning of the session. In view of [1 Cor. 1-4](#), which differences now seem *valid* as a basis for division?