

Corinth: A Church Torn Asunder
Studies from Paul's Letters to the Corinthians

Student Pages

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Session 1: Student Pages

BIBLE LESSON: 1 Corinthians 1:2-17

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Introduction

His words are stilled echoing, "Why can't we all just get along?" They were spoken a few years ago by Rodney King, an African American man whose beating by several police officers was captured and shown on videotape many times. Riots broke out and many others were hurt. In the aftermath, King spoke those words. And few have tried to answer his question.

Our world is a broken, divided place. The forces of division and alienation are powerful, and seem to be winning the day. From ethnic cleanings to hate crimes, from racism to sexism, between neighbor and neighbor, nation and nation, even within families - such brokenness. And what does the broken world often see when it looks at the church? More disunity and brokenness! About the only coverage we ever get in the media is when we are fighting over something. Each Sunday we gather in hundreds of different denominational churches, not to mention that our worship is often divided also by race.

Today's session, based on a man's letter to a church long ago, challenges us too with the importance of being unified. A house divided against itself cannot stand. Jesus said that. The church itself is called to be a living example of what the grace and love of God in Christ can do in the world - overcome the forces of division, tear down walls and build bridges. Just think what a tremendous witness it is to see people of all ages and races united by the love of Christ, getting through the barriers that would divide us, truly loving and forgiving one another? Such unity may be the greatest witness we have and may well be the reason why Jesus prayed so fervently for it (see John 17). You see, if the Gospel we preach and say we believe cannot unite us, what do we then have to offer this broken and divided world? The world will not see what we say for being blinded by who we actually are.

A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win.

All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. They all turned around and went back. Every one of them.

One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better."

All nine linked arms and walked across the finish line together.

Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. People who were there are still telling the story. Why?

Because deep down we know this one thing:

What matters in this life is more than winning for ourselves. What truly matters in this life is helping others win, even if it means slowing down and changing our course.

This is what Paul was saying to those Corinthians almost two-thousands years ago and to us, too.

The Text

Read several times 1 Corinthians 1:2-17. Read from a couple of different translations. Read one time out loud.

Greetings

(vss 2-3). It had been some time since Paul had been able to go back to Corinth where he established a church (see Acts 18:1-11 for the story of the founding of the church there). But he had been getting reports on them and things were not going well. So now he takes the time to write them and begin addressing many of the concerns he has. He writes this letter from Ephesus, just across the Aegean Sea from them. Many scholars believe he wrote at least four letters to them (for, as we will see in this study, he does mention other letters he sent).

Paul addresses them as “the church of God.” The word translated “church” is “ecclesia” in Greek. It was a term used in Greek city-states to refer to a gathering or assembly of free citizens. But it comes to mean for Christians the “people of God.” Paul uses “church” to refer to God’s people more than any other NT writer. In fact, he uses it twenty-two times alone in this letter.

Now he describes the church. It is made up of those who have been “sanctified” or who are “saints” through Christ Jesus. The church is made up of those who have been called or set apart or consecrated by God through Christ. This is what being a “saint” means. It is to be chosen as God’s own and for God’s own purpose.

Also, the church is not just local it is also, as we would say, global. It is made up of all those everywhere who call on the name of the Lord, that is, have accepted Jesus as Lord and have become his disciples. It is interesting that from the very beginning Paul is talking about unity here. This is the theme he will expand at great length in the letter, for it was their most pressing need. So he tells them in subtle but powerful words that they