

**Core Seminar**

**New Testament**

**Class 11: 1 Corinthians: The Foolishness of the Kingdom**

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There’s a lot of discussion at our church about what makes a healthy church. Expositional preaching, a right understanding of membership and discipline, correct teaching on the Gospel and conversion, a recognition of proper church leadership structures, and so forth. We talk, in our church about being an example for others, not because our church is perfect or has everything together. On the contrary, we recognize that examples in this world will be imperfect and incomplete, but we also know that in the same way Paul told believers to follow him in as much as he followed Christ, so we can strive after the same in our lives individually and corporately.

If you were going to teach on what a church should look like, what body of believers would you choose as your demonstration church? You’d probably look to a church that seemed to have the basics down, not a church to whom you have to say, “I fed you with milk, not solid food, for you were not ready for it. And even now you are not yet ready, for you are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way?” (I Cor 3:2-3) And yet this is the same group to whom Paul says, “I give thanks to my God always for you because of the grace of God that was given you in Christ Jesus, that in every way you were enriched in him in all speech and all knowledge – even as the testimony about Christ was confirmed among you – so that you are not lacking in any gift, as you wait for the revealing of our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor 1:4-7).

When Paul wrote I Corinthians about what should characterize a Gospel-centered church, he did not address a church that had it all together. Far from it, in fact. But they did have the one thing that would lead them to becoming a healthy church. For all their problems, they had Christ.

**Background**

One of the great things about the way the New Testament was written is that some of it is intensely personal. We not only understand the great truths of God from beautiful books of teaching such as Romans, but we get the opportunity to peek over the apostles’ shoulders as they deal with real problems that real churches were facing during the New Testament period. First Corinthians is such a letter.

Because a complex story of Paul’s interaction with this church surrounds these letters, we’re going to spend a bit more time than usual setting the context of this book.

*Location*

Corinth was a cosmopolitan city, situated in Greece on the main route from Rome to the East. It was a center of business, travel and culture and diversity. You’ll note from the map on your handout that much traffic came through Corinth. Any overland traffic going from Athens & northern Greece to the Peloponnesian peninsula would come through Corinth. There was also a major port there, and ships would be dragged on rollers 4 miles overland to take a shortcut from the Ionian Sea in the west to the Aegean in the East. Minus the ships on rollers, Corinth was not unlike New York City, San Francisco, Dubai, London, and Hong Kong today, it was one of the major crossroads in the Mediterranean and therefore a strategic place for the gospel.

One of the functions of it being a crossroads was that Corinth became a major center for the spreading of ideas and philosophies. The real celebrities of Corinth were the orators. They would gather wide followings of people, and they would make large sums of money by charging people to hear them speak. The worldly wisdom of Corinth was to seek fame and fortune through being an impressive speaker. This culture seems to be at the heart of many of the problems of the Corinthian church.

*Paul’s First Trip*

Paul had first preached the gospel in Corinth during his second missionary journey recorded in Acts 18. During this time, he supported himself as a tentmaker and lived with Aquila and Priscilla who had recently moved to Corinth from Rome. Having arrived in the city after being left for dead by a mob in Philippi, Paul came, as he puts it, “in weakness and in fear, and with much trembling.” (I Cor 2:3)

In his great love for this people, though, the risen Christ appeared to Paul in a dream and encouraged him to carry on his work in the city. *“Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack you and harm you, because I have many people in this city.”* Spurred on by the knowledge of God’s elect waiting to come to life through the preaching of the gospel, Paul stayed in Corinth where many came to trust in Christ. After firmly establishing the church there, Paul left in AD 51 for Jerusalem.

*Writing of I Corinthians*

After his time in Jerusalem, Paul was soon back at work among the Gentiles and from AD 52 to 55 enjoyed an enormously fruitful ministry in Ephesus, in modern day Turkey. Meanwhile, back in Corinth, others came to build on the foundation that Paul had left. These leaders did not appear to be bad leaders, but problems began to arise in Corinth nonetheless. Paul wrote a letter that has since been lost, referred to in I Cor 5:9. But problems continued. It appears that the Corinthians wrote Paul a letter about some of their disagreements (I Cor 5:9), and Paul heard about other problems from some members of Chloe’s household (1:11).

In response to these problems, Paul writes around AD 55 to the Corinthians focusing on the character and order of the church of God. How should the church reflect to the watching world the character of God? The church must be gospel-centered. The gospel is to be the organizing principle of the church. He says early in the book (1:22-24),

For Jews demand sign and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to the Jews and folly to Gentiles, but to those who are called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men.

Paul spends his time writing to the Corinthians not individually, but corporately, because he believes church is important to the witness of the Gospel. And in I Corinthians, we learn from Paul three foundational aspects. I’m going to take these in turn, and they’ll give us a thematic overview of the entire letter. A gospel-centered church is to be, first, united. Second, Holy. And finally, edifying. United, Holy, Edifying. In three words, Paul’s first letter to the Corinthians—and a blueprint for every Christian’s involvement in the local church today.

# A gospel-centered Church is to be United

One of Paul’s primary motivations for writing this letter is to counter the partisan spirituality and profound division among the members of the church. A number of ways Paul deals with this in this letter.

We see this initially as Paul addresses rival allegiances given to various teachers (**1:10-12**). These factions seemed to boast of their superior wisdom, and so Paul writes passionately about the difference between God’s wisdom and man’s wisdom **[Read 1:26 – 29]**.

 For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

So, the unity that the kingdom promotes finds its basis in the cross of Jesus Christ, in the gospel, and not in the eloquence of human words, or the influence of position, or the force of a human personality. “If you attend your church because of the pastor, you are wrongly motivated, and time will reveal that. The pastor will disappoint you. Even if he never disappoints you, he will someday die. Your faith cannot be built upon a person…True faith is built upon God in Jesus Christ…When you are grateful for a sermon, or a prayer, or how a service is led, or the work of a deacon, or work of the nursery staff, or the greetings of others, direct your thanksgiving first to the lovingkindness of God for you.” We should only boast in Jesus Christ because He is our redemption and our wisdom. He alone is worthy of our first allegiance and boasting. Any true Gospel preacher will point men and women to Christ alone and not to himself! That’s the first key to unity that we see in this letter. A focus on Christ alone as the answer.

Secondly, Paul shows that disunityis a sign of worldliness (3:3), with its quarreling and arguing. The root cause of the church’s division was and continues to be worldliness and immaturity: **[Read 3:3-4].**

You are still of the flesh. For while there is jealousy and strife among you, are you not of the flesh and behaving only in a human way? For when one says “I follow Paul,” and another, “I follow Apollos,” are you not being merely human

A third key to unity is something we find in Paul’s teaching on the Lord’s supper—the very place where unity should be most clearly expressed.

Instead, Paul exhorted the Corinthians to remember that they were the **Body of Christ** (12:12-13), built up by the diversity of spiritual gifts within the church (14:12,17,19). While, I’m guessing that most of you are not concerned with divisions between Jews and Gentiles today, what kind of divisions are present in your attitudes and actions towards others? “When churches divide for carnal reasons, they identify themselves with something other than Christ. They become the church of modern music, or the church of this pastor, or the church of the home-schoolers, or the church of the Democrats, or the church of the blue carpet. As soon as this happens, they are no longer the church of Jesus Christ.” Are there certain people that you hesitate to spend time with or don’t want to spend time with because of their differences with you? The Gospel is made most of when we are united to people unlike ourselves, and which unity can only expressed in relation to the Gospel.

This doesn’t mean that you can’t have friends that are like you or in similar stations of life, the problem is when all the people we spend time with or minister towards are just like us. Churches and for that matter Christians, that will only orient themselves towards one type of person are dividing the body of Christ and misrepresenting what it means to be a Gospel centered church.

#### A fourth strand of teaching on unity: If we are to promote unity in our church, we must love one another without selfishness. **Love and consideration** for others should govern what we do. **Ch 8** – weak and strong; **ch 9** – Paul’s personal rights conceded for the sake of others who need the gospel; **ch 10** – believer’s freedom not to cause other’s to stumble. This concern for others is crucial in a Christian church.

And that is the context for perhaps the most famous section of the book, chapter 13, were we read of the supremacy of love. “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.” I’m sure it’s familiar to most of you. Love is all about the quality of our interaction with others. Love is patient, kind, not boasting, not proud, not rude, not self-seeking. And of the wonderful gifts we receive from God – faith, hope and love – the greatest is love (13:13).

If we hold onto the gospel, and unite around that, we will not have lived in vain. That’s the first theme we see running through this book: unity.

# A Gospel-Centered Church is to be Holy

Second, a gospel-centered church is to be holy. At the very beginning of the letter, Paul reminded the church of its call to be holy, and that it is Christ who makes us holy (1:8).

Paul reminds us that the sexually immoral and others who are impure will not inherit the kingdom of God (**6:9-10**). But the church . . . the church is to be pure remembering that it was saved *from* such impurity.

One of the significant problems that Paul addressed in the Corinthian church was an act of blatant immorality to which the church was not responding. The church was associated with a widely rumored instance of incest (5:1-3), a sin shocking even among pagans. The church, astonishingly, was proud because they thought “accepting” the offender showed their “liberty.”

It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father’s wife. And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

Notice who Paul berates for this heinous sin. He does not address the sinner, but the church, for doing nothing about this. This case is representative not of a small disease in the Corinthian church, but a case in which the churches own “immune” system in relation to sin has been compromised.

Underscoring this call to holiness, Paul offers in chapter 10 a warning from Israel’s history: that beginning well is no guarantee of perseverance in the faith. Though *ALL* Israel saw the cloud by day, *ALL* passed through the Red Sea, *ALL* ate manna from heaven, and *ALL* “drank from the spiritual Rock that followed them, and the Rock was Christ.” (10:4), God was not pleased with most of them (10:5). In view of the fact that “they were overthrown in the wilderness” in verse 6, Paul called the Corinthians and us “that we might not desire evil as they did.” Specifically he mentions idolatry, sexual immorality, tempting Christ, and complaining and concludes with this application:

Now these things happened to them as an example, but they were written down for our instruction, on whom the end of the ages has come. Therefore let anyone who thinks that he stands take heed lest he fall. (10:11-12)

He finishes with a reminder that when interacting with the world, everything may be permissible but not everything is beneficial. We should seek to live circumspectly, watching our lives carefully, rather than living in a wanton and unholy manner.

#### Practice Church Discipline with Love

One tool or method that the Lord has given us for maintaining the organization and the holiness of the kingdom is biblical church discipline. So, the apostle warns in 5:6, “Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump?” When we encounter public sins of the seriousness referenced here, we are not to think ourselves kind or loving if we fail to act on behalf of that person’s soul. Paul gives us instruction (5:4-5):

1. As an assembly, as a church, address the matter…
2. by putting the “brother” out of the church (5:5, 11, and 13)…
3. as a statement about the spiritual danger they are in with the hopes that they will repent and be saved (5:5b).

Whenever we exercise church discipline we do so to make it clear to someone that they are not living like a Christian, and thus should be concerned for their salvation. We should always exercise discipline with tender love and concern for that person. This is one of the most solemn acts we ever undertake as a local body, but it is central to the preservation of holiness and the glory of God in the church.

We should also keep in mind that church discipline goes beyond the public cases we consider corporately. Every relationship you have within the church has the opportunity to be one that is characterized by loving discipline. As we “faithfully admonish and entreat one another as occasion may require” we are exercising discipline amongst each other that encourages holiness.

It’s interesting, isn’t it, now—considering the two things we’ve thought about so far. Unity and holiness. Often in churches today we see our job as balancing between them. We don’t address a particular sin in the congregation for fear of fracturing unity. On the other hand, there are some whose zeal for holiness comes at the expense of unity. But Paul sees holiness and unity going hand in hand. If we begin to tolerate unrepentant sin in the church, problems with unity will follow. The separation the Corinthians were to experience was a separation from the world. Instead, they tolerated sin—thus encouraging internal division and experiencing a separation from each other. On the other hand, Paul makes it clear that even when dealing with issues we might consider to be moral—such as eating meat sacrificed to idols—we must handle these with unity at the forefront of our attention. If you’re intrigued at how these two fit together, I’d encourage you to take time studying this letter through that lens. Holiness and unity. Together. That is our calling as a church.

# A Gospel-Centered Church is to be Edifying

And that quite naturally brings us to the third theme through this letter: a gospel-centered church is to be edifying. It’s interesting to see how Paul deals with a host of problems in such a way that the Corinthians might act in ways that edify each other.

One strategy Paul uses is to encourage us to give up our rights. It seems that throughout the letter Paul is addressing selfishness of one sort or the other in the church. That selfishness or self-centeredness gave rise to the partisan factions we mentioned earlier, disarray in the use of gifts, and failure to consider others in a myriad of ways. To thwart the confusing effects of disorder and to “nip disorder at its root,” Paul directed the members of the Corinthian church to use their liberty in ways that serve and care for others.

For example, consider Paul’s instructions regarding eating food sacrificed to idols that I just mentioned in chapter 8. Paul reasoned that because an idol literally is nothing, and that there is only one true God, and that all things are from Him and for Him (8:4-6), we are free to eat what we will because “food does not commend us (or bring us near) to God” (8:8).

*However*, there are those who are weaker in conscience, who may be led into sin because they do not understand the freedom available in Christ. Paul says that our exercise of freedom then becomes a “stumbling block to the weak.” In that case, our decision to eat is actually a “sin against our brother, for whom Christ died” and a “sin against Christ” (8:11).

So, we are to forego certain things in order that those observing us, particularly the weaker in knowledge, will not be harmed and order maintained. Paul describes his own ministry as an example of this general principle that we should forego our rights for the sake of weaker Christians (chap 9). Throughout the letter, Paul’s focus is on resolving differences and problems with an eye toward preserving order and loving one another rather than protecting our perceived rights.

In a culture like Corinth, or DC, where everyone is trying to safeguard their own reputation, and get whatever they can for themselves, this laying aside of my rights for the sake of others is such a powerful display of the gospel. For that is exactly what Jesus has done for us. The beauty of the cross is in the humility of the one who voluntarily forsook heaven for our good, though he had every right to leave us in our sins. Mark Dever sums it up well. “From my perspective as a pastor it becomes clear over time which brothers and sisters in a church have an edifying effect on those around them. They do not need to chair a committee. They do not need to teach a Sunday school class. You can simply watch God gradually commit different ministries and opportunities into the hands of certain people because they love him and are willing to quietly give themselves in love for others, without particular concern that they be right or be recognized.” We should all strive to be this type of Christian, not those looking to protect reputation and our “turf” but those who are quietly and lovingly serving one another!

Another strategy Paul uses is to appeal to our role as a church as imaging Christ. You see this especially in the set of problems that Paul deals with in this letter that have to do with the public meetings of the church, including: the role of men and women in the church (11:2 – 16); abuse of the Lord’s Supper (11:17-34); and the exercise of the Spirit’s gifts, especially those that seem more spectacular. This church had become so disorderly that their public meetings were said to “do more harm than good” (11:17).

So, the church is instructed to honor the order of headship established by God: God is the head of all, Christ is the head of every man, and man is the head of woman (11:3), even though neither man nor woman is independent of the other in Christ (11:11). At the Lord’s supper, divisions are to the put away and we are to wait upon one another so that we might remember the Lord’s death in unison (11:17-33).

The last of these problems associated with the public meetings of the church was the use of spiritual gifts. Linked to the desire to be impressive was the Corinthian infatuation with the gift of tongues. This played itself out in two ways, both of which undermined the health and growth of the whole church. It made those who didn’t speak in tongues wonder whether there was really a place for them in the congregation at all. And it made those who had the gift of tongues feel super-spiritual and important. How does Paul address this?

Well, you remember the words that Jesus spoke to Paul on the Road to Damascus: “Paul, Paul, why do you persecute me.” Paul knew that Jesus so identified with Christians that he would call them “me”.

And so Paul uses the image of the Body of Christ to show how ludicrous, and how Christ-dishonoring their infatuation with one gift over another was.

12:27  Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it.

So, to the person who doubts his inclusion in the body, because he doesn’t have a gift he covets, Paul says

14For the body does not consist of one member but of many. 15If the foot should say, “Because I am not a hand, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body. 16And if the ear should say, “Because I am not an eye, I do not belong to the body,” that would not make it any less a part of the body.

To the “more” spiritual Christian who thought that only he counted in the body because of his impressive gift, Paul goes on to say,

21The eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you," or again the head to the feel, “I have no need of you.” 22On the contrary, the parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, 23and on those parts of the body that we think less honorable we bestow the greater honor, and our unpresentable parts are treated with greater modesty

As a result, Paul’s guiding principle for spiritual gifts is one of edification. “since you are eager for manifestations of the Spirit, strive to excel in building up the church.” (14:12b)

Do you have a tendency to look down on those who don’t have the gifts that you have? They are *gifts*, not self-developed abilities! They don’t originate with you. You didn’t make them! Why should you feel proud about them!? They are not given to you for your glory, but for the good of the whole church, and thus the glory of God. Whatever gifts we have we should be humbled, and we should see them as a stewardship to be spent on the good of others.

The point in the use of spiritual gifts, regardless of what those may be, is edification not merely of the individual exercising the gift, but of the whole body. “When was the last time you attended church with the edification of others the primary concern on your heart? Or do you usually anticipate what you personally will find most helpful, like whether a hymn or prayer moves you or whether you get out on time, or whether you speak to the right people afterward? When was the last time you were genuinely concerned about the edification of others around you? Not in the sense of whether they liked this or that hymn, but in the sense of whether they are being built up in the faith? Do you seek out your close friends after the service or do you look around for visitors and unfamiliar faces? Do you pray before and during the service that God would particularly use the time you have together on Sunday as a church family to work in the hearts of both you and others?”

Are these new or challenging thoughts to you? Well you have found yourself in a good place to begin growing in a heart that desires to love and edify others. Let us pray that our church will continue to be a place where edification of others and not self-promotion is sought after by each of us! Because we have been bought by the blood of Christ to become his body.

# CONCLUSION

The Gospel centered church is to be characterized by unity, holiness, and edification. In all of these things, we are not to think like the world. We are to have the gospel as the organizing principle in our lives.

As we conclude, I think it would be helpful to ask ourselves a few questions to help us evaluate areas we need to grow in our understanding and our actions. Do we solve conflicts, or do we contribute to them? Do we resist the temptation to boast in or even to worship other human beings, or do we yield to it? Are we absolutely pure in our relationship with the other sex, or are we calculating and compromising? Are we using our spiritual gifts to build up all the members of the Christian community, or are we hoarding our gifts or using them for our own selfish advantage? Are our actions motivated by love and a desire to edify others, or by some other inferior motivation? Are we givers, or takers, do you come to church merely to consume?

Let’s consider these things for our own lives, and let us pray for them fervently for our church. Let’s pray.