

Explore the Bible: United in Christ

February 14, 2018

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for March 4 focuses on 1 Corinthians 1:10-25.*

If your Bible study group just completed the lessons in Acts, it may seem a bit odd to bid farewell to Paul on his final journey only now to turn around and meet him as he writes to the church at Corinth. However, this study follows Acts quite well thematically.

In the context of this letter, we meet a younger Paul who speaks candidly about unity and community. Before he delves in to this topic, his style begins with a doxology to God and affirmation of Corinth's call as a community of believers. We could say he is adding a bit of "honey" before introducing this big "pill."

Consider beginning with this two-part question: *What does unity look like? What is unity, really?* We need to understand it is easy to mistake things that appear unifying for what really does unify. Like Paul, we should desire true unification in the message of the gospel.

Call for Unity (1 Corinthians 1:10)

This appeal is quite strong. The verb used here is meant to "place the orator in a position of authority" so he may convey a true sense of urgency (Preben Vang, *1 Corinthians*, p. 22). Paul did not consider himself as the sole authority, but as an apostle, he would see the authority resting in Christ.

True unity only comes through being submitted to Jesus Christ. *How do we easily miss this so often?* The truth is that this is a struggle today, just as it was in Corinth. Talk about what “lordship” means to us today, comparing it to what Paul is trying to say about the lordship of Jesus Christ.

For the second half of verse 10, dissect the pieces of agreeing, no division, and being perfectly united in mind and thought. If this is all the result of unity, then unity must be a tall order. Ask your group: *Why pursue unity if it will require so much work?*

Contempt for Divisions (1 Corinthians 1:11-16)

We have seen this type of division before. Before this, we read of a division between John the Baptist’s baptism of repentance and Christ-like baptism to receive the Holy Spirit. Human nature caused this division rather than seeing these as part of the same gospel.

Let us focus on the first question of verse 13: “Is Christ divided?” Take a look at this question carefully. *What makes it such a ridiculous idea?* If Jesus could not be divided in himself, then his body of believers (the Body of Christ) should not either.

A word of clarification is needed for this section as well: Paul is not belittling baptism or his part in baptizing. Rather, he is making a point that neither he nor any other leader should claim ownership of believers. This causes division, which kills unity.

As a group, point out divisions you have witnessed in churches. Next, ask about how these affected unity and even Christ-like character. The overall point is when our eyes are on Jesus Christ, our head, we less easily fall prey to division.

The Cross that Divides (1 Corinthians 1:17-25)

One must read this section with a lens to see the paradoxes Paul is posing. Weakness and strength, as well as foolishness and wisdom, are meant to play this dance that shows the superiority of Christ's sacrifice over the best of humankind.

Put more simply, for Jesus to die on a cross as the God-man for all of humanity just does not make sense to our human understanding. We believe we can think of a wiser option, but our wisdom is below God's foolishness, just as our strength is below God's weakness.

The rhetoric for these verses really spill over into this truth: There is a clear division between those who are "saved" and those who are not. So, do not expect unbelievers to understand why a believer believes. This division is expected, but for the church to be divided means we are acting like the unsaved.

Conclusion

Make no mistake; these words are meant to slice through the hearts of these divided believers. Paul would show himself as a fatherly figure to the Corinthians, and so he felt a right to discipline by words. He does so with love and sternness.

Consider his words in 1 Corinthians 3:23: "And you are of Christ, and Christ is of God." This is the bottom line. Believers share the same salvation, the same Savior and the same God. So, they should share the same unity. This is simple. This is hard.

Ask your group: *How do our human tendencies harm unity?* We need to

know that disunity does not come from God; it comes from our flesh. If we are going to become more like Christ, we need to defeat our fleshly ambitions.

An old hymn says it this way: "Blest be the tie that binds our hearts in Christian love. The fellowship of kindred minds is like to that above." Just imagine, when we are unified "down here," we replicate the unity "up there."

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