

Hope connections



1 Corinthians

Discussion Booklet

2020-2021

Respectful Communication Guidelines

- R – Take responsibility for what you say without blaming others
- E – Use empathic listening
- S – Be sensitive to differences in communication styles
- P – Ponder what you hear and feel before you speak
- E – Examine your own assumptions and perceptions
- C – Keep confidentiality
- T – Trust ambiguity because we are not here to debate who is right or wrong

Mutual Invitation Process

From The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community by Eric H. F. Law (1993) St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press.

In order to ensure that everyone who wants to share has the opportunity to speak, we will proceed in the following way:

- The leader or a designated person will share first. After that person has spoken, he or she then invites another to share. Try not to invite the person next to you.
- After the next person has spoken, that person is given the privilege to invite another to share.
- If you don't want to say anything, simply say "pass" or "pass for now" and proceed to invite another to share.
- Do this until everyone has been invited.
- If anyone said "pass for now," invite them again to share.
- After everyone has had an opportunity to share, then you may ask questions or ask for clarification.

Guidelines for the Study

- The Bible passages and readings are the focus of this study, not the leader of the group.
- We are not here to debate who has the right interpretation but we are here to read and listen together and share our insights.
- Our leaders are not experts. They are but facilitators who will lead us through a process by which the inspiration from the Scripture can be shared and celebrated. However a leader might bring in historical, literary, and contextual information to help the group understand the text better.
- We are all equals before the Scripture: therefore no one needs to feel disadvantaged. We invite you to adopt a “beginners mind”, so that every time we approach a text, we would hear it as is for the first time.
- Because we seek insights and not just information, it is essential that everyone join in the discussion and that no one person dominates.
- We invite you to hold the personal information shared here in confidence because only in this way can we feel free to say what is on our minds and in our hearts.

Discussion Resource

The Holy Bible – each person should have a Bible

Introduction To 1 Corinthians

During the time of Paul, Corinth was a large city, a Roman colony, and a busy hub for east-west trade. Corinth was known as “Sin City”, derived no doubt from the large number of sailors enjoying themselves in port after a long voyage. Early writers noted Corinth’s great wealth, its strategic location between two seas, and its abuse of the poor by the city’s elite citizens. Paul arrives in early 50 CE and begins the work of preaching the gospel and succeeds in establishing a church congregation over a period of the next 18 months. The Corinthian church reflected the “steep social pyramid” that was typical of Roman culture – very few believers were rich and many were poor. From the names of the people connected with Corinth we can infer Roman, Greek, and Jewish heritages. Paul leaves Corinth in late summer 51 CE and travels to Ephesus, where he hopes to continue his mission. 1 Corinthians was written by Paul in the fall-winter of 53-54 CE from Ephesus, in response to a letter from the Corinthian church.

The letter from the Corinthian church asks Paul for guidance on a number of topics that were causing division and controversy in the church. These topics included (1) a man living with his stepmother, (2) taking disputes to the official courts, (3) marriage and sexual relations, (4) eating food sacrificed to idols, (5) how to celebrate the Lord’s Supper, (6) the use of spiritual gifts, particularly “tongues”, and (7) the resurrection of the dead. Before tackling these issues, Paul addresses the central problem at Corinth, the divisions that are fracturing the church. The people were making distinctions that were hurtful. “We are better than you, because ...” and the claims were based on having special knowledge or wisdom, on having spiritual gifts, like speaking in tongues, on being wealthy vs poor, and on racial and cultural divides. Some of this confusion may have arose with the arrival of Apollos, a powerful and persuasive preacher from Alexandria. Paul stresses the importance of the unity of the church as the body of Christ, while honoring each individual’s distinctive contributions and gifts.

Session #1: Divisions in Corinth [1Corinthians 1:10-4:16]

Introduction. This section sets the context for all of Paul's guidance that follows in the letter. Paul addresses the central problem that afflicts the church at Corinth. "For it has been reported to me by Chloe's people that there are quarrels among you, my brothers and sisters." (1:11) These quarrels arose because of distinctions that were dividing the Corinthian assembly, distinctions based on following human leaders, or having special knowledge (wisdom), or demonstrating spiritual gifts (speaking in tongues), or having wealth, or being of noble birth. The Corinthians were also divided over a series of controversies – about eating meat sacrificed to idols, sexual immorality, how to properly conduct the Lord's Supper, the use of spiritual gifts in worship, and understanding the resurrection of the dead. Paul offers his solution, be united in Christ. "Now I appeal to you, brothers and sisters, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you be in agreement and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same purpose." Paul wants to put the well-being of the community ahead of the rights and freedoms of the individual.

Questions.

1. Read 1:10-16. Paul is arguing that our faith should not be based on the preaching of a human leader, but on the grace of God and the crucified Lord Jesus. What is your faith based on?
2. Read 1:17-31. Paul attacks the "spiritual" or "wisdom" faction that claim special knowledge is the agent of salvation. Paul contrasts this knowledge with his message of the cross, a "stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles". Do you see divisions at ULCH based on education, status, wealth, or a particular point of view? Do you see hope or threat that God chose the foolish, the lowly, and the despised to carry forward his message?
3. Read 2:1-5. Paul acknowledges that his personal presence and speaking were not charismatic or powerful, like Apollos. What does Paul count on to convince his listeners? What might "demonstrations of the Spirit and of power" be?
4. Read 2:6-3:4. What is God's wisdom, secret and hidden? Does the believer come to this wisdom through their reason or something else?
5. Read 3:5-11, 21-23. Rather than rivals, Paul asserts that he and Apollos have worked together for a common purpose. What is that purpose? What does it mean, "For all things are yours, ... all belong to you"?
6. Read 4:1-8, 14-16. "Be imitators of me." What qualities in Paul should the Corinthians embrace?

Prayer. Dear Mother, Creator, Father, Convict us of our selfish clinging to factions, status, and privilege that divides the unity of your church. Help us to care for the lowly, the despised, and the outcast in our midst. Help us to be your arms reaching out to those in need. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Session #2: To Whom Do You Belong? [1Corinthians 8:1-13]

Introduction. The Corinthians had sent Paul an earlier letter asking a series of questions that was causing division in their congregation. This chapter (Ch. 8) is Paul's answer to their question, "Should Christians eat food sacrificed to idols?". Paul expands this question into the larger question of how should a believer treat their brothers and sisters in the faith? Paul's answer is another question, "To whom do you belong?" If the answer is God, then Christians are called to love their brothers and sisters and to do everything in their power to build them up in the faith. A faction of the Corinthian church (the knowledge faction) was arguing that their knowledge conferred on them the freedom to act as they pleased. They said "no idol in the world really exists", therefore they were free to eat food sacrificed to idols. But Paul says emphatically "No!" The question at issue is not whether eating food sacrificed to idols is permissible to Christians, but what will that do to the faith of a brother or sister who is of "weak conscience"? What is the loving thing to do? If food offered to idols is a cause for stumbling for those who are weak, "I will never eat meat, so that I may not cause one of them to fall." (8:13)

Questions.

1. Are appearances important? If you were seen in a temple enjoying a feast during a pagan festival with your Gentile friends, would that cause a scandal in your congregation? How about a MAGA rally? That is the question raised in our lesson today.
2. Read 8:1-3. Paul starts his argument with a popular saying put forward by the knowledge faction, namely "We know that all possess knowledge." Is this claim true (see 8:7)? Do you think this claim will unify the Corinthian assembly or divide it?
3. Paul jumps right in with his thesis, "Knowledge puffs up, but love builds up." (8:2) What does Paul claim to be more important than knowledge?
4. Read 8:4-6. What is an idol? Paul asks a more relevant question, "To whom do you belong?" Paul states there are many things and many lords that control people's lives. Paul argues these are idols, too. What do you suggest might be idols for us today?
5. Read 8:8. Is Paul siding with the knowledge faction on food sacrificed to idols?
6. Read 8:9-13. Is Paul saying that knowledge is bad? Is Paul suggesting that the believers freedoms should be curbed by the misconceptions of new converts? Do you agree with Paul?
7. What are my obligations to others in my congregation? Am I responsible for my neighbor's wellbeing and growth in the faith? Is that how you treat others at ULCH? What does the Parable of the Good Samaritan suggest?

Prayer. Dear Mother, Creator, Father, We do not see the pain that others suffer in our congregation or in our community as our responsibility. We do not hear the cries for help. We do not have the courage to love when others need us. Send your Spirit, Lord, to move us strongly to love as you moved the Good Samaritan. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Session #3: Not The Lord's Supper [1Corinthians 11:17-34]

Introduction. The Corinthians are making a mockery of the celebration of the Lord's Supper in Paul's judgement. Their behavior during the communal meal (presumably in the house of one of the believers) is a problem. Paul delivers his assessment, "When you come together, it is not really to eat the Lord's Supper. For when the time comes to eat, each of you goes ahead with your own supper, and one goes hungry, and another becomes drunk." (11:20-21) Paul points out that some people are only thinking about themselves, rather than the good of the whole community, "Or, do you show contempt for the church of God and humiliate those who have nothing." (11:22) The divisions so evident here break along economic lines, where the ones who are free to come early eat most of the food and drink, and the ones who come later get little or nothing. Is this the proper way to worship and praise God? Paul says, emphatically, "No!" Paul reviews his teaching on the Lord's Supper and concludes with "For as often as you eat this bread and drink this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." (11:26) Believers who take part in the Lord's Supper are remembering their place in God's redemptive story. They are proclaiming the gospel to the world. Their behavior is important. They are the visible body of Christ. "Our bodies are members of Christ. (6:15) "The bread that we break, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread." (10:16-17)

Questions.

1. Read 11:17-22. What is going wrong (according to Paul), when the Corinthians celebrate the Lord's Supper? Paul proposes this issue is evidence of a bigger problem at Corinth. What is that?
2. Read 11:23-26. What does eating the bread and drinking the cup in the Lord's Supper mean for you?
3. Read 12:12-13, 27. Paul says that "You are the body of Christ." How should we treat one another, if collectively, we are the body of Christ? Are we responsible for each other in the body of Christ? Is that how you look at others at ULCH?
4. How does the Corinthians behavior during the Lord's Supper compare to Paul's standard for the body of Christ?
5. Read Book of Concord (p.362-363) "What is the benefit of such eating and drinking? Answer: The words "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins" show us that forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation are given to us in the sacrament through these words, because where there is forgiveness of sin, there is also life and salvation." "How can bodily eating and drinking do such a great thing? Answer: Eating and drinking certainly do not do it, but rather the words that are recorded: "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins." These words, when accompanied by the physical eating and drinking, are the essential thing in the sacrament, and whoever believes these very words has what they declare and state, namely, "forgiveness of sins." What role does our faith play in how we receive the Lord's Supper? Isn't it God's presence and action in and through the sacrament that brings "forgiveness of sins"?
6. Read 11:27-29. What does it mean to partake the Lord's Supper "in an unworthy manner"? What are the Corinthians doing wrong? How do their actions fail "to discern the body"? Have you ever hesitated to come to the Lord's Supper because you were not sure or had doubts?
7. Read Book of Concord (p.363) "Who, then, receives this sacrament worthily? Answer: Fasting and bodily preparation are in fact a fine external discipline, but a person who has faith in these words, "given for you" and "shed for you for the forgiveness of sins," is really worthy and well prepared. However, a person who does not believe these words or doubts them is unworthy and unprepared, because the words "for you" require truly believing hearts. What does this mean for you?

8. "Do this in remembrance of me." What are we remembering here? It certainly links the present-day assembly to the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ and his disciples and the long history of the Church. Why is that important?
9. "You proclaim the Lord's death until he comes." How does celebrating the Lord's Supper become a public testimony to the community and the larger world?

Prayer. Dear Mother, Creator, Father, We shrink back when trouble afflicts those in our community, even in our own congregation. We are reluctant to push pause on our busy lives to care and love the neighbor. It is not our responsibility. Melt our stone hearts. Show us Jesus and his example, so that we might be inspired to look again, to listen, to love. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Session #4: Love: The Greatest Gift [1Corinthians 13:1-13]

Introduction. Paul's message to the Corinthians in chapter 13 is simple. The Corinthians have many admirable qualities and spiritual gifts. But, their attitude toward their brothers and sisters is lacking something essential – love and caring. There are many types of love: eros, romantic love, philautia, love of self, philia, love of friends, storge, love of family, and agape, unconditional love. What Paul is talking about in chapter 13 is an unselfish love that seeks to lift up the other, for their good and not for your own good. It is this mutual uplifting that can break down the divisions that Paul sees in the Corinthian church. Paul deflates the Corinthians most-admired gifts (tongues, knowledge) and even some of his own cherished values (faith, poverty, suffering) in comparison to the upbuilding potential of love. Love is the foundation on which Paul wants every congregation to be built. Paul concludes, "Pursue love." (14:1a)

Questions.

1. Read 13:1-3. Speaking in tongues was one of the most prized spiritual gifts for the Corinthians. Have you ever experienced this gift in yourself or others? How could this gift be a cause of division in the church? How could this gift be used in love?
2. Paul does not withhold his own cherished values, faith, poverty, and suffering. These values can be used to divide or to bring together. Can you give examples of each?
3. Read 13:4-7. What type of love is Paul describing here? Is Paul describing the type of love that God has for us? Or, is Paul describing the type of love that we should have for each other?
4. Paul sets the standard with a list of several things that love is and things that love is not. How does the Corinthian church measure up to Paul's standard? What in their behavior is falling short? Can any church check all the boxes? Is Paul asking us to be perfect?
5. "Love bears all things." Life can be a series of struggles or challenges. Our community life can be rocky as well. Is Paul asking us to help bear the burdens of others? Really? How about those outside the church?
6. "Love believes all things." What is Paul asking us to do here? Is love naive?
7. When we love and care for our brothers and sisters, how does that make us feel? Any stories you would like to share?
8. Read 13:8-13. Paul is saying that we are on this journey of faith together. What does that mean for you? Paul is suggesting that what we experience in our Christian communities today is only a partial realization of the love and community that we will experience in the Kingdom of God. Is this a reason for boasting?

Prayer. Dear Mother, Creator, Father, We have hearts of stone. We are apathetic to the plight of others. You have shown us the depths of your love by hanging on a cross. Fill our hearts to overflowing with that selfless love, so we can share it with those who need it. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Session #5: The Resurrection [1Corinthians 15:1-58]

Introduction. Paul leaves the most important question, namely that of the Resurrection, for the end. “How can some of you say there is no resurrection of the dead?” (15:12b) Paul begins chapter 15 with a summary of his gospel (15:3-11): (1) Christ died for our sins, (2) Christ was buried, (3) Christ was raised on the third day, and (4) Christ appeared to many witnesses after being raised. This is not a small misunderstanding. This matter is at the heart of Paul’s gospel. Get this wrong, and the Corinthians’ faith will be in vain. Paul uses the strongest language to warn the Corinthians. This is deadly serious. Paul begins the argument, “If there is no resurrection of the dead”, what are the consequences? Paul’s gospel would be wrong. The Corinthians would still be living in sin. Those who have died in Christ would have perished. The conclusion is, “If for this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied.” Paul compares Christ and Adam, and then plunges ahead into what will happen during the end times (15:23-28). Paul proceeds to a second question, what kind of body will the dead have when they are raised? (15:35-57). The answer is a spiritual or heavenly body.

Questions.

1. Read 15:1-2. Paul says the Corinthians received Paul’s gospel and through the gospel, they are being saved. Is salvation an instant in time or an ongoing process? Paul announces that the Corinthians can screw this up by “not holding firmly to the message that I proclaimed to you” (15:2b) Is our salvation dependent on believing certain things, or doing certain things, or on God’s saving action?
2. Read 15:3-8. Paul lays out his gospel in the briefest of terms: Christ died, was buried, was raised, and appeared to many. Paul seems to focus a lot of energy on the witnesses who saw Christ after he was raised. Why is that important to his argument?
3. Read 15:9-11. Paul declares himself unfit to be called an apostle. Why is it important that Paul was unworthy to be called an apostle?
4. Read 15:12-19. What is in dispute here? Has Christ been raised? That was part of Paul’s gospel and was not in dispute. Rather, it was how or when believers would be raised. Some might have argued that “the resurrection” was happening now, for some exemplary members of the community who had certain knowledge or showed spiritual gifts like speaking in tongues.
5. Read 15:20-28. Paul argues that Christ will bring the Kingdom of God to reality in which every other ruler, authority, and power will be destroyed, including death. What does that mean for believers if death has been destroyed? How do you view death in light of this proclamation?
6. Read 15:35-49. The question Paul addresses here is what sort of body will the believer have after the resurrection. Paul says the resurrected body will be imperishable, glorious, powerful, and spiritual. Why spiritual?
7. Read 15:50-58. When will the resurrection of the dead happen?

Prayer. Dear Mother, Creator, Father, We are so fearful about death. We do not trust your power, your plan for our lives. How do we know, dear God, that you will raise us up at the last trumpet? Fill us with your Spirit, so the trust will come. Help us cling to you, as we wait for your heavenly city. Thank you, God. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen

Session #6: Concerning Spiritual Gifts [1Cor 12:1-31]

Introduction. The Corinthians have raised questions in their letter to Paul concerning spiritual gifts. Are spiritual gifts the telltale sign of a “true believer”? Or, more pointedly, can a person be a “true Christian” and not speak in tongues? Paul takes them back to the fundamentals. It is simple. “No one can say, “Jesus is Lord” except by the Holy Spirit.” (12:3b) A person’s confession of Jesus marks them as a Christian and is a sure sign of the Spirit’s presence. Paul says that all manifestations of the Spirit (gifts, serving, and works) are given by God’s grace and are intended for “the common good”. All of these manifestations of the Spirit are important to the life of the Christian community and to lift up its individual members. One spiritual gift is not more important than any other, because all are needed. Paul goes into an extended metaphor, comparing the members of the Corinthian congregation to the members of a body. The body needs all its members, eyes, ears, feet, hands, and suffers when one member suffers. The church is the same. Paul is saying spiritual gifts are given by the Spirit and are not the grounds for boasting. As we have noted before, this is a problem in the Corinthian church.

Questions.

1. Read 1:4-7. Reaching back to Paul’s greeting in this letter, Paul states the Corinthians have received abundant grace from God. This grace takes the form of persuasive speech, deep knowledge, powerful testimony (from Paul and Apollos), and many spiritual gifts. How has this abundance of grace led the Corinthians astray?
2. Read 12:1-3. The Corinthians seem to be asking for a sure-fire test. How do we know that God, or the Holy Spirit, is working inside a person? Is speaking in tongues (or other spiritual gifts) a good test to use? Why or why not?
3. Read 12:4-7. Notice that Paul speaks of manifestations of the Spirit to include spiritual gifts, service, and working within the community. Why does Paul lump service and working in with spiritual gifts? Are manifestations of the Spirit meant to lift up the welfare of the congregation as a whole or to lift up the welfare of individuals?
4. Read 12:8-11. Is Paul’s list of spiritual gifts exhaustive (see the list of gifts in Rom 12:3-8)? Are you startled that Paul includes faith in his list of spiritual gifts. Do you think of faith as a spiritual gift? Why does Paul do that? Why does Paul put tongues and interpretation of tongues at the end of the list?
5. Read 12:12-13. What makes us all a member of the body of Christ?
6. Read 12:14-26. What is the message Paul is attempting to give the Corinthians in the body-member metaphor?
7. Read 12:27-30. God appoints different members to different tasks. What is the importance that this is God’s doing, and not the Corinthians themselves?
8. Read 12:31. “But strive for the greater gifts. And I will show you a still more excellent way.” Paul just made this whole argument that the manifestations of the Spirit are all important. That all are needed. What does he mean, “greater gifts”? Is Paul being inconsistent?

Prayer. Dear Mother, Creator, Father, We are so quick to exclude others (or to exclude ourselves). We do not want you (you do not want me). You have no gifts to share with us (I have no gifts to share). God, help us to embrace all (and embrace ourselves). Help us to dignify all (and dignify myself). You created all and call all people to you. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.