

**Week 47: Kingdom Problems; Kingdom Solutions**  
**1 Corinthians 1:10-17**  
**November 23/24**

**Summary & Goal:**

The Corinthian culture and the Corinthian church we see in the New Testament are not unlike the American culture and the American church we find ourselves in today. Paul writes the letter of 1 Corinthians to the church at Corinth for the express purpose of urging unity in the midst of immorality, disagreement, and rivalry amongst the members of the church community. The Apostle Paul planted the first church at Corinth—a prominent, influential city in the Roman Empire—but it appears to struggle with an outsider, cultural influences and an insider, communal differences. The letter reads not only as a timely indictment to the church of Corinth, but also as a timeless exhortation for the church's purity from the world and for unity with one another in our context today. In the following passage, 1 Corinthians 1:10-17, we will evaluate Paul's appeal to the Corinthian church when problems arise and why it is important for our modern church as well.

**Main Passages:**

1 Corinthians 1:10-17

**Session Outline:**

1. The Right Authority (Up)
2. The Resulting Unity (In)
3. The Proper Mission (Out)

**Session in a Sentence:**

The church's authority will always produce a corresponding unity and mission.

**Kingdom Connection:**

The Kingdom of God is not like the kingdoms of this world. It operates upon a distinctive authority with distinctive values and from a distinctive time frame. The culture of Corinth operated upon the authority of self, with a premium value of personal pleasure and freedom, all within the time frame of immediacy, much like our American culture today. But the Kingdom of God boasts of a King who did not come in power to be served but to humbly obey His Father. He did not lead with self-interest either but lived with others' welfare in mind. And He oriented His entire life—all of his decisions, priorities, and values—with eternity in view.

The King's people are to follow in a likewise manner to partake in the fruit of this Kingdom. And, they should orient their lives in the framework of eternity since this Kingdom is victorious and will reign forever. This King's kingdom-culture must define our church culture in terms of how we relate to authority, align our values accordingly, and orient our lives with eternity.

**Missional Connection:**

The Kingdom of God in the local church is the hope of the world. It is Plan A for bringing salvation, redemption, and healing into the world and there is no Plan B. A healthy church

culture and environment, therefore, is of paramount importance—not simply for the way its health will bless its own members, but also for how its health will reach the lost and make an eternal difference in its relative community.

Sin, conflict, and disagreement will simply be a part of God's church on earth until Jesus comes back to bring forth the new heavens and new earth and make all things new, ridding our reality of sin and its effects once and for all. But until then, the church must proactively wage war against sin and divisiveness amongst itself not only for its own sake but also for the sake of the world. Truly, if the church would follow its King rightly, His kingdom culture will flow into the church's midst, displacing all other cultural influences within itself, and then overflow through the church to make a difference in the world.

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**Introduction:**

The Apostle Paul wrote the book of 1 Corinthians to the network of churches meeting in the city of Corinth, one of the largest, most influential city-states of the entire Roman Empire in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Corinth is located along an isthmus in southern Greece, positioning it as a major port and gateway city for much of the known world's transportation, trade, culture, and business. It became a hotbed for culture, arts, and entertainment as well. In fact, Corinth hosted prominent world-class sporting events, second only in popularity to the Olympics. During the 1<sup>st</sup> century, it was arguably both the wealthiest and most diverse urban center in the modern world.

Corinth was also no stranger to religion, philosophy, and spirituality. And while they were most notably identified as a pagan culture, they were not formally atheistic or agnostic in the traditional sense. Rather, they found and experienced transcendence through hedonism and materialism, worshipping the things that would bring them pleasure and comfort. In fact, Corinth's main, formal 'religious space' was a temple building that sat atop a hill just outside of Corinth proper, overlooking the entire city. The temple was erected for Aphrodite, the goddess of love, where citizens or travelers would pay their religious tributes in the form of prostitution. In other words, the people of Corinth believed that the ultimate meaning of life could be accessed through pleasure, experience, and materialism.

If personal pleasure exists as the highest value in life, however, this implicitly means each individual person would retain the rights and authority to defining and determining what would give them the most pleasure. There was a high view of the self, personal expression, and individual status. As such, the Corinthian people also touted a cultural philosophy that is very popular in our society today—namely, humanism, which entails the highest premium upon self-authority, freedom of expression, and skepticism towards formal or traditional authorities.<sup>1</sup>

The Corinthians' culture of unhindered hedonism and unfettered individualism, however, might sound initially appealing to the individual because it strokes the ego of sin. However, practically, it will create a volatile concoction of disunity, division, and destruction in any community in general, but especially in the church. And it is this cultural toxicity that Paul finds seeping into the Corinthian church in the 1<sup>st</sup> century; and it is the same hazards we find in our own culture, our own churches, and in our own selves today.

In many ways, the city of Corinth and the city of Houston are very similar. Both are large, port cities near significant international trade routes; both feature a high level of wealth and financial opportunity; both boast a high degree of multiculturalism and globalism, and both have world-class sports and entertainment. We also live in a present culture dominated by a pervasive sense of individualism, hedonism, and materialism.

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<sup>1</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 19.

Moreover, similar to 1<sup>st</sup> century Corinth, the vast majority of people in our culture today do not formally identify as ‘atheist’ or ‘agnostic;’ but, the majority do possess a worldview guided primarily by the authority of self and the immediacy of pleasure. And these realities, unfortunately, are not only prevalent in the culture, and but are also present in the church.

The very fabric of the Corinthian culture runs counter to the biblical ideal. Discipleship takes time. In fact, it might precisely be why Paul stayed a year and a half in Corinth, substantially longer than any other city within which he would plant a church and raise up leadership.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps he knew that Corinth was a strategic city that would impact the rest of the world; so, by influencing Corinth with the gospel, many more cities would be affected as a result.

Paul engages with the church at Corinth about how the Corinthian culture has infected its own church culture. And as Paul has received the report, they are struggling from within; they are fighting, disagreeing, and fragmenting over things that Paul identifies as expressions of giving into their culture’s secular paradigms instead of God’s kingdom culture.

Paul first appeals to their sense of authority; then, he exhorts them to live in corporate unity; and finally, he encourages them to carry out their corresponding mission. In the following text, we will see how Paul starts 1 Corinthians—setting the crucial, general framework for everything else he will address in-depth within the letter.

Let’s start with verse 10.

*1 Corinthians 1:10-16: <sup>10</sup> Now I plead with you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. <sup>11</sup> For it has been declared to me concerning you, my brethren, by those of Chloe’s household, that there are contentions among you. <sup>12</sup> Now I say this, that each of you says, “I am of Paul,” or “I am of Apollos,” or “I am of Cephas,” or “I am of Christ.” <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? <sup>14</sup> I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius, <sup>15</sup> lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. <sup>16</sup> Yes, I also baptized the household of Stephanas. Besides, I do not know whether I baptized any other. <sup>17</sup> For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (Chronological Bible, November 18<sup>th</sup>, p.1467).*

Paul begins his initial appeal to the church’s reality of fragmentation, rivalry, and divisiveness. And to what does he appeal first? This is important, and it shows us the linchpin underneath true unity. You can see this particularly in verse 10a:

*<sup>10</sup> I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ...*

Interestingly, Paul first appeals to the authority of Jesus. This is our first point from the text.

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<sup>2</sup> Craig L. Blomberg, *The NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 21.

## 1. The Right Authority

Many people believe that the natural solution to disunity and rivalry is mutual respect, kindness, tolerance, open-mindedness, compassion, etc. To be sure, those *virtues* are helpful for achieving a spirit of unity amongst people. However, Paul knows that is not the true, foundational solution to division in the church. And in verse 10, he explains that the most important factor to unity in the church is their *shared authority*, not their *mutual cordiality*.

When Paul appeals ‘*by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ*,’ he is insisting that the Corinthian church first have the right authority. The phrase ‘by the name of...’ communicates and carries authoritative weight. For instance, when a Roman messenger relayed a message from Caesar to a particular community in Rome, he would usually begin his announcement with the preface, “In the name of Caesar...” In other words, there is a reason to listen because it is coming from the very top. And whatever *he* says, goes.

In the same way, Paul prefaces his exhortation for unity ‘by the name of Jesus,’ communicating and carrying the weight that Jesus’ authority among His people matters first and foremost before they even begin to address any specifics.

Why is the authority of Jesus so important? Because if they do not heed Jesus’ authority first, then it really does not matter what comes after that. If Jesus’ authority is not first, then everything else is left up to the authority, consideration, and decision of who? Us. Self-authority, truly, is treasonous to the true King.

Missionary Hudson Taylor once said, “Christ is either Lord of all, or is not Lord at all.” By invoking the ‘name’ of Jesus, Paul makes an immediate appeal to the authority of Jesus over all things and every person. Before any specific situation or any type of division in the church is further addressed, they must at least come to an agreement of Christ’s authority first. Otherwise, no real progress can be made in their midst.

But Paul also makes this authoritative statement resonate *personally* as well; he does not just communicate Jesus’ authority in a way like Caesar might declare his own. Paul significantly uses the word, ‘our’ to remind them of and to drive home their own voluntary and personal commitment to Jesus’ authority. In doing so, the authority of Jesus should resonate and register with each person. Jesus is *our* authority—both individually and corporately.

Having the right, shared authority might not initially seem apparent as the foundational solution for unity. But remember the cultural climate of Corinth: everyone operated upon the sense of self-authority—retaining the rights to determine what was best for them, what was right, what was wrong, etc. And this frame of mind had infiltrated the church. Therefore, if each person believes that he retains the rights and authority to determine primary issues in the church then even if they are compassionate, open-minded, and empathetic, they will not have unity. They might have kindness towards one another, but they will not be united in their vision and mission.

If two do not share the same authority and therefore, values and perspectives, even the most cordial will not have unity. And to say it another way, the people who are united in authority but nevertheless struggle in cordiality will still have greater unity than those who do not share the same authority but are always cordial.

Paul knows that the linchpin underneath all unity is a shared authority upon which to be united at the deepest level. And so, he exhorts them, *'by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,'* to be united.

Authority is the first, foundational tenet of any lasting sense of unity.

Let's look further at Paul's logic regarding authority and unity in verse 10b.

*...that all of you agree, and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. (Chronological Bible, November 18<sup>th</sup>, p.1467).*

## **2. The Resulting Unity**

Paul communicates that he wants the Corinthian people united in "mind and thought," meaning ideas of counsel and choice. It conveys the notion of unity in both cognition and volition.<sup>3</sup>

The Corinthians' primary sense of unity came not from the Gospel or from Christ but was based on their human leadership instead. This is an indication of how the kingdom culture of the world seeped into the culture of the church. The culture of Corinth placed a high premium on the self and the individual. It had a fascination with individual power and ability, so they primarily followed and marveled at certain men of their day.

And this very frame of mind and humanism value seeped into the culture of the church as well. Instead of elevating the message of Christ, the Corinthian church elevated certain impressive people who told the message of Christ. Thus, the church's first and final authorities were different; their directions were different; and therefore, their communities were rendered rivals instead of allies.

And as the text indicates, this resulted in quarreling, fragmentation, and division (v. 12-13).

*<sup>12</sup> Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ." <sup>13</sup> Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? (Chronological Bible, November 18<sup>th</sup>, p.1467).*

Have you ever felt division between Christian communities based upon denomination or their leadership? This problem in the Corinthian church has persisted in the American church culture as well.

Perhaps those in the Corinthian church who say they *'follow Paul'* can be likened to the Christians today who put a premium upon tradition over everything else in the church. These are the Christians who think church ought to be 'this way' and they are not ever going to

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<sup>3</sup> NIV Application Commentary: 1 Corinthians.

compromise on how it has been since the beginning. These Christians do not like change and are inflexible. They will sacrifice the mission of the church to reach the lost upon the altar of personal preference and palatability. After all, Paul was the one who founded the church, so maybe these were the Christians who emphasized tradition and origin over everything else.

Perhaps those in the Corinthian church who say they *'follow Apollos'* can be likened to the Christians today who put a premium upon sensational experience over everything else in the church. Apollos was known as a gifted communicator, who captivated people by his insight and rhetoric (Acts 18:24-28). In today's culture, Apollos would be the guy you would stream on Facebook Live and search for his books on Amazon. This is a church culture dangerously built upon emotionalism and consumerism.

Perhaps those in the Corinthian church who say they *'follow Cephas'* (referring to the Apostle Peter) can be likened to the Christians today who put a premium upon following the law and liturgy over everything else in the church. These are the Christians who think that the heart of Christianity is what you do for God and how you behave as a Christian. In this culture, notions of self-worth and salvation are indubitably tied to one's deeds and status as compared to everyone else in the community. This is a church culture sadly built upon honor and shame.

And perhaps those in the Corinthian church who say they *'follow Christ'* can be likened to the Christians today who are truly following Christ as their authority, but they are nevertheless looking down upon others for their mistakes, shortcomings, and immaturity. Perhaps these Christians are the ones who think they are the real representations of 'the church' and everyone who is not exactly like them are spiritually inferior. To be sure, this frame of mind would certainly cause dissension and disunity amongst the overall body of believers well.

Do these breakdowns in Christian subcultures resonate with you at all? We can certainly see this issue of fragmentation in our society today as well. Meanwhile, the world remains lost—and it will continue to be so at the expense of our self-righteousness that keeps us divided within. This, however, is only a byproduct of not making Christ and not appropriating His Gospel the ultimate premium in our own lives and congregations.

Who is your main authority? If it is something or someone other than Jesus himself, you will never have true unity with other believers. Each party will think they are 'right' and as a result, you will look down on them. And you can never have unity with someone you think you are better than.

Each "faction" stemming from individualism could be distinguished by 1. legalism (works and obedience) 2. theatrics (great style and emotional sensationalism, moving worship) 3. traditions (ritual and comfort) instead of the main focus, which is the Gospel. Certainly, the law, the traditions, a good Worship experience, and a talented delivery of the Gospel are not bad in themselves. But when they themselves become the main priority and the main emphasis... you will fall into a corresponding pit that will necessarily pit you against others who hold to something slightly different.

So, how does "the church" become a unified body with a unified mission?

### 3. The Proper Activity

How does Paul react to the disunity amongst the Christian church in Corinth? He interestingly and ironically begins by giving his own resume (or lack thereof). He says this:

1 Corinthians 1:13-15: <sup>13</sup> *Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?* <sup>14</sup> *I thank God that I baptized none of you except Crispus and Gaius,* <sup>15</sup> *lest anyone should say that I had baptized in my own name. (Chronological Bible, November 18<sup>th</sup>, p.1467).*

What is significant is that Paul founded the church in Corinth. He spent a year and a half in that great city, laying down the framework for what could be the most influential church in the known world. And yet, he does not mention that *at all*. He does not assert his rights or his accomplishments or his influence as to why they should listen to him. Nor does he call out other leaders and say, “*Well, you shouldn’t follow Apollos because...*” or “*You shouldn’t follow Cephas because...*” He does not caricature them nor does he talk disparagingly about them at all, or their followers (even though he might have a right to do so).

Rather, he talks about what he *didn’t* do. He is conveying that his ministry in Corinth had nothing to do with himself. I am sure he could have baptized thousands of people if he wanted to yet, we only have record of a handful. Perhaps he delegated out ‘authority’ to other spiritual leaders so that he might possibly avoid being wrongly viewed through the lens of a culture that prizes individualism and self-assertion.

Paul is portraying that true Christian leadership has nothing to do with yourself, or any other human leaders for that matter. Rather, it concerns Christ and His mission to reach the world.

What is that mission, then, that he believes is an expression of the shared authority of Christ and a unity in Christ? He tells us in verse 17:

<sup>17</sup> *For Christ did not send me to baptize, but to preach the gospel, not with wisdom of words, lest the cross of Christ should be made of no effect. (Chronological Bible, November 18<sup>th</sup>, p.1467).*

What’s interesting about this last verse is that it implicitly invokes what made the previous Christian leaders mentioned beforehand popular and why people followed them.

Paul conveys that the Christian mission is not primarily about baptizing people, nor is it about words with eloquent wisdom. By bringing up these two things, he seems to be critiquing those who are caught up with tradition or outward appearance (‘I follow Cephas’) and also those who put a premium upon sensational experience (‘I follow Apollos’). He’s not calling them out individually; he is simply emphasizing what the Gospel and its mission is all about: the cross of Christ and sharing its message.

Paul's appeal to Jesus' ultimate authority at the beginning also carries into why His authority matters. He was crucified for us; and it is His kingdom, which He purchased with His own blood. Therefore, if it is not about Christ's authority in all things—then the cross is emptied of its power.

If Christianity were *primarily* about organizational logistics or creating a sensational experience or being delivered in powerful rhetoric then the cross is stripped of its power. It is the first thing; everything else can be next in terms of its importance and priority in the church.

By invoking the authority of Jesus, Paul also invokes the ownership and sake of Jesus. Therefore, 1) Our unity should come from Jesus' authority, *not our own*. 2) And our unity is for His sake, *not our own*.

Our unity is not simply for the sake of unity. Our unity is for the sake of the mission and Kingdom of God. This notion should also help us reframe why unity is so important.

In our culture, there is a saying, "*for God's sake*." While it could be spoken taking the Lord's name in vain, the phrase is typically spoken lightly; yet, when taken literally is quite meaningful and is precisely what the Apostle Paul intends to communicate as an appeal. Paul is essentially saying, "For the love of God and for God's own sake; for the kingdom's sake and for the lost in the city of Corinth's sake; and for your own church and your own health's sake—please stop disagreeing with one another and stop misbehaving amongst each other; and start agreeing and behaving!" You can hear the 'fatherly' tone in Paul's voice. As the founding father of the church, Paul must feel some degree of parental responsibility and concern for it that other believers might not.

So, why should we have unity? Literally, for Christ's sake, because it is His mission; and because we are His people who were bought at a price.

How does your life line up? Ultimately, you can know your direction and your values by who or what is your first authority. Whoever your authority is, your life will naturally take on the direction of whoever is on the throne.

In many ways, the Corinthian church embraced the values of the culture, with a premium upon human status and the competitiveness of self-interest. As a result, their mission followed.

As Paul exhorted the church of Corinth, so Christ also exhorts us through the words of Paul as well: *Who is your main, first and final authority in life?*