

Unity *in* Christ



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *1 Cor. 1:12–17, Rom. 1:29, 1 Cor. 1:10, 1 Cor. 3:1–4, Phil. 2:5–8, 2 Cor. 11:23–28, Col. 1:24.*

Memory Text: “I appeal to you, brothers, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, 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” (*1 Corinthians 1:10, ESV*).

Those who observe wildlife know that some creatures live in packs, in herds, or in groups, all of varying sizes. From wolves, to dolphins, to even army ants, these creatures stick together. Chimpanzees are especially known for their tight-knit social bonds, sometimes existing in groups of 15 to 150 fellow chimps. However, these relationships are not always harmonious, and sometimes the chimps fight among themselves.

Humans are somewhat like that as well; that is, not only do they tend to exist in groups, but they sometimes fight among themselves in those groups. And that's a reality even in our churches! Cliques form, often around some kind of charismatic leader. And, even worse, sometimes one clique does not get along with others.

Have you ever seen that in your church? If so, then you have an idea of an issue Paul faced in Corinth. This week we will take a look at 1 Corinthians 1–4, where the apostle Paul deals with the problem of quarrels in the church and how to overcome them, namely, through unity in Christ.

* Study this week's lesson to prepare for Sabbath, July 18.

The Problem of Cliques in the Church

Paul’s appeal that “there be no divisions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (*1 Cor. 1:10, ESV*) dominates the first four chapters of 1 Corinthians. In fact, most scholars agree that unity is the all-encompassing theme that binds all the parts of the letter together.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:12–17. How does this passage help us understand how absurd it is to form cliques around local leaders? What is Paul’s solution?

Paul employs strong words to portray the lack of unity among the church members in Corinth. He uses the Greek terms *schisma* (“division,” *1 Cor. 1:10, NKJV*) and *eris* (“contention,” *1 Cor. 1:11, NKJV*). The noun *schisma* (as well as the verb *schizō*, “to split”) is used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe differences of opinion resulting in factions. In turn, the noun *eris* (“contention”) frequently appears in lists of vices that must not be practiced by Christians.

Read Romans 1:29, Romans 13:13, 1 Corinthians 3:3, 2 Corinthians 12:20, and Galatians 5:20. What other sins are listed along with *eris* (“contention,” “strife”)? What does this tell us about how bad it is?

The disagreements in the church of Corinth came to the surface—even in the form of lawsuits against one another (*1 Cor. 6:1–3*). “I say this to your shame,” Paul told them (*1 Cor. 6:5, NKJV*), concerning these lawsuits between church members. In fact, they didn’t lay aside their differences even when celebrating the Lord’s Supper (*1 Cor. 11:17–22*).

The problem of lack of unity among church members is so terrifying, and Paul is so worried about it, that this is the first issue he addresses in this letter to the Corinthians.

Read again 1 Corinthians 1:12–27. Then reflect on how this passage helps us understand why cliques are so dangerous to the unity of the church. What can your local church do in order to avoid this problem?

Centered on Jesus

Read 1 Corinthians 1:10. What do you think Paul meant by “be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (*ESV*)?

The formation of cliques constituted here a denial of one’s allegiance to Christ (*1 Cor. 1:10*). God called us “into the fellowship of his Son, Jesus Christ our Lord” (*1 Cor. 1:9, NKJV*). Our Lord is Christ, and we must be centered on Him. Thus, the answer to the rhetorical questions “Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (*1 Cor. 1:13, NKJV*) is a resounding “No!” Christ is not divided. It is Christ who was crucified for us. We were baptized “in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit” (*Matt. 28:19, NASB*).

Paul mentions that we are “the body of Christ and *individually* members of it” (*1 Cor. 12:27, ESV; emphasis supplied*). While the body has many parts—each one with its function—it is still one body. For the body to function properly, each part has to do its work according to its capabilities. This metaphor indicates that Paul is looking for *unity*, not *uniformity*. He is looking for unity in the diversity. More than that, he is looking for unity despite diversity.

However, all thoughts and opinions must be submitted to Christ, our Lord. The fact that Christ is our Lord is such an important concept for Paul that he resorts to it repeatedly, in the opening of 1 Corinthians (*1 Cor. 1:2, 7, 8, 9, 10*). Thus, before Paul deals with the issue of cliques and human leaders, he first emphasizes that all of us have Jesus as our Lord. The church is not centered on human leaders. Christians are centered on Jesus.

The emphasis on the Lordship of Jesus in the early verses of 1 Corinthians helps us understand what Paul meant by the words: “Be united in the same mind and the same judgment” (*1 Cor. 1:10, ESV*). The Greek term translated as “united” comes from the verb *katartizō*, which suggests that something is to be restored to its proper condition. When cliques are formed around human leaders, relationships within the church must be restored to their proper condition, and that can happen through unity in Christ and the death to self it entails.

During the past few decades, some parts of the Seventh-day Adventist Church have emphasized small group Bible studies. What is the difference between cliques and small groups? How can we be careful that small groups do not turn into cliques?

Wisdom and Maturity

By and large, cliques result from too high a view of human leaders. This is very threatening to the unity of the church and to the members' spiritual health, for a distorted view of Christian ministry may lead a church to give excessive importance to certain leaders, all to the detriment of others. The consequence of such behavior is an atmosphere of competition, which can split the church. More than that, if we treat human leaders as central to our Christian identity, we risk moving Christ from the correct position in our lives.

Read 1 Corinthians 3:1–4. How does Paul here describe the spiritual immaturity of the Corinthians?

Paul makes it clear that spiritual maturity leads the believer to appreciate the wisdom of God (*1 Cor. 2:6, 7*), which is communicated to us through the Spirit (*1 Cor. 2:13*), and which contrasts with the wisdom of this age (*1 Cor. 2:6*), human wisdom (*1 Cor. 2:13*). The wisdom of God is unveiled in the cross of Christ (*1 Cor. 2:1–4*). More precisely, the wisdom of God is revealed in Christ's suffering, death, and resurrection. Thus, before resuming his appeal for unity (*1 Cor. 3:1–17*), Paul wants his readers to acknowledge the need for true wisdom and maturity in Christ.

Wise and mature Christians are spiritual people, not carnal, not like infants (*1 Cor. 3:1*). They compare spiritual things with spiritual things, because “the things of the Spirit . . . are spiritually discerned” (*1 Cor. 2:13, 14, NKJV*). Wise and mature Christians feed on solid food, not milk (*1 Cor. 3:2; compare with Heb. 5:12*). The believer “who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil” (*Heb. 5:13, 14, ESV*). Wise and mature Christians do not say, “I am of Paul” or “I am of Apollos” (*1 Cor. 3:4*), referring to different people.

After all, these people are, like them, “God's fellow workers” (*1 Cor. 3:9, ESV*). We, as a church, are God's field, building, and temple (*1 Cor. 3:9, 16, 17*). We all belong to God through Christ (*1 Cor. 3:11*).

What has been your experience with being disappointed by someone whom you had admired? If you have had this experience, what lessons did you learn from it?

Christlike Servanthood

Read 1 Corinthians 4:1, 2. What does this passage teach about the correct view one must have about human leaders?

In 1 Corinthians 3:1–4, Paul hints that cliques result from a lack of spiritual maturity. However, before addressing this topic, he affirms, “We have the mind of Christ” (*1 Cor. 2:16, NKJV*). This phrase likely refers to Christ’s way of thinking and acting. In other words, the believer has “the mind of Christ” when he thinks and acts like Christ. Putting this mind into practice in all matters of life is not that easy, though, is it? In the Greco-Roman world, there was much competition among political figures, philosophers, thinkers, and religious leaders. The longing for cultural approval apparently led the church of Corinth to follow secular standards. This may be a danger for the church today, too.

Read Philippians 2:5–8. How does this text help us understand the phrase “the mind of Christ” (*1 Cor. 2:16*)?

Just as in Corinth, divisions were also taking place in the church of Philippi (*Phil. 2:1–4*), perhaps to a lesser degree. Philippians 2:1–8 teaches us that a Christlike servanthood requires dying to self and to selfish ambitions, and seeking instead to bless others above ourselves, as did Jesus.

A Christlike servanthood is what Paul meant by the phrase “servants of Christ” (*1 Cor. 4:1, NKJV*). This phrase can convey the idea that they serve Christ as assistants or subordinates. It is clear that a correct view of human leaders is based on Christ’s example of leadership. The servants are further portrayed as “stewards” (*1 Cor. 4:1, 2*). A steward is a person who has been entrusted with administering the property of somebody else. And whatever we have, it all belongs to Christ anyway.

Prayerfully dwell on the message of Philippians 2:5–8. How do we grasp what this tells us about God’s self-denying love for us? Why, too, do we need to die to self in a way so that, in our own sphere, we can emulate this love?

A Lifestyle That Reflects the Cross

The fact that we should not form cliques, especially around human leaders, does not mean we should not support our leaders. We are supposed to appreciate and help those who lead out in church work. God commissions people to do His ministry on earth. Church leaders who display a lifestyle that reflects the submissions represented by the Cross are worthy of being heard and followed.

And this is so because only the Cross has the power to reverse any manipulative form of control in favor of submission to God's Word. Christlike leaders attribute the success of their ministry to God alone. In His earthly ministry, even Jesus as a human assigned glory to God (*John 17:4*).

According to Paul, faithful Christian ministry must be grounded upon what we can call a theology of the Cross. The Cross is God's revelation of His wisdom and power to save. At the same time, it also displays human wisdom as foolishness. In 1 Corinthians 4:1–13, Paul makes it clear what such a theology of the Cross looks like. First, he indicates that it is God who sets the standard for Christian leadership (*1 Cor. 4:1–5*). Second, he points to the fact that suffering is the trademark of true Christian ministry (*1 Cor. 4:9, 11–13*). This second point deserves to be further developed.

Read 2 Corinthians 11:23–28 and Colossians 1:24. What does this teach us about what it means to suffer for Christ's sake?

Christian leaders follow the footprints of Jesus by being willing to suffer for their fellow brothers and sisters, and even if need be die for the sake of their ministry. Paul refers to himself and Apollos as “men condemned to death” (*1 Cor. 4:9, NKJV*). They are portrayed as facing a lack of food and water, as well as being “poorly clothed, and beaten, and homeless” (*1 Cor. 4:11, NKJV*). In addition, they were also reviled, persecuted, defamed, and “made as the filth of the world, the offscouring of all things until now” (*1 Cor. 4:12, 13, NKJV*). Furthermore, by referring ironically to the Corinthians as rich, kings, wise, and distinguished (*1 Cor. 4:8, 10*), Paul demonstrates that pride must have no place in true Christian leadership, for it is the root of division in the church (*1 Cor. 4:6*).

How much have you suffered for Christ's sake, whatever your role in the church? What lessons might be found in your answer?

Further Thought: Read Ellen G. White, “The Training of the Twelve,” pp. 17–24, in *The Acts of the Apostles*.

“The oneness and unity of God’s truth-believing remnant people carries powerful conviction to the world that they have the truth, and are the peculiar, chosen people of God. This oneness and unity disconcerts the enemy, and he is determined that it shall not exist. The present truth, believed in the heart and exemplified in the life, makes God’s people one, and gives them a powerful influence.”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 1, p. 327.

“God is leading out a people to stand in perfect unity upon the platform of eternal truth. Christ gave Himself to the world that He might ‘purify unto Himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works.’ This refining process is designed to purge the church from all unrighteousness and the spirit of discord and contention, that they may build up instead of tear down, and concentrate their energies on the great work before them. God designs that His people should all come into the unity of the faith. The prayer of Christ just prior to His crucifixion was that His disciples might be one, even as He was one with the Father, that the world might believe that the Father had sent Him. This most touching and wonderful prayer reaches down the ages, even to our day; for His words were: ‘Neither pray I for these alone, but for them also which shall believe on Me through their word.’ ”—Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church*, vol. 4, p. 17.

Discussion Questions:

- ➊ Toward the end of His earthly ministry, Jesus prayed for unity, “that they may all be one . . . so that the world may know that You sent Me” (*John 17:21–23, NASB*). Why is unity in Christ a powerful argument for the truth that God sent His Son to save the world? Connected to this, why is lack of unity an obstacle to the church’s mission?
- ➋ Read 1 Corinthians 4:9–13 and pay close attention to how the apostles are portrayed in this passage. How does this portrayal of the apostles contrast with the leadership features valued in our world? What does this passage teach us about how different God’s standards and this world’s standards can be?
- ➌ In 1 Corinthians 4:16, Paul urges the Corinthians to imitate him. Would you be willing to imitate human leaders? How might imitating a leader differ from exalting that leader unduly, even dangerously?

Two Dreams

Dante Herrmann had two dreams: to be a millionaire or a tattoo artist.

Everyone laughed when he, as a 12-year-old boy, eagerly shared his first dream. “If you want to be rich, you have to work,” they said.

“No, I can become a millionaire without working,” Dante replied.

He was a dreamer who needed a miracle for his dream to come true.

Dante himself was a miracle. His mother had tried for years to have a baby, and doctors finally had told her to give up. Then Dante was born. But he was a sickly baby, and doctors said he needed to move to a tropical climate to survive. So, his parents left their home in Germany to live in the Canary Islands, a Spanish archipelago off the coast of northwestern Africa.

By the age of 16, Dante wasn’t any closer to becoming a millionaire or a tattoo artist. A hyperactive teen, he followed the advice of exasperated teachers and dropped out of high school to work as a handyman. But the work was hard and the pay was poor, and he began dealing drugs, mainly cocaine. A year later, he made a pact with the devil, offering his soul for drugs, wild living, and rock ‘n’ roll. He sealed the deal with a tattoo on his hand.

For a while, Dante felt happy. He wasn’t a millionaire, but money and pleasure never seemed to end. Yet, he felt a hole in his heart. He saw that his drugs were ruining lives, and he sensed an inner voice, asking, *Do you think it’s OK to get rich at the expense of others?*

Then fear set in. He had trouble with the police, and he fled to Germany, where his mother had moved after leaving his father a few years earlier. Life wasn’t better in Germany, and Dante ended up back on the Canary Islands seven years later, when he was 25. He quit drugs, and a friend taught him how to be a tattoo artist. Dante was pleased to fulfill one of his childhood dreams, and he was making good money, although not enough to be wealthy.

Then he learned that he could still become a millionaire. His father, a rock music promoter and club owner, sued a major beverage company for billions of dollars in damages in a copyright infringement lawsuit. His father had trademarked a brand name that the company was using without his consent. He offered Dante 10 percent of the proceeds if he helped with the suit.

At the same time, a friend gave Dante a Bible, and he began to read it. He read, “The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, without painful toil for it” (*Proverbs 10:22, NIV*). He thought, *If I give God my heart, He will bless me and make me rich.* He decided to give his heart to Jesus.

Today, Dante is rich, but not in the way that the world calculates wealth. “When I was a tattoo artist, I wanted the hole in my heart to be filled,” said Dante, a Seventh-day Adventist pastor in Germany. “I thought I had to be a millionaire for the hole to be filled. But all I needed was Jesus.”

This mission story offers an inside look at the results of a previous Thirteenth Sabbath project. In Spain, Sagunto Adventist College received part of a 2019 Thirteenth Sabbath Offering for its theology department, where Dante Herrmann studied. This quarter, your offering will again help spread the gospel in the Inter-European Division, which includes Spain.